Calculated Risk: Rocket Man

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The world rests on three foundations: On study, on service, and on acts of benevolence.

— Ethics of the Fathers (a classic work from around the year 200.)

My grandfather died in April at the age of 96. It came as somewhat of a shock for my family. Thanks to good genes and better luck, members of my family usually live a long time. My grandfather's older sister is still going strong at 100. It was hard to believe that he would not just keep going indefinitely. Still, I must admit, it was not a total surprise. After all, 96 years is about as much as most of us will get. If I had to list my heroes, my grandfather would definitely be among the top five. I have thought much about him over the last few weeks and have found in his life, lessons that over the years, I have tried to incorporate into my own.

Learn something every day

Mahatma Ghandi said, "Live as if you will die tomorrow, learn as if you will live forever." A meaningful life is permeated with study. Today we call this "lifelong learning" but my grandfather personified "lifelong learning" before it was a cliché. He did not have the opportunity to attend college; at the age of 18 he set out for the United States from his native Germany. Although he arrived in this country knowing little English, he soon spoke with barely a trace of his native tongue. He wrote poems and limericks in English and solved word puzzles with ease. Every Sunday for years he attacked the New York Times crossword puzzle with a pen, a task that can make us humble pencil bearers tremble.

But it didn't end with mastery of English. He also taught himself French, reaching a point where he could read French newspapers and converse. And he retained German, rarely speaking it but still using it to write poetry and rhymes.

In addition to languages, he had a knack with mechanical devices, electronics and repairs of all kinds. I remember when I was little, a broken toaster or radio would invariably evoke, "When is grandpa coming to visit? He will fix it!" As a child, I had a firm conviction that if the universe itself were to cease to function, my grandfather would be on hand to fix it, screwdriver in hand. Needless to say he was equally at home with math and science. He never did completely trust calculators and although he used them, he would check the math by adding the column of numbers in his head.

His thirst to learn never abated. In later years when I was in college, each visit invariably included a discussion

of a new book on history he had just read, viewing the slides of a recent trip, and examining an artifact that he had brought home. For many years I had a thick book on Greek mythology that Grandpa had insisted on lending me. For too long, the book sat reproachfully on my bookshelf. Grandpa would never fail to quiz me about the contents on virtually every occasion on which I saw him over the next several years. Today, for the first time, I must confess, I never read this book. Yet he instilled in me the idea that there is always something to learn no matter where we find ourselves.

In college and in the years immediately following often frustrated by seemingly dead-end jobs, wondering what I would do with my life, he often reminded me that he had learned something in every job he ever had. Again and again, I find these words true as I apply something today that I learned as a waiter or working retail.

Even in later years, a time when some are inclined to give their minds a well-deserved rest, Grandpa continued to be passionate about learning. Painting, metal work, poetry, even learning to cook were some of the ways he continued to grow. He reveled in study for its own sake. Just for the joy of learning.

Make service to others a centerpiece of your work.

My grandfather devoted many years of his career in service to a nonprofit organization, helping design and repair machines that allowed people with disabilities the dignity of work long before the ADA was enacted.

After retiring from there, he immediately went back to work. And then again, a third time. It was not just a sense of duty and a work ethic. My grandfather loved to work. He lived to be useful. He only retired a third time when he agreed with his family that at the age of 84 it was perhaps time to stop driving over the George Washington Bridge.

Many of you reading this have already dedicated your lives to such service. To work for a nonprofit is to serve not the mighty dollar or the call of the material world, but rather a call to heal and mend a fragmented planet. The world is not perfect. There are ravages both of human making and of nature. But we were brought in to this world to create, not to destroy. To help, not to hurt. To release light, not live in darkness. The world is broken and incomplete; our purpose is to repair and to finish.

Do for others.

A wise man once said, “The greatest thing you can do is a favor for someone.” My grandfather was always doing things for his family, his friends, and even the other elderly people who lived in his building. He was very matter of fact about it. He made you feel that he was not going out of his way for you. Rather it just happened to be his turn this time. Next time you would do something for him. This is just what people did for each other.

There are so many ways in which you can help another in the course of a day. Most of them cost nothing and barely even take time. Give a coworker a smile and say, “good morning.” It sounds simple to the point of ridiculous, but how many of us just grunt at those we see every day? Pausing for just a moment and perceiving another human being can make a huge difference in both your lives. Take a minute to listen to someone or to help in a small way. When someone goes out of his way for another, it makes that person feel valued and important.

So often, I feel I have been blessed well beyond what I have merited. Helping others is the only way to pay back; yet oddly it makes one even more aware of one’s own blessings.

How do you measure the impact of a person’s life? One way is by looking at their influence on those they left behind. Is it a coincidence that my mother and her two siblings all have master’s degrees, all worked in public service and are devoted to their families and friends? Is it a coincidence that most of his grandchildren have done the same?

The common factor of the three lessons is that the most vital thing in our lives is connecting with others. When we learn, we connect with the great minds of the past. When we serve, we connect with the present. And when we perform acts of kindness, we connect with the future, since those whose lives we affect will go on to improve the lives of others. Individual connections with past, present, and future are what build a community and are truly the foundations on which the world depends.

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