

What My Grandmother Taught Me About the Universe

It was Christmas Eve, and in the garage, in a large bucket, there were eels circling frantically. They were black and thicker and scarier than the grass snakes I had seen my mother kill. But I was five years old, and it was the best day of my life since the summer when we had moved into our new home. After months of having no one on the half-built street to play with, our house was not only filled with the amine odours of a fish market but with cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents. Some of them had recently moved to Connecticut, and after an absence of months, it was nice to be surrounded by their warmth and laughter again.

But later in the evening, I was overtaken by a morbid thought: when I'd be old, my older relatives would all be dead. The lonely feeling of the deserted street returned.

As we age, we form new bonds with friends and with especially with next generation. Do we simply substitute past emotional attachments with new ones? It would not be enough. We also harbour dead souls, letting memories of them sail in and out of our daily lives.

My grandmother died when I was 17. I have recurring dreams of her awakening from a coma, and she's back in her kitchen cooking for my grandfather. In the next dream, I hope to raid the tangerines in her fridge and to hear her telling me again not to get gluttonous.

Born in a rural village in 1900, she never attended school, but she was a great peacemaker, nipping family squabbles in the bud. She showed me how to make a bow and arrows from poplar branches in our backyard. It was a thrill as a child to teach her about numbers. After my lesson, I noticed she actually picked up the phone more often. But I wish that I had gone beyond digits. If I had taught her how to write, I'd have a glimpse of her inner thoughts; she could have recorded memories that she spoke about but which have been forgotten.

From the written records of the labours of scientists, there is so much I've learned, most of which is like the cherished memory of my grandmother smiling as I looked at her EKG two days before she died. It is not often that our rational side acts as the composer of dreams, but occasionally mathematical and scientific concepts have coasted in and turned into one of those movies we enjoy in our sleep. Certainly in our awaken state, no time is ever lost revisiting what we have learned. What sense is there in letting ideas or people be forgotten? When our attempts in holding on to far more than what is normally retained are successful, time, at least temporarily, ceases to be entropy's arrow. Boundaries between the past and present fade. We are finally listening to what the universe is trying to convey.