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IN THE WORDS OF A GRANDDAUGHTER LEFT BEHIND

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My sister in law, sadly, lost her Granny a few years ago. She was very close with her and has felt her loss very deeply. Her Granny planned every aspect of her passing, down to the wording of her obituary. I asked my sister-in-law if she would share her experiences and feelings from the perspective of a grandchild left to morn the loss of a very special person in her life.

"I love those (mostly cheesy) end-of-year photo montages that you often see at the end of each year. They are everywhere; the news, radio, newspaper, online, even when watching your favorite sports team. Maybe for me it is the fascination of looking back at those "most important" things from the past year. Or, maybe it is the quiet introspection and reflection that comes with the end of something important or significant. I was recently putting together my own photo collections and having my own moments of reflection, going through my dear Granny's dusty box of old photographs and letters. Unfortunately, a major event in my 2009 was the loss of this important figure in my family's life.

My Granny was not the most organized person in the world. In many cases, that was a huge understatement. In fact, this box that I chose to sort through had war-time letters from my Papa, photos from her childhood, her days in college, and then random shots of me with really bad 80's hair' quite the confusing mess to have assembled in the same place.

I remember distinctly hanging up with my mother after getting the news that Granny had passed. There's often a stun of emotion that comes with such news, and an empty space in the world that once was filled with her presence. As I continued my conversations with my mom that day, I was in awe of Granny's organization and her own preparations. We may not have been ready to lose her, but she had, even in her passing, taken care of us as she always had.

My mother and her sister found four file folders of Granny's plans for her funeral. Scripture she wanted read, the address book of people we needed to contact, information about the cemetery plots, even her headstone had been ordered without the date of her passing. We found keys to the safe deposit box where the Will was, life insurance documents, and she even had drafted her own obituary, some amazing feat for this 90 year-old woman.

I am not quite sure when she had begun all these plans. Her husband of more than 50 years died of Alzheimer's in 2002, so perhaps having been responsible for handling his arrangements gave her the encouragement to be organized for her own death. Or perhaps, it was that, at 90 years old, her death and dying was the one thing she had control over. Either way, we were grateful for her diligence and could, instead, concentrate on taking care of one another, celebrating her life, and spend our time doing fun things - like going through old pictures.

I spoke to a good friend of mine the other day. Like me, she had just lost her grandmother. However, the fall out afterward was a completely different experience than mine. Her grandmother never wanted to talk about dying. She had no Will and the family did not know where to bury her or even hold the funeral. It was evident that her family was dealing with much more than just the stress that comes when losing a loved one.

2010...a new year. Many people use the new year to resolve to do something differently, to make their lives better, to clean the slate for a new beginning, to lose weight or stop smoking. The list is endless. I am not one to make resolutions. Maybe it is because I am afraid that I won't follow through, that I will disappoint myself or those that want the best for me might be disappointed. However, I think new beginnings can be a reminder to us all of the ways in which we can improve the life around us- even if it might be difficult to think about.

One of the last pictures I came across in my Granny's box was a sign she had seen in a garden somewhere. It says: "Leave this world better than you found it." Perhaps this quote struck a chord with her that day and left its' deep imprint, for she had left our world better by continuing to care for us even after she was gone.