

A spiritual and emotional journey to Chicago...

Contributed by Keith Rhoades
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Well...I am off to the Windy City. While it may seem fun and exciting this trip is very bittersweet and emotionally charged. So while Chicago may not be a road less traveled...this visit is more of an emotional and spiritual journey. It actually conjures up memories of the first time I flew in a plane...American Airlines DC10 LA to Chicago in 1980....I was 12 and it was my first trip somewhere and first time on a jet and loved it. I knew I wanted to keep flying.

But this weekend is very melancholy. May 17th will be my uncles 63rd birthday. May 17th is also the 23 anniversary of my grandfathers (his fathers) death. And May 18th will be the 4th anniversary of my dad's death so I tend to get a bit skittish and sentimental around that time.

My mom has not spoken to her brother or mother in about 8 years they have always had an estranged relationship. I have had a hot/cold relationship with them as well and it has ran very cold the last 10 years. I have not seen them since Thanksgiving of 1999 and have not spoke to them in about 4 years. I won't bore you with the details but lets just say family dynamics and family dysfunction which goes back decades. I'm not saying either side is write or wrong...but that's the way it has been.

The house I'm going to was bought by my great grandparents when they arrive in Chicago from Poland in 1911 and my grandmother was born in that house in 1913...so nearly 100 year history of this house. At that time it was a rich ethnic neighborhood of Poles and Czechs. My mom was born in that house in 1936 until she left in the 1950s. My grandparents and uncle stayed there. The neighborhood has changed and not for the better in fact it is downright dangerous...but they are set in their ways and will not move.

With all that history and family fall out...I had not heard from them in several years. My grandma is now 96 and my uncle who is mildly mentally retarded lives with her. Last month I got a call from a cousin in Indiana who told me they were not doing well and that I should call them. I had not heard from this cousin in 20 years. I swallowed my pride and called. Grandma is now bed ridden and cannot even get out of bed to use the toilet. Her son, my uncle who can hardly function is taking care of her. In addition he just got laid off a few months ago from a job he had for nearly 40 years due to cutbacks. The house is falling apart, their health is falling apart, and it is likely my grandma will not be around much longer. I called my uncle and talked for a bit and he asked me to come visit...and in a moment I said Yes and made the arrangements....I felt it had been spiritually directed...though now that the hours is upon me I'm not so sure.

So I leave tonight for Chicago for 4 1/2 days and am very apprehensive and nervous. He prepared me that my grandma is 90 pounds and I will not recognize her. the house is falling apart, the neighborhood unsafe and they've been robbed 3 times. This coupled with the fact that there are decades of hostility, resentment and estrangement makes me very apprehensive. I am going to assess the situation and hopefully to make amends for my part and to bring some peace and resolution to the family. I must be vigilant that if issues for me our triggered to keep my composure and do the right thing. In all probability this will probably be the last time I see my grandma alive and then upon my departure on Monday 5/18 I will not forget the passing of my father 4 years ago. While my father and I never saw eye to eye...we had peace in the end and resolution and reconcilliation...and I hope that this can have the same result.

I have found myself today near anxiety/panic attack levels regarding this trip as the emotions, the memories, the sentiment, and history around this and the events of this weekend run deep and high. Please keep me in your thoughts and prayers.