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Bridging the gap

When the older generation shares with the young, and the young share with the old, family bonds become deeper and richer. Could it all start with photos – and laptops?

BY NANCY HARPER

My grandmother was never a sit-on-the-floor-and-play-games type. But she was glamorous: cool and impeccably dressed no matter the occasion, funny and a little bit naughty. She used to slip the occasional pack of du Maurier cigarettes into my pocket when no one was looking and, naturally, I thought she was fabulous.

Like me, she was a terrible cook, which is no doubt part of the reason she came to our house for dinner every Sunday night as long as I can remember. I consider myself lucky to have known her and to have spent

plenty of time with her.

These days, as someone raising two teenage daughters — girls who've had the good fortune of growing up with their own loving grandmother nearby — I know that making an effort to connect with older people is rarely the first thing on a teenager's mind.

But I also know what I've seen countless times: that when young people find themselves in the company of their elders, and not in a way that equates visiting with duty, things can unfold in a magical way.

With the holiday season upon us, it's an especially poignant lesson to remember.

We are all more likely to spend time with elderly people at this time of year (for some it might be the only time of year that we do) and that makes it even more critical that we make the effort not just to hear their stories but also to really listen to what they're saying.

It doesn't have to be a one-way street, either. As the pressure cooker of modern-day life continues to build, and as young people spend more and more time looking down into their phones instead of out toward each other, taking the precious but increasingly rare opportunity to listen to and learn from elderly people can actually enrich our own lives.

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Other cultures — First Nations, for example — tend to revere their elders as the gatekeepers of cultural wisdom, knowledge and history. Here in the West, however, ageism is alive and well, relegating many elderly people to the margins of society.

“Knowledge comes from learning. Wisdom comes from living.”

ONTARIO BORN AUTHOR
ANTHONY DOUGLAS WILLIAMS

ing many elderly people to the margins of society.

Schlegel Villages' online engagement manager Ted Mahy — whose #ElderWisdom Green Bench campaign earlier this year helped harness what he describes as one of our greatest untapped resources — says many factors contribute to a build-up of resistance to spending time with elders. There's a deep-seated mindset that seniors

are forgetful and slow, that they can't contribute, that they focus too much on a long list of health problems. But just as likely a factor is that younger people don't know what to say, and getting old seems downright scary. And probably they're unsure of what is to come in their own lives so it's easier just to avoid contact altogether.

Still, connecting with seniors isn't about sitting mutely and listening to boring stories. It should be about having fun and truly seeing what older people can bring to the table. The key is finding the right tools to encourage lively discussion, which might be something as simple as a photo album. Often it's enough just to be present.

“The elders in our communities have so much knowledge to share with us and they're not going to share it without us engaging them in conversation,” Mahy says. “It's important to spend time with them, keep them active, keep them interested,

teach them, learn from them.”

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My own mother didn't have the luxury of growing up with grandparents nearby, but she is a wonderful grandmother herself — and she shares the kind of idyllic stories you'd expect of someone whose formative years were spent in small-town Nova Scotia in the 1930s and 1940s.

“There was no sitting home looking at a device,” she tells us. “We were talking to people all the time. We played outside. We would go and meet our friends and hang around the mailbox. We'd go to a show. We rode bikes, we played cards, we had records and the radio. We were on the ice rinks outside. Everybody walked everywhere.

“I like to know that before I pop off my grandkids have some idea of where I came from and what I did when I was their age. It's important to know because my history is part of their history and when I'm gone

that's the end of it.”

My mom is a very chipper 82, and she's done a great job not only of telling her grandkids great stories but also of documenting the family's history in photo albums.

I believe it's that combination of oral and visual history that's so vital — because if we don't have the photos and we don't hear the stories, what happens to the history?

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Technology may have rendered the old-school photo album obsolete, but it's not all doom and gloom. By making an effort to store videos and photos in the cloud, you can access and share them whenever you want.

And even though conventional wisdom may suggest that technology and aging minds aren't necessarily a great mix, technology may just be one of the best things to bring old and young together. Plenty of elderly people are actually keen to learn about technology — which in turn presents

a perfect opportunity for cross-generational engagement.

“The younger generation should share their knowledge,” Mahy tells me. “Our elders are asking questions and it's our job to share that knowledge with them and involve them. Afraid that you won't find something to talk about? Bring in a laptop and teach them how to email, how to tweet, how to use Facebook.”

Mahy is also optimistic that the big picture as we relate to seniors is starting to change, and that there is an emerging commitment to get the conversation going. People are talking about a dementia strategy, he says. They're talking about a cure for Alzheimer's. And there are a lot of culture-change conversations happening across the country.

This is good news, and we can build on it in our own small way by starting a conversation with one of our own elders this holiday season. 🍷



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