



WRITING LESSON

Three Things That Matter Most



Students will read and respond to the YES! Magazine article “Three Things That Matter Most in Youth and Old Age” by Nancy Hill.

Every day we are distracted by the clutter and chaos of the modern world. Photographer Nancy Hill recognized this and wanted perspective on the question, “What is important?” She asked two groups—children under 7 because they have lived relatively simple lives and adults over 70 because they have decades of experience—to explore what three things mattered most to them.

Part 1: The Article

“Three Things That Matter Most in Youth and Old Age”

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

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“The Life-Long War” by Emily Greenbaum

“Wise Words From Winnie the Pooh” by Amanda Schwaben

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“Three Things That Matter Most in Youth and Old Age”

A photographer explores what’s important when you’ve lived fewer than seven years or more than seven decades.



In a world that daily throws both curiosities and crises at us, it can be difficult to discern what is important. An unexpected event can render what matters today insignificant tomorrow. How do you keep perspective?

I turned to two groups—children under seven and adults over 70—to explore this question: What is important?

Children, I reasoned, have relatively little to clutter their lives, and in that simplicity they might be able to hone in on what really matters. Adults with more than seven decades of experience would have deep insight into what is most worthy of attention.

I expected to find patterns and did. What people left out was as telling as what they included. No one named prestige or individual success, and hardly anyone mentioned money.

And there was this surprise:

We live among such remarkable people, yet few know their stories.

When I began the project, I didn’t know enough people over 70 to create a body of work, so I put a notice in a senior newspaper requesting participants. The response was immediate. And amazing. I met two Holocaust survivors, a woman who had been imprisoned in a Japanese internment camp, a

community health nurse who had worked with the Black Panthers, a man with an IQ in the genius range who spent his career working with special needs kids. I met a “Jane,” the name given to all women who worked with an abortion clinic in Chicago before Roe v. Wade, and I photographed a former attorney involved in legislation that allowed abortion under some circumstances for the first time. One woman ran her first half marathon at 79. One gentleman created one of Oregon’s first vineyards.

We live among such remarkable people, yet few know their stories. Why do we show such little appreciation for people beyond a certain age? Policy and decision makers rarely seek their advice. Their faces do not grace the cover of magazines. It is unlikely their stories will show up in a Google search.

I came away from this project with my own list of what’s important. At the top of that list is the importance of connecting with others in general, but in particular with those who have lived long lives. Do not let these people disappear quietly into their homes. Draw them out, engage them in conversation, and learn from them.

Magdaleno Rose-Avila (Leno)



Born to immigrant parents, Leno was one of 12 children. He began working in Colorado’s onion fields when he 11 and later became deeply involved in workers’ rights. He worked with Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers and in the Chicano movement

of the 1960s and ’70s. Together with Sister Helen Prejean, he founded The Moratorium Campaign.

Three most important things:

1. Enjoy meeting people who expand my horizon and give me new insights!
2. It is important for me to write my poetry and
3. I love reading books that help me escape from this world of ours.

Luca, 6



Three Most Important Things:

1. Mommy, Daddy, and Elora—our family
2. food and water because if we didn’t have food and water, there wouldn’t be any people
3. Games! Because without games, there wouldn’t be any fun

Read more of this article at:

<https://bit.ly/2VYRVN1>

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

What are three things that matter most to you? Now, ask the same question to someone significantly older than you. Find out why this person chose these three things. How did your answers compare? Describe what you learned from the person you interviewed.

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?

Share your feedback with us and other teachers
by leaving a comment on our website:

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

The Lessons Of Mortality

Rory Leyva, grade 7

“As I’ve aged, things that are more personal to me have become somewhat less important. Perhaps I’ve become less self-centered with the awareness of mortality, how short one person’s life is.” This is how my 72-year-old grandma believes her values have changed over the course of her life. Even though I am only 12 years old, I know my life won’t last forever, and someday I, too, will reflect on my past decisions. We were all born to exist and eventually die, so we have evolved to value things in the context of mortality.

One of the ways I feel most alive is when I play roller derby. I started playing for the Rose City Rollers Juniors two years ago, and this year, I made the Rosebud All-Stars travel team. Roller derby is a fast-paced, full-contact sport. The physicality and intense training make me feel in control of and present in my body.

My roller derby team is like a second family to me. Adolescence is complicated. We understand each other in ways no one else can. I love my friends more than I love almost anything else. My family would have been higher on my list a few years ago, but as I’ve aged it has been important to make my own social connections.

Music led me to roller derby. I started out jam skating at the roller rink. Jam skating is all about feeling the music. It integrates gymnastics, breakdancing, figure skating, and modern dance with R & B and hip hop music. When I was younger, I once lay down in the DJ booth at the roller rink and was lulled to sleep by the drawl of wheels rolling in rhythm and people talking about the things they came there to escape. Sometimes, I go up on the roof of my house at night to listen to music

and feel the wind rustle my hair. These unique sensations make me feel safe like nothing else ever has.

My grandma tells me, “Being close with family and friends is the most important thing because I haven’t always had that.” When my grandma was two years old, her father died. Her mother became depressed and moved around a lot, which made it hard for my grandma to make friends. Once my grandma went to college, she made lots of friends. She met my grandfather, Joaquin Leyva when she was working as a park ranger and he was a surfer. They bought two acres of land on the edge of a redwood forest and had a son and a daughter. My grandma created a stable family that was missing throughout her early life.

My grandma is motivated to maintain good health so she can be there for her family. I can relate because I have to be fit and strong for my team. Since she lost my grandfather to cancer, she realizes how lucky she is to have a functional body and no life-threatening illnesses. My grandma tries to eat well and exercise, but she still struggles with depression. Over time, she has learned that reaching out to others is essential to her emotional wellbeing.

Caring for the earth is also a priority for my grandma I’ve been lucky to learn from my grandma. She’s taught me how to hunt for fossils in the desert and find shells on the beach. Although my grandma grew up with no access to the wilderness, she admired the green open areas of urban cemeteries. In college, she studied geology and hiked in the High Sierras. For years, she’s been an advocate for conserving wildlife habitat and open

spaces.

Our priorities may seem different, but it all comes down to basic human needs. We all desire a purpose, strive to be happy, and need to be loved. Like Nancy Hill says in the YES! Magazine article “Three Things That Matter Most in Youth and Old Age,” it can be hard to decipher what is important in life. I believe that the constant search for satisfaction and meaning is the only thing everyone has in common. We all want to know what matters, and we walk around this confusing world trying to find it. The lessons I’ve learned from my grandma about forging connections, caring for my body, and getting out in the world inspire me live my life my way before it’s gone.

Time Only Moves Forward

Praethong Klomsum, grade 10

Sandra Hernandez gazes at the tiny house while her mother’s gentle hands caress her shoulders. It wasn’t much, especially for a family of five. This was 1960, she was 17, and her family had just moved to Culver City.

Flash forward to 2019. Sandra sits in a rocking chair, knitting a blanket for her latest grandchild, in the same living room. Sandra remembers working hard to feed her eight children. She took many different jobs before settling behind the cash register at a Japanese restaurant called Magos. “It was a struggle, and my husband Augustine, was planning to join the military at that time, too.”

In the YES! Magazine article “Three Things That Matter Most in Youth and Old Age,” author Nancy Hill states that one of the most important things is “...connecting with others in general, but in particular with those who have lived long lives.” Sandra feels similarly. It’s been hard for Sandra to keep in contact with her family, which leaves her downhearted some days. “It’s important to maintain that connection you have with your family, not just next-door neighbors you talk to once a month.”

Despite her age, Sandra is a daring woman. Taking risks is important to her, and she’ll try anything—from skydiving to hiking. Sandra has some regrets from the past, but nowadays, she doesn’t wonder about the “would have, could have, should have.” She just goes for it with a smile.

Sandra thought harder about her last important thing, the blue and green blanket now finished and covering Praethong Sandra her lap. “I’ve definitely lived a longer life than most, and maybe this is just wishful thinking, but I hope I can see the day my great-grandchildren are born.” She’s

laughing, but her eyes look beyond what’s in front of her. Maybe she is reminiscing about the day she held her son for the first time or thinking of her grandchildren becoming parents. I thank her for her time and she waves it off, offering me a styrofoam cup of lemonade before I head for the bus station.

The bus is sparsely filled. A voice in my head reminds me to finish my 10-page history research paper before spring break. I take a window seat and pull out my phone and earbuds. My playlist is already on shuffle, and I push away thoughts of that dreaded paper. Music has been a constant in my life—from singing my lungs out in kindergarten to Barbie’s “I Need To Know,” to jamming out to Taylor Swift’s “Blank Space” in sixth grade, to BTS’s “Intro: Never Mind” comforting me when I’m at my lowest. Music is my magic shop, a place where I can trade away my fears for calm.

I’ve always been afraid of doing something wrong—not finishing my homework or getting a C when I can do better. When I was 8, I wanted to be like the big kids. As I got older, I realized that I had exchanged my childhood longing for the 48 pack of crayons for bigger problems, balancing grades, a social life, and mental stability—all at once. I’m going to get older whether I like it or not, so there’s no point forcing myself to grow up faster. I’m learning to live in the moment.

The bus is approaching my apartment, where I know my comfy bed and a home-cooked meal from my mom are waiting. My mom is hard-working, confident, and very stubborn. I admire her strength of character. She always keeps me in line, even through my rebellious phases.

My best friend sends me a text—an update on

how broken her laptop is. She is annoying. She says the stupidest things and loves to state the obvious. Despite this, she never fails to make me laugh until my cheeks feel numb. The rest of my friends are like that too—loud, talkative, and always brightening my day. Even friends I stopped talking to have a place in my heart. Recently, I've tried to reconnect with some of them. This interview was possible because a close friend from sixth grade offered to introduce me to Sandra, her grandmother.

I'm decades younger than Sandra, so my view of what's important isn't as broad as hers, but we share similar values, with friends and family at the top. I have a feeling that when Sandra was my age, she used to love music, too. Maybe in a few decades, when I'm sitting in my rocking chair, drawing in my sketchbook, I'll remember this article and think back fondly to the days when life was simple.

The Life-Long War

Emily Greenbaum, university

Every morning we open our eyes, ready for a new day. Some immediately turn to their phones and social media. Others work out or do yoga. For a certain person, a deep breath and the morning sun ground him. He hears the clink-clank of his wife cooking low sodium meat for breakfast—doctor’s orders! He sees that the other side of the bed is already made, the dogs are no longer in the room, and his clothes are set out nicely on the loveseat.

Today, though, this man wakes up to something different: faded cream walls and jello. This person, my hero, is Master Chief Petty Officer Roger James.

I pulled up my chair close to Roger’s vinyl recliner so I could hear him above the noise of the beeping dialysis machine. I noticed Roger would occasionally glance at his wife Susan with sparkly eyes when he would recall memories of the war or their grandkids. He looked at Susan like she walked on water.

Roger James served his country for thirty years. Now, he has enlisted in another type of war. He suffers from a rare blood cancer—the result of the wars he fought in. Roger has good and bad days. He says, “The good outweighs the bad, so I have to be grateful for what I have on those good days.”

When Roger retired, he never thought the effects of the war would reach him. The once shallow wrinkles upon his face become deeper, as he tells me, “It’s just cancer. Others are suffering from far worse. I know I’ll make it.”

Like Nancy Hill did in her article “Three Things that Matter Most in Youth and Old Age,” I asked Roger, “What are the three most important things to you?” James answered,

“My wife Susan, my grandkids, and church.”

Roger and Susan served together in the Vietnam war. She was a nurse who treated his cuts and scrapes one day. I asked Roger why he chose Susan. He said, “Susan told me to look at her while she cleaned me up. ‘This may sting, but don’t be a baby.’ When I looked into her eyes, I felt like she was looking into my soul, and I didn’t want her to leave. She gave me this sense of home. Every day I wake up, she makes me feel the same way, and I fall in love with her all over again.”

Roger and Susan have two kids and four grandkids, with great-grandchildren on the way. He claims that his grandkids give him the youth that he feels slowly escaping from his body. This adoring grandfather is energized by coaching t-ball and playing evening card games with the grandkids.

The last thing on his list was church. His oldest daughter married a pastor. Together they founded a church. Roger said that the connection between his faith and family is important to him because it gave him a reason to want to live again. I learned from Roger that when you’re across the ocean, you tend to lose sight of why you are fighting. When Roger returned, he didn’t have the will to live. Most days were a struggle, adapting back into a society that lacked empathy for the injuries, pain, and psychological trauma carried by returning soldiers. Church changed that for Roger and gave him a sense of purpose.

When I began this project, my attitude was to just get the assignment done. I never thought I could view Master Chief Petty Officer Roger James as more than a role model, but he definitely changed my mind. It’s as if Roger

magically lit a fire inside of me and showed me where one's true passions should lie. I see our similarities and embrace our differences. We both value family and our own connections to home—his home being church and mine being where I can breathe the easiest.

Master Chief Petty Officer Roger James has shown me how to appreciate what I have around me and that every once in a while, I should step back and stop to smell the roses. As we concluded the interview, amidst squeaky clogs and the stale smell of bleach and bedpans, I looked to Roger, his kind, tired eyes, and weathered skin, with a deeper sense of admiration, knowing that his values still run true, no matter what he faces.

Wise Words From Winnie the Pooh

Amanda Schwaben, university

As I read through Nancy Hill’s article “Three Things That Matter Most in Youth and Old Age,” I was comforted by the similar responses given by both children and older adults. The emphasis participants placed on family, social connections, and love was not only heartwarming but hopeful. While the messages in the article filled me with warmth, I felt a twinge of guilt building within me. As a twenty-one-year-old college student weeks from graduation, I honestly don’t think much about the most important things in life. But if I was asked, I would most likely say family, friendship, and love. As much as I hate to admit it, I often find myself obsessing over achieving a successful career and finding a way to “save the world.”

A few weeks ago, I was at my family home watching the new Winnie the Pooh movie Christopher Robin with my mom and younger sister. Well, I wasn’t really watching. I had my laptop in front of me, and I was aggressively typing up an assignment. Halfway through the movie, I realized I left my laptop charger in my car. I walked outside into the brisk March air. Instinctively, I looked up. The sky was perfectly clear, revealing a beautiful array of stars. When my twin sister and I were in high school, we would always take a moment to look up at the sparkling night sky before we came into the house after soccer practice.

I think that was the last time I stood in my driveway and gazed at the stars. I did not get the laptop charger from my car; instead, I turned around and went back inside. I shut my laptop and watched the rest of the movie. My twin sister loves Winnie the Pooh. So much so that my parents got her a stuffed animal version of him for Christmas. While I thought he was adorable and a token of my childhood,

I did not really understand her obsession. However, it was clear to me after watching the movie. Winnie the Pooh certainly had it figured out. He believed that the simple things in life were the most important: love, friendship, and having fun.

I thought about asking my mom right then what the three most important things were to her, but I decided not to. I just wanted to be in the moment. I didn’t want to be doing homework. It was a beautiful thing to just sit there and be present with my mom and sister.

I did ask her, though, a couple of weeks later. Her response was simple. All she said was family, health, and happiness. When she told me this, I imagined Winnie the Pooh smiling. I think he would be proud of that answer.

I was not surprised by my mom’s reply. It suited her perfectly. I wonder if we relearn what is most important when we grow older—that the pressure to be successful subsides. Could it be that valuing family, health, and happiness is what ends up saving the world

Decoding the Butterfly

Antonia Mills, grade

For a caterpillar to become a butterfly, it must first digest itself. The caterpillar, overwhelmed by accumulating tissue, splits its skin open to form its protective shell, the chrysalis, and later becomes the pretty butterfly we all know and love. There are approximately 20,000 species of butterflies, and just as every species is different, so is the life of every butterfly. No matter how long and hard a caterpillar has strived to become the colorful and vibrant butterfly that we marvel at on a warm spring day, it does not live a long life. A butterfly can live for a year, six months, two weeks, and even as little as twenty-four hours.

I have often wondered if butterflies live long enough to be blissful of blue skies. Do they take time to feast upon the sweet nectar they crave, midst their hustling life of pollinating pretty flowers? Do they ever take a lull in their itineraries, or are they always rushing towards completing their four-stage metamorphosis? Has anyone asked the butterfly, “Who are you?” instead of “What are you”? Or, How did you get here, on my windowsill? How did you become ‘you’?

Humans are similar to butterflies. As a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, a baby becomes an elder. As a butterfly soars through summer skies, an elder watches summer skies turn into cold winter nights and back toward summer skies yet again. And as a butterfly flits slowly by the porch light, a passerby makes assumptions about the wrinkled, slow-moving elder, who is sturdier than he appears. These creatures are not seen for who they are—who they were—because people have “better things to do” or they are too busy to ask, “How are you”?

Our world can be a lonely place. Pressured by expectations, haunted by dreams,

overpowered by weakness, and drowned out by lofty goals, we tend to forget ourselves—and others. Rather than hang onto the strands of our diminishing sanity, we might benefit from listening to our elders. Many elders have experienced setbacks in their young lives. Overcoming hardship and surviving to old age is wisdom that they carry. We can learn from them—and can even make their day by taking the time to hear their stories.

Nancy Hill, who wrote the YES! Magazine article “Three Things That Matter Most in Youth and Old Age,” was right: “We live among such remarkable people, yet few know their stories.” I know a lot about my grandmother’s life, and it isn’t as serene as my own. My grandmother, Liza, who cooks every day, bakes bread on holidays for our neighbors, brings gifts to her doctor out of the kindness of her heart, and makes conversation with neighbors even though she isn’t fluent in English—Russian is her first language—has struggled all her life. Her mother, Anna, a single parent, had tuberculosis, and even though she had an inviolable spirit, she was too frail to care for four children. She passed away when my grandmother was sixteen, so my grandmother and her siblings spent most of their childhood in an orphanage. My grandmother got married at nineteen to my grandfather, Pinhas. He was a man who loved her more than he loved himself and was a godsend to every person he met. Liza was—and still is—always quick to do what was best for others, even if that person treated her poorly. My grandmother has lived with physical pain all her life, yet she pushed herself to climb heights that she wasn’t ready for. Against all odds, she has lived to tell her story to people who are willing to listen. And I always am.

I asked my grandmother, “What are three

things most important to you?” Her answer was one that I already expected: One, for everyone to live long healthy lives. Two, for you to graduate from college. Three, for you to always remember that I love you.

What may be basic to you means the world to my grandmother. She just wants what she never had the chance to experience: a healthy life, an education, and the chance to express love to the people she values. The three things that matter most to her may be so simple and ordinary to outsiders, but to her, it is so much more. And who could take that away?

This Former State Trooper Has His Priorities Straight: Family Climate Change and Integrity

Isaac Ziemba, grade 7

I have a personal connection to people who served in the military and first responders. My uncle is a first responder on the island I live on, and my dad retired from the Navy. That was what made a man named Glen Tyrell, a state trooper for 25 years, 2 months and 9 days, my first choice to interview about what three things matter in life. In the YES! Magazine article “The Three Things That Matter Most in Youth and Old Age,” I learned that old and young people have a great deal in common. I know that’s true because Glen and I care about a lot of the same things.

For Glen, family is at the top of his list of important things. “My wife was, and is, always there for me. My daughters mean the world to me, too, but Penny is my partner,” Glen said. I can understand why Glen’s wife is so important to him. She’s family. Family will always be there for you.

Glen loves his family, and so do I with all my heart. My dad especially means the world to me. He is my top supporter and tells me that if I need help, just “say the word.” When we are fishing or crabbing, sometimes Isaac and Glen think, what if these times were erased from my memory? I wouldn’t be able to describe the horrible feeling that would rush through my mind, and I’m sure that Glen would feel the same about his wife.

My uncle once told me that the world is always going to change over time. It’s what the world has turned out to be that worries me. Both Glen and I are extremely concerned about climate change and the effect that rising temperatures have on animals and their habitats. We’re driving them to extinction.

Some people might say, “So what? Animals don’t pay taxes or do any of the things we do.” What we are doing to them is like the Black Death times 100.

Glen is also frustrated by how much plastic we use and where it ends up. He would be shocked that an explorer recently dived to the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean—seven miles!—and discovered a plastic bag and candy wrappers. Glen told me that, unfortunately, his generation did the damage and my generation is here to fix it. We need to take better care of Earth because if we don’t, we, as a species, will have failed.

Both Glen and I care deeply for our families and the earth, but for our third important value, I chose education and Glen chose integrity. My education is super important to me because without it, I would be a blank slate. I wouldn’t know how to figure out problems. I wouldn’t be able to tell right from wrong. I wouldn’t understand the Bill of Rights. I would be stuck. Everyone should be able to go to school, no matter where they’re from or who they are. It makes me angry and sad to think that some people, especially girls, get shot because they are trying to go to school. I understand how lucky I am.

Integrity is sacred to Glen—I could tell by the serious tone of Glen’s voice when he told me that integrity was the code he lived by as a former state trooper. He knew that he had the power to change a person’s life, and he was committed to not abusing that power. When Glen put someone under arrest—and my uncle says the same—his judgment and integrity were paramount. “Either you’re right or you’re

wrong.” You can’t judge a person by what you think, you can only judge a person from what you know.”

I learned many things about Glen and what’s important in life, but there is one thing that stands out—something Glen always does and does well. Glen helps people. He did it as a state trooper, and he does it in our school, where he works on construction projects. Glen told me that he believes that our most powerful tools are writing and listening to others. I think those tools are important, too, but I also believe there are other tools to help solve many of our problems and create a better future: to be compassionate, to create caring relationships, and to help others. Just like Glen Tyrell does each and every day.

The Phone Call

Lily Hersch, grade 6

Dear Grandpa,

In my short span of life—12 years so far—you’ve taught me a lot of important life lessons that I’ll always have with me. Some of the values I talk about in this writing I’ve learned from you.

Dedicated to my Gramps.

In the YES! Magazine article “Three Things That Matter Most in Youth and Old Age,” author and photographer Nancy Hill asked people to name the three things that mattered most to them. After reading the essay prompt for the article, I immediately knew who I wanted to interview: my grandpa Gil.

My grandpa was born on January 25, 1942. He lived in a minuscule tenement in The Bronx with his mother, father, and brother. His father wasn’t around much, and, when he was, he was reticent and would snap occasionally, revealing his constrained mental pain. My grandpa says this happened because my great grandfather did not have a father figure in his life. His mother was a classy, sharp lady who was the head secretary at a local police district station. My grandpa and his brother Larry did not care for each other. Gramps said he was very close to his mother, and Larry wasn’t. Perhaps Larry was envious for what he didn’t have.

Decades after little to no communication with his brother, my grandpa decided to spontaneously visit him in Florida, where he resided with his wife. Larry was taken aback at the sudden reappearance of his brother and told him to leave. Since then, the two brothers

have not been in contact. My grandpa doesn’t even know if Larry is alive.

My grandpa is now a retired lawyer, married to my wonderful grandma, and living in a pretty house with an ugly dog named BoBo.

So, what’s important to you, Gramps?

He paused a second, then replied, “Family, kindness, and empathy.”

Why so?

“Family, because it’s my family. It’s important to stay connected with your family. My brother, father, and I never connected in the way I wished, and sometimes I contemplated what could’ve happened. But you can’t change the past. So, that’s why family’s important to me.”

Family will always be on my “Top Three Most Important Things” list, too. I can’t imagine not having my older brother, Zeke, or my grandma in my life. I wonder how other kids feel about their families? How do kids trapped and separated from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border feel? What about orphans? Too many questions, too few answers.

“Kindness, because growing up and not seeing a lot of kindness made me realize how important it is to have that in the world. Kindness makes the world go round.”

What is kindness? Helping my brother, Eli, who has Down syndrome, get ready in the morning? Telling people what they need to hear, rather than what they want to hear? Maybe, for now, I’ll put wisdom, not kindness, on my list.

“Empathy, because of all the killings and shootings [in this country.] We also need to care for people—people who are not living in as good circumstances as I have. Donald Trump and other people I’ve met have no empathy. Empathy is very important.”

Empathy is something I’ve felt my whole life. It’ll always be important to me like it is important to my grandpa. My grandpa shows his empathy when he works with disabled children. Once he took a disabled child to a Christina Aguilera concert because that child was too young to go by himself. The moments I feel the most empathy are when Eli gets those looks from people. Seeing Eli wonder why people stare at him like he’s a freak makes me sad, and annoyed that they have the audacity to stare.

After this 2 minute and 36-second phone call, my grandpa has helped me define what’s most important to me at this time in my life: family, wisdom, and empathy. Although these things are important now, I realize they can change and most likely will.

When I’m an old woman, I envision myself scrambling through a stack of storage boxes and finding this paper. Perhaps after reading words from my 12-year-old self, I’ll ask myself “What’s important to me?”

Lessons My Nana Taught Me

Jonas Buckner, grade 6

I walked into the house. In the other room, I heard my cousin screaming at his game. There were a lot of Pioneer Woman dishes everywhere. The room had the television on max volume. The fan in the other room was on. I didn't know it yet, but I was about to learn something powerful.

I was in my Nana's house, and when I walked in, she said, "Hey Monkey Butt."

I said, "Hey Nana."

Before the interview, I was talking to her about what I was gonna interview her on. Also, I had asked her why I might have wanted to interview her, and she responded with, "Because you love me, and I love you too."

Now, it was time to start the interview. The first question I asked was the main and most important question ever: "What three things matter most to you and you only?"

She thought of it very thoughtfully and responded with, "My grandchildren, my children, and my health."

Then, I said, "OK, can you please tell me more about your health?"

She responded with, "My health is bad right now. I have heart problems, blood sugar, and that's about it." When she said it, she looked at me and smiled because she loved me and was happy I chose her to interview.

I replied with, "K um, why is it important to you?"

She smiled and said, "Why is it...Why is my health important? Well, because I want to live

a long time and see my grandchildren grow up."

I was scared when she said that, but she still smiled. I was so happy, and then I said, "Has your health always been important to you?"

She responded with "Nah."

Then, I asked, "Do you happen to have a story to help me understand your reasoning?"

She said, "No, not really."

Now we were getting into the next set of questions. I said, "Remember how you said that your grandchildren matter to you? Can you please tell me why they matter to you?"

Then, she responded with, "So I can spend time with them, play with them, and everything."

Next, I asked the same question I did before: "Have you always loved your grandchildren?"

She responded with, "Yes, they have always been important to me."

Then, the next two questions I asked she had no response to at all. She was very happy until I asked, "Why do your children matter most to you?"

She had a frown on and responded, "My daughter Tammy died a long time ago."

Then, at this point, the other questions were answered the same as the other ones. When I left to go home I was thinking about how her answers were similar to mine. She said health, and I care about my health a lot, and I didn't say, but I wanted to. She also didn't have

answers for the last two questions on each thing, and I was like that too.

The lesson I learned was that no matter what, always keep pushing because even though my aunt or my Nana's daughter died, she kept on pushing and loving everyone. I also learned that everything should matter to us. Once again, I chose to interview my Nana because she matters to me, and I know when she was younger she had a lot of things happen to her, so I wanted to know what she would say. The point I'm trying to make is that be grateful for what you have and what you have done in life. answers for the last two questions on each thing, and I was like that too.

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