

Memories and the Circle of Life

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Ever since I was a little girl, my father, a Holocaust survivor who died in 1991, instilled in me the idea that not only does history often repeat itself, but there's also a circular trajectory to life. While at the time, I didn't completely understand what he meant, now that I'm in my 60s and what people have called 'a wise elder,' I completely understand.

My children and grandchildren live nearby, which was such a blessing during the pandemic, as I've spent more time than usual playing with them. This helped me get in touch with my inner child, and I've also had a number of vivid memories about playing with my own kids, all who are now in their 30s.

I'm also reminded of the special times I spent with my maternal grandmother, who died when I was ten years old, and everything she taught me. Her most lasting gift was that of the written word, she taught me how to type, which eventually led to my career as a writer and storyteller.

Her typewriter was perched on the vanity in her bedroom beside mine. It was a hot summer Saturday morning when she invited me into her room.

"Have a seat," she said, pointing 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 have to tell one day."

She stood behind me, her reflection in the mirror showing dark roots framing her bleached-blond hair, and her glowing smile revealing the rather large space between her two front teeth. I wasn't surprised to learn years later that as a young woman she'd won beauty contests in her native Vienna.

Grandma took my right hand and positioned it on the home keys, carefully placing one finger at a time 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 have to look at the letters. 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 left pinkie pressed the “A,” a tricky maneuver for a novice typist. She then instructed me to move my right thumb down to the bottom row to type an “N.” Then my left pinkie typed the final “A.” I glanced up at the paper to see the results of my efforts, and then proudly looked up at my grandmother’s face in the mirror.

“You see—you did it!” she exclaimed, squeezing my shoulders. “Like anything in life, the more you practice, the better you’ll get. You must work hard to get results; you’ll learn that soon enough, my love.” Needless to say, I wrote my first short story on that typewriter.

Four years later I found my grandmother dead in that same room where she taught me to type. She’d taken an overdose of sleeping pills. At the time, my parents hadn’t spoken about my grandmother, but years later I learned that she’d taken her life as a result of the trauma of being orphaned during World War I at the age of eleven.

Many years after my grandmother died, my mother stumbled upon Grandma’s journal, where she chronicled her childhood growing up in Poland. I loved how it reconnected me with her. To share her story, I wrote a book about our relationship called *Regina’s Closet: Finding My Grandmother’s Secret Journal* and now I’m now working on a follow-up book.

I feel deep gratitude to my grandmother for planting the seeds for my life as a writer not only because she was devoted to the written word (evidenced by her daily journaling)—but because she taught me how to type and instilled in me my love of storytelling.

My five grandchildren are all under five, but I'm already pondering what I'll be teaching them and how they'll remember me. From the time my own children were little, I gave them journals and books, and I'll continue that tradition. I have boxes and boxes of journals that I've written over five decades, so my grandchildren will have a lot of reading material if they choose to plow through. My hope is that they will also take up journaling as a way to honor the circle of life.