

Chapel Talk
Will Speers
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Grandparents

Two weeks ago my parents visited for Grandparents Day. They remembered chemistry formulas in Joshua's class, they challenged Christopher and Tolly in their senior tutorial, they cheered at the baseball game against Tatnall, they came to chapel to hear their friend Jon Walton preach. After they left, I asked Carter what the difference was between parents and grandparents. He replied: "Well, in my case, the grandparents look and act a lot younger."

There's a unique bond between grandparents and grandchildren. Many of us are named after a grandparent – we share a first name, we take on a last name as a first name. Those names connect us: we inherit a legacy, a story, a character in that baptism of a name. So much transfers between generations; so much is honored; so much is recreated. I was named for my mother's father, but he was so humbled he didn't tell anyone my name for two weeks just in case my parents changed their minds. And the paradox of being named after a grandparent is that we then name the grandparent. What we call our grandparents may be our first creative act as literate creatures. They "name" us and we "name" them – Grandma, Grandpa, Gammy, Ga, Gramps, Bougar, Bah, Gus, Granny Witch, Grizz, Poppa, Mom-mom, Gogs, Pop-pop, Nanna, G-ma.

Sometimes children and grandparents understand each other better: there's less tension, conflict, grounds for disagreement; there's also more perspective, patience, even curiosity about each other's world. Some of you have told me that it's easier to have confidential talks with your grandparents than with your parents. Parents and children by necessity battle: they are closer in age and DNA; there is more at stake, more serious responsibility, more rules, expectations and emotions. As parents raise you, they are also balancing careers, marriages, a relationship, other children. Grandparents, however, may be better "parents" the second time around. They have time for you because there's no place they're in a rush to get to. Some of you may have seen the photograph in my

classroom of Christopher, age 3, and his grandfather. It was arduous to potty train Christopher, and I was exhausted, and, frankly, quite frustrated with his lack of progress. But during the summer, his grandfather helped him learn this vital skill just by taking the time to make going to the bathroom a fun game. His trick? Let's do it off the deck! The photograph captures the two of them proudly peeing off the deck. Grandparents can also spoil you without guilt or consequence. The same day that I'm trying to get Carter to eat his first vegetable, his grandparents arrive with Cape Cod potato chips, a case of root beer and ten Pretzel hotdogs. Grandparents can adore you freely and uninhibitedly because at the end of the day, they leave – it's always the parents who are around for the sugar-high crash.

Grandparents are important to grandchildren and to parents. Children need to see their own parents, those stern adults who never let them have fun and who always get to make the rules – children need to see their parents as children, and those parents need to remember that they too are children. Children benefit from seeing their parents struggle with their own parents: we see our parents as a little more human, vulnerable, not always getting their way, having to defer or not get the last word. In truth, we see our parents as just like us – in conflict with an older generation, trying to assert themselves, balancing the old proven way with the new possible path. But now seeing our parents as children grants us common ground, perhaps even empathy: we understand our parents, why they act that way, what they are trying to make better with me, what hurt in their own childhood they are still feeling, what button was just pushed.

Grandchildren and grandparents share another connection: that middle generation, the parents. Children love hearing stories about what their parents were like as children, usually to the delight of the grandparents and to the dismay, nay, humiliation, of the parents. A few years ago I was disciplining Joshua about the way he was treating his younger brother Carter, and how important it was for him to be a good older brother to Carter. I concluded by saying something like, "See how close my brothers and I are as adults?" Somehow my parents overheard this last remark, and gleefully began to tell Joshua about how when I was seven or eight, I'd carved my brother's initials into our beautiful cherry dining room table to get him into trouble. I guess we repeat the past because we are part of it.

Most obviously, grandparents are a wealth of first-person narratives – they are living textbooks to a past we only read about or see as a two dimensional movie. Your grandparents witnessed and experienced Vietnam, the 60's, the civil rights movement, when the Beatles came to America, what it was like watching Arthur Ashe, Mickey Mantle, Wilt Chamberlin, Gordie Howe and Billy Jean King play, or hearing John Kennedy or Martin Luther King, Jr. speak, and what it was like when they were killed. The three grandparents I knew were born in 1890, 1893 and 1898: they told me about World War I, the depression, how nothing was opened on Sundays; they told me what cities and towns were like as the automobile was invented, as highways were constructed, as the telephone moved into homes. They told me about when the Titanic sank, when Lindenberg flew across the ocean, when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Through their professions, they met and worked with T.S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Reinhold Niebuhr, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Paul Tillich, Alan Paton – people I thought just wrote great books, but weren't necessarily alive.

Their stories of *their* grandparents took me back to President Lincoln and Queen Victoria. When one of my grandfathers had his 65th reunion from college in 1977 – he'd graduated in 1912 – I drove him and my grandmother from New Hampshire to New Jersey. During that ride he told me about his experience as a chaplain in World War I. Once he darted out of his trench to pull wounded soldiers off the battlefield. After the war, he traveled across America visiting all the families of soldiers lost in his company. That took months. My car trip with them was a journey I'll never forget. Grandchildren may be better listeners than parents because we are a generation removed; maybe we make someone else's past "retro" and acceptable.

Their stories of their past don't just make the past relevant or "alive": they remind us that people we only know as 70 or 80 were once 7, 14, 18, 22, 31, 48. They struggled with grades, didn't get into a big name college, maybe didn't go to college, went through a variety of jobs, a marriage or two, lost a loved one at an early age, fought in a war: in short, they have lived full, rich lives just as we do. They are real people, with real fears, desires, needs, worries, hopes.

And because we only know our grandparents when they are old, grandparents reveal to us what the final part of our life journey will be like. Unintentionally, they teach

us about death, because they are usually the first people we know, really know, have a connection to, who die.

Aging is a tough process: bodies falter, mobility lessens, the mind wavers, independence turns into dependence, colds become illnesses. Some grandparents move into nursing homes, which they know they will never leave. Age can be a sign of wisdom and respect, but it can equally be cruel when you feel betrayed by the body and mind that carried you so smoothly and effectively those first seventy years. Grandparents can be grumpy, depressed, impatient, angry; they can be critical as they helplessly watch a world change around them. “When I was your age...” they bitterly snap.

Yet grandparents can also help us meet these challenges with their perspective and deepened understanding of life’s long, mysterious journey. What struck me about my grandparents in their final years was how calm they were: they didn’t seem bothered by the petty aspects of living. If you asked my grandfather what he had for lunch, he’d look down at his tie to see what the various food stains told him he’d just eaten. He chuckled at how he spilled or how his hand trembled. For many grandparents, there’s a serenity which comes near death, a peace, an acceptance, for some even a longing – to be parted from this aging body, yet to be joined spiritually with a loved one already dead.

What do grandparents have to do with you at St. Andrew’s? Interestingly, there are very few grandparents on the teaching faculty here – but how Mrs. Mein’s face radiates when her twin grandchildren come into the dining room for a meal. My wish for you is that you seize every chance to spend time with your grandparents or great aunts and uncles. Grandparents may be the first people we get to care for and help, and that’s a tremendous lesson for us – the chance to help another, and then keep helping long afterward. Such simple gestures of helping a grandparent out of a chair, into a car, down some stairs teaches us at a young age that we are all connected and in need of each other. At St. Andrew’s, we still have a relationship to the world, to those outside, to those not here. We have a responsibility to the world around us. So adopt new grandparents here in town at the senior center; fight for their rights; discover why some are lonely or depressed; become a grandchild to someone you are not related to.

Students in my English classes know that one of their assignments over long vacations is that they have to have a conversation with someone 50-60 years older than

they are. These are great, great people, and they love you completely, wholly, unconditionally. They so want the best for you. At that Tatnall baseball game two weeks ago, in the first inning, Christopher made an error fielding a sharply hit ball. I was upset because he made an error; my father, however, was upset – and yes, he had tears in his eyes – because he knew how much this moment hurt Christopher. My father saw the larger picture, perceived what really was at stake. My father was the better parent. He was the *grand* parent.

I urge you this summer to spend time with your grandparents. Those of us without grandparents envy you with them. I miss my grandparents – not just the ones I played with as a toddler and loved because their arrival meant a surprise or present, but more the ones I came to cherish as an adult, at your age and into my twenties and thirties. They were great friends and companions with whom I could talk endlessly about books and teaching, college and politics, mountains and hiking. So visit your grandparents, have dinner with them, have times with them without your parents. Of course you can ask them for stories about your parents, or about their lives growing up in the '30s and '40s and '50s. But more importantly, find your universal truths: find your inheritance, your name, your legacy: discover and nourish this fresh connection to them and to your parents. Next April, at Grandparents Day, may this campus teem with proud grandparents and equally proud grandchildren who relish the chance to experience and celebrate life together.