

## Building a thoughtful life



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I switched my flight three times. I pushed back my options for the semi-long trip for weeks, blaming my changes on poor scheduling and the assurance that my fiancé would accompany me for the dark endeavor.

The truth was, I was afraid to make my reality something solid and real. When I finally mustered up the courage to visit my grandparents, I knew it would not be a typical visit. Not one where we would spend a listless weekend dining at the Cheesecake Factory, walking around their retirement community, or gathering in the living room to discuss trips, lives, and memories past.

No, this one would be part of an extended goodbye. It was a screenplay-like experience where everyone danced around the realities of my grandfather's deteriorating health and, instead, played their parts with levity and a normalcy that continues to be difficult to digest.

My grandfather, Jerry Dorsey III, the man who launched me into the realm of technology with the singular purchase of a Compaq computer in 1996, a series of Mavis Beacon typing lessons after school, and who served as the foundational subject of my [book](#) and [TEDx talk](#), turned 90 this year.

His long life has been marked by resilience and resistance. Over the last few years, I've documented his stories, captured his key learnings, and found ways, along with my family at large, to honor the rigor and remarkable life he lived, in all of its iterations, nuances, and dimensions. I have saved videos and phone calls and voice messages into a folder in the cloud so that maybe, as the years go on, I'll always have his voice to remember, one that I can pass on to the generations that come after that will want to hear the story of who he was and his place in my world.

As our family meets in whispers and group text messages to support his transition, I can only think about how it must feel to see your days and weeks and years come to a close. That the life you created, the sum of all of your experiences, laughter, tears, time plugging away at earning a living, and stories shaped through a series of random events, built an unknowing yet fruitful existence one day at a time.

I will never know my grandfather's full story, just as a memoir can only capture the highlights and things remembered of a human being's existence, thoughts, memories, and feelings that defined their every twist and turn.

So to sum up 90 years of human existence in 1,000 words in an email to semi-strangers, I want to share a few lessons I've learned from my grandfather on building a thoughtful life:

### **You Always Get to Start Over:**

Uncle Sam recruited Grandpa to serve in the Korean War before he finished his senior year of high school. Upon returning home to Detroit, he had big plans to attend art school, but instead, he took up an offer to learn a trade at the Detroit Electronic and Television Trade School, completing the program in two years and landing a job at Boeing.

He hopped on a Greyhound bus for three days to start a new life in Seattle, Washington, in the 1950s, just a decade after major corporations ended their policies against hiring Black, Native, and immigrant workers, and just a decade and a half before he was granted the right to vote as a Black person in this country in 1964—7 years after my mother was born.

Grandpa built his life from scratch several times over, between jobs, marriages, skill building, and eventually spending the latter part of his years traveling and exploring the world with his family.

### **You Don't Need More Education; You Need To Put in The Work**

Grandpa did not possess a college degree, nor was he ever asked to return to get his high school diploma. But he was a learner and an autodidact, reading every manual for every electronic purchase, textbook he could muster on construction or electrical wiring, and put those skills to work.

He helped me build my science projects, remodeled my mom's kitchen, and used his technological prowess to retool and reimagine his physical environment.

His example of taking what you have, leveraging the tools you have access to, and asking for help when you need it, is one of lifelong learning at any and every age.

### **Get Over Things Quickly**

Between me and my cousin, we have both ruined our grandparents' cars. They'd loaned us their old cars to get around Seattle. Me, while I was visiting from school and my cousin, who lived nearby, when Grandpa purchased a new truck and was gifted Grandpa's old one. I crashed one in a parking lot upon shifting incorrectly. And I'm sure my cousin's accident had more to do with general neglect, but nevertheless. Grandpa wasn't one to yell or make us feel bad for making a mistake. He'd casually laugh things off and tell us, "Welp! I guess that's the end of that." He'd let the little things be the little things as long as we weren't hurt, hurt anyone else, and told the truth about what had happened.

It's not that he didn't care. He just knew that in the grand scheme of things, some things aren't that important to waste time being upset over.

This also came in handy when I got in trouble at home and asked to stay at his place because I knew my sentencing would be less harsh.

### **You're Never Too Old to Decide Your Life**

Grandpa never stopped being adventurous. When I was wrapping up at grad school, my grandparents took a multi-day history bus tour throughout New England, making friends along the way. Our family gathered bi-annually in a different country we'd vote to visit to share space, argue about sports, tour museums, and order margaritas or decent IPAs at a local dive bar.

Building a thoughtful life is deeply personal, marked by principles and values often defined by where you grew up and how people around you think.

Grandpa was born in a Colored hospital and grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, at the height of Jim Crow life, where violence and threats of violence were a mainstay of Black life. His family migrated to Detroit, Michigan in the 40s where the Black middle class began being defined by higher wages at factories and in government work. He migrated once again to a city where he had no family but had to make a way.

Throughout every iteration, I can only imagine how every new experience expanded his worldview, reset him in many ways, stretched what he knew, and then allowed him to define how he would build a legacy; one where his children and his grandchildren would pin their college degrees to his living room wall, and his name would be written in a book, and part of his story told on a national platform.

Grandpa lived with the dignity of hard work, taking care of home, and spending time with his family. I will forever be grateful for him.

This week, as you think about how you're thoughtfully building out the remainder of the year and setting your intentions for 2024, tell me how you're considering what will be essential over what is important.

*And if you're interested in some additional light reading, I recommend the following articles I explored over the weekend.*

[How I've Changed My Mind About Burnout](#) | Anne Helen Peterson

[On Cultivating Taste: Be Picky So You Can Focus on What Matters](#) | Sherry Ning

*Simplifying the Hustle to Cultivate a Beautifully Ambitious Life*

-[Sherrell](#)



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