

THE GRANDPARENT EFFECT

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CALVIN TRILLIN, GRANDFATHER: HE BABYSITS. HE SPOILS. HE TURNS THE KIDS INTO MOVIE STARS.

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If you're a fan of humorist Calvin Trillin, who's been writing for *The New Yorker* since the 1960s, you've probably read a thing or two about his family.

You know that he and his wife, Alice, an educator, raised their daughters, Abigail and Sarah, in Greenwich Village, where the family hung out with pet store owners, police officers, street singers, and puppeteers.

You know that the Trillins decamped to a small fishing village in Nova Scotia every summer, where they made movies about robbers and princesses and projected them onto the wall of their barn.

And you know that when the girls were still little, in the 1970s, Alice was diagnosed with lung cancer, which she overcame with the help of radiation therapy that ended up irreparably damaging her heart.

She died in the summer of 2001, about a year after Sarah's wedding and a few months after Abigail's, at age 63.

But you probably don't know much about Trillin's career as a grandfather, which began the spring after Alice's death and has sweetened his life ever since.

Here's what Trillin, 79, had to say about grandparenting when I interviewed him last October.

How many grandchildren do you have and what are their names and ages?

I have four grandchildren. My older daughter Abigail has two girls ... She lives in San Francisco; they live there, too. She's a legal services lawyer. She runs something called Legal Services for Children.

So you never got her to sell out?

I tried. Her husband, who's also a lawyer, also works for a non-profit. I suggested that the two of them flip a coin to decide who sells out. They did not take my suggestion.

They have two girls, Isabelle, who's 12, and Rebecca, who's 9.

And my other daughter, Sarah, is a clinical social worker. She does psychotherapy. Her husband is a social worker also and a counselor for a public school in New Jersey that has only kindergarteners and first-graders.



Trillin with his four grandchildren in Nova Scotia, where the family spends part of each summer. The children, from left, are Isabelle, 12, Natey, 8, Rebecca, 9, and Toby, 11. Courtesy of the Trillins.

They live in semi-rural New Jersey. You didn't know there was such a place? Hunterdon County, near the Delaware. It's about an hour and a quarter from the Village. Neither one of them wanted to live in the city and they didn't exactly want to live in the suburbs.

What are their kids' names and ages?

Toby, or Tobias, is 11 and Natey—his real name is Nathaniel—is 8.

It seems like both of your daughters found really nice guys.

Yes, and they're great dads. They are what we call "good stewards of my genetic material."

That was actually going to be my first question. You tend to refer to your kids and their husbands as the "adult attendants" of your grandchildren. Can you elaborate on that worldview?

Yes, that's right. Yeah, I told them that they're not exactly irrelevant now, but they're not the main attraction anymore. They understand that, I think.

Do you really find that your time with your grandchildren is more rewarding when the parents get out of the way?

No, I don't mind them being around, although when the parents aren't around we're able to operate under what are called "grandparent rules."

What do those consist of?

You can do anything you want to. You can eat anything you want to. There are no rules except that there are no rules.

Have you had them for extended periods without their parents?

I sometimes have them for weekends. I'm about to go to California Thursday and I'm going to New Jersey tomorrow, but I think in both cases the parents will just be gone for an evening. But I have in both cases gone for a weekend or so while they took a trip or something like that.

And that's when you impose the grandparent rules?

Yeah. The parents can't be there to have the grandparent rules.

Are your kids good sports about that?

Why shouldn't they be good sports? They can do anything they want to.

No, your kids.

Oh, the adult attendants. Yes, they're quite understanding of the system.

You said you're going to do some babysitting tomorrow. Do you do that often?

Yeah, fairly often in New Jersey; obviously more often than in San Francisco. Because, as I say, it's only about an hour and a quarter. Tomorrow, there's some sort of teachers' meeting—or some reason for them not being in school tomorrow afternoon—and so I'm going to be there when they get off of the bus.



Trillin and grandson Toby perform "You Cannae Throw Your Granny Off the Bus," a Scottish street song, at a family talent show last summer. Courtesy of the Trillins.

And then also my daughter teaches once a week at Rutgers and so she has to leave home early the next day, and my son-in-law leaves early, so I'll put them on the bus in the morning. Then I'll come home.

How do you think you'll spend the afternoon and evening?

Any way they want to. It's grandfather's rules.

We sometimes go to their school and play basketball.

It's a one-school district Sarah's actually on the school board. She's, I think, the only member of our family who's ever been on a ballot, but she ran unopposed. She was so intimidating she drove the other candidates out, or she was the only one willing to be on the school board, depending on how you look at it.

So you might go and play some ball?

I think I'll have to get them something to eat.

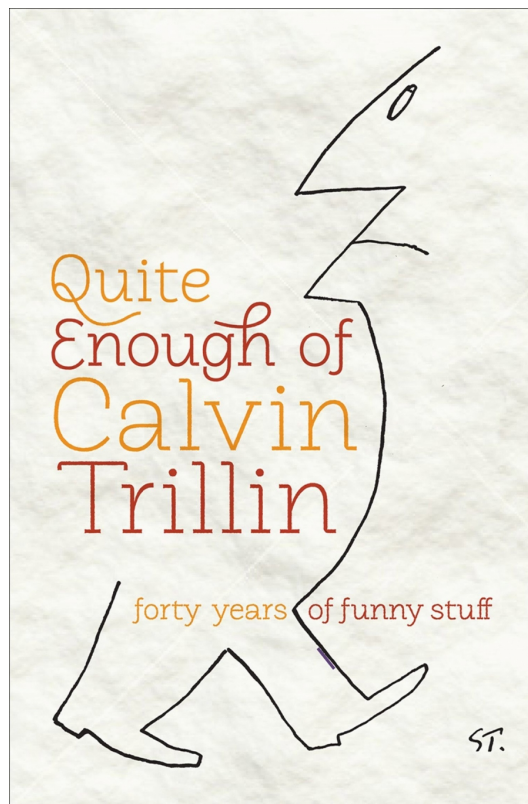
You're not a big cook, right? Even though you're a big eater.

No, no. I'll take them out someplace and get something disgusting.

And then Thursday I'm going out to California, just because I haven't been there for a while.

Do you tend to go a few times a year?

When the girls were little, I used to try not to let a month pass without seeing them in one place or the other, partly because when they're little you kind of lose track if you don't see them regularly. Now that they're at school and they have their own schedules—they have rehearsals, etcetera etcetera—I'm less strict about that. So I haven't been there since September.



The definitive collection of Trillin's humor, which won the Thurber Prize for American Humor in 2012.

So I'll see them this weekend, I'll stay three or four days, and then they'll be here for Christmas.

Will their adult attendants be there?

Yeah, I think so. Sometimes they go off somewhere on the weekend.

All the kids now are pretty much at an age where you don't have to worry about bathing them and putting them to bed and that sort of stuff.

How do you feel about that? Is that kind of sad?

Yeah. Not *kind* of sad ... I told my younger daughter , “I miss the kind you can hold and carry around.” And she said, “I hate to tell you, Daddy, but your children are getting past childbearing age.” So I think we’re at our full complement. I’m sure we’re at our full complement.

I guess Abigail is on the West Coast for the long haul.

Yeah. I did a piece, I guess before she was married, about this gnarly little black oniony pumpernickel bagel that she loved. It had disappeared, and I asked if she would move back if I found it. She said absolutely. But I failed to find it.

But they have a nice life out there. Of course, I’d rather have them downstairs ... I keep telling how I see the kids from P.S. 3—where they went to grade school, across the street—in the hope that they’ll be inspired to return. But I think they’re both settled.

What do your daughters think of you as a grandfather?

I don’t know—I never asked them. They haven’t complained.

Grandfathers have kind of a set role. Abigail’s husband’s father died not long after Alice did but father is still around, and I think he did babysitting duty this last weekend. He’s an active grandfather, too. We do different things with them.

So far, how does grandfathering differ from fathering?

It’s hard for me to remember a lot about fathering. But obviously, grandfathers have a limitation of responsibility. I mean, you’re not the person who has to worry about getting them to bed or whether the toilet training is going well or whether they’re going to get into a school or something like that. But I find I’m just as connected to them as I was to my children.

Of course, for a grandfather there are some privileges. I’ve heard myself say, in fancy children’s clothing stores, a sentence—maybe not in these exact words, but the burden’s the same—that I thought I would never utter: “Don’t you have anything more expensive than this?” It’s not something you’d hear from a father, except maybe a divorced father.

And there are other bonuses: There’s something deeply satisfying about gathering wild blueberries with your grandchildren in the same place you gathered wild blueberries with your children.

You’ve never had to worry about your grandkids, it’s all just pure ...

I haven’t had to worry about them, no. I haven’t had that experience. I don’t know how I would feel about that because obviously that would bring in when grandparents should be putting their two cents in and when they shouldn’t be.

What are your kids like as parents? Do you feel they're similar to you and Alice?

One of the things that surprised me about being a grandparent was how much of a kick you get out of seeing your own children as parents. I had just never thought of that.

They're not the same—they have different styles, and one of them has girls and one of them has boys—but they both really seem to enjoy it. Even when the kids were tiny and sometimes they were tired, they seemed to be having a good time.

And they don't seem to have totally rejected everything in the way they were brought up, which is good, I guess.

Do you feel they're raising their kids with pretty much your values and techniques?

Yeah. Alice used to say that we were easy about the small things and strict about the large things. By large things, she basically meant values.

I can't remember where I mentioned it, it may have been in the book called [Family Man](#), but I've always believed that parenting essentially boils down to one thing: Your kids are either the center of your life or they're not, and the rest is commentary.



Trillin with his wife, Alice, in 1965. He chronicled their long and happy marriage in a memoir, [About Alice](#), that was published in 2006 and dedicated to their grandchildren.

So, the question of which childrearing book you read or something like that is really not relevant. It doesn't make any difference because, in the first place, you're not going to act against your own nature anyway, and the kids see you in so many different situations that you can't put in some kind of artificial system.

I guess the girls, my girls, are roughly the same kind of parents we were, but to me the important thing is that they really like it. Sometimes you run into people who the kids seem such a burden to them. They're always complaining or they're stressed. Some of it is circumstance—I mean, if you have three kids and you're in graduate school or something ... and some of it's money. There are a lot of reasons for people to have that view.

But my girls seem to have a good time.

As did you and Alice, right?

Yeah. And then in a way, except when Alice got sick, we were pretty lucky that we had a nice house, we had a school across the street, and we didn't have any awful money problems or illness problems.

I think the girls both have lives that aren't that stressful. You could have a stressful life, particularly today doing what Abigail does. She deals with kids who are in danger of being sent back to a country they've never been to, and that sort of thing.

Have they worked full-time throughout their kids' childhoods?

No. Sarah sees clients three days a week. Abigail has always worked four days a week. When the kids were little, her husband also worked four days a week—so one day was Daddy day and one day was Mommy day. When both kids started school, I asked Abigail if they were going to change that and she said no indeed.

So I think they have it figured out; they have their priorities figured out.

When the kids were little did you feel you were urgently needed as a hands-on grandfather?

Well, Toby was one of those kids who seemed uncomfortable; I guess his stomach wasn't perfect at the start or something. I always tell him he was a pain in the neck until he was about eight months old.

Sarah always said, "He has no incentive to reform. He knows he's going to make it on looks alone."

My son-in-law was out of the house until late evening on Tuesdays—so I used to go down every week for what we called "Tuesdays with Toby." This was from the time he was a tiny baby until he was old enough to go to daycare, maybe a year and a half or two years old.

didn't do daycare, we usually had an *au pair* girl. I sometimes thought of the *au pair* girl as just another person for Alice to take care of, but supposedly they were taking care of the kids. So we didn't do daycare.

For childcare, my girls seem to have depended on daycare or blood relatives. Occasionally they have a babysitter.

That was the most intense period of going down there. If I was away on a story I didn't go, obviously, but basically I went every Tuesday.

In the morning and you came back late at night?

Yeah. Or the next morning.

How was that for you?

I loved it and I think I feel closer to Toby because of that, even though he was a tiny baby and a pain in the neck.

Did you do it again for their younger boy?

No. Sarah and her husband had different schedules by then. It's mainly when their schedules don't mesh that they need me. That's why I'm going tomorrow: Sarah works tomorrow and the kids are off in the afternoon and it just doesn't work out. Although they're now at the age where they can make playdates or something.

They'd probably rather see you.

Yeah, but if I couldn't be there tomorrow, Sarah could drop them off with a family that lives across from the school or they could go with one of Toby's friends ... It's a little easier for them now that the kids are in school and there's kind of a network of people.

Do the girls and their families still visit you in Nova Scotia in the summer?

Sarah and her family come for two weeks and usually Abigail and her family have come for three weeks. They overlap for two weeks.

There used to be a ferry from Portland overnight to Nova Scotia; we'd get a cabin. The girls loved it when they were little. That ferry service went out maybe 10 years ago. Then last summer was the first summer there was a new ferry on the same route, so Abigail and Rebecca and I went up together.

When everyone is there, what kinds of things do you guys do?

We live on the South Shore, on the Atlantic shore. We live in a village of about maybe a couple hundred people.

Our first summer in that house was 1972. So we've been going there for 40-some years. So the girls sort of halfway grew up there and halfway here.

And for about the first maybe 20 years or more we were essentially the summer community, our family. There were some outsiders there, there were two or three retired military people ... and a couple people had moved in permanently but as far as the kind of classic summer family we were pretty much it. Now it has more people who come for the summer, so it's changed a bit.



Trillin and granddaughter Rebecca making "Assembly Line Fish" last summer in Nova Scotia. Courtesy of the Trillins.

We do the usual things you do on the water—go to the beach, say, or picnic on one of the islands. But our central activity is that we make a movie during the two weeks everyone is there. We used to do that when my girls were small, and then they got to be too old to be making movies.

Tell me about the process. You start by writing a script?

It wasn't really a formal script at the beginning because when we started making the movies—the girls were 3 and 6 I think, my girls—it was a Super 8 silent camera with a narrative narration added on a tape recorder that was never quite in sync. So we've progressed technically a little bit.

What do you use now?

Alex, Sarah's husband, was a film major and he has one of those video cameras that you can edit on the computer—add music and all that. So now I do write a script. And then people complain and so I change it.

They're fictional movies. The first movie we ever made was in England with some friends we used to visit on a farm they had in the West of England. It was about a robber with a fox-like grin—I don't know where that came from—who stole a golden egg from a princess. Some years, the movie would be on a different theme, but every two or three years we'd make another "robber with a fox-like grin" movie.

Now Toby, my older grandson, plays the robber with the fox-like grin, although we noticed Rebecca making a fox-like grin last summer. Last year we made a different movie; it was about magic because Natey had gotten interested in magic. That movie was called "It's Magic."

Natey in the last couple of “robber with a fox-like grin” movies has played the mob enforcer. He has lines like, “Unless you want your face rearranged” and “You’re looking for a mouthful of Chiclets.” That’s the way he talks.

I write the script and then people read it and say, “No, that wouldn’t work,” and I change it and there’s a lot of criticism.

You don’t give it to them in advance, do you?

Yeah, when we’re up there ... So I do some rewriting. Then Alex shoots it. I don’t have to be the one who says, “Please don’t look into the camera, look the other way.” That’s Alex.

Is he kind of the director?

We call him *auteur*. And then he does it on the computer and then puts it on Vimeo and sends a link.

What do you do about costumes and makeup and stuff?

I would say that our movies are prop driven. We have a huge bag of costumes and occasionally I’ll just come across something that looks like, say, a good mustache, and I’ll add it to the bag. We have a lot of stuff, some of it from Halloween costumes that gradually migrated to Nova Scotia.

Did your girls ever go through a period during adolescence when they rebelled against the movies?

We stopped doing the movie when I think Abigail was about 13. It was just time to stop. I don’t think it was a matter of rebelling ... but so far the kids, I mean, one would think the older boy would be the first one, but he’s very involved in the movie at this point. We have a couple years left, I think.

Where do you shoot them? Outdoors?

Yeah, traditionally the movie, they open the last few years with my delivering somebody to our dock in the boat. I have a little boat with an outboard motor.

Some of them are on the beach. We move around.

We used to have a showing in our barn the next summer ... it was called “A Trillin Retrospective.” But then the technology changed and so now there are just links.

So you guys don’t ever get together when it’s done and watch it?

Well, we watch it sometimes.

But it’s not the premiere because everyone’s seen it on Vimeo.

Yeah.

And does everyone have a speaking role or just the kids?

The grandchildren, plus some of the kids from around there, are the stars. The grownups only have bit roles. They might say a couple of words, but basically it's all the kids.

Can you tell me a little about your grandparents during your childhood in Kansas City?

Sure. I didn't know my paternal grandfather. He died before I was born ... I found that grandmother impenetrably foreign. She really wasn't part of my life.

Did she speak English?

Not much to me. Later somebody told me she ran a movie theater in St. Joe, but to me she was just this foreign person ... I don't think I ever had a proper conversation with her. In fairness, we lived in Kansas City and she lived in St. Joe, which was about 60 miles away. We would visit her.

How old were you when she died?

I think I was in college. It was either college or the last years of high school.

The other grandparents ... I loved my maternal grandfather, Pop. He lived in Kansas City and he was also a grocer—my father was a grocer and Pop was a grocer.

Competing grocers?

No, no. Different neighborhoods. Small stores.

He was just a sweet man.

All of my grandparents and my great uncles and aunts all spoke with very heavy accents. They were all immigrants. The only other older person I saw regularly was our closest playmates' grandmother, who had a strong Scandinavian accent.

I've often mentioned that, walking home from first grade once, I stopped for milk and cookies at David Miller's house. His grandmother gave us the milk and cookies and she spoke regular English. That astounded me. I didn't know older people could speak regular English! I don't know whether I thought they lost it as they got older or what. I just didn't know, it was not within my range of experience.

My maternal grandfather I liked a lot ... his wife, my grandmother, I didn't particularly like. The story I always tell about her—she was very nervous, very anxious, I guess is the word, and full of old superstitions—and the story I always tell about her is her husband, my grandfather, was getting some minor hernia procedure and my mother called home and found out that Sukey, my sister, had a stomachache and the doctor thought it might be appendicitis. So they were bringing her into the same hospital.

My mother made the mistake of telling her mother this coincidence of medical procedures and my grandmother's response was, "Give me poison!"

You wouldn't want her in the next foxhole.

They didn't play much of a role in my life. The paternal grandmother played virtually no role. I would say "Hi, Bubbe" and I'd give her a kiss when I left because that's what I had been told to do.

Grandma and Pop ... Pop played a role in the sense that there were kind of rituals that we did together, not just me but my father and me.

On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, my mother and my sister and my grandmother would prepare the meal while we went to my grandparents' synagogue.

The congregation was too small to have a regular cantor. They would hire a cantor for the High Holidays, I guess from Chicago. Every year we went there, and it was chaos. We had the same conversation every year when we walked out. My father would say to Pop, "Oh, Pop, I don't know how you're gonna make it through the holiday with that screeching, that cantor. It sounds like a cat in trouble."

And Pop—as if he hadn't heard him—would say, "Cantor's not too bad this year!"

I really had a lot of time from him. But we didn't play catch, we didn't do that kind of thing. He was a foreign guy.

He was funny. He once told me ... once I picked him up when he was in his late 80s, I guess, and apropos of nothing he said, "You know, when you were born I went to see your mother and see you in the hospital, and I came home and I said to my wife, 'What an ugly baby!'"

And she said "No, all babies ... new babies don't look too good."

He said, "No, he looks like a fish."

Then he said, "Such an ugly baby, and such nice people!"

Which I thought was an odd way to talk about your own daughter. "Such nice people," like some strangers he had met.

He was funny. I mean, not in a purposeful way but also not malapropisms or something like that.

But they didn't play ...

They didn't play the kind of instrumental role you play in your grandkids' lives?

No. But we're in a different situation now. In the first place, they were working ... and also I think people didn't ... I think there was a different attitude toward children in those days.

Children were not quite valued as much.

Yeah.

Maybe because some kids were still dying before they were five.

Well, that's probably true. That was just sort of a defensive thing.

How about your parents and Alice's parents when your kids were young?

My mom was a great grandma. She lived in Kansas City and she lived to her early 80s, and we used to take the girls to Kansas City as much as we could. If the two of us were going to Mexico or someplace, we'd go take the girls to Kansas City ... because Alice didn't really have any family.

Did her parents die very young?

No, her father was from a rural family in North Carolina and ran away from home when he was 17, I think, and he never went back. So she had no relatives on that side. And her mother was from a small warring family from the Bronx.

She didn't really have family. And her mother got early-onset Alzheimer's; I think my girls were still tiny. Her father was quite a bit older than her mother. I don't think they figured much in my girls' lives, and I think they were both gone when the girls got so they knew what was going on.

My dad died young. He was 60, and so we were already married but we hadn't had any kids yet. Abigail is named in memory of him.

My mother, who had her faults, she was a wonderful grandma. Later Sukey, my sister, stepped easily into the role of my mother and is also great with the grandkids. When she goes to San Francisco she paints the girls' toenails and stuff. They love having her around.

But it was mainly those kinds of opportunities; it wasn't kind of daily visits because my mother lived in Kansas City and we lived here.

And she probably wasn't quite as mobile as you are.

No, although she came fairly often and she would walk around. She would take the bus on Houston Street to the Lower East Side and shop around.

She was very important to the girls?

I think while she was around, yeah. They still talk about how they would try not to cough when they were staying with her—she lived in one of those garden apartment places in Kansas City that had a swimming pool—because they knew she wouldn't let them in the swimming pool for the next day or maybe week if she heard a cough. She was very protective, but that's what grandmothers are supposed to do.

The girls call me the head of the safety committee. I think I worry about the safety of the kids as much as I did about my own kids. I used to think the only time I was totally relaxed when my own kids were growing up was when they were both asleep in this house.

I think you worry as much about the grandchildren as you do about your own children, oddly. At least I do.

Is there anything that has surprised you about being a grandfather?

Other than how much I like watching my kids as parents, no. I mean, I kind of like kids—not all kids but a lot of kids—and so it didn't surprise me that I was eager to have them. I'm always just puzzled when people say, "Oh, they make me feel old" or something.

And then, it's complicated by Alice not being here, complicated partly because I'm constantly reminded of what she missed. And also I feel, I'm sort of *the* grandparent from our side of their families, so I'm probably around more than I need to be.

Because you're trying to play the role that Alice would have played as well as your role?

Yeah. Plus I enjoy it.

Somebody told me when I was waiting for Isabelle to be born that being a grandparent is the only thing in life that's everything it's cracked up to be.
