

GRANDMOTHERS

Waiting Fairly Patiently

by Kirsteen Tait

I am not yet a grandmother, though as I do have grown-up children I could become one at any time now. As I wait, I have time to brood over several issues. These were not always there. Changes in family life mean that quite a few things are not nearly as straightforward today as they must have been once.

Counting The Steps

The first issues are matters of definition. What actually counts as a grandparental relationship these days? Different lifestyles, not to mention the new demographics, have made it all much more complicated.

I can only remember one out of four grandparents, though two were alive when I was born. My children only knew one and one step. Yet if my daughter had a baby this year, it could have as many as eight - if the baby's father had divorced parents too. The mathematics have been changed dramatically by divorce and longer lives. But the question is: do steps count as one, or a half?

From a statistical point of view I am likely to enter grandparenthood through marriage; having five step-children, mostly older than my own. It'll be very interesting to see how it turns out. We have eight children between us (me three from one marriage, he five from two). They range in age from seventeen to thirty-seven. Four boys, four girls. None married, none with children. Seven out of the eight are in steady relationships. If each of them eventually had the notional average of 2.4 I could have about nineteen grandchildren. But will I count for a whole grandmother in the eyes of the steps?

The truth is that the questions dominate while you are waiting. It is the vacuum, the going on holiday with contemporaries who spend hours choosing baby clothes with expensive smocking in dark Spanish stores.

This feeds the questions and doubts. If I was already a grandmother I'd know the answers instinctively and be too busy to think about them. One day one of them will have a baby and these questions will evaporate.

But why *haven't* I got any grandchildren yet?

Choice, and Uncertainty

This leads into more questions, which are bound up with our greater choice over the roles we play. In an age of growing flexibility in family life, what determines the desire to become a parent, and also a parent's feelings about being a grandparent? Might it be my fault in some way that I am not a grandmother? My younger sister has a grandchild. My husband's younger sister has five—plus twins expected this summer. It's clearly not a matter of age of children. Is it just chance?

How far may our missing grandchildren be explained by our own broken marriages? Are our children failing to marry because they have seen so clearly the pitfalls? Will they wait so long to be sure that the urge passes them by? But looking around my friends and relations, some of the children of divorce have married young—some out of deprivation, some defiantly, many quite ordinarily.

Divorce does spill over into everything. It doesn't spare grandmothering. All the guilt and insecurity returns—but in a new form. Will my children's children want me? Have time for me on their birthdays? Will our children prefer to leave their babies in the care of others within the complex family lineups? Will the poor babies get divided up too thinly?

When we complain to our friends or joke about paying one of our offspring to have a child, we are invariably told that it will be the other way round. They will all give birth in the same year and we'll have to run a creche to cope with the demands for baby sitting. The working lives of the daughters and the sons' girlfriends will thrust a role on us.

The mystery to me in this is why I—now fifty-eight - can begin to feel that I might like to run a creche for

them. It's the last thing I would have done when my children were small. Making room for regular babysitting and childminding would mean changing my working life drastically. So why is the role so alluring? Is it the luxury of being allowed to do some of what you missed out on with your own children through anxiety and exhaustion. Or to try something new? There was a period when all they wanted to do were the things that I lacked talent and patience for—singing, playdough etc. Yet I'm quite keen to tackle that now. Do I perhaps want a second chance to play a role in that stage between babyhood and, say, about two-and-a-half when you can first have a conversation with them?

My own children rejected attractive clothes at a very early age, and it was both extravagant and pointless to buy them. As a grandmother you can disregard all that and just do it. In much more important ways, too, you might be able to make up for the extravagances you missed out on as parents—more time to play, to investigate things in the street, to laugh. I register the difference between the mothers and fathers taking their children to childminders and nurseries—unresponsive, striding out, mind half on the In-Tray—and the dawdling grandparents, hand in hand with the toddler absorbed in contemplation of the empty crisp packet on the pavement. Compensating for self-inflicted emotional deprivation as a parent? Or are these the grandparents who were patient and relaxed as parents?

But the deprivation model cannot explain the appetite and the fascination. Its partly a facet of wanting to be useful to your children, easing their busy stressful lives—alongside lending them your car, advising on annuals for their patios, discussing their work problems. "I'll take the baby and you have a nice rest, go out and buy yourself a new Tshirt etc." That impulse to shoulder sons' and daughters' cares, fully exercised without babies, will take a new turn.

Its not just that. Its what you've learnt in the meantime about the world and the confidence you've gath-

ered with the years. You can see that the things that you made a great fuss about don't matter at all—take a sweater; you've got to eat that apple before the Jaffa cake; if you're not well enough to go to school you're not well enough to watch telly. And the things that did matter that you got wrong—not allowing the child to sleep in your bed at the right moments, supporting the meanspirited and misguided teacher, underestimating A-levels and exaggerating sex and drugs.

Knowing What Is Right

Then questions start to arise about how far we can, or should, follow these impulses. Grandparents are said to spoil their grandchildren, though I doubt if it is quite that. They know that very little that happens is irretrievable except neglect. They have seen their own and friends' children get into trouble and cope with setbacks, progress too slowly in some ways and too fast in others, and that it more or less sorts itself out in most cases. That perspective is their contribution.

But there are the discipline grandmothers. They say they provide routine and structure because the parents don't. Will be a perspective grandmother or a discipline grandmother? There's no contest. But then I was an anxious parent and I've got a lot of ground to make up.

And central to being a grandmother are the claims of the past and the future. You are the pivot between your own grandparents and great-grandparents in the photograph album, and the new generations. You make a small contribution to a world generally starved of history. Not passing on cumulative memories must be the hardest part of accepting that your children are not going to have children.

Two of my friends and exact contemporaries at university have died of cancer within the last year. One had two grandchildren whom she adored, and for whom she was immensely important. She desperately wanted to know what happened next. The other left one daughter recently married with the other recently engaged. At her funeral her husband, himself a vicar, said that

we should console ourselves that of the two roles—mothering and grandmothering—the first was immensely the more important, and that she had been outstanding. Of course being a parent is *more* important; but that is exactly why being a grandparent is so important. His consolation is really no consolation.

I'm not exactly practicing, but five of my eight goddaughters and one of my three godsons have children and I hold their new babies with pleasure and pride. Now my own children are becoming godparents and they email me films of them. Is it just that babies are so nice, or do they have to be in your line? You could be in trouble for soliciting strange babies in the street.

Staying Patient

I'm not desperate either. I'm just really looking forward to it. Some women I know are renewed by grandchildren and become almost totally preoccupied. Others are guarded and somehow disconcerted. My own mother was like that—at first.

She came to stay with me in Belgrade when I emerged from the National Gynaecological Hospital with my daughter, born breech without anaesthetics and swaddled into immobility in Serbian style. She seemed to be doing her duty to her first grandchild. But later they adored each other. She was a good woman and a strong influence.

Her mother was not so obviously a good woman. A beauty, spoilt perhaps, self-willed and arbitrary, unable to boil an egg, impatient with children, she nonetheless created whatever the extraordinary bond is. She belonged to me and was uncritically loyal, while not otherwise being famous for those qualities. She brought me history, and another point of view. It was her sharing with me her audacious past that cemented the link.

Perhaps in the end that's what you get. The chance to recreate yourself for your childrens' babies in the

image you want. And it could just be better than the reality you've been stuck with so far.

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