

From Grief to Celebration

by Diana Raab, Ph.D.

When I was ten years old, I found my grandmother dead in her room, which was next to mine. On that sunny summer morning, I knocked on her door to ask permission to swim in a friend's pool. I called her name, but she lay in her bed beside the window, remaining perfectly still. On her stomach sat an open Graham Greene book and a pair of eyeglasses. I touched her face, and it was stone-cold. With a child's intuition, I sensed that something was seriously wrong. I ran out of the room to phone my mother, who was at work.

Within minutes, emergency vehicles lined our normally quiet residential street. All I remember is two uniformed men carrying my grandmother on a stretcher down the creaky wooden stairs. I prayed they wouldn't drop her.

After that fateful day, there wasn't much talk about my grandmother until about twenty years later when my parents were getting ready to move from my childhood home in Queens, New York. While packing, they stumbled across her retrospective journal, which she'd written after emigrating from Vienna in the early 1930s. Only after reading it did I truly understand the deep roots of her depression, which had tormented her for her entire life, and eventually led to her suicide at the age of sixty-one.

I tucked the journal away but pulled it out ten years later, after I was diagnosed with

breast cancer. The details of my grandmother's tragic life drew me close to her and distracted me from my own struggles. Her powerful words about being orphaned during World War I pulled me in. She had watched soldiers march through her town and kill young children playing in the streets.

Only many years later did I realize the extent of my grief and how I'd never really connected with another woman in the same way—as I was an extension of my grandmother. Those ten years she'd cared for me planted the seeds for my writing, as well as my interest in learning.

I still have vivid memories of the day she taught me how to type. It feels like yesterday. My grandmother's black Remington typewriter was perched on the vanity in her room. Each morning, I knocked on her door for a morning kiss. She would then take my hand and we'd walk down to the kitchen for breakfast. One morning when I was about six years old, instead of immediately heading downstairs, she invited me into her room.

"Have a seat," she said, pointing me to her vanity chair. "I'm going to teach you how to type. This is a handy skill for a girl to have, plus, you never know what kinds of stories you'll want to tell one day."

She stood behind me, her image glowing in the mirror. She took my right hand and positioned it on the second row of

keys from the bottom, carefully placing one finger on each letter, repeating the same gesture with my left hand.

"This is the position your fingers should be in. When you become a good typist, you won't even have to look at the letters while you're typing. Okay, dear, let's see if we can type your name."

With my left middle finger she had me press on the "D". Then we moved to the right middle finger and moved up a row to type an "I." Then my pinkie pressed the "A", and something really tricky had to happen—I needed to move my right thumb down to the bottom row to type an "N". Then my left pinkie typed an "A". After each letter, I glanced up at the paper to see the result of my efforts. After reaching the last "A", I proudly looked up at my grandmother's face in the mirror.

Hearing my mother say that my independence made my grandmother feel less needed, made me feel bad.

"You see, you did it!" she exclaimed, squeezing my shoulders. "Like anything in life, the more you practice, the better you'll become. You must work hard to get results; you'll learn that soon enough, my love."

This seemingly trivial lesson on her part instilled my own commitment to the written word. I still have a replica of my grandmother's typewriter, and even though I lost her when I was quite young, she left me

with a lifelong gift: love for the written word. Whenever I sit down to write, I celebrate the gift she gave me, and I honor her in the way I know she would want to be honored.

However, in spite of this wonderful gift, I still feel her loss in every aspect of my life, especially as I watch my own children growing into fine adults and becoming parents of their own. I imagine that my grandmother would have loved to have observed and contemplated the circle of life, in the same way I do every time I sit down to write. So instead of grieving, I try to turn my reflections into a celebration of her, as I know this is what she would have wanted for me.

About the Author

Diana Raab, Ph.D., is the author of eight books and more than 500 articles and poems. She's an advocate of writing for healing. Her book *Writing for Bliss: A Seven-Step Program for Writing Your Story and Transforming Your Life* will be published by Loving Healing Press in 2017.

