An Old Friend

In three days, my grandmother will turn 84 years old. In the winter of her life, she doesn’t fear death, or deny it. She is able to talk calmly about the end of her life, and, incredibly, life beyond her own existence. To me, this blatant acknowledgment of the unknown is incredibly courageous and unbelievable. For many years, my grandma has had this passive view of death, simply seeing it as an inevitable part of life. I have always heard her words, but never truly accepted the fact that, someday, she will be gone. She was in good health up until recently; a few months ago, she started experiencing small strokes. As my mom told me this news over the phone, she didn’t sound panicked or surprised; the poignant words “Grandma is just getting older” said it all. In my 18 years, I have never lost a close family member.

I recently had an interesting conversation with my friends about nightmares. As my friends shared funny and frightening stories about monsters, disasters, and terror, I realized that all of my worst dreams were not action-packed or fantastical. The dreams that left me in a cold sweat with a pounding heart are all centered on death. Dreams of my father dying in a car crash, my sister being murdered, disease taking the life of my best friend, even my grandma sitting me in her lap to tell me she has cancer—all have haunted my subconscious. The only recurring dream I have experienced was watching my mother die, with me helpless to save her. Recently, I had a dream that chronicled my own death. In my dream, my death was simple; I chose to take care of my friend as she died from disease, with the knowledge that I would, in turn, die of the same disease. After her death, I slowly felt my own body weaken; in the dream, I spent my last moments telling loved ones all of the things I wished I had done with my life. When I woke up
from the dream, I never felt so happy to be alive and healthy. I also realized that, if I died the next day, I would not be able to face death courageously like my grandma; I would spend my last moments in a panic about what could have been. If I have learned anything from my nightmares, it is that death scares the hell out of me. I am not nearly prepared for the inevitable.

I suppose I am not the only young person who is afraid of death. The concept is so incomprehensible and seems so far away that it is easiest just to push it out of mind. After all, procrastination is what we teenagers do best. I myself am guilty of pushing the thought of death aside; the idea is often too overwhelming to handle. However, recent events have caused me to think about death, and in turn, my life. When people are asked what they would do if they had one month to live, common answers include travelling, repairing broken relationships, or saying goodbye to loved ones. These all seem like fine answers to me, but when I asked myself the same question, I realized that none of these answers would make me feel content with my life. The problem with these answers is that they all seem frantic; they all involve one last month of quickly tying together broken strings, and a lifetime filled with loose ends. I realized that I want to live a life with everything tied together; if I die tomorrow, I want to say that I have no regrets.

I will not pretend that I know the key to happiness and satisfaction in life. I believe that the answer is different for everyone, and the journey to finding it is highly personal. The only problem is a matter of taking the time to find it. It seems that, in our society, a life plan is handed to us on the day we are born; we are expected to start walking and talking within a few months of life, ride a bike by age six, just in time to tackle subtraction. As we grow, we are placed in competition with our peers, with the most athletic, intelligent, and outgoing taking the prize of attention and validation. By the time we have lived only a quarter of our life, the rest of
it has more or less been determined, based on expectations presented to us since the beginning. Life isn’t left up for interpretation, which is the reason we are all so afraid of death.

Contrary to American mentality, fulfillment is not grounded in a lifetime of competition. I recently spent two weeks in El Salvador for an implementation trip with Engineers Without Borders. The trip was my first experience outside of the United States and my first experience in a completely different culture. One of the stark differences between the two countries is the use of time. Hour-long lunch breaks were not considered a waste of time; relaxation and casual conversation were encouraged. The people of El Salvador are hard-working, but their work is not their life; they take time to ask questions, learn about each other and from each other, develop strong family relationships and values, and grow based on their own interests rather than the interests of society. Their relationships with people are more important than society’s expectations. They are content with themselves because they have taken the time to know themselves.

Of course, I cannot assert that the lifestyle of rural El Salvadorians should be the model for happiness, but they seem to have the right idea. Maybe that’s why my Grandma is so accepting of the eventual end of her life; she has chosen to spend her time building relationships with others. She will leave this world knowing that she will be remembered. Her best traits will survive through the people who knew her best. As J.K. Rowling wrote in *The Tales of the Three Brothers*, “[he] greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, as equals, they departed this life.” In the end, we are all just looking for an old friend.