

Grand parenting: Grandchildren and the holy hope of Christmas

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 9, 2007](#) issue

The excerpt from Wendell Berry's latest book was for me a Christmas gift to savor. It stirred memories and reflections about grandfathers. As Berry suggests, the grandparents of people my age lived in a different world from ours. They never boarded an airplane or booted up a computer. Before the days of joint replacement surgery, many were partially crippled and lived with pain. "My rheumatism is acting up . . . the lumbago is bad today, Johnny" one of my grandfathers used to say as he struggled up the steps to the house, leaning heavily on my arm and the handrail. I am stunned to realize that he was the age I am now.

He was a large man, a foreman in the Pennsylvania Railroad repair shops. His oldest son was killed in World War II and his wife died at about the same time. I liked being around him. I loved him in a way at the time, but, like Berry's character Andy Catlett in his relationship to his grandfather, I know him better and love him more now.

My other grandfather could be stern and a little intimidating. He worked as a draftsman for the railroad and kept a rigid daily schedule for three decades after retirement. If he loved me it was not always apparent, except for the fact that he gave me gifts not only at Christmas but throughout the year. He lost two daughters in the influenza epidemic, and his youngest son, for whom I am named, was killed in the South Pacific during the war. His oldest son spent time in a penitentiary, I learned years later. His pain must have been profound.

Grandparenting has changed a lot. I have done things with my grandchildren that my own grandparents could not have done with me: shot hoops, played football, traveled to Africa, attended concerts. When our first grandchild was on the way, a friend put his arm around my shoulder and told me I was about to experience the only truly free lunch in the world. I also recall reading an article by a new grandfather who said that the birth of this child was the only thing that had ever caused him to be called "Grand."

If there is anything better than being a grandfather it is the privilege of baptizing a grandchild. I will do that again, on the last Sunday of 2006. His name is Alex, which was also the name of my stern grandfather, although my daughter and son-in-law did not think of that when they named him. I will certainly be pondering it as I hold him in my arms and place the water of baptism on his head.

I'll also be pondering another old man who has his day around this time of year. Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms and said, "Master, you are now dismissing your servant in peace . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation." To hold a grandchild in your arms is to know something of the holy hope of Christmas.

In his essay "Economy and Pleasure" Berry describes how his five-year-old granddaughter, Katie, once spent the day with him. They had worked hard hauling dirt and now were returning home, riding in silence. It was late in the day and cold, and Berry was worried that Katie must be feeling miserable and homesick. She leaned into him as he drove the horses and said, "Wendell, isn't it fun?"