

In Memory of Helen Campbell

I read the following at my grandmother's memorial that was held on June 6, 2009. She passed away a few days earlier.

For those of you that do not know me, I am Dana Ernst. I am one of Helen's 9 grandchildren. My mother is Helen's daughter Marti.

In my experience, Helen Campbell is the most amazing woman to ever walk this planet Earth. Whenever anyone asks me who my role models are, my grandmother always makes the list. When I tell people this, they ask, "did your grandmother fight social injustice?" Or, "did your grandmother survive some horrible experience?" Even if this were the case, it's not what makes my grandmother exceptional. Helen Campbell is my role model because, on a daily basis, she was the most kind, compassionate, honest, sincere, warm, lovely, brave, and generous person that I have ever encountered. She never boasted about these qualities. I never saw her lie, cheat, steal, brag, or exaggerate. She was never concerned with extending her influence beyond those that were fortunate to be in her life. She lived *in* the moment. Helen Campbell gave of herself freely and completely.

I have two requests of you. The first is relatively easy, the second more challenging. My first request is to take one minute right now to think of the most vivid experience you can remember having with Helen. Replay that experience in your mind now.

I hope that some of you would be willing to share your experiences with each other throughout the day or weeks to follow. I'm guessing that the experiences that you thought of fall into one of two categories. You may have thought of the very rare occasion when Helen was not perfect; perhaps the time she threw a brush at you or the time she drank too much at the pond. These memories stand out because they were so uncommon. However, many of you probably imagined an experience where Helen played a motherly role, exhibiting infinite patience.

Just after my mother asked me if I would speak at this memorial, I immediately started to think about what I would say. I thought that I might relay a few personal experiences that illustrate all of my grandmother's wonderful qualities. Suddenly I realized that I could only really remember the details of one specific experience (which I will share shortly). But how could this be? For years, I've been telling people how amazing my grandmother is. Why was I not remembering hundreds of experiences with her? I became quite angry. I felt like maybe I wasn't paying enough attention to the moments that mattered. Over the past few days, I've been remembering more and more. But, what I've realized is that despite my inability to recall the details of our interactions, my grandmother has had a profound and lasting impression on my life. She was never trying to provide intense experiences for me to remember. Her influence on me, and probably you, was much more subtle. She lived the way we should all live and she never tried to hit you over the head with it. Helen Campbell truly is the best role model.

Now, I'd like to share with you my most vivid experience of my grandmother. This particular experience was one of the most influential moments of my life. This story isn't really a happy one, but at least for me, it captures the essence of my grandmother.

In January of 1983, my brother Brandt died of leukemia. I was 7 years old at the time. In the weeks before his death, my grandma and grandpa were staying with us, so that they could help out with me while my parents were dealing with my brother. I'm certain that people tried to explain to me that there was a risk that my brother would die. But this concept is near meaningless to a 7 year old that has not experienced death. I was concerned with terrorizing my brother's cat while he was away at the hospital and playing Pac-Man on Atari. The morning that my brother died, my parents were at the hospital while my grandparents were at home with me. I woke up that morning completely unaware of how my life was

to change. As I staggered down the hallway, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I heard my grandparents sobbing. I started to cry, but I'm not certain that I knew why at the time. As I turned the corner into the kitchen, I came upon my grandparents. My grandmother was on the phone and my grandfather was standing next to her. When my grandma saw me turn the corner, she handed the phone to my grandpa. She squatted down, so that she could be eye-level with me. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "Dane, your brother has passed away." She then wrapped her arms around me and allowed me to sob. I can say with certainty that in that moment, she selflessly and completely put aside herself for me. I had never in my life heard the phrase "passed away." I didn't really know what this meant. Yet my grandmother was able to communicate the full meaning and impact of the phrase by simply looking me in the eyes and holding me. In that single moment, my grandmother gave a piece of herself to me. She taught me compassion.

I mentioned a couple of minutes ago, that I had two requests of you. Here is the second, more challenging, request. Try to imagine a world with more Helen Campbells. How wonderful would this world be? I'd like all of us to live in the moment; give of ourselves freely; be kind, compassionate, honest, sincere, brave, and generous. Do not lie, cheat, brag, exaggerate, or be selfish.

I'd like to close with 3 short quotations:

"When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life in a manner that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice."

—variously attributed to the Cherokee and the Indian poet Kabir

"Live life so completely that when death comes to you like a thief in the night, there will be nothing left for him to steal."

—unknown author

"To live in this single moment, this lightest breath, this softest touch, to be captured by this smallest, this briefest space of time, to be fully present, alive, consumed in this instant alone, this is truly living."

—Jill Pendley