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The Embodied Wisdom of My-Five-Year-Old-Hula-Hooping-Self

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There are two black and white photographs on my altar. One was snapped just as I lost my groove, I am crouching to reach for a fallen hula hoop. Thick, plastic-rimmed glasses are perched at the edge of my nose and my messy hair is frozen, mid-descent. My mouth says “Oops!” while my eyes tacitly twinkle with unfazed confidence.

I’ve had this photo for years—it lived in a storage box amongst other photos from my childhood, accompanying me through various housing transitions. I had seen the photo plenty of times in my life. A couple of years ago, however, I came across it and had a bona fide spiritual epiphany. My mouth dropped as I stared at my little girl self in amazement. At age five, without any conscious effort, I embodied the

wisdom of a Buddha!

About a year before the picture was taken, my mother passed after a long battle with breast cancer. I was so young that I can't remember much about her. I cannot recall the rhythm or pitch of her laugh nor what she smelled like when I'd nuzzle my face in her neck. I do know what her hands looked like though. Parientes from both sides of the family are often amazed at how my sisters' hands "son igualitas a las de Rocio."¹ While the few memories I have of my mamita lack the lucidity I desire, they still contain many details, which I have ingrained into my mind through repetition in order never to forget them. For instance, I remember once when my papi was enforcing bedtime and made me go say goodnight to my mamita. She was in so much pain at the time that it became too difficult for her to maneuver in and out of her en vogue 1980's waterbed. My parents started sleeping in our guestroom, which had two twin-sized beds. I crawled into her tiny bed, cozied up with her, and began telling her all the reasons why they should let me stay up. I can't remember the details of my convincing logic, but I remember she was playing along, nodding her head, allowing me to polish my persuasion skills (my papi might refer to them as my "manipulation skills"). I was laying it on thick assuring her that I wasn't in the least bit tired. When all of the sudden, I inconveniently let out the longest yawn of my short little life. The jig was up.

We both laughed together and kissed goodnight.

Before she became very ill, we had a family tradition where the four of us would gather on either my sister's bed or mine, we'd hold hands and say two prayers, call and response: El Padre Nuestro y Angel de mi Guardia. If I am to be honest, I can't remember the four of us praying together. Yet for as long as I can remember, Papi, Patrish and I have practiced this ritual whenever we are all together. While I wish my mamita's hands were still interlocked with ours, she lives through the sacred communal practice that the three of us have continued to share. If I am to be honest, none of us are practicing Catholics anymore, but in those rare moments when the three of us hold hands and recite these old prayers, it feels like the holiest of acts.² I think Mamita would be pleased knowing that she passed on to her daughters a spiritual sensibility older

¹ My sister (who I refer to endearingly as "my Trish") has beautiful, baby-butt soft hands with adorable nail beds shaped like candy corn. A finger is often adorned with a statement piece ring of impeccable taste.

² I feel very confident that these moments are considered equally as sacred to all members of the papi-daughter trinity. These spiritual moments of the most high often involve a lot of giddy smiling de parte de las hermanitas Rangel. Don Pedro, on the other hand, usually does an impressive job at keeping composure.

than the Iglesia Católica. She taught us to appreciate the beauty of collective prayer and of disciplined reverence to the Divine.

Dealing with the incomprehensibility of life without my mamita flipped my world upside down. It's hard to know if the void I feel from her passing was more prominent then or now. Here is what I did know then:

Sometimes you lose the swing of things. Sometimes things happen that interrupt your flow, but the game continues. With or without playmates, I can continue to play. I can pick up my hula-hoop, let my body and the hula-hoop do their thing, and soon I'll find my rhythm again.

When I was a kid, my resilience and playfulness always got me out of a funk and back in the flow. I never found the flow by thinking the shit out of a situation—and that's not how you get a hula hoop to start-back-a-spinnin' either. As an adult, when something throws me off, I can spend an obscene amount of time and energy spinning in thought—flailing about as if *I am* the hula-hoop instead of its steady center. I lose touch with my embodied wisdom.

I forget to take after my five-year-old self who knew that
playfulness adds wonder to the present moment
and that eventually
things will flow again.

Realizing that hula-hooping is a metaphor for life (and that at age five, I had it all figured out), I knew that this photo needed a more befitting home than a shoebox stored in the back of my closet. I positioned it next to the other black and white photograph that sits on my altar: my mamita's passport picture.

I sit at my altar everyday.

Sitting at my altar doesn't always make me feel centered, but more often than not, when I sit, I can cultivate more ease



and gratitude in the present moment. My altar is also a place where I reflect on and practice various lessons that nourish my soul and help connect me with Spirit.

I learned a lesson about unnecessary suffering from a psychic some

years ago. I was telling her about my mild obsession with my mamita, my void, my longing for an intimate mother-daughter bond. The psychic got very still and closed her eyes. She told me how happy my mother was that I was inquiring about her—that she had been waiting for me to do so. The psychic told me that when my mother left this physical world, I pushed “pause” to our relationship. She said I could un-pause it.

I did.

My altar is often a place where I play with the possibilities of being mothered by my mamita.

I've been told that everyday, my mamita would drink tinto.³ Maybe I take after her, because I too like creating rituals and drinking cafecito. So every morning, I grind these beautiful, shiny coffee beans with one pod of cardamom. I boil water, which I pour over the grounds, eventually filling a cup that accompanies me to my altar. I sit on my cushion and I drink it with her. Then, I burn some palo santo.

It smells like the sweetness of ancestral love.

I have to hold the charred wood in the flame for a while before I can blow on the glowing ember and enjoy its aroma. I then wave the smoke over my head and down my body to help me feel like I am honoring something special, which I am. I meditate and say prayers from the corazón. Showing up to practice self-love, and connecting with the sources of love that made my life possible, helps me stay in the steady center.

Self-love is to my day what sugar is to a tinto.

Creating space on my altar for the hula hooping photo helped to restore the ethics of my five-year-old self, which embodies a playful praxis and an unwavering trust in grace. This photo speaks to my symbolic mind. When I look at it, I feel I am honoring my cute lil' Buddha nature, while also poking fun at my serious grown-up self who over thinks and worries and forgets the possibility of love and play in any given moment.

If I'm not cuidadosa, and I let my grown-up ways get the best of me, I can quickly create a chaotic inner world for myself. I can compose a cacophony of crazy-making thoughts, which leave me drained, stressed, and filled with fear and doubt. My triple Capricorn tendencies

³ “Tinto,” in Colombia, is coffee with sugar. Similar to Anzaldúa and others, I choose not to employ italics to differentiate Spanish words, which can reify the inferiorization of Spanish vis-à-vis English. I will, however, italicize cuando me da la gana like mis comadres, Rosalinda Godinez and Derrika Hunt.

respond by attempting to control everything, *logically*. I go into overdrive executing my refined organizational skills and exude all the effort I can muster in order to ensure things turn out as I planned. This not only goes against my embodied wisdom, which enables me to feel my way to the flow, these habits can also suck the fun right out of life.

*My grown-up self (bless her heart) isn't dealing
with anything as traumatic
as the five-year-old in the photo,
who in desperation
promised God
she would be good if her mamita didn't die.*

My life is much more stable thirty-ish years later. I am not in circumstances that require I reevaluate my relationships to God, to hope, to promise-making, to being “good,” nor am I coping with the sudden loss of the greatest source of unconditional love I’ve ever known.

I’ve lost multiple loved ones throughout my life. I am doing my best to do right by them, the earth, and my fellow sentient beings that are playing with me in this game of life. The photo reminds me that while it becomes quite tiresome to constantly pick up a fallen hula hoop, figuring out how to find and maintain balance is just part of the game. It reminds me that my fears and doubts and judgments are the only things separating me from the flow. While my five-year-old-woke-self is indeed wise, here is what I have come to know as an adult:

*Getting back in the flow is not always as easy as lighting some incense.
Sometimes, the mental storms I find myself in feel so real, so heavy,
that no amount of sitting, breathing, or praying can shift it.*

During those moments, I often sit at my altar and look at the twinkle of unfazed confidence behind those bottle-cap glasses. In spite of the devastation that was going on in my world at the time, the joy on my face reminds me that I’m alive. It reminds me that I’m blessed to witness and participate in the game of life—that I’m blessed to have loved ones, in flesh and in spirit to play with.

Only when I stop spinning can I let that in.