

ENCOUNTERS

Strong

The phone rings ... and rings ... and rings. I wonder if he will answer today. I fear the day he forgets what to do when the phone rings.

“Hello?” His tone when he answers is always questioning.

“Hi Dziadziu (Polish for grandfather!)” I reply.

There is a pause.

I wait.

Will he recognize my voice today?

“Oh ... [another pause] hi Stefcia (my Polish nickname!)” I silently celebrate today’s small victory; he still remembers my name.

Our conversation continues. He is in good spirits, as usual. He repeatedly checks in on my health, and in return, I check in on his. Between the Polish sentences, there are English expressions. He tells me his mind may be weak, but he is feeling “strong like bull.”

He does not remember what we talked about during our last call or what I am studying. When I tell him I am studying to be a doctor, he tells me to hurry up before he “kicks the bucket” (and then tells me that is one of his favourite English lines).

He is fiercely proud of his culture. He vividly remembers his childhood and early teen years when his family was displaced from Poland, crowded onto trains like cattle and sent to a work camp

in Siberia during WWII. He remembers what he ate, the work he did, his time with the young soldiers and even some Russian phrases. He tells me about his life journey — how he lived in various countries in Africa and the Middle East before travelling to England and then finally settling in Canada. He fell in love, started a family and worked for decades as a steelworker. He always tells me, “Work hard. It pays off.”

Every time he asks me what is new, I find something different to tell him. I know he will not remember it tomorrow or within the next five minutes. It does not matter.

He knows that the love of his life passed away. He does not remember when. He cared for her for decades and keeps their wedding picture at his bedside.

Every time he asks me what is new, I find something different to tell him. I know he will not remember it tomorrow or within the next five minutes.

It does not matter.

What matters is that I want to share my life with him. I want him to share my joys, my sorrows and my triumphs ... if for only a moment.

When I ask him what he was doing

when I called, he tells me he was praying. He remembers the prayers that he learned decades ago. His faith gives him strength.

He uses humour to cope with losing pieces of his mind — a true blessing. When I ask him about the trip he went on last weekend, he sounds surprised and says, “I must have forgotten!” He is not upset. Instead, he laughs; he copes.

He tells jokes and reminds me that the only interesting thing on television

is tennis or soccer. If there is one thing he can still remember, it is how many times he beat my father at cribbage last night.

“When will I see you again?” he asks. It is difficult to tell him, several times, that our next visit is weeks to months away. We both look forward to our next reunion.

I end the conversation with, “I love you Dziadziu.” I silently pray that this is something he will never forget.

He replies, “I love you too.”

We hang up.

Alzheimer disease has taken its hold. My grandfather stands strong — like a bull.

We wait.

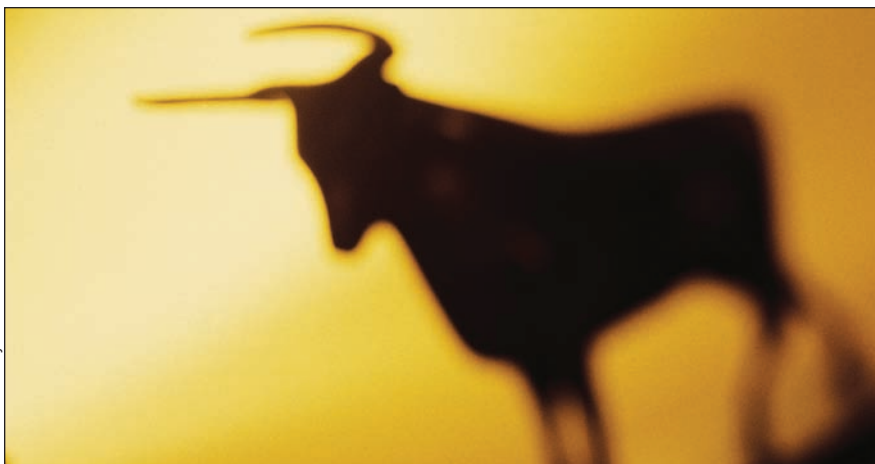
For now, we celebrate and we laugh. We enjoy each moment ... before it is forgotten.

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This is a true story. The family has given consent for this story to be told.

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