

What is your most prized possession? One might say their phone, their jewelry, their gaming set up and the list goes on. My answer to that question would be our memories and experiences. Our memories and experiences play a huge role, and arguably the most important one, in our lives.

My most prized possession are my memories and that is because of my late grandfather or Popo, as we would say in Tibetan. My grandfather was an extraordinary person. To me, he was like a father figure, a teacher, and a role model. But he was also so much more. He was a hardworking father for his kids; he was a community member that the people of our village could rely on; he was there to brighten up your day with his laughter and jokes; he was a friend that was always ready to listen; and he was someone his siblings admired. My grandfather was the epitome of happiness and altruism. He brought joy to wherever he stepped foot. His laughter was contagious and his smile beamed like the sun all the time. Popo was always the first one to get up and help others. He put others before himself without a second thought as if it was the easiest choice to make on Earth.

I was born in India and I was raised by my grandparents in a small Tibetan village in the southern state of Karnataka as my mother was studying in university here in the U.S. and my father was working in the north. Therefore, my childhood memories are all centered around my grandparents, and especially on Popo. As I walked my first steps, he held my hand. As I spoke my first word, he was there to cheer me on. He was my cheerleader, protector and mentor. Words can't fathom how important of a figure he was in my life.

In 2013, my father and I left the place I had called home to go live in the U.S. with my mother. As a child, I was oblivious to what going to the U.S. entailed. All I could think about was that I would get to see my mother for the first time since I was 10 months old. When I

started walking in the airport with my father, I realized that my grandparents weren't by my side. I turned around in a panic to find them waving goodbye from a distance. I tried to run back into the warm comfort of their arms. But all I remember in the end, from that moment, was a blurry scene, from the tears flooding my eyes, with my grandparents fading into the distance.

After about a year and a half of living in the U.S., I learned that Popo had cancer. At this point, I was still a child. I didn't understand what cancer was or the severity or significance of it. It was only until I was in 3rd grade did I understand that cancer was a deadly and incurable disease. The higher one's cancer stage was, the lower the chance of healing and surviving. Popo was diagnosed with stage 3 esophageal cancer. In 2018, my entire family went to spend Tibetan New Year with him and my grandmother in India. When I arrived, I couldn't believe my eyes. Popo, who was once a big man with a hearty appetite, was now a fragile and weak person who could barely eat. Seeing my grandfather in such a state pained me. The man I had once seen walk so confidently with ease, now stepped slowly with the support of a cane. Nonetheless, I made the most of my time there and to this day, I am very fortunate that I got to spend many of his last days with him.

A month passed since my family and I returned to the U.S. On a dark, gloomy and rainy evening one day, I was just starting my homework when the phone rang. Just a few minutes before, I had finished my prayer that I had dedicated to Popo. As I picked up the phone, I turned to my mom to let her know that my uncle was calling. Instead of his usual cheerful greeting, he just asked for me to hand over the phone to my mother. I watched my mother as she spoke with my uncle and my ears perked up when I heard her say, "Pala? (Dad?) Gari ji so? (What happened?)" As she hung up her phone, I rushed to her side and I pounded her with questions: What happened? Did something happen to Popo? Is Popo okay? She hesitated and with a sigh

and in a grave voice, she told me the devastating news. Popo had passed away. I felt as if my world had turned upside down and I felt sick. While I stood motionless, my mother told me that my uncle advised her to not tell me because I was so close with Popo. My mind flashed back to when we left our home in India and when he told me, “Don’t cry— if you cry, I will cry. Don’t worry, we will see each other again soon.” At that moment, I didn’t know what to do because I couldn’t picture a world without him. I ran to my closet and I sat curled up against the wall, with tears streaming down my face. This was the first time anyone in my life had passed away. My mother came up to me and although I saw the sadness in her eyes, I was shocked at how composed she was. How could anyone not be upset in this situation? It was at this moment that she taught me such an important lesson in life. She looked at me and said, “One day, everyone will die. That’s why it’s so important to live a life that you can look back on and be proud of. And Popo was lucky. Many people who suffer the same illness as he does do not live for that long. But he lived for over 3 years with cancer. And he died a painless death— think about the many people who die suffering.” Her words were so impactful to me. Not only did it make me think of Popo’s death in a different light, I also learned the significance of living life to its fullest. Time waits for no one, and so each moment is important.

Memories are such powerful things and they are almost all that I have left of him. They kindle strong feelings of love, hate, joy and sorrow that no material object could elicit. And not only do these memories help me hold onto the person he was, they have shaped my aspirations and goals in life. One of my last memories I have with my grandfather was a conversation I had with him during our visit to India. In Tibetan, he told me three of his final wishes. Firstly, he wished for me to always study and work hard and to focus on my education. Secondly, he told me to always listen to my parents. Third, he said to always help others out and to be humble.

These words are embedded into my heart. I will never forget these words and every day I strive to work hard to fulfill his wishes. I strive to be an oncologist because of Popo. By being an oncologist, I will be able to help so many people who are suffering from the same disease as he did and I wish to help relieve them of any pain. My memories of Popo have shaped who I am today and who I aspire to be. That is the power and value of memories. They drive us to follow a certain path in life, they evoke strong emotions and sentiments, and they teach us important lessons.