

Thoughts About My Grandmother.

I don't want to go without electricity, not have running water or have to walk up to the back paddock to use the toilet, but there are lots of things from my grandmother's days that I would like to apply to my modern life. For some time now I have felt as though we were too quick to depart from the old ways and in doing so, lost lots of wisdom. It seemed to happen in just one generation. Co-incidentally it was perfectly timed with the introduction of television into most homes.

My Grandmother was born in 1907. She lived in her own home up until the age of 99, just two months short of her hundredth birthday. She was born into a home that had a thatched roof and a dirt floor and saw many changes throughout her life. I have always been amazed by the contrast in her life, from the dirt floor through to the microwave oven in the kitchen where she lived.

She would think nothing of her life. It would be just ordinary, no different to anyone else that lived in the same era. But to me, it is very special, because I have difficulty imagining a life like hers. I have difficulty in understanding just how much work she did each and every day, especially when she lived on the farm.

When I was a small child I remembered the evening ritual of picking the beans from her garden, washing them and then 'topping and tailing' them. I was always amazed by her technique. She used a very old knife with a dark blade and a wooden handle. It was only very short, but even back then I could tell it was very old. As she 'topped' and 'tailed' each bean I was intrigued with how she seemed to press the blade against her thumb, but never cut herself. By the age of about six I decided I was ready to help with this process. She told me I would cut myself, but handed me the knife anyway. As I pressed it against my thumb, sure enough the blood began to appear and she said "see, I told you so". I always thought it was because I pressed too hard on the blade, but thinking back now and looking at photos of my Grandmother's hands I would say that her hands were much more leather like than mine.

Before I was born my grandmother moved from Dubbo in Western New South Wales to Bathurst, in the central west. She came to live with my parents and elder sister until she moved into her own place in Kelso, which was just across the river from Bathurst. I have many wonderful memories of this place. Because we moved around quite a bit when I was young, this was the only house that I ever had that 'coming home' feeling about. When we went to Bathurst, as we got closer and closer I would begin to imagine what Nanna had organised for us. Most times I hoped that she had prepared some corned beef with her homemade mustard and REALLY hoped that she had made a couple of apple pies.

The house at Kelso must have seemed very small after living on a property, but she made it very functional. She had a fabulous garden, with a white fence around it. Apparently my father built a fence with a gate when I was about two years old to keep me from going in and pulling up the vegies. Unfortunately just as he finished building the fence he turned around to see me scaling the gate.

She grew many things in that garden. She always had successful crops of tomatoes, beans, rhubarb, carrots, potatoes, zucchinis, pumpkin and spaghetti marrow. I even remember her growing peanuts. She spent a lot of time outdoors and looking back, she was just too busy to ever get old.

She cooked everything from scratch. That was one of the great things about going to visit her, we just seemed to do so much 'hands on' work. She taught me how to make lamingtons and apple pies. When I was about ten years old I remember her introducing a new meal for lunch when we arrived. It was "home made Kentucky Fry" as she called it. It was around the time that Kentucky Fried Chicken came to town, well before it morphed into KFC. To appease the visitors that loved this 'take-away' she began making her home made version, which was really only chicken drumsticks rolled in breadcrumbs and cooked in the frypan! But, as she put it, 'why would you want to go up town and pay all that money when we can do it at home'. Paying for someone else to cook your food for you when you were perfectly capable of doing it yourself was such a strange idea for her.

I always remember her doing 'mending'. She would often split sheets down the middle that had 'gone through' and either sew them back together or turn them into other things like hankies, pillow slips or peg bags. She was very resourceful, turning one set into a pair of pyjamas!

In later years she came to be very disappointed with the quality of things that you could buy. I recall her giving me some towels once and saying 'you might like these, mind you, you could practically spit through them'. Gee, thanks I thought and added that phrase to my vocabulary. Most people use a thread count to measure the quality of their sheets, I use the spit factor. I have to hold sheets and towels up to the light and imagine how much saliva I could actually get through them.

I remember visiting my Grandmother one time in Winter. Where she lived was ridiculously cold at times. I had convinced my new husband to wear a good quality woollen jumper issued by the Police Force. It was quite a few years old and had a small hole in the lower chest, but nothing else he had would really keep him warm. I had said to him not to worry about the hole, that it was more important to be warm with a good quality jumper than to worry about a silly hole. I added that my family were not interested in fashion and that they probably wouldn't even notice. You could imagine his horror and my embarrassment when I introduced him to my family members and an Uncle said out loud for everyone to hear " what, are you too tight to put out for a new jumper"? Coming from a family who made pyjamas out of sheets and recycled their wheat bags, I thought this was a pretty harsh call. It has made for some funny story telling though!

From a very young age my Grandmother told me stories about people. No need for fairy tales or Aesop's Fables in my childhood, I grew up knowing good hard facts about what happened to people when they did particular things. The moral to be learned always started with " now, you don't want to be like..... who....." and that is how I learned things in life. There was the person who got a bank card and thought it meant the bank was giving him free money, there was the lady who always had to have her suitcase packed to go to town because her husband would take off without notice and she would have to do her hair and get changed in the car. Then there was the person that repeatedly ran out of petrol because he thought he could get a bit further than what the gauge indicated. The life lessons were very clean cut. Don't do X because Y would happen and it happened to this person therefore that is living proof! A brilliant philosophy to live by, one which as an adult has somehow not left me.

When she turned 101 I listened to her talking to the journalist from the local paper. The secret to a long life, she espoused, was to keep busy and not to worry. There it was. Simple as that. Nothing to do with eating organically, exercising, not smoking or drinking or getting adequate sleep. Just keeping busy and not worrying. When I think back though my memories of her in her house at Kelso, that is exactly what she did. She was always busy and routine. Sure, she had her rest times, and as she got into her nineties this included a little 'Nanna Nap' in the afternoons, but she always put her work first. I can say that she didn't really worry too much about anything, or if she did she didn't verbalise it all the time. She had a generally positive outlook and didn't have to worry about the days to come because she was always, always, prepared. We used to joke that when the apocalypse hit everyone her side of the river would be fine because she had enough food prepared in her freezer and stored in her cupboards to feed everyone!

At the age of 100 she moved to a nursing home in Dubbo. Not even being taken out of her environment has faded her. At 101 she is now looking better than ever. She views it like a resort, stating that it is fabulous that someone cooks for her, does her washing and she doesn't have to tend to the gardens.

What an amazing woman. I just hope that I have inherited her good genes.

