AIMS For a better birth...

Transition to Grandmothering

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By Anne Hemsley

I love being a grandmother, I simply cannot believe that I have been awarded this privileged position in life.

Becoming a mother was, as it is for many women, a pivotal moment in my life. In my younger days as a midwife, there were times during some of the births I was involved with that I imagined giving birth myself and, I admit, I almost ached to nurture a baby of my own.

And then, in due course, I was privileged to become the mother of two wonderful boys. Throughout their adult life, I often pondered on who might become a life partner to each of them, but I didn't extend these thoughts to becoming a grandmother. Having listened to many stories from women, who had not especially warmed to their own offspring's life partner choices, I was delighted to welcome into our family the women who had become our sons' girlfriends, fiancées and eventually their wives. How fortunate we were to become an international family with daughters-in-law from Finland and Moldova.

To many people who know me in our local community, I was often perceived as a grandmotherly type. It was generally thought that I was yearning to be a grandmother, as I run a weekly breastfeeding support group in our local library in Beverley, East Yorkshire and have offers to hold or cuddle several babies each week. I would receive many compliments of the nature of, how good I would be as a grandmother and how fortunate any grandchildren would be to have me in their lives. I took this with the kindness and generosity with which it was delivered and still felt content, quietly waiting in the wings.

I certainly didn't want to add to the many inquiries made to our boys and their wives about when they might produce some children. It was far too personal a topic for me to ask outright. I hate prying and at the back of my mind I am aware of the heartache that so many couples endure in pregnancy loss and infertility. It didn't sit comfortably with me to ask our own couples if they were trying to conceive. So, I quietly waited, and my patience was rewarded.

Since emerging into the most welcome role of grandmother, it feels like I have won a lottery. Both of my daughters-in-law are unique and exceptional in their approach to life and most importantly, to be by their side as an invited guest as they faced the many challenges of adapting to motherhood is a valued addition to our relationship with each other.

WOW, what a life changer, and what a tremendous feeling of joy, tears of joy and butterflies in my tummy. If I were an artist, I would draw my heart, singing. When our eldest son and his then fiancée (now wife) informed my husband and I that they were expecting a baby, I was so overwhelmed that I accidentally knocked the celebratory glass of Champagne off the garden table. We all hugged and laughed and chatted with so much joy in our conversations. Of course, we asked the usual questions, would they like to know the baby's sex, how far along was the pregnancy etc… All that really mattered was that both our daughter in law and our future grandchild would be healthy in pregnancy and that they would have a safe birth.

Thinking of becoming a grandmother at this stage in my life, and with my midwifery background, I found myself counting each week of gestation as a bonus, this beautiful little human had survived another week of intrauterine life. As we learned that Monday was the day of the week that our future grandchild turned another week towards the 40 week goal, I offered prayers before I went to sleep that he/she would grow and stay inside her beautiful Mamma's uterus until at least 37 weeks. Of course, I knew far too much of the risks of pregnancy and made a determined effort to close my eyes each week to sleep with positive images of our grandchild thriving and both her and her Mamma not succumbing to any of the complications of pregnancy,

One Sunday morning in early February 2021 when our grandchild-to-be had reached approximately 34 weeks' gestation, I noticed that I had missed a call from our eldest son, I quickly called him back. He calmly told me that their baby had been born, so I asked him if this was some sort of joke. He reassured me that it was not. In an extremely calm manner, (despite the traumatic birth he had just witnessed) he informed me that his partner Johanna had given birth by C-section. Their baby needed a little help with breathing and was in NICU at the tender age of 34 weeks. Our granddaughter had arrived. Johanna, our

Granddaughter's äiti (Finnish word for mother) was recovering both physically and mentally from the unexpected early arrival, but in good shape. I simply couldn't absorb this news, not only was it amazing, but it also took me completely by surprise.

With tears of joy running down my face, I informed my husband of the news, and we went around in a haze of joy, concern, amazement, more joy and more concern. As the reality kicked in, we were concerned about the parents dealing with all the restrictions of the pandemic and of our tiny granddaughter facing the invasion of tubes and prodding by medical hands. Medical hands that were sustaining her unexpected entry into the world, but nonetheless, not the loving hands of her parents. I couldn't sleep at night, imagining this tiny baby in her incubator, facing blue light therapy and I could almost feel the discomfort of her nasogastric tube. I had intense feelings of protection for our tiny granddaughter, I wanted to stand guard next to her incubator to surround her with peace, love and calm, blotting out the necessary but noisy environment of a NICU (neonatal intensive care unit)

After two intensive weeks Astrid was allowed to return to their home in Peckham. Naturally, I wanted to rush down to London to help. But this was our third 'lockdown' and only essential travel was permitted. As soon as Astrid was able to travel, the new family came up from London to Beverley, to 'bubble' with us. I often think of how magical this time together was. We had the relatively calm world of lockdown to observe her every day, guard her and support the very tired and emotionally exhausted parents.

On the night of our granddaughter's arrival at our home, my husband had driven to one of the nearby rail stations to meet the new family of three. Memories will forever stay with me. a 'Welcome Astrid' bunting depicting the united colours of both the British flag and the Finnish flag. Our beautiful granddaughter Astrid is half Finnish and half British. I bought balloons and each breath to inflate them suddenly felt effortless.

I was so excited, my heart was racing. During the time that my husband was driving to the railway station, I took a video on my phone of the preparations made to welcome Astrid to our home and the feelings in my stomach and heart were as profound as if I was going on a first date. What would she look like in the flesh? What would she feel like? Would she like me? Was she safe with us? Had the journey been too arduous for her? How were her parents feeling? Would I be allowed to hold her? What if she became unwell? I was almost sick with anticipation and excitement.

The new family arrived, Astrid was so alert and calm. She looked perfect, tiny of course at 4 pounds 11 ounces, but alert taking in her new surroundings. My husband and I gazed at her in awe, we couldn't take our eyes away from this perfectly formed little girl. I still don't think I can do justice to this feeling, another generation has been born, and we are a part of this baby. We have the honour to be called grandparents. We took on our role eagerly, nothing was too much for this special gift.

When I first held Astrid, I was struck that despite her size, this was a strong girl. After all she has an ancestry of strong Finnish women in her genetic make-up. Astrid's grandmother is called Nuppu, her name as a grandparent is Mummu, a warm and loving lady who comes from a strong line of Finnish women.

I wasn't at all sure about my own grandmothering name. My husband's mother is still with us and has, for many years, been called Grandma Jac. I felt that it wasn't my right to claim the title Grandma, and it sounded possibly a little 'old' for me to wear. Astrid's full name is Astrid Elsa; it's absolutely nothing to do with the well-known Disney film, Frozen. The Elsa part of her name originates from Astrid's great great-grandmother called Elsa adding her roots to Astrid's deeply established family tree. Elsa lived to the age of 110 years and faced many challenges in her lifetime. No wonder I felt the strength in our tiny granddaughter.

As the months passed, we enjoyed observing Astrid's personality develop, from baby to toddler, from crying to babbling in two languages, English and Finnish. When Astrid was around the age of two years, I was sleeping in her bedroom and trying to gain an extra five minutes sleep. A delightful voice called my name, Grandma, Grandma, Grandma, I opened my eyes and despite the early hour, I started our day of play and fun together. The sweet way Astrid says Grandma is enough to melt my heart. I thoroughly claimed my name and I wear it with immense pride and honour.

Becoming a grandmother made me reflect on my own mortality. I felt overwhelmed by a desire to be fit and healthy, to eat the best diet, to build up my arm muscles to carry this baby and hopefully to carry any other grandchildren that we might be gifted with. I wanted to be immortal. I didn't want to miss a second of this role in life as a grandmother.

Just when I had thought life was good, life became even better, we received the joyful and exciting news that our younger son and his wife Irina were expecting a baby. We were overjoyed for them. The wonderful, exciting feelings were equally as powerful as when my eldest son and his soon-to-be wife had announced their pregnancy.

Our daughter-in-law felt well, barely any of the common side effects of pregnancy. Imagine our absolute amazement when their ultrasound scan revealed not one baby but two. I couldn't believe it, there is no history of twins in our family. However, there are twins in my daughter-in-law's family. Double joy, double emotions and double concerns to protect these tiny growing babies.

As the months rolled by, our future twin grandchildren, two non-identical boys, thrived and grew. Their Mother sailed through her pregnancy. The twins gained a week of gestation each Sunday, and so my Sunday night prayers were now directed to the boys. "Please stay inside your `Mamma's uterus and don't think of making an early appearance.

It seems these two boys listened, and they made an appearance at 37 weeks. That day, just as when our first grandchild was born, was a day to remember forever. We knew that an elective c section was planned, but it was Easter Sunday, and the junior doctors were on strike. This was a long, long day of false

starts, anticipation and clock watching.

By good fortune Astrid, now aged 2 years, and her parents were staying with us for the Easter weekend. While we all shared the anxiety, anticipation and clock watching, Astrid's parents also shared the wonderful news that Astrid was to have a baby sister or a baby brother in July. Once again, we experienced those ferocious and overwhelming feelings of anticipation, joy, tears of joy and strong feelings of protection for our developing fourth grandchild. What an exciting and joyful day.

Continuing to wait for news of the twins, Astrid went to bed, and we kept our vigil with our mobile phones, a definite ping! A beautiful photo of our son posing with his boys. Followed by our daughter-in-law holding the boys. We became grandparents to three amazing little people. Joy, overflowing joy, a chorus of singing in my heart and I am sure in my husband's heart. Tears, fears and awe. We simply couldn't take this news in.

As soon as we could, we drove to London to greet our grandsons. We arrived to welcome the new family home from the hospital and our brave, non-complaining daughter in law met us at the door of their apartment. I was offered a baby to hold immediately. My common sense delayed this first hold by a short moment, I wanted to protect these time babies and wash away the grime of travel.

I felt like my arms were the branches of this family tree, arms like branches had grown in strength since Astrid's arrival, and I hope that I had grown in wisdom. So many thoughts racing through my head. How could I help? How was my daughter in law? Babushka Tatiana,[1] the boys' Ukrainian grandmother, and I hugged in joyful unison at the union of our two families.

These early days evolved into teamwork, fuelled by our mutual love of being grandmothers. The history of our joint ancestries bringing so much to the baby boys' lives. I learned that Babushka Tatiana's mother was Anna. Two strong women from a Ukrainian village in Moldova bringing all their ancestry to this moment of greeting and sustaining the incredible boys.

Our first grandson Roman had made his appearance, followed 7 minutes later by his brother Harvey. We felt almost immediately the presence of their unique personalities. Two very special little humans, healthy and serene in their newborn state. Hard to capture our emotions as we gazed in wonder at the two babies who shared their uterine space and now happily transitioned into sharing a crib. Joy, joy and more joy.

Naturally, we each brought to the welcome different ways of love, protection, practicalities and knowledge. One thing I noted from Babushka Tatiana was the tiny bracelets made from coloured woven thread given to each boy and their Mamma. I learnt that they were to protect the boys from 'the bad eye'. Newborns wear these bracelets until they get baptised. I was more than happy to see these little boys being protected in any shape or form.

Just when life was busy, and our lives were brimming with enjoying our grandparent roles our 4th grandchild made her appearance. We didn't at this point know if this baby was a boy or a girl. A healthy, beautiful baby girl arrived at term in late July, avoiding both Aunt Irina's birthday and her Daddy's

birthday by one day either side.

With great timing we were driving down from our home in the North of England to their home in Hove when our daughter in law was admitted to hospital in early labour.

We had the comfort of knowing that we could take care of Astrid during the time that the parents were at the hospital. Long hours of labour and long hours of waiting for all concerned. At last, a wonderful message arrived, 'the magic ping' of my mobile phone with the wonderful news of the safe arrival of a beautiful full term baby girl. Our most welcome and loved granddaughter Rumi entered our world. We could not have been more relieved, once again I experienced the fantastic, effervescent feeling of joyful bubbles flowing through my body and heart.

It's now 18 months since our 4th grandchild made her appearance. Just like her sister and her cousins, we observe her emerging personality, her mischievous nature. My heart has grown to accommodate the love it holds for 4 amazing little humans.

My arms are stronger. My quest to live for as long as possible is driving me to be fitter, healthier. I had been told of the special feelings of being a grandmother, but nothing can match the reality of the role. I am very fortunate to experience the feeling of joy but have been blown away by being asked on occasions for any wisdom that I might hold to support situations in health, feeding and nurturing.

Our 4th grandchild is named Rumi Edith; this is a truly beautiful way of connecting us to my own mother,





Author Bio: Anne Hemsley is a nurse, midwife, lactation consultant, mother, wife and proud and grateful grandmother x 4.

[1] Babushka is a slavic word for Grandmother.