

A Granddaughter Remembers

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I WAS A BLESSED CHILD. I had a grandmother who loved me and who showed it. Her name was Ruth Alice Bird Harper Lewis, and as grandmothers go, she was a rare and wonderful human being. The words of Sherry Thomas come to mind when I think of that dear, resourceful, spiritual woman: "We didn't have much, but we sure had plenty."¹

Circumstances were such that I usually spent summers with my grandparents, and those careless, unstructured months were what kept me going the rest of the year. I was an only child, so having aunts and uncles who were just a few years older than I to play with was a great part of the fun of those magical summers, for I was only two years younger than my youngest uncle. Through no one's fault, I grew up thinking my mother's siblings were my own, and that for some mysterious reason, fate cruelly separated us when school started every fall. I longed to stay with them and be part of my grandmother's relaxed household.

It was a miserable day when I turned eight and was told the unwelcome truth: my dearest playmates were, in fact, aunts and uncles, nothing more.

And so my childhood spun out, and always my grandmother was part of the best of it. Those lazy, disorganized summers came to an end. It was decided that continuity was needed during my high school years, or until I went away to college; I would live year-round with my grandparents. Happiness was to be my lot after all! I was overwhelmed with my good fortune. By this age, I knew my grandmother well, and familiarity had bred only love and admiration. Throughout my childhood she had treated me with the same loving attention she gave her own "young ones."

She called us "young ones," and as such, we were precious. She joined those words together so tenderly that I was almost an adult before I realized "young ones" was not one word, like "onions." She loved chil-

1. *The Last Word: A Treasury of Women's Quotes*, ed. Carolyn Warner (New York: Prentice Hall, 1992), 122.

dren more than anything else in the world except the gospel, and that was the simplicity of her life. She believed in family authority kindly administered and the need for the realistic socialization of her children, as well as the deliberate passing down of value systems from generation to generation. She gave us hers, and there was no doubt about what it was. Faith in God and in his son Jesus Christ, and an unquestioning testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel. Her belief was no abstraction. It guided everything she did, every decision she made.

My grandfather, twenty years older than his wife and already retired when I was born, was a good Christian man, a quiet presence in his own home, who kept mainly to himself. It was my grandmother who taught and inspired us, and who worked to take care of us, who somehow gave us the unquestioned knowledge within ourselves that we were worth something. Her faith in God and her unwavering testimony formed the beacon around which we rallied, and it gave us a footing during some very difficult times. She was the rock in our lives, and she taught us to believe in and love our Heavenly Father. He would be with us if we stayed close to him. His answers would not always be what we expected, but his spirit was with us, and he was there, listening to our prayers. We were never to doubt that he loved and cared for us. I believed her.

I well remember her wonderful mouse stories which would entertain us on the long walk home from church. It took an hour on foot to get from the old Sacramento Ward to our home, but many times, when we reached there, we would beg her to walk a few blocks farther because we couldn't wait until the next Sunday to hear what was going to happen to those mice.

We were entranced by her tales of the little country mouse who unwittingly went to England in a missionary's trunk, and who was so caught up in the fervor of the early days of proselyting that he went on to convert his city cousin who was an aristocratic mouse to the manor born. That city cousin had the best address in London, having been born in the linen closet of No. 1 Hyde Park, the town house of the Duke of Wellington.

According to my grandmother, there was an extensive network of stalwart mice inhabiting both the United States and the British Isles, and they had all kinds of adventures helping missionaries spread the gospel. Dedicated, humble mice had a role to play in the building up of the kingdom. Surely there was a lesson there for young minds. Are we not all part of God's creation?

She was one of those grand spirited ladies who couldn't care less about appearances, who felt, along with Emily Dickinson, that housework was a pestilence, and who had an eternal view of things, never bothering about details. Her mind was pre-occupied with helping others,

especially elderly people who were lonely and uncared for. This became her life's work, and she had a gift for making each one of the old people she took care of feel loved and nurtured. She would rub their backs and their swollen feet, and make them cushions to sit on in church so their bones wouldn't come up against the hard wooden benches. Being tall and thin herself, she knew first-hand the discomfort of a hard wooden bench.

To those who were bedridden, she was a friend and companion who would sit by a bedside by the hour, crocheting and visiting the long evenings away. Years later, when she enjoyed a comfortable income, she gave much of it away to people in need, as well as distant relatives who had fallen on hard times.

My grandmother was an indifferent cook, but she could whip up a fine custard which we dutifully distributed to elderly people in our neighborhood, and she made the best chicken fricasse any of us can remember. My own mother and my aunts, all first-rate cooks, and I have tried to reproduce that same dish through the years, and failed completely. In her slapdash manner, she worked magic on old stewing hens which somehow were always tender and succulent under her careless hand, the gravy creamy and smooth and flavorful. Our fricasse tasted exactly like what it was: boiled chicken.

Two characteristics define her. First, her grateful and generous heart. She acknowledged the Lord's hand in everything that happened to us, and we were miraculously saved from the brink of disaster more than once. Living with her was a dramatic adventure and one that I longed for when I was not lucky enough to be in her realm of influence.

Second, her joy, the fun she had in being alive. It was infectious. She played games with us, whipped up batches of taffy for us to pull, and told the best stories ever as she went about her work. She dressed up in outrageous costumes on Halloween and went out trick or treating with us, not as a protector, but for the fun of it. One Christmas when several of the children had chicken pox, she had my grandfather take down our beds and put them back up by the tree in the living room so we wouldn't miss any of the festivities. And when July came around, we would help Grandpa put those same beds up in the side yard so we could sleep under the stars on summer nights.

She would whisper so we had to strain to hear, making each word a pearl, about our pioneer forefathers and mothers, and about the coyotes that encircled their little cabin at night when she was a girl in a remote part of southern Idaho. And before she lulled us to sleep with her gentle voice and fascinating tales, we would reach over and pick warm tomatoes off the vine and down them with ice-cold buttermilk or homemade root beer, which seemed always to be ripening under the bed. When it

rained, as it sometimes did, my grandfather spread a big canvas over the beds, and we slept, gathered in a close, tight circle, listening to the rain-drops thunder above our dry and cozy ears.

But if I were given just one word to describe my grandmother, it would be her faith, built upon a testimony of the reality of the Savior, and her dedication to living a life of service and compassion so she could one day return to him. I believe that she lived such a life, and that she awaits us there, and will greet those of us who love her with open arms when the time comes. And what magnificent stories she will have to tell!

That she lived was a great blessing to begin with. That she lived so well gave birth to my own faith and my joy in living.