

An Aging Memory

Today, I'd like to share a few words with you about the enduring memory of my grandfather, Henry Galler, who passed away in October.

I've always considered myself close with my grandfather. Despite the physical distance between us, I frequently spoke with him on the phone and made yearly trips to New Orleans where he and my grandmother Eva settled. As a young child, I spent hours listening to accounts of his storied past--of years in the Gulag, the loss of his sister Hannah, my namesake, and his entire family at the hands of the Nazis, and afterwards of his service in the Polish army during the German occupation of Poland in World War II. These accounts, experiences of life as a Jewish soldier during the Holocaust, frequently served as the topic of our conversations.

Through his stories, I felt his history come alive and found myself able to connect with my grandfather on a much deeper level than I had ever imagined. My grandfather's carefree and positive spirit always shined through these conversations. His past forever cast a shadow on his life yet it also pointed the way to the future. He always emphasized his successes and lived his life to the fullest.

My relationship with my grandfather ignited my interest and desire to care for the elderly. I devote Saturday afternoons to visiting the Cambridge Rehabilitation and Nursing Center, an activity that began during my sophomore year at Harvard. Each week, I go to Central Square to spend two hours with the elderly residents.

Upon arrival, I make "rounds" on the two floors of the facility, which houses both temporary and long-term residents. I enter patient rooms and the lounge, where wheel chairs are clustered as the residents listen to the loud TV that displays

afternoon game shows. I make my introduction, offering “bingo” invitations to the residents, and in response the booming sounds of “Family Feud” give way to the hustle and bustle of the parade of wheelchairs as the residents move towards the elevator and then make their way to the activities room on the ground floor below. My typical visit consists of games of “bingo” and other activities, during which I converse with the residents. They tell me their stories, allowing me to enter their special and private worlds.

This weekly routine serves a major purpose for both me and the residents I visit. The elderly provide a rich pool of information and experiences from which the young may benefit. Therefore, the primary goal of these visits is to establish relationships between the elderly and their community as well as to foster a bond between younger and older generations. Playing “Bingo” and sharing in their personal stories helps them combat the challenges of aging and rebuild their personal connections.

Al, a former comedian who prides himself on being the “resident photographer” at the nursing home, has been a resident since I began visiting and we’ve developed an enduring friendship over the months.

“Hey Big Al, how are you doing today?”

A large man donning a Harvard baseball cap and crimson sweatshirt smiles. As I pull out a chair and take a seat next to him, he prepares to claim yet another Bingo victory.

“Doing good today, “ he says as he places another red chip on the laminated plastic board in front of him. “Hey, have you seen my pictures?”

His photographs, filed neatly into a crimson, plastic, album, captures memories which would otherwise fade with age. Though a natural part of life, aging is oftentimes arduous and coping with memory loss is one of the most challenging aspects of growing old. Al’s photo album serves to preserve his memories. Similarly, my grandfather’s stories kept his past alive. Our conversations served as a way to cement this foundation, share our thoughts, and build our own story as we went along.

I cherish the moments I devote to this purpose. Knowing that the brief time I spend away from the Harvard campus is directed toward addressing the needs of these seniors is very satisfying. My weekly visits also have been particularly beneficial in the past few months, helping me to cope with my loss of my grandfather. I always leave feeling deeply appreciated and pleased that I have found the right way to honor the memory of my grandfather.

