

# Seeing mother in my granddaughter

By SaraKay Smullens

**M**y first grandchild has confirmed what a wise teacher told me many years ago: People die, but relationships continue. Every time I see my granddaughter, mental "snapshots" from the past become part of our visit. It's part of being a grandparent and worth considering, Sunday being Grandparents Day.

These flashes fall into two categories: those involving my daughter at my granddaughter's age, and those involving my mother, who lost her battle against cancer nine years ago.

When my granddaughter, Charlotte Rose, took her first steps on the same rug on which her mother had taken them — tottering, smiling and with the same serious and joyous intent her mother must have shown over 30 years before, I had a flash of my own mother. I longed to see her smile, but she did not. Her look was one of sadness and of yearning.

Flash: My mother's best friend telling me that from the moment my mother married my father, my mother stopped smiling. He didn't beat her; her wounds were invisible. The constant indignities of her marriage brought a torment that today we know as emotional abuse.

Finding nothing medically wrong, her doctor referred her to surgeons to address her many physical symptoms. Since my mother's pain was all psychic in

origin, she was operated on needlessly again and again. As time passed, terror overwhelmed her and the truth immobilized her. She began to fear friends as much as strangers, and she rarely left our home.

My range of choices in life — my educational, professional and personal opportunities — is far wider than my mother's. When divorce was necessary for me, it was a possibility. A second marriage to one with whom there could be a deep compatibility became a blessing. Four children would come together, and a family — by no means perfect but surely real and devoted — could be formed.

*Flashes of insight  
connect  
suffering and dreams  
across generations.*

Flashes of my mother's face have punctuated my years of good fortune. For Charlotte Rose's first birthday, I made the same cake my mother had made for my daughter, Elisabeth: three tiers, with white icing and real flowers. I traveled to Washington, D.C., for the celebration with the cake on my lap and many "snapshots" in my head. She brought the same kind of cake to Philadelphia for my Elisabeth's first birthday party. When my granddaughter blew out the candle, again I saw my mother's face, brimming with tears.

Just before Charlotte Rose's first birthday party, I learned that my daughter and son-in-

law were expecting a second child. A few days after the party, I had a jolting dream.

I was in an extraordinarily beautiful and peaceful place, and my mother's best friend — who had told me when my mother stopped smiling — welcomed me, explaining that my life on earth had ended.

"But I didn't have a chance to say goodbye to anyone I love," I whispered. Yet as I spoke an acceptance came over me. My children were well and on honest and meaningful paths, and my husband and I had just spent a perfect day together. "How fortunate I have been," I dreamed.

"Where is my mother?" I asked. "I have missed her so very much."

"She's been exceptionally busy renewing old friendships and making new ones. I'll take you to her."

"Does she smile now?" I asked, as we walked through the most exquisite garden I had ever seen.

"Charlotte hasn't stopped smiling since she arrived."

At that moment I woke up, feeling the same marvelous peace I had as I dreamed.

I told my dream to no one, not even my husband. But I've noticed something extraordinary during visits with my granddaughter. When the "snapshots," the flashes, of my mother appear, her eyes no longer brim with tears. She finally, once again, is smiling.

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**Sunday:** A range of views on what has or hasn't changed in the wake of Sept. 11.