

If You Have Your Health, You Have Everything – A Lesson From My Grandmother

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My grandparents didn't share a lot of stories. Yet I have a clear recollection of a phrase that my grandmother used. I heard it often enough that it became something I associated with her and remember to this day. Whenever there was some kind of personal strife or problem, my grandmother's response would be "As long as you have your health, you have everything." It was like her tagline. As people today say – well, whatever- it was a way she punctuated a thought.

Under what circumstances did she use the phrase? When I was in the fifth grade, we moved. There were two classes for each grade. One class moved along more quickly than the other and you had to prove you belonged in that class. My mother couldn't find any report cards or paperwork that would help the school with my placement, so I was not placed in the higher class as I had hoped. My grandmother's response to my distress was "Work hard and you will be fine.... As long as you have your health...." I remember thinking that health and my class placement didn't seem to go together.

My parents were very interested in buying a house they had seen. They had been looking for a new house and found one that fulfilled all their requirements and more. In the end, another family bid on the house and my parents didn't get it. My mother was particularly disappointed. My grandmother's response, "It's too bad, but as long as you have your health...." It was her attempt to make the situation better. Again, in my head, it didn't seem that not getting the house was particularly connected to having your health.

Looking back, I remember times I tried to make sense of what my otherwise smart and well-spoken grandmother was saying when she punctuated her thoughts with that phrase that didn't seem to fit the situation at hand. I clearly recall thinking to myself - If you have a cold, you feel a bit unwell for a few days, you get better and you go on. I actually remember thinking that! My definition of having my health meant not having a cold.

Many years have passed since my grandmother died. Now I think I understand the import of those words. As happens, I got an orchestra seat to what 'you have' when heart disease, cancer, diabetes, Parkinson's – the serious stuff, rocks your world. Those times have made me appreciate the importance of having your health.

Today, with the coronavirus wreaking havoc in the world, I watch the news and find myself reflecting upon my grandmother's words. I realize that this is a time when 'having your health' is about more than just your own health. It is a time when 'having your health' requires taking responsibility to follow guidelines that are inconvenient and uncomfortable. It is a time when 'having your health' is about social distancing, self-isolating, quarantines – protecting not just yourself but also your family, your friends, and everyone else. It is a time when 'having your health' is an enormous uncertainty.

With time and reflection has come insight. When my grandmother spoke that phrase, she was giving more than a simple pronouncement about health. She was teaching a perspective lesson. She was saying that at times life goes off the rails, but if you have your health, things can work out, things can be okay. In 'having your health,' there's the opportunity to be able to make things better for what's to come. There's the possibility to "have everything."

Now as a self-isolating grandmother, I find myself returning to the words that took me a while to understand, "When you have your health, you have everything." I think I get it now!