

# Religion taught me rules

# but Grandma taught me G A D E



by Carlan Helgeson

All of my adult life I have met people who struggle with their inability to live up to standards and rules they have accepted for themselves. Those who live long enough inevitably accumulate a horde of failures and sins, broken dreams and dashed hopes. Some never escape from the weight of those disappointments and disasters; they spend their whole lives in remorse and regret. Yet there are those rare people who, in spite of a lifetime of mistakes and troubles, can find unusual delight in the midst of their pain and heartache. My mother's mother, Grandma Tront, was one of those exceptional people.

As a young boy, I always looked forward to visiting my Ukrainian grandma. I remember her raspy voice, her love of plastic flowers (something I could never quite understand; I guess she preferred to dust her flowers than water them) and her penchant for stinky cigarettes which, when mixed with various food odors, gave her house a unique smell that I could still recognize blindfolded, to this day.

But what I relished most about Grandma was her playfulness, bordering on orneriness. She loved to tease, and—with her broken English—sometimes you couldn't tell whether she meant what she said or not. I was fascinated by the conversations between Grandma and Mom in that foreign language that conjured up exotic places far to the east. I only learned a few words and phrases. I think that was intentional on their part so that they could talk about me in my presence.

My grandparents lived right across the street from the Polish Hall, and periodically Grandma would take us to the dances there. Back home I might have been a Saturday-night rock-band drummer and a Sunday-morning church organist, but when I visited my grandparents, I became an aficionado of polkas, waltzes and schottisches.

I think Grandma took us to those cultural events more to show off the grandchildren to friends than to entertain us, but I found great delight in the joy that those

work-weary foreigners seemed to take in life.

The alcohol flowed freely and sometimes the tears would pour out as if the vodka had torn down the stoic wall that kept life's troubles from overwhelming daily routines. I liked it best when the effect of the drinking was more subtle, rendering a generous relative incapable of distinguishing between a one-dollar bill and a ten-dollar bill—to my benefit! Back then I didn't know that Jesus had anything against drinking and dancing!

Holidays at my grandparents' home were filled with delights to the eyes, ears, nose and taste buds. No family gathering was ever held without



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the obligatory *perogies*. My favorites were the cheese-and-potato-stuffed ones, which were served smothered in fried onions and sour cream.

Cabbage rolls were also a necessity. Beyond that, any other dish, including meat, was optional. Aunts and uncles, cousins, siblings and parents would all crowd around Grandma's table.

After polishing off days of work in the kitchen in one grand feast, the table would be cleared and the "big game" would start. As if by magic, wads of bills and bags of coins would suddenly appear on the table and the poker would begin. (That was before I knew that gambling was a sin, too!) Their favorite game was called "Stuke," a variation of Black Jack. Poker was the only card game my grandma ever knew, and boy did she make it interesting!

There were strict rules for the poker game: Nobody outside the family was ever allowed to play, not even if they were dating family members. Money was far too hard to come by to lose so foolishly to anyone outside the clan. Children were not allowed to play, either. But if we sat

quietly so as not to give away the hands, we could watch.

Yes, those nights were quite the big events: Glasses full of cherry whiskey, bottles of Labatt's beer, piles of money, smoking ashtrays and spunky poker players—not in some back bar room—but right in the middle of Grandma's dining room! What I grew up thinking was normal almost caused my Baptist fiancée to have a heart attack the first time she saw it! Those experiences left such an impression on all of us who were there that even to this day at Tront family reunions we play poker in Grandma's memory.

In my pilgrimage through faith, I have come to appreciate the riotous abandonment of my Slavic heritage. Undoubtedly my grandparents drank and danced and gambled with glee as an antidote to the hardships of their lives. Many will find fault with their excesses, mostly because they don't understand their culture; yet the older I become, the more I see how much I learned of grace in those early days. Everywhere the apostle Paul went he had to fight against the idea that "doing good" was what Christianity was all about. He himself had struggled through legalism toward faith in Jesus. He summarized it in his Ephesians letter: "...by grace you have been saved through faith—and this not

from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Paul called on the Galatians to resist relapsing back into keeping rules as the sum of their religion and, instead, to realize that "for freedom Christ has set us free."

As a pastor I have found more people hindered from genuine joy in life by their inability to live by grace than I have ever found to be hindered by their inability to keep religious commandments. Jesus must have discovered the same thing, for it was the sinners who followed him in droves, while the religious people sat at a distance and scoffed.

Life is hard, and living a perfect life is impossible. The sooner we accept that reality, the better

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chance we have of a truly happy life. Religion taught me rules, but the smirk in the corner of Grandma's mouth and the mischievous twinkle in her eyes taught me grace—and that grace has given me the freedom to drink deeply of the joys of life. Admittedly, the only way Grandma will ever make it to heaven is on the coattails of Jesus, but isn't it the same for all of us? One day, at the greatest of all family reunions, I hope to dance with her again. □

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