

Lessons from My Grandparents

By Jeffery Greb

Grandparents can be marvelous creatures. Freed from some of the worries and responsibilities of parenthood, grandparents frequently transform into people unrecognizable to their own children. Often their change in status is reflected by a change in name. The only grandparents I knew were my mother's parents, Charles and Beatrice Stewart, who I knew as Stewie and BB. Reflecting upon my experiences with them, I recognize some lessons I learned and incorporated into my own persona.

Charles Lowell Stewart grew up off the coast of Maine on Swan's Island. The son of a lobsterman, CL, or Lowell, became the first member of the family to graduate college in 1932. He worked for Keyes Fiber (at that time the makers of Chinnet paper products) in Waterville, and eventually was relocated to open a new plant in Hammond, Indiana. Later, he was sent farther west to open mills in both Sacramento, California, and Wenatche, Washington, which he split time between until his death just short of retirement at age 64. My memories of him are mostly from this latter period on vacations to their home in Carmichael. My family took a single driving vacation to California, but my brother and I were flown out to visit more than once. After our own move west in the late 1960s, more visits ensued via Greyhound bus.

While my mother regularly tells me how much I remind her of her father, my own memories are not detailed enough to affirm this assessment, so I must take her judgment as accurate to a certain degree. I can, however, recognize some traits I picked up from being around him. For example, growing up on an island as well as frequently helping onboard a small boat in the North Atlantic taught my grandfather the importance of the aphorism "a place for everything and everything in its place." When a nor'easter is bearing down upon you, and you need a specific tool or line or article of clothing, you don't have the luxury of time to hunt around for it. The item needs to be in its designated place. Although I grew up under vastly different circumstances, I still become nearly apoplectic if something is not where I left it (or, more likely, *think* I left it). This trait does not endear me to my wife; however, when I can instantly lay my hands on some mundane item – like scotch tape – she has been searching for, suddenly I'm the hero.

My grandfather also ingrained upon me the importance of doing a task well. I can distinctly remember "helping" him by following him around in my hardhat carrying a tool as he

explained why this was the “right” way to lay brick or trim hedges or clean a pool. Although the details of the tasks are lost to me, the larger point of taking the time to do something correctly the first time stuck with me and has served me well.

My grandmother was an Upham, and family legend contends that the Uphams built the *Mayflower*, although I can find absolutely no evidence to support the claim beyond the fact that both the family and the ship came to America from England. During my visits my grandfather would often be at work, so I would spend most days in her company doing things like grocery shopping and cooking, but always watching the lunchtime broadcast of *Jeopardy!* I suspect I was her favorite, but again I have no conclusive evidence.

The lesson from her I continue to try to take to heart is her capacity for love, kindness, and understanding. For instance, she taught me to fill ice cube trays about three-fourths full rather than to the brim. She explained how the ice needed room to expand and not filling them to the top made it easier to get the cubes out. I dutifully complied. It wasn't until decades later when my wife asked in exasperation why I never fill the ice cube trays all the way that I understood my grandmother had lied to me. Clearly, I had made a mess negotiating full trays back into the freezer, and she'd created a rationale for not filling them to the top. What a delightfully gentle way to manipulate a child, who was only trying to be helpful, into not making a mess. I only wish I discovered her invention sooner. Perhaps I would have found other ways to influence the behavior of my own kids rather than yelling so much. At the least, she and I could have had a laugh at my gullibility and her ingenuity. This is a single example out of many. Her patience and acceptance are models I continue to strive for to this day.

I suspect my story is not unique; for many people grandparents taught lessons their parents didn't or couldn't. Unfortunately, like many good things, this fact may pass unnoticed while growing up and not understood until much later. Sometimes that means after it is too late to thank them. But that's ok; they didn't do it because they wanted to be thanked. They did it because they loved us.