

Excerpt from speech given at May, 2004 Awards Ceremony of the Greater San Diego Council of Teachers of English to honor student writers.

In 1987, I participated in the San Diego Area Writing Project held each summer on the campus of University of California. It was there at the project that I found my own voice, you might say, because I was required not only to learn how to teach writing to my students, but I was required to practice the assignments myself. This poem is one written during my time in the Writing Project. The assignment was to capture the essence of a family member using imagery that appeals to the five senses.

My grandfather had recently died and thoughts of him and his relationship with my grandmother arose in my mind as I considered that sensory image assignment. I share this poem in honor of him and his influence on me as a person and as a lifelong learner. I recite it for you tonight to inspire you to use your words to preserve the memories of your family members and your friends. I titled my poem, "Grampoppa".

Grandfather, or grampoppa, we called him
Working at odd jobs
Living out his faith.
God called him to pastor –
To shepherd his flock,
To care for his family.

Amidst the dusty-pew odor
And sour, mildewy hymnals,
Intermingled with colognes and after shave
Energine and perspiration,
I see him sitting on the platform
In a small rented church,
His skin glistening like warm maple syrup,
His bald, billiard bare head
Thrown back or cocked to one side,
Inspired, but unmusical hymns
Stirring him to respond.



Sometimes Grampoppa would raise his arm
To beat the time
Like a mime
Restricted to precise, but invisible boundaries
Like a Marine
Guarding the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Sometimes the emotions burst from this glowing face
In an arousing “Glory!” or “Hallelujah”!
These eruptions startle and amuse us,
We, who sit in the pews, observing like peeping Toms,
Our grandfather’s response to
Songs of praise
Songs of adoration
To the God who called him to be a pastor.

Pastoring his family –
Providing food, clothing and shelter.
Fond memories of love and devotion
For each of us and his wife for life.
His wife of sixty-five years – loving to the end.

I can see the two of them
She in a small-print cotton dress
Covered with a full-checked apron,
Hair neatly combed
Feet neatly shod,
Carrying him a tray of food
Throwing him kisses before returning to the kitchen.

I see them – my first house guests my first year of marriage.
Me – married fewer than fifty-two weeks;
Them – married more than fifty-two years!
What a model! What a challenge!

After dinner, Grampoppa tells humorous anecdotes
Of his first years as a pastor.
She listens as though each detail is new to her.
But even I know the story of that dinner invitation.

After church one Sunday, one member said,

“Re’v Wi’yums, yawl gotta come and hab suppa wif us.
Suppa is ready. Yawl won’t haf ta wait.”

Dinner really was ready; already on the table.

“Come on in,” she invited.
“Sit right down,” she cajoled,

Grabbing a soup spoon, flicking the flies
From the fat, floating atop the now congealing soup.

Granmamma smiles at the punch line; my husband laughs on schedule.

Being a pastor meant caring for his family,
Working at odd jobs between pastorates.

I remember him, smiling pleasantly, courteously bobbing his head
Working in a grocery store
Carrying other people’s groceries
But bringing home for his family
Day-old baked goods
And week-old fruits.

I remember being thrilled –
We could have our clothes cleaned for free!
Anytime we wanted. Just tie a white cloth through the buttonhole.
Grampoppa worked nights at dry cleaners.

I remember him in a suit and tie
No matter how old
No matter how frayed
Shirts starched and ironed by Granmamma
Shoes shined and polished
No matter how old
No matter how holey.
I can see Grampoppa reading, sitting in a front room chair
Its turquoise brocade zipped in plastic protectors.
His toes turned inwards
His knees tightly clamped
Cradling a study-worn Bible.
His fourth grade education extended a lifetime
He believed more could be learned
He knew more must be gleaned
To prepare a pastor to practice his faith.
Grampoppa

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