

Grandparents and Other Wise Ancestors

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image info

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I NEVER KNEW MY GRANDPARENTS because they all died either before I was born or when I was very young. My parents were in their forties when I was born, and people routinely thought my parents were my grandparents. But I know from the stories, so many of which were entwined with stories about my grandparents, that many of the lessons that came to me from my mother were lessons she learned from her mother, and likely my grandmother learned those lessons in some fashion from my great-grandmother. The stories, the lessons, the habits, and even the prejudices and grudges get passed on. What we do with them . . . whether we are able to sort the valuable from the worthless, the wheat from the chaff . . .

is up to us, but it can take a lifetime to figure it all out.

Mother-daughter relationships are notoriously complicated, but there's really no question that my mother loved and cared deeply for me. She always said that my being born late in her life was the greatest thing that ever happened to her. I gave her something to do, something to live for, and she was devoted to raising me in the best way possible. Along the way she taught me many important lessons that I often reflect on and cherish today. For example, during all my years in elementary school, she and I would walk to the local library one evening a week, returning books and finding new ones to check out. My mother enjoyed a good story, and we often spent

evenings together in the living room, reading quietly to ourselves, each consumed by her own story, wrapped in the imaginary world of fictional characters and amusing plots. From her I learned that reading for pleasure is a rewarding way to pass the time, and there is value in imagining ourselves embarking on excursions far beyond the limits of our own life circumstances.

My mother's favorite bit of wisdom was "A place for everything and everything in its place." It was generally used as a commentary on my messy room. I still hear it in my head from time to time, usually when I can't find something because it's not where it should be. I learned well the first part of her saying, but I still have a little trouble with the second.



My mother (far left) and her parents and siblings

My mother also passed on her financial wisdom when she would tell me, “Pay your bills first, and then live on what’s left.” She preached that if you have to eat creamed peas and carrots on toast for a week, you do it because you have to pay your bills and keep up with your responsibilities.

My mother made sure I knew how to use a hammer, screwdriver, pliers, and wrench. I learned the difference between a nut and a bolt, a nail and a screw, a washer and a socket. I watched my mother fix leaky faucets, rewire lamps, and install hinges, latches, curtain hooks, and door knobs. “Girls should know these things,” she’d say. She was absolutely right. A table saw, electric drill, and an assortment of screwdrivers have gotten me through many household projects.

My mother taught me to use her Singer sewing machine when I was just seven. I remember it clearly: me sitting on the bench that was always tucked under the sewing machine cabinet and her on a chair next to me, working the power lever and holding my hands as I guided the fabric under the needle. Over the years I watched her sew my clothes, curtains, my father’s pajamas. She crocheted and knitted slippers, hats, tablecloths, even a dress for me once. She embroidered dresser scarves and dish towels. And sitting with her on the couch, she taught me all of it. My crochet skills never matched hers, and I can’t knit at all. But I love to stitch. For years I embroidered, and then I found quilting. I piece quilts by hand, everyday spending some time sitting with my fabric pieces, stitching them together, enjoying the colors and design come together into something bigger than the sum of its pieces. From my mother I learned the gratification that comes from using one’s hands to make something

as well as the sheer delight of repetitive action—the needle going in and out, over and over again, the sound of the thread being pulled through the fabric, the snap of the scissors cutting the thread. I learned that my cares and all the world’s problems drift away when I sit down with a cup of tea and my fabric, a needle, some thread, and a thimble. It’s more about the process than the product; my mother knew that well. Though she never said those words, it was clear from her actions. And that Singer machine, made before I was born, I have it still and use it frequently.

I heard the story many times about a nun calling my mother to her desk to point out to her that her family wasn’t tithing. My mother was in elementary school at the time. It was a gesture meant to instill, perhaps, some sense of responsibility, but it turned out to be an exercise in shaming. My mother’s father died from tuberculosis when she was eight. My grandfather spent his last days in a sanatorium. When he died, they brought him home, carried him up the stairs in a wicker basket. My grandmother took him in, washed him, dressed him in a suit, and he was laid on a table in the front room while people came to visit. Afterward, with three children to feed and clothe, my grandmother of course went to work. “There was no welfare in those days,” my mother would say. That nun taught my mother an important lesson: some people just don’t get it. My mother, who went to church every Sunday of her life, regularly expressed her disgust for it all. “They’d do better to sell all their jewels and statues and fancy things and give the money to the poor.” Her shame transformed into righteousness.

The most important thing my mother taught me is that no one is better than anyone else.



My extended family, photograph taken six years before I was born, includes my parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, and cousins

No one should be treated differently because of religion, race, skin color, level of education, amount of money in the bank. She knew because she was treated differently. She was a poor Polish girl from Milwaukee who didn’t go to high school because she had to go to work in a knitting factory to help support the family. She would eat by herself off in a corner because she was ashamed of the Karo syrup sandwiches she brought for lunch. That story didn’t come from my mother; I heard that one from my aunt.

My mother repeatedly told me to stay in school, finish my education, and don’t get in bed (I think she meant that figuratively) with the first guy I met. The lesson here? Make

something of yourself before you get married and have children. Use your talents. Develop your skills. If you miss your opportunity, you’ll have no one to blame but yourself. Think of your future because every woman needs to be able to take care of herself. Years later, my aunt again filled in the missing lines of the story. When my mother was a teenager, a family uncle and his wife offered to take my mother to California to live with them and send her to college. My grandmother wouldn’t agree to it.

There is a silken thread that connects us to our ancestors and along that thread run the events of life that make up the lessons of

life. I know how strongly the loss of my mother's father affected her, and it also affected me through the lessons my mother taught me: "Every woman needs to be able to take care of herself."

I know little about my grandparents and not a thing about my great-grandparents; I don't know their stories at all. I've searched the internet for information, but all I've come up with are names and some dates. I do know that my grandparents were all born in Europe—Germany and Poland. They immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1800s. The decision to make that journey, the journey itself, seeing the Statue of Liberty, landing at Ellis Island, making the decision to settle in Wisconsin . . . those experiences must have formed lessons that were passed on to their children, my grandparents. "Pay your bills." "Stay in school." "No one is better than anyone else." And those lessons were passed on to me because that silken thread, like the individual strands of a spider's web, is both delicate and strong. It's taken me a lifetime to figure that out. ❖

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE founded Shanti Arts Publishing in 2011 to revel in nature, art, and spirit. As an editor, writer, photographer, one-time data analyst and higher education administrator, and a full-time observer of daily life, Christine draws from a diverse background and a wide range of experiences to curate the work of artists and writers that comes to her from creative people all over the world. Through Shanti Arts, Christine edits and publishes the quarterly art and literary journal *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, and designs and produces books of poetry and prose that cover topics from nature and spirituality to music and memoir. Born in Milwaukee and raised in southern California, she has called Maine—a Mecca for nature lovers and artists—her home for the last twenty-five years. Visit shantiarts.com and christinecotephoto.com for more news and information.

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