

CAST YOUR BREAD UPON THE WATER AND IT WILL COME BACK TO YOU: A TRIBUTE TO MY GRANDMOTHER

By Rolanda Pyle

This narrative is a personal account of some of the issues grandparent caregiving families face. It is told from the perspective of a professional who, influenced by being raised by her grandmother, now helps other grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. It focuses on how her grandmother contributed to her career and her life. It attempts to encourage and inspire grandparents to continue in their caregiving role.

There is an old saying, "Cast your bread upon the water and in many days it will come back to you." Sometimes when you are casting your bread you really don't know how, when, or if it will come back to you. Like so many grandparent caregivers, I'm sure my grandmother wondered how the three stair-step siblings she was raising would turn out. I'm sorry she did not live long enough to see the results of her caregiving.

In my work as the Director of the Grandparent Resource Center, I often reflect on my days as a child. When I was a little over three years old, my mother decided that she had to leave our household, which consisted of my sister who is eleven months younger than I, my brother who is ten months younger than my sister, our dad, and me. Apparently my mother could not handle the responsibility of being a mother and a wife.

Her decision meant she was leaving young children motherless. As all of the grandparents I work with at the center, my grandma took up the helm and made it her responsibility to help my dad raise us.

My grandmother just stepped in where needed as grandparent caregivers are doing across the United States today. Many grandparents state that they cannot imagine having their grandchildren placed in the child welfare system or just growing up without some maternal input. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to ask her, so I can only imagine that my grandmother felt that she had no other choice but to help her only son out with this awesome responsibility. If her feelings were anything like the rest of my

family's, I'm sure she felt shame, disbelief, anger and horror all rolled into one at the way things had evolved. After all, she was a good woman with strict Caribbean and religious beliefs. She did what was expected of any good mother and grandmother in the late 1950's; she took on the caregiving responsibility. Things have not changed much over the last 40 years because grandparents in increasing numbers are still taking on caregiving responsibilities where needed.

While my father was always the provider, my grandmother was the nurturer. She held this role for the next eight years of my life. Although she died when I was 11 years old, my grandmother left an indelible impression on my life and the lives of my siblings. It is because of her input in my childrearing that I am able to inform grandparent caregivers of the opportunity they have to inspire and impress the children in their care.

Grandmumu, as we affectionately called her, was a short Barbadian woman. The oldest of six children, she left Barbados over 70 years ago to seek a better life with her husband. My grandparents first arrived in Massachusetts, where their three children were born. My father, their only son, was their middle child. The family soon moved to Harlem in New York City with other family members including my grandmother's sister and brother. Grandmumu was a seamstress and her husband, my grandfather, was a painter. They worked very hard to provide for their family and, after many years in New York City, they were one of the many Barbadian families who purchased brownstones in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of

Brooklyn in the 1950's. My father was their first child to marry and give them grandchildren. I was their eldest grandchild. Unfortunately, I never knew my grandfather, who died the year after my birth. My parents, who also lived in Harlem, moved to Brooklyn after my grandfather's death. Once my mother left, we stayed in Grandmumu's house and that very house became our home.

Although I had only eight short years with my grandmother, I have some vivid memories of life with her. My grandmother was an extremely spiritual, church going, God-fearing woman. Grandmumu belonged to the Brethren church, which, in those days, had very strict rules and regulations. She would often take us with her to church services and special meetings. She remained committed to her beliefs, her church, and their doctrines even when others found them controversial. It is that same faith that many of the grandparents talk about today in their support group meetings when they testify of the strength they find to raise children again for the second or even the third time.

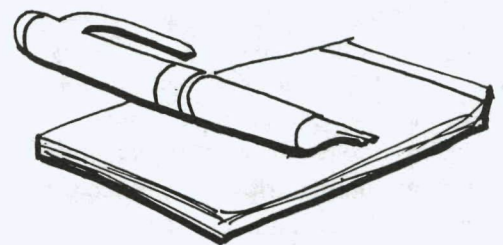
In my treasured chest of memories is a picture of my grandmother cooking and working in the kitchen, where she would hum and sing hymns and choruses. She was a great cook! To this day the memory of her singing one of those hymns, "Tell me the Stories of Jesus," still echoes through my mind and often soothes my heart in troubled times.

I have fond memories of my grandmother caring for me when I was sick. I remember, when having the measles, chicken pox, and mumps, being bedridden and quarantined to my room for several days. Grandmumu always brought our family physician, Dr. Rock, in to see me. In those days, doctors still made house calls, and your family doctor was a family friend. Grandmumu would stay throughout the check-up, soothing and encouraging me, comforting my fears, and wiping away my many tears. Immediately following the

doctor visit, she brought in my favorite dish of soft-boiled eggs to lift my spirits. The fact that she knew how to console me is one of the reasons why I developed such a strong attachment to her. I would cling to Grandmumu, because as a young child I developed a fear of abandonment as a result of the traumatic experience of my mother's leaving.

My aunts tell the story of how I would place a chair in the corner of our kitchen, hug my doll, and cry. My grandmother would come to me and ask, "What's the matter? Are you thinking about your mother?" She would be the one to comfort and assure me that everything would be all right. There were days when my grandmother would walk me to school, and I would cry as I stood in the line and watched as she left. Although I loved school, I always felt a void when she left.

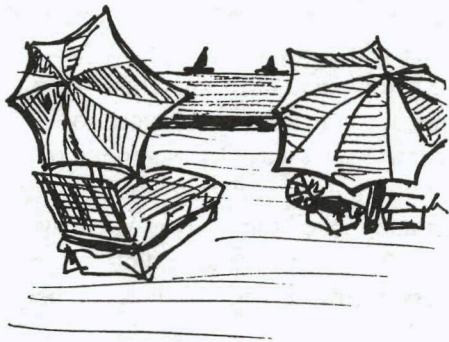
Family relationships are important to children being raised by their grandparents. Seeing healthy parent-child relationships can be examples for grandchildren to pattern later in life. One of the things I noticed very early was the close relationship my grandmother had with her daughter. We affectionately called my aunt, Auntie. My grandmother's eldest daughter died at the age of sixteen, so Auntie was her only daughter. Auntie had lived in the house with Grandmumu until she married and relocated to Massachusetts. It was obvious to me that Auntie treasured her relationship with her mother and looked out for her. After my grandmother's death, we would often spend summers in Boston with my aunt and her family.



Back in the days when I grew up, winters in New York were very cold, snowy, and icy. Unfortunately, one winter my

grandmother fell outside on the ice and broke her arm. During her convalescence, I became both her secretary and her beautician. Grandmumu would have me write letters to my aunt in Massachusetts whom I continued to correspond with until her death. By the time I reached junior high school, I was writing letters to most of my out-of-town family members. From those experiences grew a passion for writing, which I still possess today, and the letter writing legacy continues. As I counsel grandparents today, I encourage them not only to involve their grandchildren in activities but to give them tasks and chores. Grandparent caregivers should try to assist their grandchildren in discovering and developing their talents.

I often remind the grandparents to take this child rearing opportunity not only to create memories but to instill values in their grandchildren. One of my most enjoyable memories is sitting and combing Grandmumu's hair. My grandmother had very thin hair and I loved playing in it. I looked forward to scratching her head and massaging her scalp. The time spent playing with her hair was our "bonding time."



I believe one of the greatest values she instilled in me is love and loyalty for family and friends. My grandmother had a couple of friends with whom she had a close relationship both socially and emotionally. I vividly recall summer trips to the beach with her friends and their families. They were very dedicated to each other and I have grown to be the same type of friend. Grandmumu and her siblings were also very close and watched out for each other. My

siblings and I have developed those same qualities, thanks to my grandmother and my father.

Like so many grandparent caregivers today, my grandmother neglected her health to care for us. She had gallstones and abdominal problems. Apparently, the doctors told her that she needed surgery, but she did not want to leave us. Although my grandmother had lots of support from my father, her daughter, and two of my maternal great aunts, she was still concerned about the care of her three grandchildren. Evidently she waited too long. Once admitted into the hospital, my precious grandmother never came home, and at the age of 11, I had to cope with the first death of a very important person in my life. The death of my grandmother was doubly hard because now I lost not only my grandmother but also my maternal caregiver. For the second time, I felt cheated in life.

As I reflect back, my grandmother had a major impact in my life. She was not only a nurturer but also a spiritual leader and a friend. During my childhood, it never occurred to me that my grandmother was making a big sacrifice to care for me. I never thought about the fact that she could have said no and turned and gone another way. I certainly didn't think that she had anything else that she could have been doing with her life besides caring for us. At her age, what else was there for her to do? I didn't learn until later in life that my retired grandmother wanted to use this time in her life to travel back to her beautiful homeland of Barbados. And that she had considered moving to Massachusetts to help her daughter raise her children. Or maybe she could have just wanted to sleep late, not cook, participate in more church activities, or enjoy peace and quiet. I don't think I considered the fact that she had a choice in the situation and could have said no, nor did I truly appreciate the fact that she did say yes. I didn't understand that saying yes meant giving up her dreams, rest, resources, health and yes, even her life. It had never occurred to me that she could have been raising us because she felt she had to and not because

she wanted to. No. All I know is that I missed her when she was gone and I had never even thanked her for her sacrifice.

And that is why in 1992, my love and appreciation for my grandmother's care and sacrifice influenced me to jump at the opportunity to work with grandparent caregivers at a community-based agency in Brooklyn. After completing college, I began my career working as an intake worker in an alcohol detoxification ward at Cumberland Hospital. Many of the women on the ward had children who were placed in foster care. These women frequently talked about missing their children and the difficulties they faced with the child welfare system.

When the city went through a fiscal crisis and many civil servants were laid off, I went to work for a foster care agency. I found this job very difficult and often quite depressing. Later, I worked at preventive services agencies helping at-risk families prevent foster care placement of their children. It was at one of these preventive agencies that I had the opportunity to work as a volunteer coordinator where I placed seniors in the homes of at-risk families. These elderly women were role models for the mothers in those homes. They helped them with child care and discipline issues. They also modeled household tasks and child-rearing techniques. I enjoyed coordinating this very successful program. But, in time, I had to move on.

Eventually, a colleague from this same agency offered me the position of director of a Grandparent Program at a community-based agency, Miracle Makers Inc. It was there the miracle of giving back began for me. Within one year, the program grew from one grandparent support group to three grandparent support groups and case management services.

Today, I am the Director of the Grandparent Resource Center (GRC) of the New York City Department for the Aging, which is the largest Area Agency on Aging in this country. The GRC serves as a clearing-house, offering information and referral to grandparent caregivers and providing technical assistance to community-based

agencies, in the form of training on starting and maintaining support groups, workshops on relevant issues, and specialized sessions. The GRC also provides community awareness through information forums for grandparents and service providers.

The resource center was started in 1994, and in 1995 I was offered the position as the Director. I have been here ever since. As a result of working at the Department for the Aging, I have received numerous awards and accolades. These honors include community service, hero of the month, and a public service award. In addition, the GRC was a semifinalist for an "Innovations in American Government" award. This resource center is being replicated around the country.

I believe that my experience of being raised by my grandmother sensitized me to the plight of grandparent caregivers. I can truly identify when grandparents talk about the fear of leaving their grandchildren, neglecting their own health, or of being overwhelmed with their caregiving responsibilities. I can understand when they say that their grandchildren don't understand them or what they have sacrificed, and that they don't seem appreciative of the enormity of their sacrifice. I can understand because I lived it, and I believe in kinship care.

I can also understand and relate to some of the issues faced by the grandchildren. These include issues of divided loyalties, embarrassment, and yes, being unappreciative of what you have. I understand that there is a generation gap. But most of all, I know that if these grandchildren did not have these grandparents, many would be lost. As someone once told me, these grandparents are "silent saviors." I totally agree and as a recipient of this salvation, I am honored to have been afforded the opportunity to give back. Today, I help grandparents in honor of my grandmother and also to show grandparent caregivers that when you cast your bread, you never know how or when it will come back.

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