

I don't feel so old anymore



My grandmother, Nana, closing in on 102 and the final days of her life

This morning after my ride I got a call from my mom, letting me know that my grandmother, Nana, had been admitted to the hospital last night with breathing problems. No biggie, for most people. And for all I know, it could be no biggie for Nana... which would be something of a surprise, since she's closing in on 102. But my mom sounded like this was pretty serious, so we (the wife & kids included) paid her a visit tonight.

If this is what someone on death's door looks and acts like, my fears of getting older have been greatly misplaced. Sure, she hears primarily from just one side, but she does hear and understand quite well. Yes, she has trouble recognizing some people sometimes, but retains a tremendous amount of memory of subtle things; events in your life, events in hers, and little things that didn't seem too important at the time but now, 30, 40, 50 years later, you can see that they were.

Interesting to think about what might be important to you 30, 40 or 50 years from now. It likely won't be what you got for Christmas or anything having to do with your finances.

She's also happy. Really happy. Almost to the point of displacement (as in, having no sense of her current situation). She smiles, and in those moments where she gets serious, she's mostly admonishing people for worrying about things too much. She could talk about all the unfortunate things in her life, in particular relatives she's outlived by far more than a country mile (my cousin Jon cut down by pancreatic cancer is his mid-40s, my aunt Judy who passed away a few years ago, my grandfather, Pompa, one of the great influences in my early life, who has been gone for maybe 27 years... her sister... ohmygoodness, when you live to be nearly 102, I guess there are going to be quite a few!).

But Nana focuses on life. And it's kind of strange, because you can't tell if she's really aware that she's not that far from joining those now gone. In her late 80s and early 90s, it (her death) was all she talked about. But somewhere, sometime, that all changed. She seems completely at peace with where she is, and doesn't spend much, if any, time discussing where she's going. Is that so bad? I wish I knew. I don't. Part of me says there are things to discuss, not plans, but questions to ask while she's still around, and for her, things to get off her mind so she can be at peace. But she's a pro at the final stage of life, expanding it from the usual too-short a time (a short chapter cut even shorter by an ending that came sooner than expected) to something approaching an epic novel in its entirety. She's been "preparing" for this for maybe 20 years. Or more.

I will miss her when she's gone, but probably not as much as I fear, because what I won't miss will be the memories of many years past, and those memories don't die with the person. There may be just a few short days to create new memories, and in fact, visiting her, I struggle a bit, looking for something new to learn and share. But that's missing the point and putting far too much emphasis on the next few days, weeks or months, than should be the case. The point is that she's been part of my life since I was born, and the memories are already in place. There will be few, if any, unanswered questions upon her passing. And what I am today is at least partly a result of the time I spent on Nana & Pompa's ranch in the Sacramento Valley during the summers while a young kid. That won't die with Nana.

Addendum 01/02/12- Nana's left the hospital and is back "home" (one of those "assisted living" places that can take care of elderly folk 24/7), apparently more determined than her doctors thought to make it to that 102nd birthday in February. Pretty amazing!

