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Like sands through the hourglass

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Essay/Personal Reflection

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On a Monday in July, my sister and I sat with our 89-year-old grandmother, Vera, in Hope Hospice, Ft. Myers, Florida, all of us knowing there wasn't much time left.

As we talked, Vera looked past us on the TV. It was playing *Days of Our Lives* (a soap opera known to its viewers simply as "Days"). The next day, the same thing happened when her pastor stopped by around 1:00 pm — the same time that *Days* aired. Vera had always cared deeply about her church life and was very much looking forward to seeing the pastor, yet we could sense her frustration that he'd chosen that time for his visit.

I was close to Vera from the day I was born, having spent my first decade of life living around the corner from Vera and then moving with my family less than two miles away from her house. My siblings and I would look forward to our mall outing with Vera before every school year when she let us pick out the restaurant for lunch and she embraced whatever styles we were into that year, no matter out outlandish the clothes must have seemed to a grandmother. A woman of tradition and generosity, Vera later invited my children on mall outings to find my daughter's pretty dresses and my son a "dandy blazer" when we'd make our annual, and sometimes semiannual, trips to visit her in Florida. It was their turn to choose the lunch restaurant.

Vera had her unique sense of style when it came to clothes and decorating her house. I always felt comforted upon seeing her in her matching pants and jacket pastel outfits and spending time in her clean and cozy home. Vera cared deeply about the lives of her loved ones and imparted helpful advice whenever she had the opportunity. A pointer that sticks to me to this day is when my grandmother who valued tidiness told me, "Time goes by so fast. Don't worry about keeping a perfect house; spend that time with your kids." I spoke with my grandmother on the phone every week or two throughout my adult life, and I still treasure all the words of wisdom and funny stories she shared with me. Now my sister and I each had traveled across many states to be with our dear grandmother at this sad and intimate time. There wouldn't be malls, lunches, or pastel outfits on this trip, but, as always with Vera, it was a time that included smiles and making memories.

On the third day, Vera was asleep during *Days* ("my program," as she called it), and my sister and I watched it while waiting for her to wake up. When she awoke, Vera didn't miss a beat.

"What happened on my program?" she asked.

Disbelievingly, I heard myself reporting the news about Hope and Bo and even that guy with the eye patch — all of whom I remembered watching with my mother, 30 years earlier, on sick days from school. In the interim, I'm guessing (hoping) that the plot has changed — but this show was, for the most part, the same. Was that why Vera wanted to catch every minute of it, even during her final days of life?

In 1965, when *Days* debuted, Vera was a stay-at-home mom with a young teenage son, Ted. Ted was a three-sport athlete all through junior high and high school, and when he wasn't on a field or court, he was a drummer in his garage band. Vera, an energetic woman who'd enjoyed the excitement of chasing her son around when he was younger, likely craved some spark — something to keep her mind occupied during those days at home when Ted was busy. *Days* allowed a daily 1-hour escape to another world in which Vera could immerse herself.

If a person wants to escape from reality, I found myself thinking, *could there be any better time than at the end of life?*

The more I reflected on Vera's attachment to *Days*, the more sense it made to me. Her strategy for escapism and enjoyment had worked for 50 years. She knew that her own life was ending, but the lives of Bo and Hope and the man with the eye patch would continue. *Days* was the constant that had been there for Vera during the ups and downs of her own life. That week, as she was saying goodbye to my sister and me, she was also bidding farewell to the cast of *Days.* They've been with Vera even longer than we had. She knew their secrets — all of which (thankfully) were juicier that our family's goings-on. The tales the *Days* writers had woven, day after day and year and after year, were intricate and memorable.

That week at Hope Hospice, Vera requested that her hairdresser, "Margaret," stop by to fix her hair. I couldn't think of anything more befitting her life with *Days* than chatting with the hairdresser, which had been a weekly ritual for the last several decades of Vera's life. When Margaret came by, they discussed the neighborhood gossip while she did Vera's hair.

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Neither made note that, instead of a chair, Vera was sitting in a bed, and that the big upcoming event was her own funeral.

A week later, I sat in Vera's church, celebrating her life with all of her Florida family and friends. As I heard her loved ones' many fond reminiscences, I couldn't help thinking of the open-ended narrative Vera had left all of us who were there. Just like in *Days*, one episode was ending; but the story would go on.

Silently, I promised Vera that I'd continue her storyline with the people around me that day, and with my children. I vowed that when my children are feeling unsure about a new situation, I will remind them that, back in 1945, Vera bravely left her family of 12 in sunny Florida to move to frigid Upstate New York, where her fiancé lived. Later in life, Vera had enjoyed traveling and spoke fondly of visiting Italy, cruising Alaska and coming to my house in San Diego. I'm determined to put other pins on the globe with my own kids and to add to the family adventures, many inspired by Vera.

Days' opening sequence always included the late cast member MacDonald Carey intoning, "Like sands through the hourglass, so are the days of our lives," while, on the TV screen, sand drifted down through a large hourglass. In Vera's last week of life, that image of the passage of time was ever-present. For me, it underlined that the days of Vera's life had included the characters of *Days* as well as my sister and me, and countless other relationships. Vera spent her last week doing what she'd done throughout her life — engaging in the stories of the people she cared about.

Now, whenever I see an hourglass, it's a reminder to embrace that sense of closeness and kinship in my life, whether with my sister, with the characters in the novels I'm reading or in the memories of my relationship with Vera.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that no conflict of interest.

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