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The Power of Storytelling

When I first thought about writing this essay, I was a bit lost. *What about my identity makes me so unique? What stories do I have to tell?* These thoughts ran through my mind as I slumped over my desk in utter confusion. Then came a realization- I simply do not know. So when I arrived back at my house for the long weekend, my first time being home from college, I asked my mother, “Tell me about Papa. I want to know what his childhood was like.” “Huh? You already know about my father,” she answered.

“Well... I know his parents were immigrants, and I know he was born here, but tell me more about his childhood,” I asked curiously.

“So your grandfather spoke English and Lithuanian from a young age, and his parents worked in the mills in Lowell...”

She told me all about his childhood. He was born, the youngest of five, in Lowell, MA in 1932- ten years after his parents moved to the United States from Lithuania. It was not safe in Lithuania in the early 1920’s. Russia was expanding westward and the two countries were at war, so his parents docked at Ellis Island in 1922. My grandfather’s experiences were similar to author Amy Tan. In her piece, *Mother Tongue*, Tan describes what it was like growing up bilingual- speaking English and translating her mother’s Chinese. Tan states, “I sought to preserve the essence, but not either an English or a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests could never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her

speech and the nature of her thoughts” (Tan 8). Tan found herself translating for her mother at a young age, and sometimes even pretending to be her own mother over the phone (Tan 7).

Similarly, when he was only ten years old, my grandfather would translate his parents’ Lithuanian at the local grocery store. His primary language was Lithuanian, but he learned to speak English in grade school.

Some bits and pieces of this story were familiar, but some of it was new. This had me thinking: *How much of all this gets passed on? And what is forgotten over time? My grandfather was bilingual and spoke Lithuanian, but how come he never taught my mom his native language?*

In his piece, *Can you Lose a Language you Never Knew?*, Kevin Garcia touches on this same idea. Garcia was raised a monolingual Mexican-American. He grew up in Los Angeles. His parents were busy all the time so his aunt took care of him and his brother. Garcia’s aunt was supposed to teach him Spanish, but she desperately needed to learn English to fit into American culture. So, Garcia and his brother were not exposed to enough Spanish to pick up the language and, therefore, do not speak it. My mother’s experience can be related to that of Garcia. While my grandfather spoke Lithuanian, he never taught the language to my mother or her siblings. Similarly to Garcia’s parents, my grandfather was always busy while raising his three children. He worked the night shift at General Electric Motors, and would often work overtime, so he only saw his kids on the weekends. This left my mom to care for her younger sister as her older brother was off at college. But aside from that, there was no real need for my grandfather to pass on his native language. When his parents immigrated to the U.S., along with hundreds of thousands from their homeland, in the early 1900’s, they found a Lithuanian community. But today, far less Americans, a miniscule percentage, actually speak Lithuanian. It

is a very old and complex language, so it is not commonly spoken in the United States. Even in Lithuania, English is the most popular foreign language and is spoken by eighty percent of the country's youth (Chepkemoi). So, according to my mother, there was never a reason for my grandfather to teach her the language: nobody speaks it.

James Baldwin states, "Language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity" (Baldwin). Times were tough for my grandfather and his family. His parents worked in the textile mills in Lowell during the Industrial Revolution. Every Christmas, my grandfather would be gifted a single orange with gratitude and appreciation. They lived in a poor Lithuanian neighborhood. Language and communal identity united their neighborhood. They had their own church, native ties, Lithuanian food, and a shared community. James Baldwin speaks of language connecting one with or separating one from a larger communal identity, which applies directly to my grandfather and his family. In a country that seemed so foreign and distant, language and culture united their community and preserved their communal identity. In spite of this, foreign languages, as with my family, tend to become lost over generations as families assimilate. Immigrant communities may learn the English language and American culture, and then pass it on to their children. *But what about their native language?* English is the U.S. is the dominant language, so it is translated to power. This makes learning the English language a necessity for all American citizens. Tragically, once families learn English, they may neglect their native language, and it disappears over generations as less and less people speak it.

The Lithuanian language and culture of my grandfather, and his parents, and the generations before them- defined my ancestors and how I came to be. But to answer the

question: *How much of this gets passed on?* Well, the truth is that over time, if these stories are not told, the roots disappear. When my great-grandparents arrived in the U.S., they were forced to conform to societal standards. They were forced to speak English, forced to learn American culture, forced to fit in. And successively over generations, one's origins may feel distant. When passed on from generation to generation, culture, language, and family history, collectively, make up our identity. And that is why these stories must be told.

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