

WORLD'S CHAMPION GRANDPARENT

My first grandchild, Thomas Jonathan Burkett, whose parents have nicknamed him TJ, had thirteen grandparents when he was born. Except for my father, all of his great grandparents were living, and he had an extra set because his maternal grandmother had both natural and adoptive parents. Surely that's an unusual number of living ancestors for a child to be able to claim. Whether it's an advantage or a burden, I don't know, but I'm more interested, actually, in thinking about what it means to be a grandparent: though TJ is now seven years old and I'm a grandparent four times over by now, I still can't get the hang of it. When TJ calls, he can be civil to me, but it's clear Granma is the person he wants to talk to. Kelsey, his two-year old sister, is a bit less partial, but she'll learn. Much as I dote on my six-year-old Sarah, who lives just next door, as it were, she will effectively brush me aside if I open the door when she announces her arrival by ringing the cowbell-doorbell outside our converted barn. "No, Papa," she'll say, frowning and waving her hand in dismissal, "I want to see Granma." Even our newest, Athena, not yet a year old, reaches out from my arms, asking Karolyn to take her.

Searching through some family papers the other day, I found some photocopies of tattered newspaper articles from 1939 that make some strong claims about grandparenting. These articles celebrate the 100th birthday of a woman they call "Texas's Number 1 Grandmother." In one of the pictures an ancient, frail creature in black sunbonnet, Mrs. Mary Jane Skinner, sits in a rocking chair on the porch of a weathered old farmhouse in Leesville, Gonzales County, among four other women who, with her, represent five generations of a single family. Another photograph gives an idea of the extent of her progeny, assembled for this occasion outside the farmhouse. A windmill behind the house and several old flivvers parked here and there help to set the scene for this crowd of Texans -- most of them farmers, probably -- all of them dressed in what looks like Sunday best: suits and ties, calico dresses with fancy collars, straw hats for both genders, though some of the men seem to sport 10-gallon felts. The photograph is too blurred to get an accurate count, and the caption offers none, but I would guess there are 250 persons present. What the caption supplies is itself speculative, but impressive:

Last year a check among relatives attending her annual birthday party revealed she had 283 [grandchildren] -- an increase of 45 over the previous year. This year's count will probably put the total well over the 300 mark, relatives here believe.

On the eve of her centennial, Grandma Skinner expressed the belief that she will celebrate at least 10 more birthdays, and if she does, with the [word obscured] rate of increase, she can expect to be a grandmother to a thousand or more children [and] hold a sixth generation baby in her lap. Another article says Mrs. Skinner is "acclaimed hereabouts as the world's champion grandmother" and quotes her as saying she doesn't feel like she is 100 years old: "I feel all right and I don't see how it happened that I lived this year. It doesn't seem possible. I guess it is because I don't worry and have an abiding faith in God." I don't doubt for a minute that her faith sustained her, but it didn't carry her through to 110; in fact, this very celebration was her last.

To my knowledge, I never saw this woman, but since my mother was her granddaughter, I too am one of those (great) grandchildren and could have been there, for I was eight years old when those photographs were taken. Maybe I could have picked up some pointers, though of course grandparenting was not for me the priority at age eight that it is at sixty. I don't aspire, even now, to be the world's champion grandparent -- quantitative or qualitative -- but I would like to be at least adequate in terms of quality. Maybe Grandma Skinner couldn't have helped. She looks terribly dour in the newspaper photographs -- and in the one or two others I've seen -- but, then, she was very, very old. I suspect her championship referred to quantity, not quality. I knew a few of her daughters, my grandmother Julia Park Skinner Thackston among them, and I've heard stories about some of them being "mean and hateful." Though I can't think of a mean or hateful thing my grandmother ever did, I remember being just a little afraid of her when I was a child. Indeed, when I think of the grandparenting I experienced, meager as it was, I begin to suspect that if early modeling is of consequence in developing excellence, I'm doomed to failure. Except for Grandma Skinner, who could of course be of no help, since I never knew her, I had only two grandparents, my mother's mother and my father's father, and neither was much of a presence in my life.

The mates of these two grandparents died long before I was born. James Featherstone Thackston, my mother's father, was felled by the flu bug that ravaged the country in the first world war, and his early death gave his widow, then pregnant with their sixth child, what Texans call a tough row to hoe.

Similarly, Delilah Leslie Crawford Burkett died a few days after my father was born, leaving her husband to care for their six other children, ranging in age from age three to nineteen, as well as the newborn infant. I have a lot of sympathy for Julia Thackston -- who by the time her husband died must already have looked very different from the young woman in the portrait I have of her at eighteen -- a woman poised at the beginning of life, beautiful, composed, vulnerable. She was a widow at thirty-seven and destined to struggle with poverty and dependency for the rest of her days.

It's hard for me to imagine what would have provided any sense of accomplishment or satisfaction for her in the more than half century she lived after she was widowed. Her children assumed responsibility for her from the time I had any awareness of her existence. Though I don't remember hearing my mother talk much about Granma, I do remember events that convince me she loved her dearly. When she learned -- on the telephone, with my grandmother in the house -- that the second of her two younger brothers had died, her concern was for her mother's grief rather than her own. She ran to the home of a neighbor, sobbing and saying, "I can't tell her. I just can't do it." When she saw the movie *Gone with the Wind*, she remarked with tears in her eyes how she felt about Scarlet's return to Tara in the worst days of the Civil War. "She fought so hard to get home to her mother," she said, "and when she got there, her mother was dead." Somehow I knew, even as a child, that her having been separated from her own mother was informing that sympathy for Scarlet. Granma spent her last days in a nursing home, weak, and too heavy for anyone to lift without help, and my mother spent much of every day at her bedside. These evidences of Mom's attentiveness to her mother are the more affecting, to me, because I can't remember any indication that Granma herself was a very loving person.

I must confess I never felt much affection for this old woman who sometimes came to live with us for weeks at a time. Since we had just two bedrooms, she slept in the room with my brother and me -- with a cloth over her head, which seemed to us a very strange way to sleep. Not infirm, exactly, she was nevertheless old already in my earliest memories of her, though it chastens me to realize she must have been younger than I am now. Confined, just by preference, I suspect, to a rocking chair, she spent most of her time piecing together quilt-squares out of scraps of cloth sent to her by numerous female offspring and reading "romance" stories in what she called her "trashy magazines." I was a fastidious child in some ways, and her habit of dipping snuff was repulsive to me: kissing her meant risking contamination by that nasty brownness. Her other

addiction, reading Red Ryder in the funny papers, was more appealing. Though she had a fair number of progeny by the time she died, including some great great grandchildren (to be seen with her in some five-generation photographs of her own), she came nowhere near the numerical record her mother had set. I don't think she would qualify in any way for "Number one grandmother."

My most enduring memory of her is one that stands opposed to my notions of grandmotherlyness. When I was about sixteen years old and terribly embarrassed by myself, my sexuality, my fascination with it and fear of it, she asked me one day if I knew the meaning of LSMFT. That was a slogan for a popular brand of cigarettes of the time and everyone knew that it meant, "Lucky Strikes Mean Fine Tobacco."

So of course I said no. She beckoned me close to her rocking chair and pulled my ear to her brown stained lips.

"Let's Screw, My Finger's Tired," she whispered.

I drew away, shocked, and stared at a stranger.

My other grandparent, Thomas Jefferson Burkett, was a bit more likeable than Granma, but not what I would call a champion. He too, had had a hard life. His own father, Isaiah, been called to serve the confederacy before he was born and had died in a federal prison in Springfield, Illinois. Isaiah may never have seen his son, but someone in the family claimed he did manage to come back through Moulton, Texas, where the family lived at the time, a few days after his son was born and do what today might well leave him open to charges of sexual abuse. He kissed his son, so the story goes, on the tip of his tiny penis. It wasn't abuse, of course. I'm sure it was a response to the feeling we all have about nature's making of perfect toes and fingers, but I like to think that subconsciously he was communicating with the generations that would emerge from that little organ -- my father and me -- and my children and theirs.

That boy, Thomas Jefferson, became, in his youth, one of the last of the Trail Drivers, driving longhorn steers from the plains of Central Texas up to the Kansas City stockyards. He married Delilah Crawford when he was twenty-three and she was just eighteen, and they seem to have moved around Lavaca County a bit in the early days of their marriage. Leslie Isaiah, their oldest was born in 1885 in Hocheim, but Ethel came three years later in Dreyer; Edna their third child, was born in 1890 in Shiner, where they had moved when the town was first established. This man had already known loss when his wife died almost twenty years later: two of their children died in infancy, and the oldest child, Leslie Isaiah, fell from a tree at age fourteen and died of a fractured skull. Widowed at forty-six, my grandfather lived for another forty-four years

without remarrying, raising his younger children with the help of the older ones and retiring into the care of his second-oldest daughter, Edna, who remained single all her life and kept house for him.

"Papa," as we all -- children and grandchildren alike -- called him, was City Marshall and proprietor of the Shiner Bottling Works in Shiner, Texas, and was offered for a fee of \$100 the franchise to market Coca Cola in all of South Texas. Affronted, Papa declined. "I make my own soda water," he said, "I don't pay people for the privilege of selling theirs." I wonder what that franchise would cost today! After Delilah died, he moved his family to Yoakum, where he opened a meat market. I think he was well respected in that little town, but by the time I knew him he had grown quite old and seemed to have no occupation at all. Of his ten children, only five were living when I was born, and those five produced only five grandchildren for him, so we were never, when assembled, a group to rival Grandma Skinner's crew; nevertheless, I recall getting only scant attention from the old man.

Papa was much revered by his children. Even my mother, who always resented my father's family, spoke of him as a good man, telling me once that he was as close as she could imagine to what Jesus must have been like. I couldn't see it, but then I hardly knew him. It wasn't that I feared him at all; I sort of liked the old man, and I was fascinated by some of his antic attitudes. He refused to wear his false teeth, even for meals, and kept them in his back pocket, where he claimed -- to my delight -- that they occasionally bit him on his behind. After a good meal he would smack his lips, rub his tummy, and declare, "Even the smallest child could speak to me now." Though I wasn't the smallest child -- my brother had that honor -- I felt the remark had some reference to me and was puzzled by it. Though I say it myself, now, I'm still not quite sure what it means.

During the years of World War II, I remember Papa engaging the radio in conversation with great apparent seriousness. "Lucky Strike green has gone to war," a commercial announcer would proclaim, and Papa would retort that lots of young men were going to war and nobody was bothering to announce their names on the radio. He could also be heard, on occasion, in spirited conversation with himself. "I enjoy talking to an intelligent man," he would explain, when challenged in this activity. Coming home from the funeral of his sister Dora, said to have been so small when she was born they could have put her in a coffee pot, he opined, "Well, they said when she was born she couldn't live, and they were right. Of course, she was 89, but she didn't live." Like my Granma, who gave away her pieced

quilts, he had a leisure-time activity that benefitted others: he picked out the meat from pecans that fell from the trees in his back yard, filling "fruit-jars" with them. Edna, would sometimes give us a jarful as a present. Otherwise, it seemed to me he spent most of his time in the front porch Swing or at a folding table on the screened-in back porch playing forty-two with various people of my father's generation. I think the company of adults was more congenial to him than that of children.

Corny though it was, Papa had a sense of humor, and that may be a very important factor to a child. I think he also seemed more benign than Granma. Maybe I never kissed him -- boys weren't always required to kiss male relatives -- but at any rate his tobacco habit, being a pipe, was less offensive. Instead of having to accommodate him in my room (he never even came to visit, as far as I know), I could look forward instead to visiting him, an exciting prospect, since his (and Edna's) house and yard were more spacious and various than any other I knew. There was a piano, for instance -- an old upright dreadfully out of tune, but a wonder to me anyhow -- and a shed out back, and a garden, and the pecan trees with their rich treasure to be gathered from the ground. So the pleasure of place must have reflected some glory on him, and I liked him better than Granma. Though I'd hate to settle as grandfather for the degree of affection I felt for him, it counts for something, I suppose, that I've asked my own grandchildren call me Papa.

Another source of instruction for grandparenting is watching our parents be grandparents to our children. My mother and father did not exert themselves; they always welcomed us and seemed to look forward to our visits, even though the six of us usually posed a serious logistical problem for them in the small houses or apartments they sought out in their wanderings, following the construction jobs that my Dad sought during the last years of his working life. They were glad to see their grandchildren, but they generally subscribed to the idea that grandchildren, like children, should be seen and not heard. That is, they wanted to admire but not be bothered except for occasional brief and well-controlled interactions. Eager for them to worship our kiddies as grandparents are supposed to do, I promoted such interactions, but I was, at the same time, somewhat nervous about the close quarters and the potential for spontaneous combustion inherent in the contiguity of incompatible elements. Tommy, my son, has a song, "What my grandpa taught to me." It's a sweet song, and he claims the grandpa is an amalgamation of my father and his mother's father, but in fact I suspect he wasn't taught much by my dad, whom the

children called Papa Burketts. Tommy does seem to have gotten into his genes, however, my dad's ability to fix things mechanical or electrical. I loved my father, and I think my children loved him; he was a generous and gentle-tempered person, but the fact is, he was never very generous with his time. Like Papa, he preferred the company of adults.

Mama Burketts, on the other hand, related somewhat more successfully because of the need to feed us. Planning meals was an engrossing task for her, involving as it did shopping, cooking, and cleaning up. She was no more patient with children than Papa Burketts, but nourishing the crowd gave her occupation and connection. Also, she was irresistibly drawn to babies. As long as the children managed to avoid walking at any greater speed than a slow toddle, her ability to worship measured up to our expectations. Even when she was much older, ill, and living in our house, her happiest moments seemed to be those brief ones she spent with her great grandchildren, as pictures of her with TJ and Tommy's daughter Sarah will document. She would hoard tidbits for "our precious Sarah," who would sit wide-eyed and grab at the tiny pieces of cookie offered at her shrine. Our own children came to love Mama B., I think, because she lived long enough to know and respond to them as grownups. She and they catered to each other with various kinds of favors and learned to tolerate, perhaps even admire, each others' idiosyncrasies.

But it's Karolyn's parents, "Bapa" and "Gogo," who succeeded best of all at grandparenting. Bapa, a rigidly dignified corporate executive, simply melted when our oldest child was born. He would shop for toys, take long, proud walks pushing the stroller, disappear to parks and ice cream parlors for hours at a time, squire the whole family to expensive restaurants where he could weather infant and childish misbehavior without a wince. Unfortunately, he was ill for several years before he died, and the illness made him difficult and frequently ill-tempered. One of his grandchildren said at the time of his death, "I'm glad I can remember Bapa before he got sick." I'm glad, too; it would be unfair to have his reputation for grandparenting rest on those last few unpleasant years.

Gogo would qualify in anyone's books as a world champion right up to the day of her death at age eighty-four. Though Bapa was himself generous with the children, Gogo outgave him by far. She never arrived without gifts in hand (for us as well as the kids, I must add); she bought clothes and shoes in addition to toys, and she sewed and knitted and crocheted most everything the children wore that she hadn't bought. We used to laugh about a Dennis the Menace cartoon that caught exactly the

relationship between Gogo and our firstborn. "If I want an elephant," Dennis said to a little friend, "all I have to do is ask my grandmother." That Tommy would ask for one was not beyond possibility, and we dreaded the possible outcome. Living in a suburb of New York City when the children were very young, she would urge us to send the children to her -- one or two at a time -- and make royalty of them during the visit. She was a kind of genteel Auntie Mame -- with less sophistication, but equal amounts of the energy and affection that made the world glorious for Patrick as a child: fancy eateries, fantastic Shopping sprees, Broadway shows were routine on those visits. I'm struck with envy when, on occasion, someone might comment, for instance, on Carol Channing's performance in Hello Dolly and one of my sons say will Say, "Oh, yes, I remember that, and Louis Armstrong was in it, too." Let anyone mention an exclusive cafe in Manhattan, and one of the kids is sure to tell us, "We used to eat there with Gogo and Bapa."

Being raised on an academic's salary, the children would never have had at home the experiences their grandparents' relative wealth provided. But the children weren't enamored just by the spending: they responded as well to an intensity of attention lavished on them by these two adults and gave them, in return, complete adoration. Gogo's attention never slackened. In college, our children were the envy of their dormitory mates because they regularly received from her big coffee cans full of homemade cookies and, still, homemade shirts for the boys and nightgowns for the girls.

When, after Bapa died, Gogo came to live at the barn in Granville, she gave herself to her great granddaughter Sarah with the same kind of unreserved selflessness. Sarah became a kind of tyrant, demanding that Gogo, then in her eighties, sit on the floor and play, or read books interminably, or make toast and tea -- whatever struck her fancy. If she became dissatisfied for any reason with Gogo's behavior -- how she could is beyond me -- she would put Gogo in the broom closet and there would Gogo stay until allowed to come out.

At that point, even Karolyn took back seat to her mother in Sarah's affections, and she has gained ascendancy, now that Gogo's gone, by adopting her mother's methods. I don't think She has yet been punished with the broom closet, but she does give to grandchildren her undistracted attention. Like Gogo, she is an indefatigable shopper for children's clothes, and she's always on the alert for gift-giving occasions. My daughter Mandy, a psychologist, is aghast at her mother's failures as a disciplinarian. It's hard for Karolyn to set any Standard for a grandchild's behavior and impossible for her to enforce one.

Sounds like jealousy, doesn't it? Well, it isn't. I certainly wouldn't want to emulate her way of relating to our grandchildren, even for the adulation it brings her. It's bad for children to be so thoroughly indulged. They shouldn't be encouraged to believe that everything they want in life will come to them just for the asking; they need discipline, after all. Indulgence begets weakness. It's an unkindness, actually, to give children a false impression of the world. Allowing them to be unmannerly, to behave inconsiderately will make them unpopular and contribute to social difficulties for them later in life. They're actually happier when boundaries are set and enforced.

Yeah.

The truth is, I would like to be adored by my grandchildren; I think I'm just constitutionally unable to make the investment that earns such a dividend. Whether it was nature or nurture that made me unequal to the task, I'm not sure. The two seem to reinforce one another: I was never grandparented effectively, and the people who had charge of my gene pool didn't seem to value grandparenting very highly. Like my mother, I warm to babies, and they seem at least to tolerate me, but the bigger kids generally require more than I've been willing, or able, to give.

I've always admired James Joyce's ability to recover, presumably from memory, the experiences and emotions of his earliest life as he conveys them in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In the first page and a half, he seems acutely in touch with the mind of the child. I've tried to discover, from mining my own distant past and from observing my grandchildren, something of how very young children feel, especially with regard to old folks. I think there must be, frequently, a kind of repugnance that needs to be overcome.

In the usual situation, if there is any such thing, children warm to their parents, obviously, because the parents are immediate presences in their lives, providing all of life's necessities including affection. Grandparents, on the other hand, are generally stranger, one remove separated from the intimate routines of life. We are, with our wrinkles, our bald or greying heads, our artificial accoutrements for seeing, hearing, and chewing, less attractive as well as less familiar. I wonder if they don't sense almost from the beginning that we're nearer to the end of life and therefore representative of something threatening to them. Perhaps like the golden leaves in Hopkins' wonderful poem "Spring and Fall," we remind them pre-consciously of what "heart heard of, ghost guessed": their own mortality.

I'm arguing that it's a mistake not to cater to them, that spoiling them is actually a kind of responsibility for grandparents. No doubt, we require a good deal of sweetener to become palatable, and, Clearly, there's much to be said for providing the sweetener -- absolute attention, gifts, even an elephant if necessary. Aside from the adoration to be earned, there's the sense of being socially useful, of helping these future citizens overcome their natural antipathy to age. Perhaps grandparenting can help bring Sanity back to a nation that seems to have lost its marbles over youth. That's an important objective, now that senior citizens are taking up more and more space in the world. I'm for trying harder; maybe this Old dog can learn a new trick or two. When we visited our son and his family in Wisconsin for Easter this year, TJ and I went to the grocery to pick up some last-minute necessities for dinner. Passing a display of videos, he told me he really wanted 101 Dalmations. My old self would have resisted such blatant manipulation -- this small and appealing person working his charm on Papa for material gain. But I said, "Well, we can fix that" and plopped the cassette into the shopping cart. Back in the car, TJ said to me, "You're the best grandfather that ever was -- and you would be even if you hadn't bought me 101 Dalmations." At least for the moment, and in the eyes of one grandchild, I held the title.

The years that have gone by since I wrote this essay have brought me more grandchildren. Somewhat duplicitously, I've tried to solidify my status by assuring each of the children that "Grampa loves you best." I figured by the time they were old enough to question the accuracy of that claim they'd understand its intentional ambiguity -- better than other people love you, better than he loves other people, the best way he can love and you can be loved... there may be other possibilities. Maybe not the smartest move, but we've stayed on good terms. My youngest, Anna, is wise and serious beyond her years. When she was about 10, we were walking together down the drive and I said, "Well, Anna, you know who loves you best, don't you."

"Yes, you do, Papa, and I love you best."

Foolishly, I challenged the assertion. "Now, Anna, you don't really love me best, do you?"

Almost without thinking she replied, "Well, no, Papa, but I do love you." I don't know how many different ways she had interpreted the infamous and ambiguous claim, but I was both amused and pleased with her forthrightness.

"That'll do," I thought to myself. "That'll do."