

A Parable of Two Grandmothers

I grew up within reach and earshot of two grandmothers. One was irresistibly kind, full of fun and, happily, enthralled with me. The other seemed chronically irritated and just wished I'd stop biting my fingernails. One seemed comfortably connected to God, herself and other people. It was hard to get close to the other, like trying to hug someone who won't relax. One was kind of fat. The other was consumed with her appearance. And I couldn't help but notice that the older they got, the more pronounced their tendencies became. Even as a child, I began to understand that such ruts were the ultimate good news and bad news of old age.

My last visit with Grandmother Number One came at the end of a cold day in December 1963. I didn't know it would be our last talk, and being thirteen years old at the time, I may not have known what to do if I had.

Through the fall she had grown sick and begun to lose weight. After weeks in the hospital, she came to live with us, still kind and patient even though she was unable to leave first the house and then even her bed as cancer moved relentlessly through her brain.

On that particular cold day in December I had skied for the first time and, for the first time had come home with a brace on my leg. I pushed open the front door and hobbled a b-line to Grandma's room looking for sympathy and a chance to regale her with the story of my harrowing day. She did not disappoint me, as she gushed with comfort and questions. She didn't mention anything about her own deadly pain that day, but six weeks later she was gone from us.

A few years after that, during those tumultuous days of the late sixties, my values were all up for review. Being a true Boomer, I had rejected the institution of the church. But I had also begun to learn that God could mean a life-giving relationship. Over time, I found God to be a little bit like Grandmother Number One: Kind, gentle and safe even when I needed correction, and able to comfort even when His own heart ached, which it does on occasion because He is a Person and we have a relationship.

I tried to tell Grandmother Number Two about my profound new relationship with God and with a few other safe people and she sniffed her suspicion. Her interest, after all, had always been in other priorities: Could I stop dressing like a gypsy? Could I talk more slowly? more softly? had I stopped biting my fingernails yet?

Grandmother Number Two lived for another twenty years. All of that great skin-care has resulted in a truly glorious complexion for an eighty-six-year-old woman. The problem is that her beautiful skin framed a chronically irritated expression. She drank too much and chain smoked and didn't care to go out if she can help it. Her brain was fine, but she was sad and lonely and self-pitying and nearly impossible to give to.

I fear that, being human, my capacity to someday be just like her is boundless. My two grandmothers have presented me with a life-long question:

What are the routines and choices and connections in life and in work that will lead me to the process and the destination of Grandmother Number One or Grandmother Number Two?

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