

April 24, 2022
Psalm 150 / Revelation 1:4-8
“How Shall We Live?”
Lauren Ballester

A few months ago, my grandmother gave me a gift. I'm still not sure what made her decide to give it to me. My least cynical theory is that it's because I'm the eldest grandchild. My most cynical? I am on the brink of eternal damnation but my soul is salvageable enough that I could be back on the road to heavenly approval with just a little guidance. The gift was my late grandfather's study bible. A leather bound Thompson Chain Reference Bible containing dozens of his notes and bookmarks, and hundreds of annotations dating back to 1983 when my grandmother gave it to him. It's like a time capsule of the kind of thinking that guided much of his adult life. In 1983 he was 37, my mom was 16 and getting ready to leave the house, her brother was 14. He'd already been married almost 20 years. They lived in Ovid, New York on a small farm. Here are a few of the bookmarks

In the front of the Bible is a handwritten list on the back of what look like typewritten notes for a bible study, including speculation that Christ would be coming between 1997 and 2003. The list is titled “How shall we live?” Here it is:

Enough time spent with this book and you eventually piece together that this bible was more than just a spiritual compass for him but a decoded guide for how to live his life. The other notes in the front are about heaven (what it's like and how to get there), our sinful nature (why that's not a given) and angels (the go betweens). Though he never finished high school, he was a lifelong student of this book. Not just this book, but a fear based interpretation of it that sets out an impossible standard of goodness and the harshest of punishments for those who don't meet it, a brilliant mechanism of social control.

At some point in my childhood it became clear how different my mother and her father were. My mother is effusive with praise, gratitude, terms of endearment and physical affection. She can count on one hand the number of times he told her he loved her. I found this out when upon hanging up the phone with him one day, I said "love you" and he responded with "yup." I asked my mom about it and she said something like "yes, expressing feelings with words has never been grandpa's strong point." She told me the story behind each time he had said it to her. Once when her car had broken down and she was stranded late at night and he picked her up. Another when she left for college. This one was a surprise to her as he thought her choice to move away and seek a degree was haughty and unfeminine, and she'd be better off finding a farm boy to marry close to home. College, city life, registering with the Democratic party, and a dark husband were among his greatest fears for my mom. He once told her he didn't want brown grandchildren. Surprise!

Another moment I learned we were different was in 2002, I was 9 years old and Bush had just invaded Iraq. At the dinner table, I ended my prayer with "and please forgive George Bush." This caused an eruption that I was shocked to witness. Wasn't he the bad guy out there killing people for oil? I thought we were all on the same page about that one, but I guess not. Eventually I realized there were things we talked about and things we did not talk about around my grandpa.

In spite of all this, I knew he loved me, though I can't remember him ever saying it himself. He loved to tell the story of when they were living in Alabama and came to pick us up at the airport one day. I, about 2 years old, didn't show much of a response when I first saw him. I held his hand anyways as we walked to the car, and looked up a few minutes later and said "grandpa?!" Whenever he cooked meat, he would cut up some small pieces to give us as "samples" because he knew we loved them. His face would light up whenever we came

to visit. He'd say "hey girl," and would always ask me what new thing I had learned that day. He once, unprompted, bought my sister and I some as seen on TV "turbo twisties" to dry our hair with, but of course, gave them to my grandma to give to us for christmas, as this was a woman's job.

For kindergarten, I went to a Christian school and although I am sure there were many other ways I was taught about what that meant, the only one I can remember was singing. I was taught the importance of praise, and Psalms always make me think of this time. For my five year old brain, praise meant delight. Honor the beauty, the deliciousness, the pleasing nature of all of the gifts of God. I got this from grandpa, too.

When I sat down to look at the lectionary for this week, I looked through grandpa's bible for the verses for this week. The page before the Revelation verse that Gerry read had a bookmark I hadn't seen yet, this is what it said:

When I saw this, I felt the blood drain from my face and I sunk with heaviness. Grandpa never knew that I'm gay, and sometimes I feel that keeping that from him was a gift I gave him. I know he would likely not have strayed from this thinking if he had known, and knowing that in his mind I would certainly be spending eternity in hell, and that would have tortured him. It would have also tortured me to hide myself from him. It is a gift I give to myself to live fully and freely in spite of the ideology that shaped him and many of my other family members.

A few weeks ago, before I saw this, I was lying in bed with terrible back pain after an injury, thinking about what I might speak about this morning. I had recently read a book by John Sarno explaining his theory that many people's back pain is basically a psycho-somatic response to living with unconscious anger and resentment resulting from constant internal pressures to be capital g Good. Through a lot of work on the part of my mother I've been able to escape

some of the dogma behind the kind of Good my grandpa wanted to be, but my desire to be good still holds me captive. I have always wanted to be good. A good sister, a good daughter, a good friend, a good student, a good girlfriend, a good partner, and most recently, a good teacher. Though my metrics may be different, I think I inherited this preoccupation with being good from grandpa, too. I think we all have our guides and metrics that we hold ourselves up to that tell us whether or not we are good. Few of us have guides about how to live well. An astrologer I follow on instagram (@saltwaterstars) posted something the other day that really resonated. She said we should live in right relation to our mortality. My body had an immediate reaction when I read this. I think she's right and I don't think I do. Grandpa lived with a constant looming fear of judgment day. He's not around for me to ask him what he thought about this orientation to death, and he probably wouldn't answer even if he were, but I wish I could.

I don't think my grandpa had that kind of relationship with his mortality, but if there is one thing he had that I don't, it is a relationship with his labor that was in alignment. He spent his days in the rhythm and at the pace of the earth's cycles. He used his hands to produce something good that others needed. His work was not just how he spent his time but who he was, it was his divine purpose— an offering. You could tell that in the fields was where he felt most himself, most at ease. I wasn't around for many of the struggles he faced because of what it means to rely on farming for income in our country, it wasn't always easy, but even still there was nothing else he would rather do.

As I am at this transitional and very uncertain moment in my life I am thinking a lot about who I am and how I want to live, and truthfully I don't know. I know that my body is telling me that how I am living right now will not work for me. In some ways, the way my grandpa lived (or wanted to) inspired me. But in many ways it was very limiting. As much as grandpa, in his pain, caused harm that he

will never have the chance to be accountable for in his lifetime, he also gave me a lot, and whether I like it or not, I am of him. He passed away in January 2018 and I said this at his funeral:

Here are some things I learned from grandpa... Trust your gut. Trust the Creator. Show up. Land is holy, seeds are one of the most wondrous gifts from God. Water is life. There are a lot of ways to be smart. Dinner is better when I get a sample of it from you first. Peanut chews are a blessing, but only the dark chocolate ones. Family family family. Your hands can build everything you need. Sweet corn from your fields is the best on earth. Never stop learning. The warm sun is healing. How to blow a bubble in hubba bubba gum. How to drive a car. God is all around us, especially outside. I'm sure your crops in heaven are even more other worldly than the ones I got to taste. Hope you are having the reunion you always dreamed of.

Being around him was complicated while he was living, but in his death my relationship with him has softened. I've been able to see him for more than what he showed me, and for the person he aimed to be. At the bottom of his notes it said "because you are God's children, live with compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and love." Knowing this was how he *desired* to live both made sense and made me a little sad. He read this book so differently than I do, and he read it in a way that made it very difficult for him to live this. I inherited his desire to live this way too, though, and I have come to understand that I need to offer myself those things, and that God's unconditional love for me is my guide. I am sacred and though I may not always act on it, I am worthy of the compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and love that God extends toward me, that God extended towards grandpa, even if he couldn't receive it for himself and therefore could not extend it to us either.

I do not know how I will live, and I do not know if I believe I am destined for heaven or if I will ever meet an angel. I do know that I want to live in right relation to my mortality. That in this realm and on this earth I am here to do more than obey. I am here to praise, here to find delight and honor the pleasures of creation. To rest, to feel satisfied with the work that I do, to experience joy. Grandpa showed me that there is immense pleasure in watching sweet corn grow from a seed and sharing it with others. I know there is also pleasure in resting in my girlfriend's arms after a hard day. While I am here I hope to live and to pray and to love in a way that honors the finite nature of my time here. I want to use that time with intention and oriented towards compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and love.

To close, we will sing one of my favorite Psalms that I learned in my kindergarten class and I invite you to sing with five-year-old delight.