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Going Home

1. Encouraged

“In My Father's house are many mansions: if *it were* not *so*, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you (John 14:2).” The aforementioned piece of scripture is one that I have always been familiar with. But I only began to have a deeper understanding of it on Monday, November 21st, 2013, as I sat in the front row of my great-grandmother’s funeral.

Shamefully I must admit that there are times when I’m in church and I clap and say “Amen”, because something sounds good at the moment, but I don’t really carry it with me. As I stated before I had heard that scripture preached many times. But as I listened through tears as my granny’s preacher of many years (who I’ve met on several occasions since I was a little girl), reiterated that verse, a small sense of peace fell over me and my tears slowly began to dry.

1. A Journey Reflected

In the year 1989 my grandmother had my granny life-flown from New York, where she lived for 20 years, back to our hometown in Jacksonville, Florida. The doctor’s all said, “Her case is hopeless, “she has sepsis”, and she is going to die.”

From her own journey through the ups and downs of life my grandmother has come to place a deep *connotative meaning* on the Bible verse, Jeremiah 32:27, “Behold, I *am* the LORD, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?” As a strong and steadfast Christian my grandmother refused to believe that those doctors had the final say in the fate of her mother’s life, and she used that verse to will my granny back to life. The doctors were amazed that all of their science and education had failed them, but my grandmother had something they didn’t have, and that was faith.

Fast-forward to an unusual weekend for both me and my granny in 1997. You see from the time I was born I spent almost every weekend at my granny’s active adult retirement home. I always had the best time talking and singing for her neighbors, who loved me like I was their own grandchild. But my favorite past- time was collecting hers and the neighbor’s trash so I could watch it go down the trash shoot. Everyone thought I was just being cute and helpful but feeding my fascination with the trash shoot was my true motive. But on this strange weekend I stayed at home, leaving my grandmother alone for the weekend. It was on this day that she took what should have been a life altering fall and shattered her hip.

Once again the doctor’s said that there was no way that a 67-year-old could ever recover from a fall like that. But after almost losing her life several years prior to this event, she decided to give her life to Christ, and this time she didn’t need anyone praying her strength and willing her to live. By then she had her own faith to live off of and once again she proved the doctor’s wrong, and in no time she was back to taking me on three mile walks to the park, to her senior community center, and catching the bus to the mall.

I guess it could be said that we created our own *culture* through the experiences and traditions that we shared with one another. We were the *in-group*, the ones that understood each other’s routines, and for the most part each other’s wants and needs, and everyone else was on the outside looking in. For example, my grandmother had a rug that no one was allowed to walk on, and as I child I was the only one who understood that. Well whenever we would get visitor’s people would walk on that rug, and I would run and get the broom and sweep off those foot prints. Being a southern lady, my granny would never scold a houseguest, but I knew she was holding her disdain deep down inside by the tight look she would get on her face. Anyway one afternoon my granny and I had a rare disagreement on my want of juice and her knowing my need of water. To a four- year- old water is hardly ever at the top of the list of wants and that day was no exception. Still my grandmother insisted that I drink water and before I knew it I was stomping on that very special carpet, and to my dismay I was forced to sweep until she gave me her permission to stop.

I could go on forever about the times we spent together I would be remised if I didn’t share one last occurrence that is often told amongst my family. Before I started grade school it wasn’t uncommon for me to spend a weekday at my granny’s house. One afternoon my granny put me down for my nap before her favorite show, The Young and The Restless (now me and my mother’s favorite television show) came on. My granny always made up her bed and made a palate for me at the bottom of it, but I was always jealous that her Cabbage Patch Doll was allowed to “sleep” at the top. This time I asked, “Granny how come the baby gets to sleep up there”, to which she replied, “You never undo the bed just for a nap.” When she left I made sure to be quiet so she wouldn’t know I was listening to the show. It had to be about halfway through when my little eyes started to get tired and for some reason my attention shifted to that doll. I crawled up to the doll, threw it on my palate, and drifted off to sleep in its place at the top of the bed. My granny would often say when she came to wake me she couldn’t help but laugh at me instead of being angry that I had disobeyed her.

Skip ahead again to the year 2003, by that time I had already moved to Virginia and I was only able to see my granny about three or four times a year. With me not around as often my grandmother was left to take her mile-long walks alone. One day in the fall not far into her daily walk a teenaged girl ran a red light and hit her as she crossed the street. At 73 it was a miracle that all she had suffered was a few bruises and minor fractures, but again she was blessed and recovered.

Next in 2009 at 79 years of age my granny was diagnosed with cancer and in 2011 she had to have a pacemaker inserted into her heart and twice she survived yet again. So you can only imagine the shock that I felt on Friday, November 31st, 2013, the day my mother (who had just flown from Florida) along with my grandmother drove here to Farmville, only to tell me that my granny did not make it through this final battle with her health.

Over a month ago my grandmother went into the hospital because she was feeling mighty bad. When she got there she found out that waste had filled up her body and they were going to do a procedure to correct it. The pumping procedure did not work and to my grandmother’s (who my granny had been living with since recovering from cancer) and granny’s dismay the doctors said that they would have to perform a surgery. When they opened her they found her intestines all scrambled and due to swelling could not close her right away. In the beginning doctors were optimistic about her recovery but then slowly her health went further downhill. When she stopped responding my grandmother called my mother here in Virginia and told her she needed to come home.

From that moment my mother and grandmother created their own *community of practice* (in this case it was a shared task) where there goal was to get my granny well again. Every morning my mother and grandmother would make their rounds with my granny’s team of doctors, watch them prepare her, and my mother would read the Bible to her. They would leave around noon when my grandmother had to go to work and return for a couple of hours after my grandmother returned from her job. On Saturday, November 2nd, 2013, which turned out to be the last day of her life my granny finally responded by opening her eyes and squeezing my mother’s hand and they were optimistic again. After leaving for lunch they returned to the hospital to find the doctors in my granny’s room trying to resuscitate her, but in the end it was all in vain.

1. After While Crocodile

That Thursday my mother came to tell me about my granny’s death I thought had cried all of my tears away. Initially I cried because it seemed unreal, then I cried at the guilt I felt for allowing us to drift apart. We were still close but in the three years I’ve been in college I’ve had a hard time tending to relationships I had already had prior to coming to Longwood. My mother, grandmother, and I were on our way home when I burst into tears and said, “I didn’t call her like I should have and I didn’t go to church with her the last time I was here.” My grandmother being the strong and faithful Christian that she is reassured me that my grandmother new I loved her, that she was always proud of me, and understood why I didn’t go with her to church. She continued saying that all of those negative thoughts that I was thinking was just an attack of THE ENEMY trying to confuse me and keep me feeling down.

On the days that followed I was determined to remain strong. I managed to do so, until four days later when we were getting in the family car on our way to the church, and my uncle (an ordained minister) said a prayer over the service, and started with, “We are here to say our final goodbyes”. Of course there was more to the prayer but when I heard that word, “goodbye”, the rest of it was a blur. The walls that I had built over the four days came tumbling down.

Of the five funerals I have attended I had never experienced one like my granny’s. When I walked in people were on their feet singing and clapping, I was taken aback because that usually doesn’t happen until many word and songs of encouragement have been doled out, but these people had come into the service that way. At that moment encouraged was the furthest emotion from my heart, so I took my seat and put my face into my mother’s shoulder. After I could muster the strength to sit up straight I immediately made eye contact with her preacher, who was singing, “He’s a mighty good God”. That’s when I realized that he had gotten old and so were about 75 percent of the attendees. In truth the preacher isn’t really that old he’s probably about 50 or so, but because I’ve grown up knowing him he just seemed much older than he actually is. As for the attendees it’s only logical that most of them were older because my grandmother was 82.

When he first started preaching I was initially annoyed because he started with the generic “she had a long life” opener and then I realized that he couldn’t have known that both off my great-great grandmothers ( both whom I had the pleasure to know ) lived pass 100 years of age. Soon after he gave me new hope when he spoke on having the honor of being her pastor for 20 years and seeing her love and care for others, and said for those reason’s alone left no doubt in his mind that this was not a funeral but a Home going Celebration.

He followed the welcome by acknowledging my family by that he understood the looks in our eyes and the congregants let out an “Amen” in agreement. Immediately I understood through *field of experience,* (their past experiences)that they were all telling the truth, and that they all knew what it felt like to be sitting on that front row.

All of his words played a large part in turning my mood around, but when he kept repeating that verse where Jesus promises his followers a dwelling place in his father’s house followed by the singing of “What a Friend we Have in Jesus”, I wised up and I was filled with peace, and happiness that my granny wasn’t in any pain and laughed at his joke that she was probably picking out furniture for her mansion. I had finally *acculturated* and adapted to the older and wiser people’s view of death, and began to sing along.

It is *denoted*, or widely understood in the Christian culture that there is life after death. It was so beautifully said by the pastor that my granny’s warranty had expired and that she had traded up to something much better. Those words were music to my ears, and I couldn’t help but cry again. This time they weren’t tears of sorrow, but tears of joy. Immediately I was reminded of how we use to say goodbye when I was a child leaving her apartment. I would always say, “See ya later alligator,” and after she’d kissed me goodbye she would respond, “after while crocodile”! So now I can’t rest assured that my uncle, a clergyman, was wrong when he said that we were saying goodbye. But instead it was only see you later!