

Beyond the Destination: The 2:13 A.M. Call

At 2:13 a.m., our phone rang.

My mom picked it up half asleep. A few seconds later, she was suddenly wide awake.

“I want to speak to Sumedha!”

It was my grandma.

My mom immediately started panicking. “Are you okay? What happened?”

But my grandma wouldn't explain. She just kept insisting that she needed to talk to me.

So at 2:13 in the morning, my mom rushed into my room and woke me up. By this point, I was convinced something terrible had happened. I grabbed the phone and nervously said, “Hello?”

“Sumedha, I DID IT!”

There was no emergency. My grandma was practically cheering.

She had completed an online financial transaction. By herself.

I was relieved, slightly annoyed that this apparently couldn't wait until morning, and, more than anything, incredibly proud.

For years, my parents had handled most of my grandma's financial tasks. They paid bills online, helped manage her investments, and took care of anything involving technology. Whenever she asked them to teach her, they usually responded with some version of, “It's safer if we do it.”

And I understood why. My parents weren't trying to make her dependent. They were trying to protect her. There are enough stories about older people losing money to scams that their concern was completely reasonable.

Still, something about it bothered me.

My grandma wasn't asking them to do something for her. She was asking them to teach her how to do it herself.

I started thinking about how strange this was. When we're little, adults celebrate practically everything we learn to do without them. Tie your own shoes. Make your own food. Cross the street. Manage your money. Independence is the goal.

Then, at some point, the direction starts reversing. As those same adults grow older, we start taking responsibilities away from them. We call it helping, and usually it is. But I started wondering what it must feel like to repeatedly hear, “I'll do it for you,” when what you really want to hear is, “Let me

show you.”

So during my summer vacation, I decided I would teach my grandma.

Every evening after dinner, we sat together with her phone.

I assumed this would be pretty easy.

It wasn't.

“Click the blue icon.”

“Which blue icon?”

“That one.”

“You said the blue one. They are all blue.”

She had a point.

I also discovered that words I considered completely normal made absolutely no sense when I tried explaining them.

“Open a new window.”

She looked toward the actual window.

Okay. Also a fair point.

Those moments were funny, but they also made me realize something about myself. I was so used to technology that I had forgotten I had once needed to learn it too. I expected my grandma to understand words like “browser,” “tab,” and “link” simply because they felt obvious to me.

And when she didn't understand something, my natural reaction was even worse.

I wanted to take the phone.

I could see exactly what she needed to press, and watching her search for it was almost painful. It would have taken me five seconds to finish whatever we were doing.

But every time I reached for the phone, I was basically doing the same thing that had bothered me in the first place.

So I started stopping myself.

That sounds like a very small thing, but it was probably the hardest part for me.

I had always associated helping with doing something. Fix the problem. Give the answer. Make the process faster. Sitting there while someone struggled with something I could solve immediately felt

almost unhelpful.

Slowly, I learned to do it anyway.

I started watching where my grandma paused instead of immediately telling her what came next. I stopped saying, "It's easy," because I realized that hearing something is easy when you are struggling with it doesn't exactly make you feel better.

Sometimes I explained something and she still didn't understand. My first instinct used to be to repeat the exact same explanation, only slower, as though that would magically fix everything. Eventually, I realized that if she still didn't understand, maybe the problem wasn't that she wasn't listening. Maybe I wasn't explaining it well.

So I tried another way.

And sometimes another.

There were evenings when we went over something I was positive we had covered the night before.

"We literally did this yesterday, Grandma."

"I know. So teach me again."

And I did.

Before this, I would have described myself as patient. Those evenings made me reconsider that assessment.

I began realizing that patience isn't just managing to avoid getting annoyed. Sometimes it means changing your pace completely. It means listening long enough to figure out what someone is actually confused about instead of answering the question you assume they have.

More than anything, though, those evenings changed the way I thought about independence.

I had always thought of the digital divide as a knowledge problem. Some people understood technology; others needed to learn it.

My grandma made me realize that there was another part I hadn't considered: confidence.

If someone constantly tells you that technology is dangerous, that you're likely to make a mistake, or that it would be better if someone else handled it, eventually you might start believing them.

That realization stayed with me.

Later, when I began conducting cybersecurity workshops for older adults, I thought about my grandma a lot. I could have filled my presentations with examples of scams, fraud, stolen passwords, and everything terrifying about being online.

But that wasn't what I wanted people to take away.

I didn't want someone leaving my workshop thinking, The internet is terrifying. I'm never touching online banking again.

I wanted them thinking, I know what to look for. I can handle this.

So I focused not only on what could go wrong, but on what they could do about it. How do you actually inspect a suspicious message? What protections can you turn on? What should you do if you accidentally click something?

Without really planning to, I found myself teaching the same way my grandma had taught me to teach: slow down, listen, explain differently, and don't confuse someone's lack of experience with a lack of ability.

Which brings me back to 2:13 a.m.

At the time, I thought the important part of that phone call was that my grandma had finally completed the transaction.

Now, I don't think it was.

The transaction took a few minutes. Getting there took an entire summer of questions, repeated explanations, wrong buttons, my occasional frustration, her refusal to give up, and me learning not to grab the phone out of her hand.

And somewhere in all of that, I changed too.

I became a better listener. I became more conscious of how quickly I make assumptions about what other people should understand. Most importantly, I became less interested in solving every problem for someone and more interested in giving them enough confidence to solve the next one without me.

My grandma, meanwhile, has apparently decided that completing online transactions is no longer impressive enough.

Now she wants to learn about Bitcoin and trading.

"I don't really know enough about that to teach you," I told her.

Her answer came immediately.

"Then learn."

So apparently, somewhere along this journey, the student became the person assigning homework.

And I guess she's right.

After all, we never really decided that 2:13 a.m. was the destination.