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Common Reading Experience Writing Competition

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Same Blue Eyes

Alcoholism runs in my mother's side of the family. My mother's dad, Tom, was a doctor and a loving father, husband, and grandpa. However, he struggled with addiction and his crux was alcohol. The liquid turned him from a gentle, loving man into sometimes an out of touch father, who would later abandon his family. My mother grew up with a few other siblings, and her mom and dad (grandpa Tom). When my mom was very young her dad Tom abandoned his wife and kids and left in his wake a single mom to care for multiple young children. When my mom would ask where dad was, my grandma Sarah would often tell her kids that dad was on a long fishing trip. However it soon became apparent that dad wasn't coming home, and I'm sure my grandma struggled on how to let her kids know that their father was probably starting a new life that revolved around alcohol.

When I was much younger, my family and I would often spend time with Grandpa Tom and he was a very kind, gentle, and loving figure to us. During those times, it didn't occur to me that there was a much different side to him.

The last time I saw my grandpa Tom when he was in a rational mental state was when I was probably around ten. It was a lovely day, my mother and grandpa Tom were having coffee at

a neighborhood park, and my sister and I were playing in a fountain nearby. The memory of saying bye to him that day lingers in my head, and I can still remember his smile and the Broncos ball cap he was wearing. A month or so later, my mom got a call from Jonathan, her brother-in-law, one of Tom's other children from a different marriage. Jonathan explained that the past couple of times he had seen Tom, he seemed distant and not in his normal state of mind, and that recently he hadn't heard from Tom in a while so he decided to go check up on him in his apartment. When he got in, he was instantly up to his ankles, and sometimes knees, in beer cans. He found my grandpa Tom in an altered state of consciousness in his bed and Jonathan immediately called for help. It had turned out that Tom had drank so much he developed dementia from it. For the last few years of his life, he spent his days in a nursing home complacently drifting around in a state which I can only describe as "half there." This all took place when I was in my younger teens and when my sister was entering adolescence; these are very impressionable times, and I believe these experiences before and after our Grandpa drank himself into dementia gave us a unique perspective of the consequences of alcohol.

When our family went to the nursing home for the first time, it was the first time I had seen grandpa Tom since he was hospitalized. It was also the first time my sister and I had been in a nursing home for Alzheimer's patients. Were these old people staring at me for some reason? What can possibly be so interesting about us? Why is that old man calling me his son? Questions like these were ones I asked myself and my parents because I had been so oblivious to diseases with such effects. Even stranger than seeing patients as strange as this was seeing my once familiar grandpa in a state that was so odd. My mom had told me that grandpa Tom made some terrible decisions and that he wouldn't be the same, however I didn't fully understand the

implications of “wouldn’t be the same”. The first time we walked in his room with the “Dr. Tom” sign, I looked at my grandpa and made an expression like, “hey grandpa it’s me!” but his expression didn’t change. I thought this was odd but was even more thrown off when he didn’t seem to recognize any of us except maybe my mom. He looked the same mostly, same blue eyes, bushy gray eyebrows, yet he was radically different.

My grandpa was so far gone that out of the four of us, my mom, dad, sister, and I, Tom would only remember, occasionally, my mom’s name and would call me by my uncle’s, his son’s name, Andy. When we would go into the nursing home we would be met by other folks of equal, lesser, or greater spacy-ness who would often times stare at us as like deer in the headlights. Sometimes they would say inaudible things to us and we would just smile back at them.

One such encounter I remember in full detail. This time I could understand every word this elderly woman said to me. She asked me as I was walking through the halls of the nursing home, “where do I go to die”? I was very hesitant and clueless how to answer this, and I believe I said something to the effect of, “uhhh merp, I don’t know.” Looking back on this moment, there are other ways in which I wished I had answered. In Eric Greiten’s book, *The Heart and the Fist*, he asks us to be “more than just good, and better than just strong” (Greitens 11). In this case, I wasn’t even good. I wish when that old lady asked me where to go to die, I would have had the courage and thoughtfulness to put my hand on her shoulder and said something like, “go into your room, lay down, close your eyes and envision yourself in the most beautiful place you can picture surrounded by whoever you wish. Then smile to yourself and if you are ready, ask whoever your God is that you wish you could stay here in this fantasy of whatever you want for

a while.” Now, I don’t think this old lady would even comprehend what I would have said, but at least she would feel like I understood her and at least made her feel good by me placing my hand on her shoulder. Maybe I could have even just changed the subject and asked her to go on a walk with us. Rather than being struck dumb at the foreign situation that confronted me, I wish I had been strong enough to do something to make her feel understood, loved, or even appreciated. Living in nursing homes such as these, often times the workers just will say “yes, yes”, or nod their heads and go along with whatever their patient is saying rather than taking an extra second and treating them as people, people who are moms, dads, siblings, or grandparents to some of us.

Being in a nursing home, especially one with residents who have different severities of Alzheimer's, can allow for a newfound appreciation for mental clarity. Indeed, at the same time, it can inspire one to comfort those who have lost most of their grip on reality. Simply giving a smile to a resident walking by will often times be the nicest gesture they will encounter that day. Giving a smile is nice, but there is so much more we can do. So many more ways we can be, “more than just good, and better than just strong”. Sitting down at a table during their lunch and offering to play with cards or dominoes can spark up feelings of happiness and community that these people probably haven’t felt in years. When our family would take Grandpa Tom on walks outside of the nursing home it brought him a refreshing happiness that was visible in how he perked up a bit and formed genuine smile that we hadn’t seen for such a long time. It is activities like these I wish I had done more of during my time visiting Grandpa Tom. Sure, it was kind of me to get dragged along to the nursing home with the rest of the family, but it would have been “better than just good” if I had gone in enthusiastically and had more personable interactions with the folks there.

This interaction between me and the old woman might seem like an insignificant ten second encounter on the surface, but it has given me a new perspective on how to treat others in an embracing and comforting way. Just taking an extra moment to stop and think that this person isn't just a stranger, but a human being just like me with a family behind them. To this day this interaction, and my reflections on it, continues to affect me. It has given me a new drive to take a second or two and make interactions with strangers that I encounter as an opportunity to make them feel like I appreciate talking with them, I want to hear what they have to say and maybe learn something that I can incorporate into my own life.

Seeing a loved one in such an unfamiliar state of mind can start to lead us to questioning whether or not this is the same person we once knew. Though on the surface a family member with dementia may seem completely different, they are still the same soul we once cherished so much. Loving a person back when they sometimes might not notice or seem to appreciate it can be tough, but it is this unconditional love that keeps families together through the obstacles life lies before us. I loved my grandpa before and after his life altering disease and when he was terminally declining of course we all felt grief. However once the time came where grandpa Tom left this world for another, our whole family felt as though his hindered soul had finally detached from his body and could now flourish as the gentle, intellectual, loving spirit that is Tom.

I learned a lot from our family outings to visit Grandpa Tom in the nursing home, I learned how substance abuse can destroy one's mind, and my sister and I got new insights by just being in such a foreign and unfamiliar environment. We learned the importance of comforting people, and how "random acts of kindness" such as asking to go on a walk, can go such a long ways. Most of all I believe my sister and I got a whole new appreciation for our position in life,

and how we have to mental sharpness and clarity that can take us to great heights, while also seeing first hand how abuse of substances can take us to low lows.

Greitens, Eric. *The Heart and the Fist*. New York & Boston: Mariner Books, 2011. 11. Print.

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