**Roots and Regrets**

*Travel Lessons from Italy*

In 1993 when I took my very first trip to Europe, my Italian grandparents were alive. They religiously hand wrote me letters nearly every week during the duration of my first study abroad semester in London. I’ll never forget my Grammy’s perfect cursive penmanship or the way she and Pappy always tucked 20$ bills into their tri-folded drugstore notepad letters.

As the end of my time in the U.K. neared, I prepared for my first backpacking trip through Italy–Rome, Florence, Pisa, and Venice were on the list. I was excited, and in advance of the trip received one of Grammy and Pappy’s letters with a 20$ travel bonus! This time, however, the letter wasn’t the ordinary update with the regular news of their local Italian choir and spaghetti dinner club they hosted. In preparation for my first trip to Italy, they had carefully created a list of the names and telephone numbers of all of my relatives in the cities I would be visiting so I could connect with my roots. It was a treasure map.

Unfortunately, the thing about teenagers and treasure maps, was that I wasn’t smart enough to know the value of this letter at the time. It was just a piece of the same old drug-store notepad paper from my grandparents with the names of people I didn’t know on it. I put the 20$ in my wallet, tucked the address list into my Let’s Go guide, and hit the road!

As a teenager I thought of my relatives as the people who I saw at family reunions and funerals. They were the ones who brought funny Italian dishes like cold pizza with no cheese they called tomato pie, and pinched my cheeks, and always asked me if I remembered their names. (And of course I didn’t.)

One day in Florence, where some of the relatives on the list lived, I pulled out the piece of paper from my guidebook, admired Grammy’s perfect cursive, and picked up a hostel payphone. And then I got scared and put the receiver down. I didn’t know who these people were. Maybe they were somehow related to my ‘old’ grandparents, but I didn’t know them, I didn’t know what to say to them, AND they didn’t speak English. Game over.

I never made that call. I put the list back in my book and never looked at it again. I had assumed that I was living my once in a lifetime chance to visit Italy and I didn’t want to waste it with cheek pinching strangers who might serve me funny food and not be able to talk to me in 18 year old English. I had no inkling that I’d spend the next 20+ years traveling.

I’ve been back to Italy at least ten times since, and I’ve thought about this moment dozens of times. I’d give anything to be able to pick up the phone, dial into the past, and get to know the family on that list. I’d call them all and mumble in my best incoherent Duo-Lingo Italian.

Sadly, I lost that paper, and within a few years after that trip I also lost both of my grandparents who were my connections to these living stories. For some reason, however, I’ve never lost that memory of putting down the receiver and making that choice not to call.

Sure, it was just a phone call in the past that I didn’t make, but moments like these also go by another name. We call them regret, and regret strangely has a way of sticking around—even longer than estranged relatives and cold cheese-less pizza.

Perhaps regret sticks and stings because it so badly doesn’t want us to forget the lesson it teaches. She stays with us to remind us to run the other way from our fears and failures. Not to condemn, but to condition us for the better and to prepare us for the future. To make us stronger and more willing to pick up the phone the next time we get the chance.

I’m headed back to Italy next week, making my own mission to chase my roots into the village where my great grandparents came from. I’m not sure what I’ll discover, but I know one thing that won’t be hanging out there: Regret.

You may never get a rewrite of that moment from your past, but you do get to write the end of your story.

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