

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Now and Again: Finding Memory Lost to Alzheimer's

Alex Leff · Wednesday, January 16th, 2019

On a crisp spring morning in 1945, two teenagers set off on their rickety bicycles for Philadelphia. For George and Mel, Depression kids born to Jewish immigrants in a Brooklyn ghetto, this bike ride was their escape, a claiming of personal freedom. It was an adventure they would remember for the rest of their lives—until Mel lost his memory to Alzheimer's.

I grew up hearing this story every chance Grandpa Mel got to tell it. How these youngsters navigated through the farmlands of New Jersey, fixed flat tires, and posed for a picture by the Liberty Bell just a couple days later. And now, to him, it was if it never happened.



Riding to Find Lost Memory

So, over seventy years after their bike ride, my brother and I set off on the same 100-mile journey to explore the legacy of our grandfather. It's the subject of my new film: *Now and Again*. Mel may have lost his memory—but we are determined to find it. We search forgotten places, interview family, and explore decades of family tapes and film reels to piece together the life of a man who can no longer remember it.

My grandparents' stories have fascinated me ever since I was old enough to listen. Speaking with an elder is the closest we've come to time travel. I felt transported by their memories, connected to distant history, and a deep sense that my life was part of a larger continuous story. As I watched, my grandfather's Alzheimer's made him more and more forgetful and his stories came to a halt.



Connie shares photographed memories with Mel

Meet "Grammy" Connie, Mel's wife of sixty years. She stands in her cramped art room, overstuffed with supplies and dusty mementos, her curly hair dyed auburn, with wrinkles formed as much from laughter as from pain. My grandmother examines photographs that span close to a century. She shares the story of when she first fell in love with Mel, at the age of eighteen, working as camp counselors upstate. A lifetime of love, conflict, and mutual growth later, Mel began to forget who she was. Once he asked her, "Where is the girl I met in summer camp?" Connie asked, "Who do you think I am?" Mel said, "You're the woman who takes care of me." Connie can't help but laugh as she remembers it.

Almost every minute someone in the United States develops Alzheimer's disease. Our elders are

the keepers of society's collective memory. Their memories are our connection to history. What do we all lose if they cannot remember?

Connie struggles to get her new digital camera to work. "I photographed you moments after your birth. I was one of these people—talk about documentarians—who wanted to capture your every everything. You putting butter on bread, baby Koby crawling on the floor, everything you ever did I wanted to document. And now," she chuckles to herself. "I can't even know how to use a smartphone."



Glitches in Memory

Perhaps more than our fear of death, we are terrified of being forgotten. We write, record, and document to immortalize our memory. In my grandmother's lifetime, our tools of documentation have rapidly transformed. Eighty years ago, several black and white portraits captured her childhood. Like many millennial childhoods, an ever-present camcorder followed mine like it was a reality TV show. Today, seven hours of footage will be uploaded to YouTube each *second*. Almost every historical document ever created is now accessible and stored online. Yet at the height of the information age, we are just as susceptible to forgetting.

We protect our memories by passing them down. The key is cross-generational dialogue and the connections that are made. The stories we share are more important than the boxes of our records, photographs, and films. When a memory becomes a story it is not as likely to be forgotten.

[Image Credit: Ashbourne Films]

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