

I'll Rest When I Die

A Tribute to NA

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There was a woman who inspired me to live life to its fullest. She was my “grand” mother for 31 years of my life. During those years, I witnessed a lifetime of love and righteous living that few people could ever have the pleasure of experiencing or even envisioning. She left me an inheritance more valuable than a million dollar estate. In return, I affectionately named her “Na” and I will cherish her in my heart and memories for ever.

She was my closest family member to pass away, save her sister, my saint-like Aunt Lucy who I now refer to as my guardian angel. As sad as it was to lose someone so close to me, I found solace in the fact that she had everything “in order” when she died. No last minute apologies, no regrets, no ambiguity and most importantly, no guilt. No loose ends were left untied. I believe that Na could have passed away at any time and not left a burden behind for anyone to contend with. True to form as the great housekeeper she was, she kept her life neat and in order as well. She had her bags packed and ready to go whenever the Lord was ready for her.

Na was full of intuition and premonition all of her life. How ironic that she knew it was her own time to go upon checking in to the hospital for abdominal pains. She blessed me by passing her sixth sense along to me starting the instant she died. I'll never forget the moment when I realized it. It was a sunny day in Virginia Beach and I was driving my boat with my brother Layne. I bent over to grab my water bottle which was rolling across the deck and I hit my sunglasses on the metal windshield frame. The corner of the frame caused a small scratch on the polarized lens allowing a ray of unfiltered light to shine through. Before I could formulate a thought about the scratch, my phone rang. When I saw it was my mom on the caller ID, I didn't even have to hear the sorrow in her voice before I knew Na had passed. That ray of light a second beforehand was her signaling me from heaven.

At age 89 Na had the health and mobility of the average 60 year old in this country. An amazing feat, considering she had been through 2 hip replacement surgeries and colon removal. A lot of people wouldn't have survived what she lived through - they would have given up and been bed-ridden 10, 20, 40 years prior. A friend of mine went with me to their house for a visit one afternoon. She was awestruck to see my grandma on hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen floor – because she knew how old she was! I was shocked when I heard from my uncle that they were taking Na to the hospital because just the week before I had witnessed her cleaning the house and cooking. Her words resound in my memories today “you've got to keep doing until you die or you will die.” There is

no doubt in my mind that her daily and weekly routine and devout adherence to those is what kept her healthy and alive for so long.

With the exception of drinking governmentally-polluted well water for a large portion of her life, Na lived a very healthy and active lifestyle. She did not own a microwave and wouldn't have thought of using one if she did. No sir, all meals were home-cooked the old fashioned way. She would put out holiday meal spreads that would rival the work of a team of sous chefs and she would do it by herself in a humble kitchen with a standard 30" electric stove. This feat would be difficult or even impossible for anyone her age, but she did it with a smile and made it look easy. I once had a vision of her as a little girl watching her mother cook not a holiday meal, but a nightly meal in a country style kitchen with a wood stove and no running water. I then knew why Na cooked with a smile – her kitchen was heaven to her - a girlhood fantasy inconceivable in her era and state of technology at that time. It was this realization that afforded me a viable argument to a contractor who was putting me off on some trim work on a historic renovation. After 2 weeks of lollygagging, he told me that he didn't have the right nail gun to do the job. I know the construction of late nineteenth century houses and I know that when they built the houses originally they didn't have any nail guns, in fact, they were lucky to get a straight nail from the blacksmith. It was apparent to me that this guy didn't have the will power to work at age 25. I thought about my Na cooking in her kitchen every day, 3 times a day for her and my grandfather and occasional guests. She never missed having a double oven or a micro-wave, she made it work with what she had. She resisted the urge for take-out or prepared foods or frozen microwave meals. She avoided the easy way out. She never missed things that a lot of people take for granted today.

Na was cultured deeply in her own way. It blew my mind that she never experienced Italian or Mexican food. "Spicy things didn't agree with her". What she did experience was the wholesome goodness of home-made (and home-grown in many instances) food that she made with love. I swear she made the best tasting meal you could ever eat. Rolls, corn-puddin', fried okra, butterbeans, snaps and cobbler with special sugar sauce were some of her specialties. I would pay 5 star dining prices for one of her meals any day. Their back yard garden yielded an abundance of organic goodness which they lovingly shared with family, friends and neighbors via Da's tractor pulled trailer through Rayon Park. Na's grapevine was the envy of every bird for miles. Somehow there was always enough left over for canning and preserving. It was almost like Jesus sharing the fish. There was always enough to share and for them sharing came first. Na would give you the shirt off of her back, or better yet, make you one of your own. As a child I watched in perplexity as the bobbin on her singer sewing machine plunged in and out a piece of fabric taught between her fingers with careful calculation and precision. Her concentration was amazing and her handi-work was typically flawless with a certain degree of "Na-ness" or love sewn in to every fiber. I was teased as a kid by classmates for some of the home-made fashion I wore, but looking back, I know they were only jealous that their grandmother either lacked the life, time, ability or most importantly desire to craft such a garment for them. Was it her time in the "spool room" working the looms which produced fibers for DuPont that taught her this skill or was it inherited from her mother or self taught? Either way, most people probably wouldn't want to even see a

needle and thread if they worked in a post-depression factory doing the same thing hours on end every shift work week. She took the skill to a different level and never accepted a penny for any of her button sewing or hemming services.

I don't think Na would want anyone to be sad about her death. I think I am a lot like her and I think we both share the same view on post life wishes. She led by example and I think the highest complement that I can give her is to emulate her in certain ways. Times have changed drastically since she was my age, but certain values and morals are timeless. She taught me that the most important thing you can leave behind to a loved one or the good of the people is a great impression. Have you known anyone for 31 years? Could you look back and honestly remember them never complaining about anything, or bad mouthing anyone, or fighting with their spouse, or speaking of some ailment that you know they have? Even when times were probably tough, you would never guess it from meeting her. She loved her husband with benevolent devotion till death did part them. Together they made a perfect team. Na had her "software" chores and routines in the house and garden and Da handled the "hardware" side of things in the garage. They were the Yen and the Yang of life.

Although I am not a devout Christian like Na, she taught me that you should believe in something whether it is religion or simply believing in yourself. Without a higher belief, the mind becomes stale and the heart loses hope. A higher belief keeps you ascending higher in life and gives you purpose, morals, values, history and discipline. I wonder how many times she read the Bible before going to sleep at night. She believed and prayed daily and always practiced what she preached.

Na was a grandmother, a mother, a role model and a friend to me all of my life. She made my childhood special with her goodie bags that she would prepare for me and my brother. To this day my mouth waters when I glimpse that left-hand door of the buffet in the dining room where she used to keep the sweets. Junior mints, candy bars and all kinds of treats resided in there - it was like a candy store! Not only did the quaint cape cod on Libwood appeal to my sweet tooth as a child, but also had the aura of a carnival fun-house. I'll never forget the adventure of following Na into the storage eaves on the second floor that she nicknamed "man-holes". She made such an adventure out of something as simple as looking for yarn in storage. There were always some cool antique toys or other keepsakes to be found in there. No matter how busy Na was with her own tasks and chores, she never hesitated a moment to go out of her way to make sure Layne and I were entertained, fed and comfortable.

Na was a spendthrift with her love, but frugal in every other aspect. I watched her wash Saran wrap and Aluminum foil and spread it on the counter to dry for reuse later. I saw her pour salt and pepper packets from take-out restaurants into her shakers at home. I thought surely my grandparents could afford to buy salt and pepper - after all, they paid for their house in only seven years. Then I realized that it was frugality like that which allowed them to pay off their house so soon when other families remained married to a 30 year mortgage.

Every aspect of Na and Da remained as constant and stable as the sunrise. From the décor in their house, the beautiful blooming Dogwoods and John-quills in the spring, the summer vegetable garden, the Concord grapevine, the smell of her rolls in the oven, Webber Baptist Church Sunday morning and the Chesterfield airport restaurant Sunday lunch buffet to grocery shopping on Thursdays – her routine was clockwork. Her daily routine translated into yearly holiday traditions as well. You could always count on a comfortable, loving family environment and a home-cooked meal every Christmas, Thanksgiving and birthday. She and Da always put the extra touch on the holiday to make it special. I will never forget the Christmas wonderland that the basement transformed into with the antique Christmas lights and the pile of neatly wrapped presents covering the washer and dryer in the corner. My favorite Christmas tradition of all was the “Boom-Bag”. It was a Na-made red naga-hyde bag with a broom stick handle at the top and a draw string at the bottom. She and Da would pack it full of every goodie and trinket imaginable and they would even stuff some cash in some unsuspecting tissue packet or something. When she pulled that draw string, a pile of joy fell onto the floor and the whole family delved in for their share. What a cool tradition.

Na would defend and “rescue” me sometimes when Da would pick on me. I will never forget when Da generously offered to give me his 1972 Ford LTD “greenie” when I turned 16. Na, in her infinite wisdom, said “Jake, he doesn’t want that big old car, he wants something sporty”. She couldn’t have been more right, but I would have never had the heart to tell it to Da. Na always knew when something was bothering me and she always knew how to make it better.

The best way for me to honor Na is to carry her memories fresh in my mind and live life to the fullest as she did. She used to tell me when I was distraught because my younger brother was “copying me” that “imitation is the highest form of flattery.” She has inspired me to “copy” her in many ways. I have expensive taste and will never be frugal like her, but I conserve and recycle whenever possible. She taught me that helping others can bring a great sense of accomplishment and that generosity will be rewarded tenfold. I gained a green thumb and affection for gardening because of her and I now take great pride in growing my own herbs and adorning my tiki hut with plants in the spring and summer. I clean my apartment with energy and a smile instead of disdain. I always appreciate a home cooked meal and the love, time and energy that goes into one. Every time my mother cooks some rolls or corn-pudding, I thank my grandmother for teaching her those skills. I witnessed a wonderful marriage and aspire to have the same situation myself and I know that it will work if I have the same respect for my wife that Na and Da had for each other. I will have children one day and will endure the same patience that Na had with me and my brother. I will go out of my way to make every occasion special for my friends and family. I miss Na always, but will always remember and cherish the memories and examples that she left behind. I will continue her legacy by passing them on to my family and friends in the future. Rest in peace, Na – and know that you are loved and remembered by those whom you loved.