

# Invisible GRANDPARENTING

There is an empty spot on my counter every year for the Christmas cards I'll never receive, and the thank-you notes — signed in my grandkids developing handwriting — for birthday presents I don't get to send. I am an Invisible Grandparent. Over the past decade I have only been able to imagine my two biological grandchildren (now nine and twelve) running excitedly into my open arms, spouting versions of “gam-ma” that become more and more articulate as they get older.

There are millions of us out there. We are women and men who — because of our own or our children's careers, marriages and/or divorces, custody issues, personality/family conflicts, or even choices made long ago — cannot connect with our grandkids as much as we'd like.

Are you an invisible grandparent, too?

*Leave a Legacy of Love  
Whether You Can  
Be There or Not.*

# Loss & Transformation

story by Pat Hanson, Ph.D.  
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A few years ago, at a storytelling session at Crones Counsel (a national conference of older women), I shared my “Invisible Grandmother” story with hundreds of other eldering women. Afterward, more than a dozen women came forward to say, “that’s my story, too.”

Each one of these women bore her own particular story of grief. The reasons for their separation from their grandchildren differed: some were lesbians, or had religious or political differences between themselves and their children’s families, while others described personality conflicts and control issues within the family. Some simply lived too far away from their grandchildren, with their children unwilling or unable to bridge the miles between them.

As I continued to air my own grief in public forums, I came to realize how much secrecy and shame surrounds this complex and painful issue. I also came to understand the enormous need for healing all varieties of invisible grandparenting. In dealing with my own situation I have begun to develop a variety of unique tools to help in dealing with this hidden — but surprisingly common — form of loss.



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### **Varieties of “Invisibility” — Differing Circumstances, Similar Pain**

Like me, you may have once played a part in your grandchild’s life, and then have been blocked from full (or any) participation. I call this being “partially-invisible.” Or you may be “fully invisible” — not knowing your grandchildren’s whereabouts or even their names. This is common in cases of adoption, and in situations of the most severe kinds of family separations. (Abortions can also fall under this category.) Or you may not even know whether you actually even *have* grandchildren. This is the most deep (and dire) form of invisibility: when you are invisible as a grandparent, even to yourself.

But whether you are simply distant from your offspring or can only imagine the spirit of your grandchild, it is possible to work towards healing the bitter wounds of separation. With the willingness to face your circumstances, you can leave a legacy of love, whether you can be there in person or not.

## My Story.

My life has transformed twice in the past decade or so. For years I winced whenever someone confided, “I can’t wait to be a grandparent!” When my friends donned beatific smiles and went all gaga in the presence of a tiny baby, I’d paint a poker face to hide my revulsion. “Just wait and see,” my friends warned. “You love your own children involuntarily. Well, when it’s your grandchildren, it’s even deeper.” I pooh-poohed them. Surely I wouldn’t succumb to such infantilism.

But 13 years ago, my risk-taking teenage son got his 16 year old girlfriend pregnant, and then deserted her. He repeated his mistake two years later with a different woman.

The good news: both of my son’s partners have subsequently created stable families with new partners. Also good: my son has grown beyond the bad choices he made and now supports himself working at a ski resort. These new families have a full set of grandparents.

The bad news: I get to be invisible. I don’t count. In spite of having close ties to my son’s partners during their pregnancies and the early lives of my grandbabies, I have been kept from fully participating with them. In one case, until recently, I am one among an extended family of grandparents that visits only annually and sends gifts every year (deciding how to label them with some difficulty.) In the other I’ve been cut out completely for over five years. The pain — and sense of betrayal — of becoming invisible was deep, cutting, and seemingly endless.

## The Power of Letters.

After a period of rage, grief, therapy and upheaval, I took some good advice, and tried to find ways to creatively connect, at least spiritually, with my grandchildren.

For me, one method of doing this had been writing letters. I write two kinds: one directly to my grandchildren, to save for a hypothetical future date when I am again connected; and the other *never* to be read, but instead to be ritually burned to transform negative energy into forgiveness.

Here is my first letter — addressed to one of my two grandchildren. This is a “keeper” — a letter I hope to one day be able to share with my grand-daughter.

*Dear Grace\**

*You will be soon be having your first day of school. That must be exciting! Or is it scary? How would you describe it to me? Would you call and tell me, or send me pictures? I would love that.*

*I decided to write to you because it is a way for me to participate in your life on some level. It also should help heal the hole in my heart from not being able to see you and play with you. It fills the time I now have at sixty-three to come and baby sit, or help you with your homework, or take you*

\*The names of people other than the author in this story have been changed to protect their privacy. A very similar letter was written to my grandson, Carter.



to parks and zoos and theatre and concerts. Time that could have given your dad and very very good mom a break.

I still have a photo of your biological father, (not John who is doing such a wonderful job of being a dad to you) getting on a big yellow school bus in 1986. He was as handsome and proud as you are beautiful.

“What’s ‘bio-log-i-cal father’ mean?”

It means that when you were born you came part from your mother Lily, and part from my son Brad, the dad you knew for a while when you were a baby and then some weekends till you were four. He went away two years ago because he had a drug problem, and did not get along with your mom, on what I hope is his ‘low road to enlightenment’.

“What’s en-light-en-ment?”

Good question, I think it’s finding peace with yourself and the world and your place in it. It has a lot to do with ‘god’ but we don’t need to talk about that right now. We’ll do it in some other letter.

So your father disappearing does not mean that he doesn’t love you. Or that he doesn’t love me his mom. (He still remembers to call me on my birthday every year.) Nor do I love him any less for making some bad choices.

Somehow it was meant for you to be raised by your mom and John, and to have your wonderful sister. And for some reason that I have yet

to understand, it was meant right now for me not to be in your life in person. Your mom wants to erase the memory of Brad from your life, and when you moved, she refused to give me your address or phone number. I can’t even get it from your other grandparents.

Oh well. I get to love you and imagine you growing up safe and sound and happy and getting all the things you deserve in life ... invisibly. I am the Grand-ma you may not see for a long long time, or ever again. But I will be watching over you from a distance, and sending good thoughts every single day.

I am going to write you these letters and save them. Someday when you’re grown up you may decide to look me up. A very big pile of letters will be waiting for you.

This is a lot for one day, before you even go to school for the first time. I can’t wait till you can really learn how to read well! I know you’ve started already.

Just know I love you, and that you will feel this love deep in your heart whether you know it or not.

I hope you get a great kindergarten teacher.

Love,

— Your “Invisible Grandma” Pat





As I wrote that first letter, an incredible weight seemed to start to lift off my shoulders. I found the process incredibly therapeutic. I kept writing letters; it helped me to reconcile the circumstances surrounding my situation. It also gave me a vehicle for leaving behind family memories and values I want to pass on. I may be invisible, but I still have a voice.

My early letters were about a variety of topics. Sometimes I wrote about places I'd been that were special to me and of fond memories. At other times I wrote values-laden letters about the high costs of war and presi-

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dential elections. Some contained advice on things like “thank you’s are important,” while others were about aging, or “letting go” when a friend died. I edited some of my own mother’s writing into a document I titled ‘Great-grandmothers Memoir-ies,’ to give them information on their heritage. In some letters I answered questions I might be asked by children and teenagers: “You Were Married Three Times Grandma? Why?” and “Well, What Does Love Have to Do with it? How many times were you ‘really’ in love?”

## Coping with Negative Feelings.

I'll be honest: there were many times I couldn't suppress my anger, jealousy of the other grandparents, and resentment at what was happening to me. I was pissed that I wasn't allowed to model aging gracefully, directly to my grandchildren. *Invisibility hurts.*

My first reaction was to scream in self-righteousness about all the good things my grandchildren would miss out on. But this left a bad taste in my mouth and alienated many people that I shared those feelings with.

Instead, I decided to write a few letters that I would *never* send.

I developed two categories of letters: those to be "Said and Saved" (SS) and those to be "Said Never Sent" (SNS.) I did not want my grandchild to be exposed to my negative energy, but wanted to use this new letter to release it. I even burned some of the negative letters dancing in the moonlight to Janis Joplin's *Take a Little Piece of My Heart*. I did burn the original hand-written version of my first SNS letter but as a retired educator (and now a writer,) I could not help but keep a photocopy of it as a model for others.

**"This year,  
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Here's my first SNS letter:

*Dear Grace:*

*I was just bending over the kitchen sink crying. Sobbing. I don't want to turn on the radio and listen to cheery Christmas music, or go into stores and watch everybody spending money on the gifts and the special foods they make every year. This year, the thought of opening the beautiful decorations I store in a box for eleven months, looking forward to hearing you say how much you like the bubble lights just gives me a stomach ache. I want to watch you see everyone exclaiming, "Oooh! the surfer girl!" and hear me say "Grandpa gave me that one when I went to college in California." All of this makes me very, very sad. And mad.*

*I want to be buying a tiny tree you could string popcorn for, and have you help me cook turkey dinner. It's your voice I want to hear asking me to make a favorite recipe, like the pink molded cranberry salad your father loved and always helped whip the cream for.*

*But most of all, I was crying because your mother sent me a "Sending You Holiday Hugs Card," with no return address. All that was inside the envelope was a picture of the five of you. Five, wow! I see you have a new baby brother or sister. Maybe that's all your mom wanted to tell me, to show me, but what a way to do it!*

*Your mom doesn't have a clue what it feels like (!\*x#?\*!) to be blocked from having the kind of family that actually makes contact with one another, especially at holidays! There are so many traditions that can make special memories in ways only can, right? Well I guess I don't get to show you some of ours.*

*I am going to spare you the negative energy of these words by burning them. Really. I will put them in a bowl outside, light the paper on fire, and watching the words disintegrate and turn into ash and blow away. To be forgotten, I wish!*

*Merry Christmas. Take a look at this picture of the way we put the lights on our houseplants. With no children around we've stopped decorating a tree.*

*Please, please Grace, may you grow up with the good sense to communicate the truth clearly to everyone you deal with, and not get caught up in a bunch of distorted lies.*

*Christmases hurt for me. May yours be memorably merry!*

*I love you!*

*— Your invisible grandma, Pat*

Over the past three years I have continued writing these phantom letters at least once a month, and will keep it up until ... ? I don't know.

I believe that if other parents and

grandparents burdened with invisibility wrote their own letters, a movement of positive intention for future generations could emerge. We, the grandparents kept in the shadows, can have a voice, even if we can't be "seen." By writing, we

too can have an opportunity to express own feelings; by forgiving we set ourselves free.

### **Dealing with Being Invisible.**

Even if we are excluded from the lives of our descendants, we can still leave some of our memories and values behind. My way of doing this was to write letters, but there are many more methods of passing on what we feel and believe.

As a veteran educator and workshop leader, in 2008 I began to offer workshops on Invisible Grandparenting. In that process I have met so many other invisible grandparents, who shared with me how they have dealt with their particular situation and what steps they are taking to heal their separation.



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**Ailia**, 69, had a parting of ways with her son and daughter-in-law over the family business that failed and went bankrupt five years ago. Letters and packages she sends get returned, marked “unclaimed” by the Post Office. She told me that she hasn’t spoken to her son and his family for over five years.

A lifelong metaphysical seeker, she told me, “I don’t want to perpetuate the vibration of anger and fear. I know it won’t do any good. If I can release my anger, forgive my son and daughter-in-law, that’s important. I believe that my karmic path is about love, and I’ve been confronted with these issues for a reason: to clean them up.”

One day Ailia found a piece of jewelry: a gold heart with a loop on top that her son had given her mother (his grandmother) who passed five years ago. The same day she came across a heart-shaped bar of soap on a rope with “I love you grandma” on it. She hung the gold heart and the soap in her bathroom. “Every time I wash my hands I say ‘I love you too,’ thinking of my grandkids.”

**Darrie**, 59, is a long distance grandparent who has grandchildren living in Japan. She keeps her connection with them alive by writing letters, and sending packages, even Skype-ing them at Christmas and watching them open their presents.

It is not her long-distance grandchildren from whom she is estranged; rather it is her relationship with her daughter and four-year-old granddaughter that live nearby that is the problem. Darrie has seen three therapists to deal with this troubling situation but she reports “I don’t think I’ve found the right one, yet.”

Seven years ago her 32-year-old daughter recovered a suppressed memory during therapy that she had been repeatedly molested as a child by a babysitter’s teenage son. Angry with her mother for not knowing about and stopping the abuse, Darrie’s daughter believes her mother is “not safe” to baby sit or even see her children. Particularly

distraught because she was intensely present for the first eight months of the baby’s life, Darrie felt desperate when the break first happened.

“She stopped talking with me and is even tried to pollute my relationship with her brothers,” she told me, her grief acute. “At first, I couldn’t think of that baby girl’s name without sobbing.” Then, by visiting on-line websites (such as [www.aarp/grandparenting/groups](http://www.aarp/grandparenting/groups)) where she chatted with other parents and grandparents in similar situations, she began to feel less alone. She also finds release in praying for her granddaughter, and visualizing her surrounded in a golden bubble consciously imagining good things happening in her life.



While Darrie would love to do all the day-to-day grandparenting things like swimming with her granddaughter in a nearby lake or taking her on vacations, she tried to compensate by starting a scrapbook of ‘Tidbits’ of things she’d want her to know. With pictures and mementos she writes, “How I think about things right now.” As she ages, she admits “I’ll change these notes as I imagine how I’d interact with her if I were able to be present.”

**Shawna**, who raised one grandson herself, is the invisible grandparent of four other children. Her daughter’s four other children have been removed from her home by social services and adopted by foster parents. Shawna supported the adoptions at the time they occurred and even wrote a letter to Child Protective Services saying so, believing it was the best way that her grandchildren could have stability in their lives. But after the adoptions occurred she says, “I searched my soul,” and that led her to contact the social workers in her daughter’s case to try and get information on the whereabouts of her grandchildren. Today she is able to see one of them, a granddaughter who is now five, twice a year. She travels 500 miles to do visit her granddaughter at the home of the adoptive parents, but Shawna has not been given any access or information on the other three children.

**“When I start to worry and obsess, I picture God holding each of these little ones in His lap like Santa Claus.”**

How has she coped with this situation? “In a sense it’d be easier to not be involved at all, because it was so sad,” she muses. “I was totally in love with that first grandchild since he was born, so I knew I had to play a role in the lives of the others, but it was apparently not to be. Dealing with this forced separation is a huge challenge for me. My yoga helps as well as conscious effort not to let this situation take me down.”

Shawna suffer immensely. “I probably would’ve killed myself,” she confided to me, “but I couldn’t have borne the pain, so I didn’t attempt it. My daughter numbs herself with alcohol in order to not have to feel what it’s like to have her kids taken away.”

Shawna continues, “When I really start to worry and obsess, I picture God holding each of these little ones in His lap like Santa Claus. I have learned that you have no real control over anybody. I’d like to think my daughter will clean up, but at this point the odds of that aren’t great. Ultimately everyone has to choose their own life.”

**Roxanne**, a 69 year old therapist, adopted a three-year-old daughter when in her forties. She later discovered that her adopted daughter had “attachment disorder,” and after a troublesome adolescence and periods of living on the

streets, her daughter gave birth to five children, each with a different father. Her daughter died of cervical cancer at the age of 43, and Roxanne has been involved with three of her grandchildren over the years in spite of living more than a thousand miles away from them. It hasn't been easy; in one case she had to go to court in order to be able to continue to make phone calls and see a grandson (now ten) she'd had contact with since birth he was born.

What words of wisdom does this professional counselor have for other invisible grandparents? "People need to talk to others and get in community with other people who've done the same thing. Your website could make a difference in lots of lives," she told me.

"Do what you can to heal," she mused, "and know you'll be living with loss. After all, Erich Fromm said that separation is the cause of *all* anxiety. Take the attitude that you're *not* a victim. Life may have handed you a crummy hand, but you are in charge of how you handle it!"

**"Do what you can to heal, and know you'll be living with the loss. Life may have handed you a crummy hand, but you are in charge of how you handle it."**

## **Uniting to Heal Our Invisibility**

If you are an invisible grandparent, tell me about your journey. We can help each other by sharing ways we've handled our invisibility. I would like to discover the myriad of ways others have coped with this painful reality.

I'm working on collecting interviews with other invisible grandparents for a book that will give us some solace and hope. Please go to [www.invisiblegrandparent.com](http://www.invisiblegrandparent.com) to read and comment on my journey or email me at [pat@invisiblegrandparent.com](mailto:pat@invisiblegrandparent.com). Soon there will be a secure section of this website where we can read and comment on each other's stories. We need to develop a community of grandparents who can transcend their grief and still make a positive contribution to future generations.

In solidarity, Pat Hanson©



**PAT HANSON, PH.D.**, 67, is a health educator, writer, and public speaker living in Monterey, California. She lectures nation-

ally on *Aging Positively*, and has three versions of her memoir underway: *In Search of a Significant Equal*, *Hopelessly Heterosexual?* and *Stillness My Final Frontier*.