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Reflections on becoming a grandmother

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By Petra Wood

My first grandson will be three years old next month. My son and my daughter-in-law decided to marry while they were still very young by today's standards and it was on their wedding weekend that they told us that she was pregnant. It was amazing! I remember thinking, 'Oh my god I'm far too young to be a grandmother', but also, 'You know, why not?'.

From the beginning it has been a journey of mixed emotion - of holding two almost opposing thoughts or feelings and of having to navigate a route between them. There was this incredibly important new human being coming into the world, a human being that would ensure my eternity; the next generation of my line - my grandchildren, my great grandchildren, my great great grandchildren and so on. It felt incredibly important and emotional. But it was my daughter-in-law who was pregnant, not my own daughter, and I am not her go-to person. Her go-to person is her mother, and so it should be. I was afraid of not being needed, of not even being wanted around.

Also, I remember so clearly how much I hated unsolicited advice as a young mother myself and I wanted to never overpower my son and his wife or tell them what to do. But also, I am a homoeopath and have been for 20 years, whilst my daughter-in-law is a children's nurse and fully immersed in the medical

system. I knew I had to be true to myself and raise certain issues that I felt strongly about, but I also knew that ultimately I had to accept their choices.

Happily, three years on, it is clear that I am a very important person in their life. At the same time, being one step removed has been a hard thing to get to grips with. I was aware that I held a lot of knowledge and experience but that I wasn't in charge. As a grandmother I felt that my grand baby was naturally going to be one of the most important people on the planet but I was not the mother. I was not in charge, I shouldn't be in charge, but I am a person who is usually in charge when things touch my life, so it was a really rocky journey to explore. What I found was a belief that it was going to be okay, and so it was.

Being a practicing Buddhist also helped me to navigate the uncertainties and lack of control encountered on my journey into grandmotherhood. The philosophy helps me to work for the betterment of myself, my environment and the people around me, but at the same time it teaches me acceptance and appreciation of what is, rather than just wishing for something else. For example, as a nurse, my daughter-in-law had a covid vaccination when she was pregnant. Whatever happened to the idea that pregnant women avoided all vaccines! I just had to believe that it would be okay, that it's the way it's meant to be. My faith was a rock to cling to at times like that.

When there were complications in the pregnancy I wanted my daughter-in-law to see a homoeopath, which she didn't do. I offered some 'acute' treatments but I didn't want to be their homoeopath. I am the mother, the mother-in-law and the grandmother; these are separate roles from being a homoeopath and I knew that, and yet I had these tools that I knew would help. Towards the end, my daughter-in-law was in hospital with preeclampsia and, even then, I repeated my mantra, 'It's okay, it's okay'. My grandson was born by c-section at 37 weeks. They sent me the first photograph and I fell totally in love with that most gorgeous baby ever born. The connection felt absolutely remarkable.

I found that there is something about being a grandmother that requires you to surrender. I had to allow things to be as they were. Simply on a geographical level, they live in Bristol and I live in West Wales. Then there is my daughter-in-law's family to be respected. I have learned to park any feeling that I wasn't having enough time with my grandson because it wasn't benefiting me.

I have a great relationship with my son and with my daughter-in-law as well. A while ago I was talking with them about the fact that as my son's parents back then, his father and I were in charge, just the two of us to synchronise our approach, but as grandparents there are four (plus a step grandparent) so there is a huge potential for conflicting grandparent guidance. It is really strange to change position from being the primary carer to not even being a secondary carer because I share that role with all these other people who are equally important. When I first saw my grandson I was overwhelmed by the feeling of him being a precious little human being, my very own flesh and blood, who needs to be looked after, but then I realised I had to step back and learn to share that role - the cake isn't all mine.

I remember that with the announcement of my daughter-in-law's pregnancy, I realised I was being shunted up a generation and it felt like a shunt because it wasn't of my doing. My son and daughter-in-

law, in deciding to create the next generation, had pushed me up towards the older generation, towards the ancestral side. I remember very vividly asking myself if I was ready for that, but it wasn't a matter of whether I was ready or not because I was not in control. When I became pregnant with my son 28 years ago, it was of my choosing. I decided I was ready to be a mother and then he chose to come along. Becoming a grandmother was different. They hadn't said that they were planning to have children so quickly, not to me anyway, so it was literally a shunt up into the next generation - you're going to be a grandmother ready or not, hold on to your horses.

I had never spoken to my mother about her transition into grandmotherhood but she was there when my daughter-in-law's pregnancy was announced. I vividly remember the whole family sitting around the table talking about it. I said, "I can't believe I'm going to be a grandmother at the age of 54, that's far too young", and my mom looked at me quizzically and I suddenly remembered that she was 54 when she became a grandma too. To me, she had been an old woman at that age and definitely grandmother material. People are coming to parenthood much later than in previous generations and naturally, coming to grandparenthood later too. It would be interesting to ask her how she felt at that time.

Whenever there is a health problem my homoeopath head kicks in big style. I do offer suggestions and they often ask me for remedies. They even have remedies in the house, but I know they also give calpol and antibiotics. That has been a challenge for me. What I have realised about grandmotherhood is that I may be given challenges at any time and basically these are opportunities to decide and demonstrate my values as a grandmother, to decide and show what sort of grandmother I want to be.

One of the biggest challenges for everyone came in my daughter-in-law's second pregnancy. They told us early because we were visiting and I would have spotted my daughter-in-law's morning sickness. Some weeks later they had a dating scan and found that she was expecting identical twins who were sharing one placenta. It was such a wonderful surprise. Sadly, the smaller twin started to struggle and as time went by, he was hardly growing at all. There followed a time of very frequent monitoring, waiting and worry.

I conferred with a colleague of mine and we put homoeopathic remedies in that my daughter-in-law very happily took, but nothing seemed to make a difference. After another three weeks it became really clear that the little twin's problems were too big and that he was not going to live.

It was really hard to know how my son and my daughter-in-law would cope. With the first pregnancy they hadn't wanted to know whether it was a boy or a girl until the baby was born. However, when it came to the point that they knew the little twin wouldn't live in this second pregnancy, they did ask, and I found it so reassuring and comforting to honour this tiny human being, who had become part of their lives, our lives, with a name: Griffin.

My son and his wife had a lot of support from the charity Bliss. They continued being monitored and my daughter-in-law gave birth to both twins on Good Friday. They were born together, back to back, at the very same time. In many ways it was a timely and beautiful arrival into the world. In the hospital they had

a special room for parents of stillborn babies where the parents can stay with their baby. They stayed there with little Griffin (who was just two or three inches in length) while the bigger twin, who weighed a kilogram, was around the corner in NICU (neonatal intensive care unit). And because of Easter they were able to stay longer than anticipated.

While this was all happening, my first grandson was on a holiday with his maternal grandparents and we had gone to see my parents in Germany. We flew back on Easter Monday and my son invited us to stay at their house in Bristol and to come and meet my new grandson. So my partner, my daughter, and I went in and we all saw little Griffin too. It was strange because he wasn't there - we saw a little body but he wasn't there, he had moved on. I found that reassuring.

After that I went into the intensive care unit to meet my new grandson. This scared me witless. I am not a fan of hospitals because I don't come from the technological medical model in my personal and professional philosophy of health; I have a very different view. I felt extremely hesitant but my daughter had been very insightful; she said, “Mum, what are you scared of?”. I was scared to see my little grandson wired up and separated from his mother. As soon as I realised that, I thought, “It’s okay, this is a fear to be overcome.” So I had to face the fear, and I went in. It was a very weird environment, he was bruised black and blue as his passage through the birth canal had been a rough one. Everything was beeping and my son said straight away, “Don't worry Mum, there's good beeps, and there's bad beeps, these are all good beeps”. My daughter-in-law, in her training as a children’s nurse, had actually been on the ward in one of her placements, and so, whilst I was looking in alarm at all the concoctions that were being pumped into my little grandson's body, she was able to keep control, hide her fears, and look at ease in that environment and it was so good to see.

My little grandson was in hospital until early June. Things happened, but nothing untoward. With every complication the consultants said, “It's not because he's poorly, it's just because he is premature”. It was reassuring that they were expecting things like that to happen and they were nothing extraordinary. He always picked up, everything went well.

What I learned as a grandmother during this time was that my grandsons’ parents were perfectly able to deal with things, and that I didn't have to. I learned that it wasn't my job to make decisions. I was just there to check in, and hear the news, and provide childcare for my older grandson as needed. At times, I felt worried that I didn't know enough, that they didn't tell me enough about what was going on, but as soon as I clocked that this was my desire to be in charge, I was able to step away again and know that it would be fine.

They all came home on the eve of Father's Day. I happened to stay overnight, and my son and I were the last ones still up before going to bed. What I realised that evening was that he had become the most amazing father anybody could wish for. He was looking after his family, financially, practically, and emotionally, and making good decisions. He was a wonderful father, and I saw that. I realised that ‘me not being in charge’ needed to happen in order to fully enable him to become the most amazing father, one who can take care of his family in every way. I had to be shunted up a position so that he could step up. I

shared that with him as we spoke. I told him about the times when I was longing to know more, times when I was worried about everything, but I said that, with hindsight now, I wouldn't have wanted him to need me to make his decisions. I felt so proud seeing him as a fully fledged adult and father.

As we spoke about this, I had the insight that his ability to father came truly from within him, it wasn't something that he was just copying, that he was used to. This felt so profound. It was a very special moment.

The idea that the ability to parent can be found deep inside ourselves makes sense as it must be a biological imperative for all mammals to know how to care for their young. Being shunted into grandmotherhood must also be the natural way of human beings, maybe of all mammals too, so that we are there for our children as they become parents. When I had my son, my first child, I started to rely emotionally on my mum much more than I had done for the previous decade, needing some information from her, just checking things out with her, or needing her as a sounding board. I realised then that, as grandparents, we give forward to the next generation. It's not so much about what we get back. If we get something back it is a bonus. It is the way we become eternal. What I truly understand now is that motherhood too, is about enabling the next generation to become the most amazing people that they can be so that then the next generation can become even more amazing, and so on. We are all paying forward to the next generation. I realise now that the people who came before me, my mum, my grandma, my ancestors, they are to be honoured for what they passed down.

Both my grandmothers are dead now. One died when I was six, but my maternal grandmother was around for a long time. I have always felt a really strong connection with her, even though we didn't spend much time together. In the course of my work as a homoeopath I came across the fact that when a woman is pregnant with her daughter, the daughter in utero already has all the eggs for the next generation. When I learned that, it was just mind-boggling. The thought that, as a woman, as a mother-to-be, I was already holding two generations, just as my grandmother held my mother and me, is a wonderful thought.

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