

Alamance Reads 2011 Writing Contest

Category: Adult 18 years & older

First place winner: Leigh Ann Whittle

## LIFE'S TRUFFLES

Forrest Gump said. "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get." I disagree. You know *exactly* what you're gonna get: a lesson. Sometimes you can't quite figure it out, like nougat. There will often be a few nuts thrown in just to make things interesting. And you know who you are.

One life event that offers a Whitman's Sampler of lessons is a death in the family. It's something we will all experience, and it comes with a host of lessons. The lessons I learned from my grandparents' deaths were there all along, but age made me realize those lessons. Maybe getting older does have its perks. Nonetheless, I was handed two "life truffles": listen to your relatives; and, for goodness' sake, don't retire!

Yeah, I said that last part. Stay with me here; you'll see what I mean.

My mom's mom, my "Memaw," was widowed in her late 40s. Suddenly the single parent of a teenager, she learned how to drive, moved to another state and took a full time job after Granddaddy died. Independence wasn't a choice. It was a necessity. And she never got sick. No, she was sick once – the day the *Challenger* exploded. Two improbable events on the same day. She was a child at heart; and, when I, her only grandchild, was little, she would swing with me on my backyard swing set. In childlike innocence, I thought we'd swing together forever.

Memaw loved animals and kept the squirrels of Henrico County, Virginia, well fed. A black snake once got into her house. Without flinching, she plunked the serpent into a paper bag ("or plastic" wasn't yet an option), carried it outside, and let it slither happily in wild suburbia.

A medical secretary for more than 20 years, Memaw finally hung up her lab coat on her 73<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Her coworkers, unaware of her real age, figured she was retiring in her early 60s like most everyone else. I'm not sure they ever knew the truth.

Not one to keep busy with septuagenarian tasks like knitting and bridge, she happily spent retirement working in her yard. Her backyard endeavors one day left her feeling tired, and she visited her doctor when she couldn't shake the feeling. The "C" word was uttered, and surgery was scheduled.

Within nine months of her retirement, my Memaw was gone.

I am afraid to retire. Working for decades and only being able to enjoy retirement for a fraction of the time doesn't seem appealing. So why not keep doing what kept you going for so long?

Don't get me wrong; I'd love to punch the clock one final time and sail off into the life of leisure promised by my 401(k) provider. But given my family history, retirement is pretty scary. Then again, Social Security may not be around when I retire, so this all may be a moot point anyway.

But until I reach what is generally considered an appropriate retirement age for folks not in professional sports, who retire at the ripe old age of 35, I must learn from the other lesson I was dealt.

I once came across a photograph of myself, though the background wasn't familiar. I stared at myself in the photo, then at my reflection in the mirror. Or so I thought. Flipping the photo over, I found that it was taken in the '40s. It was a photo of my Memaw.

I have been told I resemble her in more than looks. As an adult, I am honored. As a teenager I thought it was, well, weird. I mean, what teenager wants to be compared to an old woman? Really? (Insert overly dramatic eye roll her.)

Now I'm kicking myself for not really getting to know her. It's not like I can just call her up. Heaven might have cell phone service – never mind. They don't. They only have reliable things there.

Maybe I was too young, or maybe it just didn't matter to me back then; but I don't think I ever just sat and learned from her or any of my elderly relatives, for that matter. And that's a real shame.

As an educator, I know people learn in different ways, but when it comes to your family, I find listening to be the best lesson plan. God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason.

Listening to your family is an investment that no economic downfall can diminish, and it offers returns more precious than gold. Listen to their experiences, fears and goals and you've glimpsed into their soul. Turn off the History Channel and listen to their stories about "back then." We've all lived through some historical event: Vietnam. The end of the Cold War. Nine Eleven. We all have our own unique perspectives to share, unmatched by television depictions.

Just by listening, you may learn to see things through their eyes. You may not agree with the decisions your family has made, but if you'd just *listen* to them, maybe you can learn to understand their motivation. There. Family issues solved. Dr. Phil not needed. Was he ever?

When is the last time you *listened* to your family? No, not listening to the everyday chatter about what happened at work or school, what's on sale at the store, or why people can't drive in the rain. I mean *listen*. Learn from them. Learn about them. Find out who they really are. Knowing your family means more than knowing your daughter wants to study forensics or your husband snores like a buzz saw.

It takes time to get to know someone, and like you may be, I'm guilty of not withdrawing from the time account. But the time you take to get to know your family is time well spent, for once they're gone, you can't get that time back.

So, if you'll excuse me, I've got some kinfolks to reacquaint with and a huge box of life lessons to sink my teeth into.