

Grandparents & Grandchildren. Matilda and Amanda.

(June 16, 2016)



Let's talk about generations. About generations who talk to one another. Our first conversation - aired on TV and partly available online - is between Matilda Cuomo and Amanda Cole. Their extraordinary talk touches upon everything from immigration to religion, from language to cooking and traveling in Italy, and culminates in an emotional and for us unscripted moment when grandmother and granddaughter decide to read a letter written in 1999 by Governor Mario Cuomo (Amanda's grandfather and father of the current governor, Andrew), a kind of spiritual last will and testament for his thirteen grandchildren.

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Despite the encumbrances of a TV crew, it was a rare treat to hear Matilda and Amanda retrace their history, its ties to Italy and their emotional memories. The place where the conversation was shot – the house where Matilda lived with her husband, Mario – was also special: the two women seated on a sofa, behind them a credenza topped with Italian mementoes, a figurine of Pulcinella peeking out from behind a shelf. In the opposite room was Mario's study, full of objects, books, photographs. You couldn't not sense the charismatic presence of the great politician who, in the 1980s, was known as the great communicator of his party, believed by many to be the only real man of "presidential stature" in the Democratic Party back then. At the same time all of his humanity was reflected in the faces of his wife and granddaughter, and in their words. Like a real Italian grandfather. Below are a few brief excerpts to whet your appetite before you visit us online to watch the full video.

STORIES OF IMMIGRATION

Amanda: [I remember you telling me] the story of our two great grandmothers, who both came here very young...

Matilda: They were into their 20s ... they both had a very terrible trip, on the steerage in the bottom of the ship. It was terrible.

Amanda: That's what blows me away, thinking about how they physically got here. [And then] in school learning about the conditions in the ships that people did come across in, and the length of that journey and how scary it must have been not knowing where they were going or if you could even get in once you got here.

Matilda: That's right. And they both went to Ellis Island and they were completely examined ... And my mother would tell me the story of two young girls, two sisters... because they had a rash on their face, they made them go back. That's how strict the rules were at that time... But you know, they both had their first-born son here and they came to make a new life. They had an uncle. There's always somebody who's going to give them a little help in the family. So the family—like the Pope says, "la famiglia"—is very important. The women [of course] ... could not get a job at that time. It was unheard of, you know, so they would stay home and take care of the children. But the men [had] to get a job, and to speak English as well as they could—and they couldn't at first but they did, gradually. My father told me that they'd pick up some words to make themselves understood, and they were lucky if they were working with some Italian people so they could [at least] understand each other. It wasn't easy. It was very difficult, there's no doubt about it. [...] But when my father came to this country ... he loved the freedom. ... That you could do anything you wanted. "If you work hard, nobody will stop you," [he said]. "And if you have good ideas, use them, and nobody would stop you." And you could reach for the stars...

Amanda: I know that grandpa was quoted as saying "after 100 years, we finally did it" when he became governor. But I remember you both telling me the stories about how much Italians were discriminated against ... It's just not the same today ... and there are definitely other marginalized groups. But did you feel it? ... Did you personally feel growing up with Italian parents that you were discriminated against?

Matilda: No. Because I lived in an Italian community, we were insulated. That was a good thing. But then when they say that they didn't treat the Italian immigrants so well, well, it's true. Also because of the lack of language.

THE POPE

Amanda: You met the Pope...

Matilda: Yes, Pope Francis. [It was] the very first time I have met a pope. I was in Naples on a conference for Mentoring USA Italia and I heard that there was to be a yearly celebration where the Pope had to come and speak to the people in Naples. And I mean there were 3,000 people, at least,



if not more. And the Pope came and spoke. It was something like a miracle to see him. He is the most humanitarian pope I could ever think to meet.

Amanda: What does the pope mean for Italians? Because I know here—I had some friends who didn't totally understand why we were making such a big deal, and I think that's because religion is not as popular among my generation, statistically. But when you were growing up, you know ... What did the pope mean to you growing up?

Matilda: Well, the pope is like the pinnacle of our religion. I mean, he is the speaking voice from God to all of us, to give us lessons and the beliefs that we should continue to emanate... And we happen to have one now who is a great humanitarian and he understands that the basic unit of all societies is la famiglia, the family. If you don't take care of your family, everybody suffers within that scope of humanity.

MARIO CUOMO, A GRANDFATHER

Amanda: I'm sitting in his seat right now.

And this is the seat he would sit in every time you came into the house and I know that when I'd call him he'd be sitting in this seat — we just have so many memories of sitting right here, the hours going by.

Matilda: And you could ask him any question and he knew the answer.

Amanda: Oh yes, of course. Or what I think was so amazing about him is that, when I was younger, grandpa asked me how old I was, and I said "Eight." And he said, "How do you know?"

And I: "Because it was just my birthday."

And he said, "But how do you know you were turning 8?"

"Because I was born 8 years ago."

"How do you know that?"

" Because my parents told me."

"How do you know that your parents weren't lying?"

"Because the birth certificate says so."

"Well, how do you know that they didn't make a mistake on the birth certificate?"

And that was it — to really shake an 8 year old to truly understand that you don't know what you don't know! The lesson of that story to me is that you have to always be open-minded and never feel as if you know the right answer. For having the right answer isn't the way to win an argument, isn't the way forward.

Matilda: All the time. That's right. And to think about it and come to your own solution.

Amanda: Right, and he could argue any side of an issue. And we are so unbelievably lucky to actually have a moral compass, a grandpa who has set our sense of what is right and what is wrong. And it's so simple. He does so in a way that enables any person, from any religion, or from no religion, anyone who's just a human, to understand... A humanist is what I like to refer to him as.

Matilda: He would be very happy to hear you say all this if he were here.

"LETTER TO MY GRANDDAUGHTERS"

Matilda: Every granddaughter got a copy of this letter, "A Letter to My Granddaughters", written November 1999.

I'm writing this letter to you, and all our other granddaughters...

I think this paragraph right here is very meaningful.

At some point you will probably find that filling your own basket with goodies, satisfying your own



winsome desires for personal comfort will not be enough to make you truly happy.

Chances are you will discover that to be fulfilled you will have to lean on some fundamental belief some basic purpose in life that gives you a sense of meaningfulness and significance, and that answers the question: "Why were we born in the first place?" Without an answer, all the accumulating of material goods can become nothing more than a frantic attempt to fill the space between birth and eternity.

This is very deep.

Amanda: I read it once a week. And then this is the best part, this is where he breaks it down.

It happens to a lot of people who spend their whole life so involved with the challenge of just staying alive in some decent condition that they don't get to think much about why they were born in the first place. Others get past the struggle then wander aimlessly as they approach the end, satisfying whatever appetites are left until there are no more appetites or no strength to feed them. They look for answers in the world around them, in the words of wiser people and the leadership of some heroic figure. But the answers prove elusive. No Moses comes to them, and they die without ever having an answer. Don't let it happen to you. You don't need another Moses... God knows how grand the world is and how small we are. He's not going to expect any miracles from you, all he asks is that you do what you can. If you rise to great power and are able to end a war - or be a governor - or find a cure for cancer, wonderful. But if the best you can do is comfort a single soul in need of simple friendship, that's wonderful too... If one does what one can to make things better, it's all God will ask. It's a job that you can work at every minute that you live, and it's a job that can make your life worth living, no matter what else happens. So live, learn, love. And have a happy new millennium. - Grandpa Mario.

It's so simple and makes so much sense. And for a recent college graduate, they are the words of wisdom that you need.

NEVER FORGET YOUR HERITAGE!

Amanda: What is your lesson to your granddaughters today, your Italian American granddaughters? What is one of the pieces of wisdom that you want to tell us?

Matilda: Well, I think you should never forget your heritage. I think that's what you've learned since you were a little girl and I think that stays; as a grandparent I'm thrilled that all of you get that, you understand and you're faithful to your own heritage but you are open to the heritage of others.

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