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Lowell House Speaker Series
March 4, 2012

“Remembering and Forgetting”

When I closed the door to come down to the dining hall tonight, just like I do every other time that I leave my room, the last thing that I saw was a picture. It's sitting on top of my bookshelf. It's a picture of my family on my graduation day. My mother is hugging me so hard that you can see wrinkles forming in my gown. My grandmother, the shortest in our family, is squinting from the glare of the sunlight and my grandfather, at least a foot taller, has his arm placidly around her.

Most of the time when people come into my dorm room, just like when they come into my living room at home, they ask if the man in all of my photos is my father or my grandfather.

That answer, genetics aside, is a little complicated. To me, he has always been both.

My father left us the first time when I was two weeks old. He left multiple times, so many that he was more often out of my life than he was in it. With his most recent and final departure, my mother removed all of his pictures from our living room. He's just a ghost in our house now. But as his absence was felt in all of my recitals and concerts and tennis matches, it was also felt in the weight of parental responsibility.

My mother keeps weird hours, usually having to be at the firm much earlier than 8 AM and much later than 5 PM. When I was in middle school, my classes started at 9:45 AM. Without my father around, she would have had to take off work every morning. But my grandfather volunteered to take me instead. It would be no problem at all and he could pick up the newspaper along the way.

So I learned to be ready to go at exactly 9:15, because leaving then would give us just enough time to get me to school on time while driving at least 10 miles per hour under the speed limit; which means that everything you've heard about old people in Florida is true. And that was our routine for three years.

This regularity turned our car ride conversations into sagas. He would start a story in the morning that, after telling me to remind him where he left off, he would finish when he picked me up that afternoon. He told me about what Cuba was like before he, my grandmother, and my mother all had to leave. He told me what it was like to live under a dictatorship, where police officers would ransack his store at gunpoint every day under the guise of looking for illegal weapons. He told me how painful it was to have to waive

custody of his only daughter so that an American relative could adopt her and help her enter the United States. He told me what it was like to live in fear and what it was like to have to start over after losing everything. And he told me about how difficult life was without an education, because he only had an eighth grade education. This was among his favorite stories to tell me. Even when I was late, itching to run to homeroom, he would make me stay to listen to the story. If I had to remember only one thing he had told me, he said, that would be it.

And so remembering and forgetting have always been critical to our relationship. Except, lately, one has become more prominent than the other. In May 2009, my grandfather left the water in the kitchen running. I guess that you have to know him to understand the significance of this, but for a man who is meticulous in his actions and his habits, this was unusual. A series of similar events followed. My grandmother dismissed it as a consequence of old age until he asked her where they were one evening while watching television in the home that they've lived in for fifteen years.

My grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer's on January 13, 2010, two days after his 83rd birthday. Since then, he has had good days and bad days. On the good, I can call home before class and he'll remember exactly what I told him the day before. On the bad, he'll ask me if I'll be ready for school by 9:15 because we won't be on time if we leave any later.

And so the man who taught me to always remember to appreciate what it's like to live without fear and to appreciate the value of an education is now starting to forget.