

To my beloved grandchild,

I hope you don't mind me writing you an old-fashioned letter rather than sending a text or a WhatsApp message, but I've realised that what I have to say may take a little time, and my texting skills aren't as proficient as yours. A part of me wishes I could get to grips with the IT a little faster; it's been such a blessing over the past couple of years, gathering on group video calls and chuckling at the pictures you've sent me on my phone. But, try as I might, and I am partway there, I find I'm always on the receiving end. Initiating a call or sending a photo is not as simple as you make it look. I love what you share, but sometimes I wish I was better at finding the pictures and news in your earlier messages.

Now that it's my turn to share with you, I wondered what would be the best option. I remembered the stack of letters and cards that I've kept over the years, and re-reading them has rekindled so many of my memories: the stories of my life. They took time to write - and to read! - so I've decided that, for this communication, a letter is the best option.

I wanted to tell you about yesterday – the day of our grand performance. I wish you could have been there! You may not know, but I've been dancing, yes dancing, every week for the past six months. And it's not been classical or ballroom dancing as you might expect, but contemporary dance based on the life stories of the members of the dance group. We shared these stories with one another at the start of the programme, and we discovered such a lot about each other. As the stories unfolded, we got to see beyond the greying hair and the walking and hearing aids. Instead, my fellow dancers and I shared our tales of joy and adventure: a nonagenarian told of a career in fashion that began at the age of 13, while another wielded her crutch to add even more colour to her story of riding an ostrich. Two or three explained how they'd used skills learned in childhood when they went to their allotment, a place that helped them manage the anxiety of the COVID pandemic. The abundance of nature, and time spent enjoying it in youth, was a common theme. I came to understand what it might have been that gave us the courage to experiment with dance.

Yesterday you see, we performed our dances to one another, and they were beautiful. I wondered what you would have thought as some of the older people threw down their sticks and took to the stage. One mimicked a bird as it twirled - circling around another performer who danced in his wheelchair. Another pair faced each other in a story battle, the first enacting a tricycle accident and her partner responding with a snorkelling adventure. I saw stories unfold that incorporated images of courage and strength – and then there was humour: a performer strode past, knocking back an imaginary glass of something cold as another snapped the scene on an invisible camera.

We danced so many stories and we shared many more. As one story led to another, our ageing bodies of wrinkles and greying hair melted away, replaced by glowing faces and nods of encouragement. Each one of us shared life lessons and wisdom gained from years of experience – but that wasn't all. We also ran workshops with people in care homes, sheltered housing, colleges, primary schools, support centres and in the community, encouraging them to tell their stories and dance them out. It was amazing! And I think it's this that I really wanted to say: whilst, yes, I may fall asleep in front of the TV, need help getting to my feet and ask you to speak a little more loudly, there is so much more to me. I have a rich past and it's my memories that gave me the strength to dance on the stage, to teach others, to sit out the pandemic and to continue to struggle with IT!

So you may be wondering why I felt the need to write this all down for you, my beloved grandchild. Well, I've had a lot of time over the past couple of years to reflect on the challenges presented by the pandemic. I recognise that society sought to protect me and my generation as the 'frail and vulnerable', forgetting the resources we had to draw on: our life experience and the knowledge that we had successfully faced challenges in the past. At the same time, you and your generation were largely left to fend for yourselves. Thankfully, for many of you, this was the first time you'd had to face an existential crisis, but you were doing it without a lifetime of experience to make you strong. So perhaps it's unsurprising that, for some, the experience was overwhelming. What I wanted to share is my reflection following my dancing adventure, that, with time, you too will develop a million memories, and have life stories that will give you the resilience to face future challenges. I sincerely hope that you will have the opportunity, as I have done, to continue to push the boundaries and learn new skills when your own hair is grey and your skin is wrinkled!

Sending you love and best wishes for the future,

Your Grandmamma