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IT'S A QUEER THING

Elderly ally

Grandma went to the library and then went to bat, after she learned her grandson is gay

by Howard N. Dana

As my grandmother gets older and older, she becomes more and more fun. Rather than narrowing her scope and calcifying her ideas, age has given her license to live. She tells me she is constantly amazed at the things she learns, even at age 80. In my life, her open attitude has meant a true inquisitiveness about things gay, lesbian, bisexual and such.

My mother's sister, Dorothy, lives in Portland. Being one of two living daughters, Aunt Dorothy gets a couple of visits each year from my grandmother. Naturally, when in town, Grandma always makes sure she gets in a day or two with me. Not only does it give her a chance to see me, but she knows that the time we spend together will be much more "colorful" than that spent with her daughter. Aunt Dorothy lives a comfortable, upper-middle-class life and has comfortable, upper-middle-class tastes. In my aunt's company, Grandma is taken to the symphony, art museums, quilt shows, fine restaurants and garden parties. From the elevated seat of my aunt's red Trooper, Grandma is whisked from one affair to another. All this can be a bit much for a simple librarian from rural Montana.

My grandparents lived in my hometown of Deer Lodge, Montana, the 50 years they were married. My grandmother lives there still. Not only was their home life stable, but my grandmother held her job as the sole county librarian for 25 years. She is a woman who knows what it means to be from a place. She has rural Montana in her bones. But she also has had the world at her fingertips all of her life.

On my travels to Guatemala, over and over I would run into people who had never traveled beyond their home province but who could name all 50 U.S. state capitals. I met farmers who had read fine works of literature with the aid of an eighth-grade education. These people called themselves "armchair travelers." It has been the same for my grandmother. By way of an eagerness to know, research comes naturally to her. This urge to embrace new ideas serves her well in her old age and in her travels. It also serves me well.

My grandmother took to my coming out as a gay man like a duck takes to water. I remember telling her on the way home from a movie that I was gay. She did not say much about it that evening, but when I got up the next morning she was ready to talk. She had pondered my revelation all night and, not being frightened by it, was ready to learn what she could. Though I never expected a negative reaction from her, I could not have guessed what an ally she would turn out to be.

Whereas my mother cried for three months upon learning that her son was queer, my grandmother calmly went to the library. It was through many long telephone conversations that Grandma was able to convince my mother that I was going to be just fine and there was nothing wrong with being gay. I do not know to what lengths my grandmother had to go to find good information in rural Montana about queer folk, but she was able to wear down the rest of my family's denial through the information she found. And her research did not stop there.

Each time Aunt Dorothy drops Grandma off at my front door, she knows that I have a fabulous itinerary for our time together. I delight in taking her places my aunt never would. Whether it is

lunch at Hamburger Mary's or a walk in the Japanese Garden, a trip to NikeTown or a drive on Sauvie Island, my grandmother knows that she will see something unusual when she is with me. Often a new experience will come at her request. On one trip, she told me that she had never seen drugs being sold on the street or truly homeless people. So, I took her down to Old Town. In no way did she want to ogle the people we encountered on our walk through this section of town, but it was from a sincere desire to understand that she went. Montana being as white a place as you can find, we often go to North and Northeast Portland on her trips here, again to broaden her experience.

I have had to get used to the blunt nature of some of my grandmother's questions. My being a



gay man makes me, in her eyes, the expert on all things queer. This can be a big responsibility. A couple of months ago Grandma called me up to ask questions about transsexuals. She had been watching some daytime talk show featuring transgendered people. Apparently the show did not cover the topic as well as she would have liked, so she automatically turned to me to fill in the gaps. Luckily, I know something about transgender issues and was able to help her out. Luckily, I have a grandmother with enough pluck to ask her grandson about such things.

What has resulted from an honesty in our relationship is that my grandmother and I are able to really understand what is important in each other's lives. She will ask me if I am dating someone and even met a boyfriend of mine once. She always inquires about a little boy she met who has two gay dads. She meets my friends with great interest, able to talk to them about the things and people who matter in their lives. This level of understanding probably would not have come about had I not come out to her.

Once again in my life I am amazed by the openness of elderly people. So many I know are like my grandmother. They have seen a lot in their lives and often seem almost like children in their ability to absorb something new. Being someone who believes that life is circular rather than linear, the idea of coming completely around from youth to old age is very comforting. What a gift it is to be able to see with the eyes of a child. What it means to be open is to be filled with love, for love conquers fear. That which we fear most is what we understand least. So take a chance, come out to your grandmother or grandfather. Who knows what delightful paths your relationship with them might take? Who knows what they will ask? Who knows how grateful they might be?