

There Is A Lot We Can Learn From Our Elders

How values can be communicated to us with and without words and why this wisdom is worth remembering.

By Kerrie Ní Bheaglaoich

My Grandfather was the wisest man I've ever known. He possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge on many subjects – History, Music, Poetry. He didn't just know things, more than that, he appreciated them. My Grandfather communicated to me that culture in all its forms - Literature, Music and the Arts - are all worthy of preserving, of passing on to a new generation. He didn't need to tell me, I just knew because he surrounded himself, and by extension, me, with that culture.

His home was a reflection of his interests. I can still remember clearly it's unique scent. The aroma stemmed largely from tightly packed bookshelves at every wall, filled with varied literature clad in leather bound sleeves. The dusty record player sang, Opera usually being the genre of choice but sometimes Jazz or Blues, depending on my Grandfather's mood. Paintings and photos, colourful or in stark black and white, looked down on me from his walls.

His taste was eclectic. Objects littered the oak windowsills, memories of the wondrous places he had seen and been. Some were clearly of monetary value, others, smooth stones or pieces of aged wood, simply held value for him. His 'Study', piled high with research documents, demonstrated to me from an early age that there was always more you can learn. There was much to be learned in his home, often without any words being spoken.

My early childhood was filled with stories of my Grandfather's life in inner Cork City. One such tale was a picture he painted in my mind of his own Grandmother, fiercely protective of him. She, wrapped in her black woollen shawl, would drag him, pushing her way to the front of the line for their local cinema. They would pay in bottlecaps, a detail absurd to my young mind. At the time, this story was nothing more to me than an amusing tale, but now I can see there was a lesson to be learned. A lesson about family, about looking after those you love. His Grandmother, an extended family member, was welcomed into his home, protected. In return she protected him. She opened his eyes to a new world, one completely outside of his own. She was poor, but open-minded and unafraid. Without her, I wonder whether my Grandfather would have expanded his horizons, been self-educated, travelled. Would his world have been a much narrower one? Would mine?

Another such story of family sacrifice was the story of his father's coat. His father, a bus conductor, would every year receive a new winter coat from the bus company. This coat would quickly be stripped from him and altered by his wife to fit my Grandfather, leaving my Great Grandfather in his threadbare, ragged overcoat for the cold spring. I again found this humorous, but as I grew I realised that he had imparted to me the importance of being both resourceful and self-sacrificing for the good of others, the importance of looking after family.

These are just a few examples of the values which were deeply rooted in me from an early age. The knowledge and culture that he valued, I now value. His stories carried a wisdom, an insight that I could never have fully understood without them. A sense of the times that came before us. When our elders are gone, and that insight gone, these stories are what keep both the people and the teachings alive. We must document these stories, while there is still time. We must appreciate these lessons and honour them so that when we are the elders, we may instil them in those who follow us.