Listening to Grandmothers

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ABSTRACT

In this column, three proud grandmothers share their unique stories and eloquently describe the transforming experience of becoming a grandmother and the joy associated with witnessing their daughters giving birth.

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PATRICIA'S STORY

Who knew? Well, God certainly knew that I had been told about it often enough. Over the years, I had even been shown a plethora of photographs. They were always proudly displayed with the accompanying braggadocio one learned would follow. Still, nothing and no one could have really prepared me for what it would feel like to actually be a grandmother. It arouses feelings of joy that are almost tangible. It provides emotional and physical nourishment far more satisfying than any gourmet extravaganza or medicinal miracle drug. It's just more, so much more than anyone can explain.

From the moment our daughter and son-in-law announced they were expecting a baby, I felt the joyful anticipation I'd experienced when being pregnant with my own children. Then, I didn't

think I could ever be happier. This, however, was somehow different. I felt an increased sense of intimacy and respect for my daughter, along with an enormous gratitude for the little person she and her husband were about to add to our family. She embraced the fullness of being a woman when, after many hours of hard labor, my petite child gave birth to 8 pounds, 5 ounces, 21.5 inches long Liam. Before my daughter took Liam to her breast, the nurse handed him to his father, who had supported his wife so beautifully through the birth of their son. Mother, Father, and beautiful, new, baby Son had begun the universally joyful process of bonding, first to each other and, then, with the eagerly waiting family and friends. It was a new day and a new, richer way of life for all of us. Instead of the increasing consciousness of my aging and my less-than-perfect health, I felt a new buoyancy and an anticipated promise of the joyful years to come. Perhaps that promise is the biggest reward to a grandparent—an enjoyment of life far greater than we might have expected.

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Ask me how my grandchild is and, no matter what mood I'm in or what task I am involved with, everything will stop. Deep within myself, I can feel the warm birth of a smile. It fills my whole body until it finally reaches my mouth. Then, I produce not just a smile—or so I'm told—but a glow identifying my joy at just the thought of this child, this grand grandchild. Gladly, I'll tell you how he is and what clever new things he is doing. I'll whip out my latest array of photographs, hoping that you might gain an inkling of the enormity of my happiness. I'll even find a way to share my pride and appreciation for the informed and loving parenting skills of my daughter and her husband, while secretly giggling at myself for becoming the shameless braggart I never expected I would become. Such behaviors, I've learned, are the entitlements of a grandparent.

These days, I start each morning with a prayer of gratitude for a good husband of 41 years; two wonderful daughters; a terrific son-in-law; great friends and extended family; and an adorable, precious grandson. Engaging this child and expanding the status of our immediate family have a way of coloring this stage of my life. The world brilliantly radiates with new hope, increased happiness, a greater sense of fun, and the challenge of wonderful possibilities for us all. God and other grandparents already knew all about this. Now I know. I really, really know, and I am overflowing with delight.

– Patricia Berté
Brooklyn, NY

ELENA'S STORY

After almost 20 hours of a difficult, strenuous, but unmedicated labor, my baby gave birth to her baby! Little Ana Paula was born after struggling for hours to find her way through her mom's pelvis. Fortunately, we were blessed with a caring and supportive obstetrician who believes in women and trusts their ability to birth. My daughter, Angelica, never gave up, and she worked and worked to help her baby out. After finally reaching 10 cm, and with little Ana Paula still floating around (as she never engaged), my daughter started pushing, while the rest of us joined in the effort and helped as best as we could to bring the baby down through her mom's pelvis. At 3:03 a.m. on Thursday, September 6, 2007, Ana Paula was born. She was immediately placed on her mom's chest and, this time without any problems, she found her way to her mom's breast where she stayed sucking and gazing into her mother's eyes for a long time.

You are never really prepared to witness this miracle, no matter how many times you have seen it happen. When mother and baby find each other for the first time, the world seems to stand still for a few moments, as if honoring mother and baby in this magical moment. There are no words to describe this, especially when your daughter has gone through a huge transformation in just a few hours. She was no longer my little girl; Angelica received Ana Paula as a courageous, incredibly strong, and caring woman: a loving mother! I needed to share this with you, my dear friends.

I also needed to let you know that only the birth of my granddaughter would seem a justified reason for my absence from the Lamaze annual conference (the first one I have ever missed since 1988) and from a board meeting (in all my time serving different organizations, this has never happened). I'm very thankful for your understanding and support, and I'm ready to jump back to work, as my daughter and little Ana Paula are gradually falling into a "normal," daily routine, discovering the wonders and joys of having each other. I'm sharing with you my newest love!

– Con Cariño [With Affection],
Elena Carrillo de Reyes, CLC, CD(DONA),
LCCE, FACCE
Mexico City, Mexico

(the proudest mother of an incredible woman and
the proudest grandma of the most beautiful baby)

MARY JO'S STORY

Celebrate birth. Birth matters. Birth profoundly affects a woman and her family. Having a baby is deeply spiritual and fulfilling. You'll never be the same; becoming a mother will be the greatest, most empowering event in your life.

As a childbirth educator, I've owned those words and shared them for three decades; as a woman, I've been blessed with three amazing births that led me to the seminal role of my life—nurturing, educating, and raising my three children. Although I've been privileged to provide labor support for more teens than I can count, I didn't realize that a birth could once more be "up close and personal" and change me.

When mother and baby find each other for the first time, the world seems to stand still for a few moments, as if honoring mother and baby in this magical moment. She was no longer my little girl; Angelica received Ana Paula as a courageous, incredibly strong, and caring woman: a loving mother!

As I watched my daughter's elated face and heard her cries of joy, and as I've seen her grow into a mother who shares my passion for parenting, I am also transformed. I'm a "nonna," like my mother and my grandmother before me.

On May 25, 2006, I became a grandmother for the first time. My son-in-law, Paul, and I cushioned my daughter, Amy, on either side as her midwife gently provided guidance and our precious Jonathan Richard Gough was born. And it was indeed a celebration of life and woman's inner wisdom, and it mattered more than I can articulate in words. At that moment, a wave of love—so primal that it came from my very core—swept over me; later, I told my husband, Rich, that I instantly knew Jonathan was ours.

More than just my grandson was born that May morning. As I watched my daughter's elated face and heard her cries of joy—as she guided Jonathan, with an inner wisdom that resonated within me, to her breast when he was minutes old—and as I've seen her grow into a mother who shares my passion for parenting as the truest calling of all, I am also transformed. I'm a "nonna," like my mother and my grandmother before me. I now understand the amazing blessing of seeing your children's children, and I am once again connected to all women in all cultures throughout time.

Not long ago, my second daughter, Lisa, told me that I had "a low threshold for joy." She could be correct—I am blessed with a deep capacity for loving my life and treasuring each day. The joy Amy has gifted me with since Jonathan's birth would make anyone's heart soar. Not long after Jonathan arrived, my Amy decided to become a Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educator. Imagine the elation that

rose through me at that announcement; my cup runneth over. Amy's words echo in my heart:

Nothing in my life has filled me with the passion I feel for parenting Jonathan. His birth completed me. I want to be part of birth. I want to share the most important time in a woman's life. I want to be there when a woman prepares for birth so that I can help her understand how much her birth will matter. I want to help her nurse her baby and support her as she becomes a mother.

There is a sacred trust linked to the role of childbirth educator; I am twice blessed. I will now share that role with my own precious first-born.

I see my son, Nathan, in Jonathan so much that I slip and call my grandson "Nate" more than I like to admit. Jonathan loves to laugh. He has a deep, belly laugh that he shares with wild abandon when something pleases him. Victor Hugo said that laughter is the sunshine that takes winter away from the human face. Jonathan is my laughter; his mother's outstanding parenting is my greatest joy. Birth—and life—are the greatest celebrations of all.

– Mary Jo Podgurski, RNC, MA, LCCE, FACCE
Washington, PA

PATRICIA BERTÉ lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is the mother of two daughters and grandmother of a little boy. Berté is also an artist and retired teacher. ELENA CARRILLO DE REYES is a childbirth educator, doula, and lactation consultant who has worked in private practice for more than 30 years in Mexico City, Mexico. She is the mother of four daughters and grandmother of four grandchildren. MARY JO PODGURSKI is President and Founder of The Academy for Adolescent Health, Inc. (www.healthyteens.com) in Washington, Pennsylvania, former President of Lamaze International, and Jonathan's grandmother.