

Wednesdays with Grandma

Shelley Muneoka

“You’re gonna miss me so much when I die.”

I put my fork down and looked at my grandma. She was looking down, pushing her steamed fish around her plate. I picked my fork up again and joined her, with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat.

“I really am.”

It sounds callous to say that this was not always the case, but it is the truth. For many years, contact was largely limited to major holidays and birthdays. After her eldest daughter, my mom, died suddenly, we struggled to keep in close contact. Now we share weekly meals, dishes that teleport us to the weekly Sunday dinners of my childhood. Now I have a recorder and the presence of mind to ask about what brands she likes, the right cut of meats, the order of how to put everything together, and perhaps most importantly, the family stories that go with the food.

Like sweet and tangy pigs’ feet, made with special Chinese black vinegar. I’ve always loved this dish, but I never knew that it’s made for new moms after giving birth. Grandma jokes that when she gets too old to cook, it will be my job to make these dishes for her. She’s eighty-seven now, and talks freely about a possible future when she will need more assistance with her daily activities, and indeed, about the inevitable day when she will die. Somehow we’ve fostered a relationship so safe we can talk not only about death, but about life too.

It’s taken years for us to get here. In the early days of my visits, things were very businesslike. She’d only call if she had an appointment. I’d pick her up, take care of the errands, and bring her home. But over time, the scheduled visits evolved into a weekly standing visit. I began blocking out half a day to take care of anything she might need to do. She loves not having to check with me first before scheduling appointments, because she knows that Wednesdays are for her.

Slowly, the chill between us began to thaw, and the new schedule gave us spaciousness in our interactions. Time to just talk story, and the permission to be in whatever kind of mood we might find ourselves, have been the keys to deepening our relationship. Together, we’ve seen the #MeToo movement spread like wildfire, increased visibility for transgendered people through Caitlyn Jenner’s story, Colin Kaepernick kneel in protest of police brutality, an uprising centered on the protection of Mauna Kea, and now the coronavirus epidemic—and we’ve talked about all of it and more.

I never could have imagined these kinds of critical conversations happening between us. And they would not be possible if not for the easy pace of mundane tasks like trips to Costco and weekly grocery shopping.

We don't just talk politics, we discuss family stuff too—aspirations, dreams, fond memories, secrets, regrets, friendships, and deaths. She tells me stories about growing up on Kaua'i as the middle child of sixteen siblings, and about her dreams beyond being a wife and mother. She shares stories about what kind of person my mom was, and simple tidbits like songs or toys she loved as a child—stories I never knew I had to mourn. And I've shared what it was like to grow up without my mom, and the events that transpired in the years after her death, before my grandmother and I became reacquainted.

Coded in these stories is important information about family and community, which helps me move through a world that feels increasingly difficult to hold together. One day at the kitchen table she declared—

“Guess what? This morning, I woke up and while still in bed I listed out every fruit tree I can remember in our yard, growing up in Olohena.”

I could never find this level of detail in an archive. Grandma's family used to give duck eggs to a neighbor who would make a special sponge cake out of them. Connecting raw materials with the people who have the specialized knowledge and skills for using them—do we continue this practice today? In elementary school, they had Grandma and the other kids gather wild guavas and learn how to make jam. Where can young people today learn life skills such as food growing, foraging, and processing? And what do we risk if we don't teach them?

Spending this time with my grandma has changed how I think about aging. She often jokes with me that getting old is not for the faint of heart. The challenges range from daily aches and pains, to coping with the gradual loss of some functions like her eyesight, to the heartache of losing friends and family to death. But she's shown me that there is so much more to later life—that we can be full of creativity and curiosity well into our eighties. It's been a true pleasure to help bring her creations to life—whether by buying paints (or a blowtorch) to complete her paintings, or gathering ingredients for a recipe she saw on Pinterest.

She's taught me about the gap between knowing the facts of someone's life and actually knowing a person. She's shown me that aging is the culmination of our entire lives, and to take a long view about decisions before me today. She reminds me that I am flush with choices and opportunities that were not available to her at my age. She's shown me how to face new limitations with grace and new technologies with zeal. She tells me stories about being the tallest in her elementary school class, and therefore the designated person to stand on the little stool by the telephone pole to use the call box outside. She also gives me tips on how to drop a pin on Google Maps so I can find my car at the mall.

For the last three years, I've worked half-time at Hā Kūpuna, the National Resource Center for Native Hawaiian Elders, housed in the UH Mānoa School of

Social Work. We disseminate statistics and anecdotes about long-term care needs and preferences of Native Hawaiian kūpuna, and about their health and life expectancy disparities. All my grandparents are my unwitting research partners, helping to remind me how diverse the experiences of kūpuna are.

Studies struggle to find representative samples, since people who are doing well may be more likely to volunteer to participate. There are other considerations as well. Do the findings reflect elders living in a rural and an urban setting? How does socioeconomic status play a role in one's health status? What impact does aging have on family culture and values in a multiethnic family? How has colonialism impacted families differently?

When I zoom out and re-imagine eldercare in a post-COVID-19 world, I hope that more families will have the kind of time I'm sharing with my grandma. So many of the challenges older people face could be addressed through quality time with family members. A weekly visit could help with social isolation, transportation, and food insecurity. Though social agencies or private providers offer some of these services, quality time with a family member is ideal, because professional workers—or family caregivers squeezing in visits around full-time work schedules—may struggle to find spaciousness in their time together. Professional caregivers can be godsend, providing specialized skills and respite for exhausted families. But they often meet care recipients when they are experiencing limitations. The shared history, present, and future of family members or long-time friends change the quality of interactions, adding a natural relevance and meaning to stories.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely such arrangements can become commonplace as long as Hawai'i's cost of living stays so high. Many families can't spend time on what they value most, because they're forced to prioritize paying bills. It was painful to head to work each morning, driving away from my grandparents, when I really wanted to drive to them. To clear time for my grandma, I left a full-time job, and lucked out on an affordable apartment with a roommate. I'm not sure I could do this if I had children to care for.

I've come to understand spacious time with kūpuna as much more than a personal indulgence. If we want to avoid hitting reset with each and every generation, we need to *intentionally* spend intergenerational time together, to learn about our pasts, presents, and futures. We need to hear not just the facts and figures, but the feelings and philosophies. I hope that by forcing us to reorder our day-to-day lives, COVID-19 has given us an unexpected chance to spend time differently—with family, reprioritizing what matters most.

Shelley Muneoka is a kanaka maoli woman born and raised in He'eia Uli, in Ko'olaupoko, O'ahu. Shelley works at Hā Kūpuna: The National Resource Center for Native Hawaiian Elders, and continues to share meals and mo'olelo each week with her grandma.