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Enrique

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Enrique

By Nicholas Mavrolas

I was never the type of person to sit and think about the overall meaning and impacts of my past experiences. I always carried a “things happen for a reason” and “you just gotta roll with the punches” type of mentality. Although I still possess some of these features, it took a series of unfortunate events to get me to realize that there is more to life than constantly pushing forward. To me, death was just something we would all have to go through at some point in life. Whether it be our own or that of a relative or close friend, death is inevitable. Yet it is still something nearly everyone is uncertain about. When will it happen? What happens after? Is there an afterlife? These are questions I often find myself thinking about, and although my faith assures me there will in fact be a life after death, my mind can’t help but wonder.

My relationship with my grandfather was quite different and unlike the stereotypical movie-like relationship between a loving old man and a happy go lucky child. All throughout my childhood, my mother and her siblings painted this godlike picture of my grandfather, Enrique. Whether it was the time he wrestled a bull to the ground with his bare hands in Mexico, or the many times he swam across the freezing waters of Littlerock Dam with the force of a submarine, the stories were endless. Yet even after all these stories that placed him beside Hercules and mammoths, I still just saw him as the little old man that never took off his cowboy hat and boots. To me he was still just Grandpa. I recall the times I would sit in his living room and play with old toy cars and legos as he spoke to my mother about god knows what, and the time he finally took his cowboy hat off and let me keep it. I recall hugging him and my grandmother as we visited them for Christmas Eve every year, while their wrinkled smiles scolded my mother for not teaching my siblings and me how to speak Spanish. I knew he was talking to me when he would switch from fluent Spanish to broken English. He would

ask about school, baseball, and comment about me growing too fast. Although, had I been growing as much as he said I was, I'd be playing for the Lakers right now. As much as the language barrier limited our communication, the love and respect was never hindered.

At the age of 83, the only thing that plagued him was bad asthma and an even worse case of stubbornness. He had finally received his American citizenship after working nearly his whole adult life in a country that wanted nothing more than to send him back to where he "came from". Still, through all the challenges and obstacles that were thrown at him, he had achieved marrying a beautiful woman and bringing six children into the "country of opportunity". In the end, all it took was a couple misguided teenagers breaking into his house to end a life that impacted so many of us. It was one in the morning on the third of January; I remember lying in bed and receiving a text from my mother. My grandfather had been found lying face down in the dirt without a pulse beside his truck. After hearing his house was being broken into, he jumped into his truck in hopes of stopping it. His stubbornness had come back to bite him. What was he thinking while he sped down the road in what would be his final moments of consciousness? What were his final thoughts? How long did he lay lifeless on that cold gravel? The EMT found him and used emergency CPR to revive his heartbeat. Although he was alive, he never regained consciousness. Compulsions and seizures riddled through his body as he fought for his life in that never ending ambulance ride.

I remember walking into the ICU and seeing him lying in the hospital bed while my grandmother and parents huddled around him. As the machine above him stabilized his breathing, I remember being taken aback at how small he looked in that bed. His shriveled body sank into bed as if it were quicksand, and his cold pale legs draped across the sheets that seemed to devour his body. It was also the first time that I could recall seeing him without his boots on. The thought of him not being around anymore was something I hadn't fully accepted nor acknowledged. With every new guest that entered the room, we would

take our turn blessing him with holy water and praying over him. We did this every day and every night for about a week; my mother and her siblings took turns spending the night at the hospital, fearing he would pass during the night. The day my grandmother made the decision to take him off the machine and end the pain of drugs and fluids that the doctors continuously pumped into his body is a day I will certainly never forget. We gathered around his bed, said one final prayer, and held him as he took his last breath. Being a part of something so emotional was an extremely moving experience. An experience that was moving in a way I cannot truly understand or define, and although I hadn't come to terms with what had really happened, I knew it was real. Nothing is more humbling than seeing a grown man weep at the feet of his dead father, or talking to someone who I knew would not be able to answer me back. As terrible as I was feeling, I knew my pain did not compare to that of my mother and her siblings.

It was all so weird to see my mom's siblings in the same room again. For years most of them remained distant in the wake of bumping heads over and over again. It was the first time in years I had seen a couple of them. It is unfortunate that in the last years of his life, my grandfather didn't get to see them reunite and heal the open wounds that they left on each other. However, I know he would be proud and filled with joy to know his kids came together for him in his final days. Seeing my mother and her siblings laugh and reminisce about old memories put many of us at peace; they could have handled things much differently if they hadn't put their pride aside during all this. It was even better that my grandmother was able to see her children share emotions and mourn the man that made it all possible.

I began to think of my own family, and how the passing of my father would affect my siblings and me. I thought of all the times we went trout fishing in the Sierras, and all the time we spent jumping and screaming in front of the TV as the Dodgers and Lakers played. To me, my father and grandfather had always been total opposites of each other. However, after everything that happened and further thinking, I came to a realization that the

only thing that separated them was age and language. They were both a couple of stubborn construction workers who left home at an early age in search of independence and a way to survive; but they both ended up achieving much more. Overachievers are what we like to refer to them as. If I was this emotional about my grandfather, who I had limited interaction with, how would I handle the death of my own father or mother? The two people who I've spent my entire life with. There's no way for me to prepare myself for these events. The only thing I can do is be grateful to have a good relationship with them and hope they live long, full lives filled with many more memories.

I find that lately, my mind begins to wander, whether it be while I'm out with friends or sitting in my dorm room all alone. I find myself thinking about standing over the hospital bed, or carrying the casket with my ties towards the gravesite. The death of my grandfather was so impactful, yet I still don't understand it. I may not understand death, but at least I now know how to cope with it. Sometimes it's better not to try to move on so quickly. Instead, find the time to sit down, reflect, relive, and cherish the moments and memories you have with someone. Acknowledge that life is too short to stress over minor inconveniences. I learned how easy it is for life to be taken away. Death doesn't discriminate or prey on the weak; death does not wait for the right time or act in the cheapest manner. Death gives little to no warning and doesn't keep emotions or values in mind. Death is as cold as it comes, but death allows me to enjoy and value the life I am living. Through my fear and experience with death, my outlook on life changed drastically. The humbling and emotional experiences that have been engraved into my head will not go unnoticed as I continue living. I remember watching the graveyard workers fill in the lifeless hole with dirt. As the workers packed down the fresh soil they had just placed on the grave, my father, who was standing next to me said something I hope I never forget. He didn't look at me as he said it, as our eyes were locked on the two men packing dirt with their shovels. "And just like that...that's how it ends... all your hard work, everything you've worked for.... a couple of minimum wage workers throwing dirt on you."