

**Lived Religion in 140 Characters or Less:  
Lived Religion and the Art of Remembering in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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**Abstract:** The study of lived religion through the medium of feminist digital storytelling spaces opens up new ways in which religion itself can be both deconstructed and expanded upon to include communities that are often overlooked. New pedagogical tools and communities that utilize social media, such as Twitter, recreate traditional safe spaces where individuals feel empowered to share the most personal and metaphysical parts of their lives. Utilizing new mediums and modes of communication transform traditional definitions of religion and religious spaces into new, digital, and online landscapes where everyone can partake in the lived realities of each individual willing to share his or her story through a tweet. Twitter is just one medium in which individuals can share their stories with each other, join in the communal ritual of tweeting, and if they choose to, rediscover God with a hashtag. Twitter is a lived, religious, and feminist space of sharing and remembering.

**Keywords:** feminism, digital storytelling, Twitter, religion, lived religion

Twitter is a lived, religious, and feminist space of sharing and remembering. Self-expression through different mediums enables the growth of empowerment, legacy, and history to live on. Oral and digital stories have transcended from being received by word of mouth to multisensory and multidimensional reenactments that expose the risks of each storyteller's most deeply held aspects. Through these risks, storytelling presents a vulnerability and risk to the storyteller that they did not know prior. One medium that stories are being frequently shared on is Twitter. Founded on March 21, 2006, Twitter Inc. is an online social networking service that transforms traditional modes of communication

and transforms users and their stories into micro-blogging communities made up of individuals from all walks of life.

While many individuals on Twitter share items such as the daily news, their daily actions, or their opinions on a variety of subjects, many users have utilized the online forum as a way to join together to share both their personal experiences as well as the communal power that is created by joining individuals for a common cause. Twitter has become more than just the action-oriented medium for individuals ranging from celebrities, presidents, and ordinary people to communicate with and follow each other; but more importantly twitter is now a space for new communities, oftentimes cognizant of their enviable religious quality and transformational power wrapped up within lived experiences, to meet, commune, and share their lives together in a digital space. Robert Orsi shows in his exploration of the definition of *lived religion* that religion, is not defined by the semantics of language, but rather “by meeting [and understanding] men and women [involved] in [their] daily tasks in all the spaces of their experience.”<sup>13</sup> Twitter empowers individuals to tell their own stories in their self-created online spaces by offering them the opportunity to never forget every moment and every tweet, regardless of how insignificant or important it may have been.

The study of lived religion, through the medium of digital storytelling spaces, opens up new ways in which religion, itself, can be both deconstructed and expanded upon to include communities that are often overlooked. While scholars of religion are not initially inclined to include Twitter into their exposition of lived religious experiences, religion

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<sup>13</sup> Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” 7.

“comes into being in ongoing, dynamic relationships with the realities of everyday life.”<sup>14</sup> Scholars such as Robert Orsi, R, Marie Griffith, and Stephen Prothero have opened up the study of religion to include communities, rituals, beliefs, and practices that are often overlooked due to their nature or doctrine. Scholars of religion are emphasizing the modalities in which religious, faith-based spaces, congregants and laypeople are able to engage with one another. This process allows for the deconstruction of lived religion in the twenty-first century as well as resignifying its importance in everyday life in a way which emphasizes that religion no longer needs to be strictly experienced in pews and houses of worship, but on digital platforms without geographical boundaries.

Throughout this paper, I show how new pedagogical tools and communities that utilize social media, such as Twitter, recreate traditional safe spaces where individuals feel empowered to share the most personal and metaphysical parts of their lives. Utilizing new mediums and modes of communication transforms traditional definitions of religion and religious spaces into new, digital, and online landscapes where everyone can partake in the lived realities of each individual willing to share their story through a tweet. Twitter is just one medium in which individuals can share their stories with each other, join in the communal ritual of tweeting, and if they choose to, rediscover God with a hashtag. I found belief in 140 characters; I found a lived religious community with a hashtag and a Twitter handle; and I found God through my grandmother’s story one tweet at a time. Twitter is a lived, religious, and feminist space of sharing and remembering.

### **@StoriesofSelf: Twitter and My Grandmother**

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 7.

My own fascination with Twitter began first as a user, second as a scholar, and third as a grandson wanting to discover a way to cope with the loss of his grandmother. Unable to deal with the death of a woman who defined my core feminist values, I was searching for a new way to codify the multiple stories, pictures, and words of wisdom I had been told by my grandmother. As an agnostic individual and self-divorced Catholic recovering from years of indoctrination on Sunday mornings in the St. Patrick parish in Ripon, WI, my grandmother's house was a sanctuary I retreated to after my mother dropped me off on Sunday mornings. The advice and stories she gave me, both spiritual and not, subconsciously aided my religious and feminist awakening in future years to come. Stories about my grandmother's time in the army or when she witnessed and felt a divine presence when her father died helped turn my grandmother's house into a house of religion, whether I realized it or not.

In an attempt to cope with her death, I wondered what it would be like to go back and ask her whether or not she considered herself a feminist, or if she ever decided to tell my mother that most of my religious training came from her rather than from the local Catholic community parochial school volunteers. My grandmother's stories were actions of self-empowerment that helped me to both honor and remember her legacy. Her stories were also her way of passing down wisdom and advice that I would one day need when trying to cope with my own similar struggles as well as ensuring that future generations can also hear her voice, share in her history, and become active agents for change.

During my grandmother's funeral, in a side room, a TV was replaying a documentary feature that she had participated in a few years back. The video series, put on by the Wisconsin State Historical Society, featured various individuals who were involved in the

United States efforts in World War II sharing their stories about their time ranging from the battlefield to the home front.<sup>15</sup> The video featured my grandmother sharing her story about the time she enlisted, after walking off her job at a local Ripon, WI factory called Knitting Works, and taking a train into Milwaukee, WI. My grandmother continued to explore her story within the context of how this singular decision changed her life and eventually all of those who would one day cross her path. While I had seen the video only in passing, I found myself, with my nieces, transfixed to the TV, constantly rewinding the videotape to hear her re-tell her story multiple times. While I found myself unable to peel myself away from the television screen, I began to notice how other members of my family, yet to be born or unable to full comprehend what she was saying, could live in this same moment as I was and experience the full power of an individual telling their story and taking part in the cathartic effects it has.

While I was growing up, the one constant in my life was my grandmother. She picked me from school, taught me to drive a car, and hide things from my mother, her daughter, like our secret adventures to fancy dinners and trips with her local jazz band the Harmonica Rascals. All these memories came rushing over me during the fall semester of 2010, the first semester back after she had died. I was taking a Visual Research Methods course, and the final project for the course was focused around transforming traditional

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<sup>15</sup> The 4-part documentary series featured in-depth interviews with individuals to document Wisconsin resident's involvement in World War II. The series focuses on Veterans and those involved with them describing stories that changed their lives. The series focused on individuals who participated in the conflict that took place in Europe and the Pacific. The piece that my grandmother, Gladys Hritsko, found herself in was tales from the home front. Specifically, this feature focused on the stories of those who stayed behind, went without, and waited for soldiers to return. The ending piece of the series focused on the legacy that these individuals left behind and how their stories can live on and affect generations of families and Wisconsin residents to come. For more information about the project, visit: [wpt.org/wisconsinstories/index.cfm](http://wpt.org/wisconsinstories/index.cfm)

person-to-person storytelling into a digital context.<sup>16</sup> Challenged to think radically about what it meant to be able to tell a story in the age of YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and online blogs, my grandmother's story seemed not only appropriate to meet this challenge, but also as a way for me to cope with being able to share her story with other individuals and members of my family who were also struggling with her death.

I sought to create a username that accurately described both the intentions of my project as well as the community I was hoping to create and appeal to. In the chapter "Twitter Networking: A Safe Space for Introverts; a Party for Extroverts," scholars Susan Whitcomb, Deb Bib, and Chandlee Bryan state: "twitter is what [an individual or group] want it to be."<sup>17</sup> Simply, Twitter is whatever the user needs it to be. The first step in any successful online platform is making it a space that accurately reflects the user and their intentions. In my case, my Twitter account and user name were about my grandmother as well as myself. My Twitter handle, StoriesofSelf, was designed to show how my grandmother's life could both live on as well as signify the immediate impact it had on constructing my own individual identity as well as my religious one. My username and online space told a significant amount about my self through the content that I published to the page. Much like the study of lived religion that "risks the exposure of the research," the publication of personal stories, family histories, and ponderings leave the individual user open to public critique by any given individual or group that decides to follow their tweets.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dr. Alex Juhasz is a Professor of Media Studies and led the course. Her blog and more about Visual Research Methods and Digital Humanities can be found on her blog at [www.aljean.wordpress.com](http://www.aljean.wordpress.com)

<sup>17</sup> Chandlee Bryan, Deb Dib, Susan Whitcomb, *The Twitter Job Search Guide: Find a Job and Advance Your Career in Just 15 Minutes a Day* (New York: JIST Publishing, 2010), 155.

<sup>18</sup> Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," \18.

My grandmother's life impacted my username as much as the stories that I would be telling on my digital platform. Self-expression through the medium of Twitter enables my grandmother's story as well as its impact, to live on. While I grew up with my grandmother always at my side, through Twitter, I would be able to relive the storytelling and experiences that I associated with her but through a different medium. My grandmother's stories were still fraught with memories and the important lessons she passed on to me but now, I would no longer be the one solely benefitting from them. Although my grandmother's stories were already housed on Wisconsin World War II Stories and the Wisconsin Historical Society online databases, they were removed from the family that benefitted from them the most. StoriesofSelf reclaimed her stories while expressing them to the family that was always meant to hear them for generations to come.

Rediscovering the impact of my grandmother's story was half of the battle in making sure they were accurately preserved on a space created not only by her family and for her family but also the mournful grandson still struggling with his own identity and lived history. I no longer needed to search my memory to hear the voice of my grandmother's deep voice but rather search through the series of tweets I had recorded:

I was hired because mom and dad lost two of us. My brother enlisted first, and then I enlisted second. Our parents come from the old country. Women were to stay home, and keep house and have children. You see, [I] sort of moved out of that rank. After Pearl Harbor, they were short-handed. So, they decided to try the women, for one year. That's what started it, but they had to put us under the [Women's Auxiliary Corps], because we were not regular Army. It was more or less that you were going in on a trial basis. You had to prove to the government that we, as women, [could] handle the training. And we were trained very hard. But it was the best decision that I made for me

and my personality. I wasn't ready to settle down. I wanted more out of life. It was interesting, you know. It opened up a whole new avenue for me.<sup>19</sup>

We all come from a community, whether religious or social; mine happened to be feminist because of the stories and unbowed passion she embedded within me every day through her experiences as a woman throughout the twentieth century. Expressing my grandmother's memory and its impact on my life took form in seventeen tweets of one hundred forty characters or less. The order of Tweets went as follows:

Wisconsin Stories allowed my grandmother and others the chance to tell their own tales and account of the victory over the Axis Powers...

In Partnership w/ the Wisconsin Historical Society, Wisconsin Public Television, and Veterans Affairs, Wisconsin WWII Stories Went Digital

These are THEIR stories!

For Gladys Hritsko-Ripon, joining the Army, "was the best decision that I made for me and my personality."

What POWER does the digital have?

"New performance spaces, new technology has brought new conditions for mediated action and narratives as cultural tools" (32) <http://tinyurl.com/23ygp5v>

Does the digital overpower the oral story? (TwitPic of Grandma and I)<sup>20</sup>

"By using terms like my(space), you(tube) or face(book) we see combinations of the personal expression and the meditational means used in an integrated way" (32). <http://tinyurl.com/23ygp5v>

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<sup>19</sup> "Wisconsin World War II Stories," Wisconsin Public Television, accessed: July 20, 2012, <http://wpt.org/wisconsinstories/worldwar2/homeFrontTranscript.cfm>

<sup>20</sup> A TwitPic is an image that you can attach to the tweet that shows up alongside the tweet while individuals are reading them.

Would ORAL stories survive in a technological savvy and obsessed age? Would the world KNOW Nellie Wilson's Story of recalling her work at a Milwaukee defense plant?! <http://tinyurl.com/2fvovrh>

"Digital storytelling in principle...provides the means to distribute more widely the capacity to tell important stories about oneself...in the public domain" (54) <http://tinyurl.com/23ygp5v>

If my grandmother never told me her story, would I have ever known the struggle of Wisconsin men and women in WWII? Would I ever know their story?

Digital storytelling allows me to find other tales and accounts of women during WWII. I can seek out and find other "Rosies" <http://tinyurl.com/24psodj>

I discover my grandmother's role in history. I hear her story shouting out to me, telling me her life's passions saying: "WOMEN IN THE ARMY!" <http://tinyurl.com/249prgw> <http://tinyurl.com/2gyd8vc>

"Just call me Private First Class. I'm in the service." <http://tinyurl.com/2fvovrh>

Her Story Lives On. (TwitPic of Gladys Hritsko Smiling)

New Avenues of Story Telling: Traditional, to Digital to Tweetable. Self-Expression becomes a universalizing ideal and legacy building ideal.

Self-Expression Through Different Mediums Enables Empowerment, Legacy and History to Live On. Oral, Digital, and now Tweetable! All New Ways of Storytelling, all "new avenues."<sup>21, 22</sup>

Tweeting "shar[es] feminist thought" and "sustains movements" through the art of remembering.<sup>23</sup> StoriesofSelf guided individual readers through my grandmother's account of her World War II stories and through a digital map that led them to multiple websites

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<sup>21</sup> John Erickson, "StoriesofSelf," accessed August 10, 2012, [www.twitter.com/storiesofself](http://www.twitter.com/storiesofself).

<sup>22</sup> To view the tweets in sequence, visit [www.twitter.com/storiesofself](http://www.twitter.com/storiesofself).

<sup>23</sup> bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*. (New York: South End Press, 2000), 24.

including Wisconsin Historical Society, Google Books, and TwitPics I had uploaded from my own personal photo archive of my grandmother. As Ola Erstad and James V. Wertsch state in *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-Representations in New Media*: “New performance spaces [and] new technology has brought new conditions for mediated action and narratives as cultural tools.”<sup>24</sup> Online communities created new spaces that mimicked not only religious but also other cultural ones where stories were using new critical methods. My grandmother’s story was as much a lesson to her grandson as it was to culture as a whole. Digitized storytelling adds a new condition to the performative nature that storytelling invokes on the listener, reader, and tweeter: “By using terms like (my)space, you(tube) or (face)book we see combinations of the personal expression and the meditational means used in an integrated way.”<sup>25</sup> Online stories are no longer just narratives but are rather a complicated mixture of the personal, political, and social combined. As Erstad and Wertsch continue:

the power of expression is a basic element of human development. The way we express ourselves, through whatever medium available, is one of the key elements in how human beings have evolved...Humans are not only able to reinterpret the perception of their world but also to find out more about the tools they used and impact these tools have.<sup>26</sup>

The tools that we use, contribute largely to the ways in which we make up a community. Through traditional mediums such as person-to-person storytelling, stories are transformed onto new digital landscape and narratives can be seen as both cultural and

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<sup>24</sup> Ola Erstad and James V. Wertsch, “Tales of Mediation: Narrative and Digital Media as Cultural Tools,” in *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-Representations in New Media*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Land Publishing, 2008), 32.

<sup>25</sup>Erstad and Wertsch, “Tales of Mediation,” 32.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

personal tools that are essential and as significant in “meaning-making activities” as a communal prayer or ritual enacted by a group or individual on a daily basis.<sup>27</sup>

### **Twitter, Lived Religion, and Feminism**

Twitter exploded into popularity upon its launch in March of 2006. Twitter users send and receive text-based messages known as “tweets” that is limited to being 140 characters or less. As a social network:

Twitter revolve[s] around the principle of followers. When [an individual chooses] to follow another Twitter user, that user’s tweets appears in many people an individual followers], a mixture of tweets [will appear] and [range] in [topics from]: breakfast-cereal updates, interesting new links music recommendations, [and] even musings on the future of education.<sup>28</sup>

While there are an estimated 500 million active users as of 2012, generating 340 million daily tweets and 1.6 billion search queries per day, Twitter has both become and been utilized in ways that help women and men to communicate with each other, share their stories, and join together for various causes. In recent years, Twitter has become more than just a way people follow their favorite celebrity, but rather one in which individuals can subscribe to their church’s online social media platform, their favorite scholars’ random musings, and even daily religious affirmations. Twitter empowers people to take part in the world around them, to exist in both community and cross-cultural identities not based on geographical location. For example, regardless of one’s religious affiliation, individuals are able to reach out and both connect with or debate members of different faiths and communities. Twitter and other digital platforms opened the doors to how individuals connect with not only their religious communities, but also the leaders of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>28</sup> Steven Johnson, “How Twitter Will Change the Way We Live,” *Time*. June 5, 2009, 2.

others movements they might have never known about. Digital platforms like Twitter breakdown both socioeconomic barriers that prevent interreligious dialogue from occurring in person by encouraging or allowing for religious dialogue, critique, and sharing to be not only experienced by the individuals but also shared with their digital community. Twitter is an interdisciplinary space that is not just restricted to one mode of thought but various modes through the growing interconnections that individual and organizational users are able to experience to gain better access to further their spiritual or religious lives.

While Twitter aims to engage individuals from all walks of life, it has been extremely successful with women. Statistically speaking, women outnumber men in terms of number of total followers by more than half with an average of 1717 as of 2012 and which has further diversified each subsequent year.<sup>29</sup> Women have both the statistical advantage over men on Twitter and continue to utilize the platform in new ways; women and girls can be in contact with one another while creating new and empowering spaces to not only share in community but also take part in what has become the ritualized aspect of tweeting. Through sharing their stories with one another, women and girls have been able to take part in the act of liberation, similar to that of second wave feminism, which is the result of empowering others through the art of remembering and reclaiming. The daily storytelling that takes place on Twitter and other online spaces isn't defined by the magnitude of its length or social importance but rather the act of tweeting and posting itself.

Twitter recreates spaces where individuals, who have been traditionally ostracized from mainstream heteronormative or heteropatriarchal society, can partake in communities that mimic religious ones. Because they do not remain in churches,

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<sup>29</sup> Joanna Brenner, "PEW Internet: Social Networking," PEW Research Study (2012), 4.

synagogues, mosques or other locations of religious worship, spaces on Twitter break down gender, social, and religious barriers by enabling individuals and organizations to join together in community to preserve the tradition of community or by joining with others in the essence of communal worship. Studying communities on Twitter “exposes the researcher [and] his or her most deeply held existential orientations and moral values” and through engaging with and defining Twitter as a lived religious space “displays an obviousness [that is] not found in earlier ethnographic or, especially historical accounts [of spaces where ritual and beliefs are acted out]”.<sup>30 31</sup> Individuals mold and shape their spaces in accordance with their experiences and communities and the power that it gives them. As a result, the community, they are part of, repositions the traditional hierarchal models of religious and communal worship into more linear ones that emphasize the story rather than where it is told. Twitter has the opportunity to reconnect individuals with not only religious communities but also religion in a whole new context. Twitter breaks down the modes in which individuals not only communicate with each other but also proselytize. Storytelling is an essential part of Twitter’s success. Through the act of recreating history, storytelling signifies the struggles of the past in order to create a chance for a better good. Through inspiring others in similar and different communities, storytelling aids activists, academics, and laypeople alike by sharing the power of the struggle and the impetus of change. While feminist pedagogy has traditionally utilized the rhetoric of safe space, vehicles such as Twitter have broken down the historical mode of feminist thought and expanded its borders from being strictly within the limited spaces of the women’s studies classroom and into digital and online platforms. As a result of the

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<sup>30</sup> Orsi, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 7.

continual push towards online modes of communication, new methods have empowered both women and men to have the chance to expand their ability to create and share their histories, develop their communities, and share in their similar and various struggles.

In regards to gender, Twitter has taken on many similar aspects of faith-based communities. In the past decade, women have been surpassing men as US web users. Women, as early as August 2000, have become the backbone of the majority of Internet social networking sites.<sup>32</sup> Ann Braude, author of *Women and American Religion*, states that “women are the backbone,” which rings true for both the ways in that women have been involved in the construction of religious and church spaces as well as the new digital spaces like Twitter.<sup>33</sup> Women as well as other underrepresented communities such as LGBTQ individuals are taking to digital spaces to find support in the forms of online communities centered on issues and stories that resonate with their lived experiences. The increased connectivity that Twitter, as well as the Internet, offers, suggests that many individuals take to the Internet to create identities that are free from the sociopolitical, gendered, and religious norms that they must overcome or redefine. The Internet serves as a tool that liberates individuals from real world limitations that allow women and other underrepresented communities the freedom to shape and create their own spaces, usernames, and pages devoted to who they are and the communities they come from and wish to create.

Twitter and feminism together have expanded together to become a larger and more prolific force which is capable of becoming an unstoppable force on digital and online

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<sup>32</sup> “Women Surpass Men as US Web Users,” ClickZ, accessed August 7, 2012, <http://www.clickz.com/clickz/news/1706714/women-surpass-men-us-web-users>.

<sup>33</sup> Anne Braude, *Women and American Religion*.

arenas. Feminism, as both a concept and lived experience, is recreating itself in both digital and non-digital spheres of existence through the use of hashtags, search queries, and activists gathered together not in person but rather online, around the world, and numbering in the millions.<sup>34</sup> The younger generations of feminists are able to not only share in the history of feminism by following, tweeting, and searching for their heroes online but also in appreciating the stories and struggles of feminism's past while continuing the struggle for equality and social justice one tweet and post at a time. Twitter's motto, "Be a force for good," is more than just a guiding principle and backbone of the micro-blogging community but also a significant contribution to the power twitter has in endorsing community and sharing with women and men together, both online and off.<sup>35</sup>

### **Lived Religion and the Art of Remembering in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Storytelling plays a vital part in identity construction. The act of remembering that traditional storytelling empowers individuals to share fundamental aspects of their pasts with the hope that they will create a better future for generations to come. Archiving the past is vital to ensuring the success for the future. StoriesofSelf is an online space that I created not only to share my grandmother's story with the world but also to ensure that I could revisit, from time to time, the images and sounds of my grandmother; online spaces have ensured my ability to always revisit these important memories and stories. My grandmother was both the backbone to my religious understanding of dogma and worship as well as the community leader that helped me discover both metaphysical and religious

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<sup>34</sup> Twitter's global impact on these mediums have been seen most recently in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 that closely utilized new media and social movements as a method where individuals worked to change social movement ecology as well as communicate with individuals and communities not only locally but also across the world.

<sup>35</sup> Claire Diaz-Ortiz and Biz Stone. *Twitter for Good: Change the World One Tweet at a Time* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 5.

aspects about myself that through Twitter, I have been able to invite others to partake in the same experiences that shaped my life and defined the aspects I hold essential to my existence.

Since Twitter's inception in March 2006, millions of individuals have tweeted their own personal stories to the world and their communities. While traditional stories can live on in memory, digital stories now have the ability to live on forever thanks to the Library of Congress. On April 14, 2010 the Library of Congress announced that every tweet since Twitter's inception would be archived digitally for future generations to come.

No longer confined to the corners of my memory, my grandmother's voice and life are able to live on through online spaces, in one hundred forty characters or less. Digital stories, lived experiences, and the communal expressions of people long gone strengthen not only faith but also the hope that one day we will all be fortunate enough to remember what was once considered lost. Twitter opened up a whole new avenue for me to remember and recreate my grandmother's story, to help me cope with her loss while looking to the future, and the memories that are to come as a result of her legacy.

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