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Lessons on Love from the Back of the Pew

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Lessons on Love from the Back of the Pew

Abstract

Saturday marked the one year anniversary of the death of the most important man in my life, my paternal grandfather. Despite the desire of each of his grandchildren to be his one and only favorite, somehow, looking back, I now understand that he saw the same amount of value in each of us, and that is not something that can be quantified. I learned so much from him: how to shoot a gun, how to remove a splinter, and how to be a good, kind and compassionate human-being under any circumstances. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, death, family, grief

Disciplines

Family, Life Course, and Society | Pain Management

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

LESSONS ON LOVE FROM THE BACK OF THE PEW

August 19, 2013

Saturday marked the one year anniversary of the death of the most important man in my life, my paternal grandfather.

Despite the desire of each of his grandchildren to be his one and only favorite, somehow, looking back, I now understand that he saw the same amount of value in each of us, and that is not something that can be quantified. I learned so much from him: how to shoot a gun, how to remove a splinter, and how to be a good, kind and compassionate human-being under any circumstances.



That last lesson was the most important he ever taught. Sadly, not everyone paid attention. It is no secret on campus that I am openly queer, but at home, I live in a glass closet. I came out to disastrous results and now, everybody knows, but they refuse to acknowledge it. My brother can talk about his girlfriend throughout the entire Christmas dinner, but I can't mention that two weeks before I was dumped, unless I want to hear, "It wasn't a real relationship anyway, Ann" or "I'm sorry, what were you saying, I zoned out for a second."

My grandfather was the only person whose perception and treatment of me did not change after I came out. Rather than try to distance himself from me, he reaffirmed, between breaths made ragged by Parkinson's, that he loved me no matter what and that was never going to change, which was the most perfect statement he could have made to a fragile high school senior who had received negative feedback from everyone else. When his health took a turn for the worse, I started making promises, as if my words would keep him alive so that I could keep his love in my life. "You'll see me graduate, I promise," and he did. "You'll see the end of my freshman year, I promise" and he did. "You'll see me at Thanksgiving," I promised him as I left for summer tour guiding, but this time he didn't make it. Instead, I had to tell him goodbye one last time over the phone, hoping that for the first time in months he could fight through the Parkinson's to remember who I was. The last words we exchanged were "I love you;" the next thing I knew I was on a series of buses trying to get home to be there for my grandmother and to help plan the funeral.

This was the first time my entire family had been together in months, and I was apprehensive; how would it go? As the eldest grandchild, I had always been told that when it came time, I would speak on behalf of the younger

generation. While on the bus, I prepared a eulogy, poured myself into it, only to be denied the opportunity to share it with my family, much less the church congregation. As it was explained, due to my aberrant lifestyle, the family didn't think I would be the best person to represent the virtuous and moral Catholic life led by my grandfather. Afraid that he wouldn't get into Heaven, my family decided to appease God, the bishop, and the pastor, by forcing me to the back pew and giving the honor of the grandchildren's goodbye to my brother.

No matter how hard I try, I cannot find words that accurately describe my sadness and confusion. Growing up Catholic had taught me that God was benevolent and kind; rather than judging me, He would one day welcome me to Heaven with open arms. God was not someone to say that Richard Sasala, a man who attended church every day until his body gave out and took the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule (Love thy neighbor as thyself) to heart and lived them out everyday, would be denied access to eternal glory because he has a queer grandchild. Grief does weird things to the mind, and in the case of my family, it strengthened their already strong homophobia and prejudices into a force that nearly barred me from the church and the final celebration of my grandfather's life, a life lived not in judgment but in true, unrequited love.

Hardly a day goes by that I don't think about his death and how things would have been different had my aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandmother followed his example and not allowed stereotypes about "those queers" to color their decisions and instead accept me for who I am. I have forgiven my family members. That is what my grandpa would have wanted. But that doesn't stop me from wishing that they had paid a little bit more attention so that the world could be full of more individuals like my grandfather: Christians who follow what the Bible says rather than the fallible interpretations of humans; people who see the someone struggling and let them know that no matter what happened or who they are that they are someone of value; individuals who refuse to see "those queers" as a separate group to be discriminated against, but instead see us as worthy of the same amount of love as they who try to tear us down.

Grandpa, for you, and only for you, I ate your favorite ice cream sundae of peaches and vanilla, even though I hate ice cream. I bought a watermelon and checked it every hour to see if it was cold enough yet. For you, I played Sinatra, soft strains flying away on the wind so I know that you can hear.

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