

Living Between....

a Time to be Born and a Time to Die

Are you comfortable with
your stretch marks?

By Dr. Maxine Hancock

MY THREE-YEAR-OLD GRANDSON STUDIES my face, mentally mapping it. "Gram," he asks, "why do you have those lines, right there?" He holds up three fingers to imitate the delta of vertical lines deepening between my eyebrows. "Well dear," I say, always ready with a story, "they are lines I have earned by living a long time. They are a sort of stamp of approval to tell you that I have learned enough to be a grandma."

I marvel at our beginnings, as I have learned to marvel, too, at our endings.

He seems satisfied. But that night, I chastise myself for making up a euphemism: "Just face it," I tell myself, looking at the unsparing mirror, "they are just wrinkles." But I actually do think they are all I told Spencer they were, and something more. They are highly visible marks of the ways in which I have been stretched in the past 10 years as I have lived in the middle of the generations – between the birthings of beloved grandchildren and the final earth-breaths of beloved friends and family members. I bear the marks of having been stretched between joy and sorrow, sometimes the two coming very close together, sometimes so intense I hardly know where one starts and the other stops.

For one grandson, born too soon, the date of his birth was also the date of his death. Life collapses in around itself at such a time. I still feel the aching desire to have known and held that little person every year on his birth/death day. Exactly a month after we shared the loss of this little one, my father died, and I was comforted to think of wee Dominic being there, wherever "there" is, the two of them learning together how to live in The Glory That Cannot be Imagined.

Another grandson was born on my own birthday, and laid in my arms at the hospital with my daughter and son-in-law's "Happy Birthday, Mom," echoing around me as I studied that tiny new face, once more memorizing and taking into my life a person who would never stop mattering to me.

After the six-weeks-early precipitous birth of a granddaughter, I rushed from our farm home in Alberta to Chicago, springing from the taxi that brought me from the airport and nearly running through the corridors to find her. I came into the preemie nursery room to see, soft in the greys and blues of muted light and hospital gowning, and tender in new motherhood, our daughter Heather curving around a tiny, perfect girl no bigger than the dolls she had so tenderly cared for when she was, herself, a girl. "My dolly holding her dolly" is how I would have titled the picture, so full of tender repetitions of love.

When another granddaughter was born, I was in Ottawa speaking at a conference. The phone rang in my hotel room at about 11 p.m. and our son told me of the birth of a daughter. "Her name is Marissa," he said. It was a new name to

me then, (a lovely variant of Mary, as I was to come to know), and I lay awake for hours just saying it. "Marissa, Marissa, Marissa," I whispered, naming her before the Lord, before the cosmos. Naming her and drawing her into my heart. Loving her, and being stretched to receive her.

I marvel at our beginnings, as I have learned to marvel, too, at our endings: so fragile, so needy, we are borne from the susurrations of the waters of the uterus into an ocean of family love; and then borne, finally, from the loves of this life into the endless, unfathomable love from which nothing can separate us (as the Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:37-39).

It is that larger ocean of love – that "love that will not let [them] go" – into which we release both our children and our grandchildren as they come of age. It's the love greater than our own; the love from which our own fierce maternal love has been drawn but into which it must also flow back again. It is the love into which we release our beloved ones as they reach the crossing-over place of death.

Stretched as I have been in the past decade by the births and deaths of a family, I have become softer, more wrinkled; kinder, I hope; someone perhaps now fit to be a grandmother. Stretched by both grief and love, I pray a hymn, with my own variations: "Oh love that will not let [them] go, I rest my weary heart in Thee; I give thee back the life [you loaned], that in your ocean depths its flow / May richer, fuller be."

Maxine Hancock writes, teaches part time at Regent College, Vancouver, and has been a keynote speaker at BWOQ conventions. She now lives in Nova Scotia.