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# Lost Wisdom of the Elders

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## Lost Wisdom of the Elders

Susan McAnanama's father died when she was five. She saw glimpses of him in the words of her older sisters, who described him as musical and said he had a wonderful knack with people. But when she sought stories and memories from her mother, she got only pained silence. Her mother said it had all happened in a different lifetime. McAnanama stopped asking.

"I really didn't get to know my father," said McAnanama, who is now 68. "I wish my mother had maybe talked a little bit more."

Parents and grandparents are a key source of wisdom and life lessons, social scientists say. Yet often, out of reserve, ignorance, and sometimes even the best intentions, that wisdom does not get passed down. Experts say there is a serious communication gap between the older and younger generations. They say more should be done on both sides to foster meaningful conversations.

Older people possess knowledge gained through experience—things that can't be learned from a textbook. Parents, uncles and aunts and other older relatives can pass down life lessons, skills, and stories—from a secret family recipe for fried chicken to how to change a tire or save for retirement. This knowledge can provide benefits that go beyond the practical, shaping a young person's outlook on life or creating a sense of belonging to a wider community. Some of people's deepest regrets involve things they wish they had known at an earlier age. "Within families, one of the positive roles that older people play is transmitting family values, transmitting family culture, particularly in immigrant communities where the younger generations are being raised in a different cultural setting," said Jake Harwood, professor of communications at the University of Arizona. "There's a lifetime of experience that you can draw on with somebody who's older, that you just don't have."

One reason the generation gap exists is because people tend to socialize with their peers—so-called age segregation. For example, teens might spend the weekend staying out late with their same-aged friends, while older people stay in. Jon Nussbaum, a professor at Penn State, who studies the social life of older adults, says he experiences it firsthand.

"The students kind of ignore me and I'm not really in their social system," said Nussbaum, who is in his sixties. "Sometimes it's hard for me to teach a good class, because I can't communicate directly. But I can, it just takes a little bit of work. The question is Are we willing to invest that time in the interaction?"

Members of younger and older generations tend to communicate only when they have to, at family gatherings. "In my daily life," said Harwood, who is in his forties, "I have very little contact with anybody who's over the age of 60. I think if you were communicating with older people every day in a diversity of settings, then it would be no big deal."

But it's not just lack of opportunity that creates the communication gap. Stereotyping is another cause. Because older people's strength, vision and hearing decline, younger people may use an infantilizing tone when speaking with them. "They might patronize the older adult, assuming that the older adults don't know anything about the topic or they might speak louder as though they were talking to a person who's deaf," said Charles Choi, a communications professor at Pepperdine University. "Instead of really listening, the young adult is just relying on

what they think an older adult needs.” Older people might stereotype young people as well, by assuming that they’re immature and self-centered.

Another factor that leads to the disconnect between generations is known as non-accommodation—an absence of the flexibility needed to overcome superficial obstacles to communication. Older people may make interactions difficult by focusing too much on themselves. “They’re just kinda talking about whatever they wanna talk about; their day, their health, their issues, their problems,” Choi said. Younger people, for their part, may feel impatient with the slow pace or disabilities of an older person, and as a result stop listening or try to get away. In a 2013 study, Choi compared the attitudes of U.S. and Mongolian university students toward older adults. He found that young Americans, but not Mongolians, avoided interactions with older adults when the older person showed decreased vitality.

When the elderly are on the receiving end of non-accommodation it can make them feel stressed and potentially lower their self-esteem. Choi says such experiences can cause older people to get more set in their ways. “They’re like, okay, well, if people are gonna treat me like that, I’m just gonna be like that,” Choi said. “It’s like [a] self-fulfilling prophecy, they end up acting the way they’re treated, and then it just continues this negative pattern over and over again.”

Yet another obstacle to intergenerational communication is something experts call “painful self-disclosure”—the inappropriate sharing of negative information, as when grandparents discuss their medical issues with a grandchild or make old age seem scary. Kids subjected to such talk may try to avoid spending time with their grandparents. “If you hear that when you’re 18, 20 years old it’s going to make you feel negatively about the whole idea of growing old,” said Daniel Mansson, a communications professor at Penn State Hazleton. “But instead if they talk about how much fun they have when they’re out being active and traveling, then children or grandchildren are going to think much more favorably about growing old.”

Mansson said his grandmother on his father’s side would always complain about medical issues, boring neighbors, and bad weather. “It was just sort of borderline depressing talking with her, because it was never anything positive or favorable.” On the other hand, his grandfather on his mother’s side was more positive, despite also having medical issues. “He was always optimistic and asking questions about me and my life,” Mansson said.

One of the main solutions to the communication gap is awareness. For example, parents need to realize that when they ensure their children spend time with grandparents, they are fostering an important relationship. Grandparents can influence attitudes not just toward older people, but toward school, work, and romantic relationships. “Grandparents often teach their grandchildren things like the family history, they teach them about the world around them, anything from tying their shoes to how to hold a baseball bat,” Mansson said. “Without those interactions, younger people have no frame of reference of what the older generation is like.”

Sometimes younger people don’t realize they need guidance until they find themselves in a bind. When Nussbaum’s daughter gave birth, he noticed that she didn’t ask for her mother’s help until the moment of truth. “All of a sudden when she was taken into the delivery room, she wanted her mom with her and my wife was so happy,” Nussbaum said. “You got this woman here that gave birth to three kids, use her.”

Nussbaum’s wife waited until her daughter reached out. But when parents and grandparents push their points of view, the result is not always good. Sometimes parents give bad advice, for example when they don’t recognize what their child’s true passion is and focus instead on financial stability.

Lucy Aponte, a 71-year-old artist from the Bronx, says her deepest regret stems from her parents putting their own opinion before hers. Aponte dreamed of becoming a writer and an artist since childhood, but her father told her she would be a nurse instead.

Following her father's orders, Aponte became a nurse and was good at it, because she was caring and thoughtful. "But my passion for my art and for my writing was put on the back-burner and I wish that they had said to me, 'What is your dream, what do you wanna be, they didn't ask me that,'" Aponte said. "They just assumed that what I say she's gonna do, she's gonna do."

Conversely, youngsters can inspire or even teach their grandparents to use Facebook or Skype. Mansson knows a 90-year-old who uses Facetime to talk to great-grandchildren who live in another state. "You have the four-year-old on one end with Mommy's iPhone, and then the 90-year-old lady on the other end with an iPad," Mansson said.