

Building Lasting Legacies

Written by U.S Immigration News
Thursday, 18 July 2013 23:09 -



The late Steve Jobs said the following about death: “Death is the destination we all share, no one has ever escaped it.” Perhaps this is the reason why we should focus our concerns not so much in trying to avoid death but instead we should concentrate our efforts on learning all that we can in and from life. Learning from life and all that it brings with it may actually prepare us to live life with a deeper understanding of our purpose and its fulfillment.

This month, my husband and I were faced with the difficult task of saying good-bye to a loved one. In his early eighties, at the time of his passing, one could argue that my father-in-law Aubrey Richards had lived a full life. A self-made man, the death of his mother during his childhood and of his father during adolescence forced him to single-handedly pave a way for himself in this world. With very little formal education he worked hard and became an entrepreneur. His lack of formal education was not a deterrent for self-education. The diligent study of the Bible and the reading of every book and newspaper he could put his hands on became his tools for education. In his role as father, he made sure that his seven children not only went to school but insisted that they aspire to achieve the highest academic levels that they could.

While I may have described my father-in-law I am sure that many of you can relate. You have met and know men and women in your own families who share this caliber of character and perseverance. It is unfortunate that often, it is not until their deaths that we begin to understand the legacy of their contributions and the depth of their wisdom. Even more regrettable is that often we do not take the time to learn from them or to teach the younger generations to sit at their feet to acquire from their knowledge.

As a people, this lack of generational continuity has become the sustained suicide of our cultural knowledge. We have become so obsessed with living life for the moment that we have become entangled with the banalities of short-term gratification. Our children have followed our example and as a result very few of them have an appreciation for wisdom, age or life itself. In too many of our families and communities, there are no practiced or theoretical spiritual, cultural or social legacies being passed down from one generation to another. As a result, the faith, the wisdom, the knowledge and often the strength of character of our elders dies with them.

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Today, our children and youth are missing out on the knowledge and confidence that a healthy generational legacy provides. They lack a sense of self and sense of purpose simply because their identity has not been anchored in the cultural knowledge of their own family legacy.

So, how can we break this cycle of self-inflicted death to cultural knowledge?

1. 1. We need to respect the contributions of our elders. Yes, they may come from a different day and age where things were done differently, but they paved the way for us to be where we are today. Were it not for them we would not be here. Period.
2. 2. We need to respect the humanity of our elders. They are human beings not expendable goods. Putting them in nursing homes to get them out of the way may seem practical but may not always be the most humane option.
3. 3. We must be intentional in creating opportunities for cross-generational interaction and communication. Family picnics, celebrations, graduations, etc are some of the best ways to for the generations to share and interact.
4. 4. We need to listen to our elders. There is a lot of wisdom in those gray hairs. We need to take the time to learn from them.
5. 5. We need to cherish the stories of our elders. Every child has a right to know something about the life of his or her grandparents from their own lips. Allow the elders to repeat their stories over and over for when they are gone their stories will remain with us.
6. 6. We need to learn from the mistakes of our elders. Not all of our elders made wise decisions or lived circumspect lives. We often feel that their failures give us the right to judge them. However, their failures must only serve as lessons for us not to make the same mistakes.
7. 7. We need to teach our children, with our actions, to love and respect their elders. Often times we forget that we teach our children how they should treat us when we grow old with the way we treat our elders today.
8. 8. We need to value the time that our elders are with us for once they are gone only the memories of the moments we spent together will remain.

Our elders are the depositories of our cultural knowledge. As such, the time they spend with us in life is a legacy that we should cherish and secure its passing on to the next generation.

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