

Lessons from my 80-year-old grandpa

Leave it to Grandpa to put things in perspective.

It was half way through our second annual Christmas party, and I was flitting around, refilling glasses and collecting empty plates.

Preparing for the party had kept me moving - wrapping presents, baking shortbread cookies, stringing 3,200 white lights on our Blue Spruce. Not exactly meditating to Silent Night.

I brought some water to Grandpa, sitting in the corner facing everyone, and sat down beside him.

"Look," he instructed me, his blue eyes misty. "What do you see?"

I scanned the kitchen: nodding and laughing. Then I looked at Grandpa. Somehow he had stepped outside the scene and was observing it from a distance.

"No ill will," he said, answering his own question. "Everyone's happy. You see love."

In that moment, I glimpsed it too, rising above the particulars and seeing the picture in broader strokes. Here we all were, shoveled out from the snow, marking another Christmas together, bound by blood and by love, standing in the sacred space where duty meets desire.

It was the perfect Christmas gift, to step outside the party like the Ghost of Christmas Present and then re-enter, relishing all the little things that had seemed ordinary a moment before.

That is Grandpa's magic. He has a painter's grateful eye, sharpened 10 years ago by a heart attack. Surgeons patched the hole in his heart, and he steadily recovered, embracing each day as a gift from above.

Three years later, at 73, Grandpa taught himself to play clarinet, putting numbered

tape on keys to correspond with his fingering chart. Within months he was playing the second movement of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto.

He is a dark-skinned, blue-eyed artist, the fifth child of a Florentine immigrant raised in the shadow of the Duomo.

Grandpa spent his career painting Catholic churches, refinishing statues of saints and applying gold leaf. Now he is enjoying retirement, playing in the St. Paul Police Band, fishing at his cabin and watching "Jeopardy" with Grandma. (She would be a brilliant contestant, he insists.)

He's on his second pacemaker and awaiting the birth of his third great-grandchild. He began writing a book called "Life Begins At 70."

He's come to love reading, and in March he wrote to World War II P.O.W. Louie Zamperini, the subject of Laura Hillenbrand's bestseller "Unbroken."

"God sure must have had a mission for you in life to put you through so much," he wrote. "We will probably never meet in this life but look forward to meeting you in God's heaven."

In May Grandpa gave a toast at my cousin's wedding. "May earth and heaven mingle," he told the newlyweds. I've seen him cry at every grandchild's wedding, and that evening, he found the words for his tears.

In June Grandpa turned 80. We celebrated on the second Saturday of the month, which happened to be the day the cottonwood trees had been buffeted by just enough heat and just enough wind to unleash their flossy seeds. Wrapped in cotton clusters, they are designed to travel long distances.

So is Grandpa.

To experience 80 years and rejoice in each new day is his singular joy. He has taught me that heaven brushes earth - in paint strokes and clarinet notes, in written words and spoken prayers, in first Communions, in every Communion. And when those moments happen, we hold them to our hearts, never quite the same.

Christina Capecchi is a freelance writer from Inver Grove Heights, Minn. She can be contacted at www.ReadChristina.com.