

I love being a grandmother...

but that's because
I learned from a pro

BY BETH POWNING



On the day that our daughter-in-law, Sara, was in labor with our first grandchild, I made a path in my flower garden. I laid bricks in a loop through a bed of foxgloves.

I named it the “children’s path,” and imagined grandchildren trotting beneath the fairy-hatted blossoms. It was my first grandmotherly act, and as I did it, I was unconsciously patterning myself on my own beloved granny, whose only thought was of how she might make someone else happy.

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If she had been the sort to speculate, my granny would have thought that it would be her pies that I would remember, or the rambling house in the Connecticut village where our family had lived for five generations. She might have imagined me remembering applesauce boiling on the gas stove, releasing puffs of sweet-smelling steam. She might have thought that I would long for the expeditions up to the apple orchard with my grandfather to pick Gravensteins; or rummaging through chests filled with spectacles in leather cases, dresses with rusty hooks, ivory fans.

Her name was Helen Merriam Davis, and she was my father's mother. She had three sons and nine grandchildren. She would never have thought that I would long for her. And she would be surprised to know that when Sara and my only son, Jake, asked me what I would like the grandchildren to call me, I would name myself after her.

“Nanny.”

I anguished over this choice, worrying that if I took her name, which came from my older brother's inability to pronounce the

Kids and their Grandparents

Whether we admire them for their wide-eyed innocence, their sweet smiles, or their unique sense of humor, let's face it, grandchildren are just plain cute. We asked for the adorable, the lovable, and the silly stories of your grandkids, and your responses flooded in. As Grandparents Day approaches (this year, September 9th), we thought it a good time to share some of your stories. A few can be found below, while more tales of special moments with grandkids and fond memories of loving grandparents can be found on the Web at www.catholicdigest.com. Of course, as your stories show, a grandparent's bond with a grandchild is one that needs no holiday or fanfare, but can be celebrated every day of the year.

A CARD FROM THE CHRIST CHILD

My 6-year-old granddaughter, Cara, was sitting at my dining room table when she suddenly stopped and did a double-take at a Christmas card of the Blessed Mother holding Jesus that was

word “Granny,” I would lose the feeling that floods me whenever I speak hers. But, I reasoned, I could refer to her as my Nammy.

She was the granny of a children’s book. She was spare and small, so tiny that by the time my girl cousins and I were 12 years old, we were the same height as she was. Her grey hair was always wound into a deco-

ther, she had taught English literature, astronomy, and geometry. She could name the constellations, identify apples, read Latin. She loved gardens, but never picked the flowers she grew, nor did she encourage me to bring her wildflowers, for it made her sad, she told me, to put them in vases and watch them die. She whispered to me of heaven, and how we would one day live there all together.

She gazed at me, peacefully, hands busy in whatever act they might be engaged in: stirring, folding, smoothing, digging, knitting.

rous bun bound with the finest of nets. Plagued by arthritis, she limped, and the tips of her fingers bent sideways. Her short eyebrows raised in a sweet, worried peak, their sadness the legacy of a younger sister lost to diphtheria, their quirked tension revealing her desire to shield her family from life’s random tragedies; her eyes bore no secrets, no guile, no malice. She gazed at me, peacefully, hands busy in whatever act they might be engaged in: stirring, folding, smoothing, digging, knitting.

Before marrying my grandfa-

ther, she had taught English literature, astronomy, and geometry. She could name the constellations, identify apples, read Latin. She loved gardens, but never picked the flowers she grew, nor did she encourage me to bring her wildflowers, for it made her sad, she told me, to put them in vases and watch them die. She whispered to me of heaven, and how we would one day live there all together.

When I hugged her, I felt how, beneath her soft wool sweater, she was hard and strong, like a winter tree, its skeleton softened by snow. When Jake and Sara told us that they were going to have a child, my first reaction was conditioned by years of motherhood. I thought, first, of my own child. *My son*, my mind protested. *He’s too young!* I felt the familiar desire to protect, nurture. Then, within seconds, these feelings wisped away. The work of helping a child become an adult was over. The

perfect life I had imagined for my son was replaced with the real life that he himself would shape.

Once Maeve arrived, the new baby seemed as natural as the first quiet snowflakes, and I had to remind myself to marvel at the fact that our son was a father, or that I was now a grandmother. What was surprising was that the feelings I had as a grandmother were so different from those I had as a mother. The visceral, overwhelming impulses to nourish, teach, protect, and defend were gone. I was perfectly content to observe, wonder, and love, leaving the rest to the parents.

Three years later, a second granddaughter, Bridget, arrived. Our son and his family moved just down the road from us in New Brunswick, so close that in the morning we can see smoke rising from their chimney. We see our grandchildren often, but not every day. I'm as amazed every time they burst joyously into our kitchen as if I were seeing them for the first time.

Just as I called my Nammy mine, I'm theirs. Our relationship is vigorous, easy, loving. They are neither in awe of me nor overly respectful. "Come on, Nammy!" they say, tugging at my hand. Their little bedroom, once their father's, is upstairs next to the guest room.

displayed on my hutch. Amazed, she asked me, "Grandma, you know Mary and Jesus?" Then, thinking of the photos many families send to friends at Christmastime, she turned to her mother. "Mommy, do you know Grandma knows Mary and Jesus? They sent her a Christmas card!"

ANNETTE C. CARBONE
Mineola, New York

HONOR THY MOTHER (NATURE)

I was riding in the car with my two granddaughters, 5-year-old Nettie and 3-year-old A.J. Nettie was displaying her newly acquired knowledge of Mother Nature to A.J. "Look, A.J.," she said, "Isn't Mother Nature wonderful! Look at all the trees and birds and animals and sky," she said, continuing on and on. I looked in my rearview mirror and saw a bored, aggravated look on A.J.'s face. Still, Nettie kept up the constant chatter about Mother Nature. Finally, when she could take no more, A.J. turned to Nettie and yelled, "I don't care about Mother Nature, Nettie. I don't even know her!"

CAROL COLWELL
Alexandria, Louisiana

WHY GRANDMA, WHAT LOVELY EYES YOU HAVE!

One day while I was walking and carrying my 3-year-old grandson



It has yellow walls, a sloped ceiling. My own childhood stuffed dog lies on a bed. There's a small table with boxes of shells, pebbles, scissors, crayons, a tea set patterned with ladybugs. A pullout, child-height shelf beneath the sink has two blue-speckled enamelware

cups, two plates, two bowls. In the flower garden, beside the children's path, there's another path that winds beneath the tall raspberry canes and is bordered with zinnias; it's a secret way into the vegetable garden. That, too, is theirs. In the pasture, there are two ponies:



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Cricket and Puck.

There's nothing precious about any of these things.

Toys get lost or are tumbled in cupboards. The paths need weeding, or the ponies need burrs picked from their manes. But the point is that we do things

Sam in my arms, he looked in my eyes and said, "Grandma, I love your eyes." Then, after a short pause, he said, "Grandma, I love your mouth." I was quite amazed. Then he said, "I love your nose." Finally, he smiled, gave me a big hug and kiss, and said, "Grandma, I love your whole head!"

JOYCE KELEMEN
Overland Park, Kansas

SHE'S AN OLD FRIEND

On our way to Mass one Sunday, my granddaughter asked me which saint she was named after. I told her it was St. Ann. I explained to my granddaughter that St. Ann was Jesus' grandma, just like I was her grandma. "Oh!" she said. "Did you know her?"

MARY LENIHAN
Brooklyn, New York

NOT YOUR TYPICAL WORKOUT

My grandson Will, 6, and granddaughter Heather, 8, were recently caught standing on their heads on the sofa. "What are you doing?" their mother asked. Will responded, "We are exercising our brains!"

CAROL CURRY
Longmont, Colorado

A HEALTHY COLOR

My 5-year-old granddaughter was coloring in her coloring book when my husband returned

together, my granddaughters and I. I lift them up onto the ponies, hand them pony-sized brushes. When we cook together, I give them eggs, let them smash them on the side of bowls, hand them forks to whip the yolks. We crawl beneath spruce trees and pretend to camp. In a forked birch tree, we're in an airplane: Bridget, 2 and a half years old, wild-haired, is determined to do things for

self to be draped with scarves and costume jewelry.

As we play, work, sing, read books, I hope that I'm making memories for them as strong as my own are of my grandparents, and that my home will be as wondrous to them as that long-ago house was to me. It was mythical, that house, with its barns, orchards and beehives, like a place set apart from the

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herself. Her round, blue eyes are wide with the importance of her role as the flight attendant. Maeve, 5 years old, takes command. She's the captain. She has eyes the color of winter dusk, grey-green; braids keep her loose blond hair from her face and make her look like the princess of some Scandinavian saga. I'm the passenger. I am, indeed, often the willing passenger, being dragged beneath the blanket-draped piano, or whirling with one girl while the other bangs the piano keys, or allowing my-

rest of the world, somehow safer than my own, imbued with an encompassing peace, its verandas lined with wicker-bottomed rocking chairs, its grandfather clock ticking, deep-voiced, in the hall, the screen door creaking as my grandfather came from the sunshine carrying warm lettuce heads. It was changeless, unmarred by sorrow, failure, fear.

I'm not as much like my grandmother as I would like to be. I don't have her quiet, selfless ways. I'm restless, both agitated and an agitator. I would love to

be a homemaker, as she was, but I itch for more. I know I can't reproduce that peaceful house. Yet I hope when my granddaughters are older, feeling life's sorrows, they'll remember that there was once a place where all they had to do to be loved was to be themselves.

It's not so much the place itself that endures in my heart. It's the place as my grandmother made it, since always, at the heart of this child's kingdom, there she was; and at the sight of me, she dropped wooden spoons, or armloads of wind-dried sheets, or trowel-loads of uprooted dandelions. She threw her arms wide, smiling as if nothing gave her more pleasure than me. And I felt myself to be whole, incomparable, radiant.

I can't reproduce that peaceful place, in my memory, as it was 50 years ago. But I hope that when the children bound into our house, my face is like hers: gentle, delighted, and like a mirror, reflecting all that's wonderful about them back to themselves. **CD**

From *Chatelaine*, May 2007. Beth Powning is the author of *The Hatbox Letters* (St. Martin's Press), *Shadow Child* (Vintage Canada), and *Edge Seasons* (Knopf Canada).

home from visiting his mother, who was sick in the hospital. I asked him how his mother looked. "Her coloring is better," he answered. My granddaughter looked up. "Oh," she said. "Is she staying inside the lines?"

TERRI LA MASA
Grants Pass, Oregon

UNFORGETTABLE AFTERNOON

One recent outing with my grandson consisted of playing miniature golf, pony rides, exploring nature, train rides, and a campfire, complete with wiener roast and s'mores, Needless to say, we had a wonderful time.

On the trip home, I knew that if my grandson slept during the ride, he wouldn't fall asleep at his usual bedtime, so we played a game of "I spy." As we got closer to his house, the items got easier to guess because my grandson was choosing from the things in his neighborhood. He said, "I spy something special," and I began to name what I saw — the playground, his house, the neighbor's dog. Finally, I said, "OK, I give up. What is so special?" He looked up at me and said, "You, PaPa!" It was an afternoon neither of us will forget.

THOMAS LONEY
Bristow, Oklahoma

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