

GRANDPARENTS

Their Witness and Presence in the Family

RON AND MAVIS PIROLA

ON OUR WEDDING day, a beautiful blessing was bestowed on us: ‘May you live to see your children and your childrens’ children’. Many years later, that blessing has been fulfilled in four children and eight grandchildren. Our family and friends have taught us that grandparenting is an adventure that is best appreciated in the context of expressions of love given and love received. In this brief presentation, we can only refer to some ways in which this is expressed.

Grandparents Often Have the Gift of Time

First of all, grandparents are usually not as rushed as modern young parents. In Australia, more than half of mothers with children under the age of fifteen work outside the home. A modern phenomenon is that weekends are especially busy times for parents as they drive their children from one activity to another and try to catch up on the household chores they couldn’t get to during the week. By contrast, many grandparents have the gift of time—time to listen, to affirm and to explore the world together.

A grandmother we know has several grandchildren and makes a point of having a special outing with a different grandchild at regular intervals. The outing is planned according to the special interests or needs of just that child so that he or she is made to feel really loved and special. In a family where usually all the children have to do the same thing together, this strengthens the sense of self-worth of the child.

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Grandparents See the Inner Beauty of the Grandchild

To a grandparent, each grandchild is a wonderful mystery. Other people may look and see a pimply little child but the grandparent sees someone unique, special and loveable. But the older generation not only gives love; it receives love. Young children don’t seem to notice their grandparents’ wrinkles and the sagging skin. To them, their grandparents are simply beautiful and they tell them so repeatedly. Our own grandchildren even laugh at our jokes and ask us to tell them the same stories over and over again. So we older people are helped also to see ourselves as God sees us – loveable, good and made in his image.

The Grandparent/Grandchild Relationship is an Interplay of Mutual Benefit.

This reciprocal giving is demonstrated in many ways. For example, grandparents not only help grandchildren to play, the grandchildren in turn bring out the child within us and get us to play in ways we would never do otherwise. The other day I was talking to another older adult at a parish picnic when his five year old grandson accidentally threw a ball in our direction. My friend turned and, to the delight of the giggling little boy, pretended to be a growling monster threatening to throw him into the nearest rubbish bin but pretending not to be able to catch him. Everybody smiled and enjoyed the fun while my older friend enjoyed something he would never have done if the child had not been there.

In our own home, Mavis spends endless

hours in imaginary tea parties with grandchildren while at other times I am an imaginary horse on my hands and knees with grandchildren on my back. We get satisfaction out of doing something for them, but we also enjoy reliving our own childhood during those special moments.

Grandparents Provide Memories.

Memories are part of what makes us who we are and they help us to understand ourselves. Without memories our lives would be almost blank. A friend whose husband has dementia commented recently, 'He's physically there but it's as if he's not really there'. What she was highlighting was that without memories of the past, we can't engage properly in the present. For most families, the older generation is the 'Central Bank' of memories. Our grandchildren never tire of hearing stories about their own parents when they were children. Both my brothers died at the age of fifty, leaving large families. When we come together, the hunger for family memories of their father is very obvious.

Once again, the process works both ways. We help create memories with the grandchildren and these in turn revive our own memories and help us to understand ourselves better.

Grandparents and Grandchildren Help Each Other to Learn.

As a presence in the lives of grandchildren, the grandparents help pass on simple skills like how to tie shoe laces, to cook, to cut wood or to read. These are also precious opportunities to reflect to the child that he or she is loved. Recently, I helped one granddaughter to plant a tomato seed. Over the next few months it grew into a strong young plant and finally it produced its own tomatoes. It was a lesson in nature, but the biggest lesson she learned was how loved she was.

Through their involvement in the lives of



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grandchildren, grandparents also pass on the deeper lessons of life. Opportunities arise to discuss the inevitability of disappointments, the difficulty of handling failure and the importance of generosity.

Grandchildren also teach us and reduce our tendency to become fixed in our ways. For a start, they are different to our own children and they represent a new era in society. To keep up with them, we have to adapt. It is more than just new technologies and the world of iPods and X-boxes. Generation X actually thinks differently to generation Y and we are constantly having our favourite concepts challenged and tested. They keep us learning.

Grandparents are 'Significant Other Adults' in the Lives of Grandchildren

This support of grandparents starts at the most elementary level of presence – in babysitting, shopping, helping with homework and sporting activities. In Australia, nearly one fifth of grandparents are engaged in caring for grandchildren for an average of about twelve hours per week¹. That is a very high percentage when one considers how many grandparents are not able to do such caring because of geographical distance or because of poor health.

When the new capital city of Australia, Canberra, was founded, it was in the open countryside between the two largest cities, Melbourne and Sydney. Gradually, houses were built and large numbers of civil servants and their families moved in. Unfortunately,

very few families came with grandparents so the city was unique in generally having only two generations living there. The absence of grandparents created social stresses that were well recognised at the time and fortunately no longer exist as the population has aged.

Psychologists talk of the importance of 'significant other adults' in passing on values to children. In the pressured relationships of small nuclear families, and especially in single parent families, it is of enormous importance that parents have other relatable adults who share common values. This allows the children to hear the same messages in a variety of ways. Grandparents fulfil this role very naturally.

They can also be a 'safety valve' for the tensions in a family. A visit to the older generation can allow a grandchild to 'let off steam' in a safe environment and then return a little wiser to their parents.

Schools recognise the significance of grandparents. In Australia, a 'Grandparents Day' is now a regular event in the school calendar. If a child does not have a grandparent, an elderly parishioner is often invited to play a surrogate role.

Grandparents are Often Strong Witnesses to the Faith.

Nowhere is their presence more important than in passing on the faith. This is most obvious at special faith events such as the first reception of the Sacraments of Initiation. The presence of three or more generations witnesses to the love of the wider faith community.

More often, this witness is expressed through small family rituals such as grace before meals, the reading of bible stories, celebrating patron saint feast days and offering to pray for their special concerns. There are many resources, including websites, that offer ideas for family rituals and many of these are ideally suited to grandparents. This year, in preparation for Holy Week, some of our children and grandchildren gathered in our home

to hear the Exodus story before a family meal. Short scripture readings were blended with quite simple re-enactments of various scenes. It all helped to strengthen our identity as a people of faith.

This faith presence and witness of grandparents is of special significance when one considers that over half of Australian Catholic weddings are between a Catholic and a non-Catholic. This places an extra challenge on the Catholic spouse as he or she struggles to create a climate of faith in the family. In such a situation, one young mother commented that without the loving presence and support of her own parents who witnessed to their faith, she would be tempted to stop trying.

A teenager in our parish told us that the Rosary wasn't said in his home but that when he went to stay with his grandparents he could always hear them saying the Rosary in their room together before they went to sleep. He was sure that they said it extra loudly so that he could hear them from his bedroom but he seemed to appreciate their strong commitment to their prayers and it introduced him to the rosary.

Grandchildren also often help us to keep growing in our own faith. Every year, during Lent and Advent, our local parish school holds special liturgies where scripture is enacted by the school children. As dutiful grandparents we attend whenever possible. However, we are inspired in our own faith by the child-like expressions of faith of the youngsters.

It is important to acknowledge that most of what we are saying about grandparents applies to a large extent to older single members of the family. Single uncles and aunts also provide a major witness and presence in the family, expressed from a different perspective to that of grandparents. For example, the Exodus ritual that we just described was initiated by one of our single daughters who is also deeply involved in the lives and the faith development of her nephews and nieces.

Grandparents Provide a Sense of Continuity and Hope in the Future.

One of the biggest challenges for a child growing towards adulthood is in the realm of sexuality—their sexual identity and the value of reserving sexual activity until they can commit themselves to a permanent married relationship. In a changing world, married grandparents can be a sign that it is not only an achievable goal but a highly desirable one. After 48 years of marriage we tell our grandchildren a wonderful secret—that Mavis is my princess and that I am her prince charming. They roll their eyes and joke about it, but they love it. Deep down every child dreams of being a fairytale prince charming or princess. As we move into adulthood, we discover that there never will be dragons to fight or castles to live in, but we never stop yearning for a love without end. Grandparents by their example can be the best teachers of the value of keeping oneself for a lifelong committed relationship.

Again, the older generation are also the beneficiaries. Grandchildren provide a sense of continuity. As we get older, we start to realise that many of our hopes and plans will never materialise. However, the most important things in life always remain and they are our relationships—with God and with each other. Grandchildren are a living expression of our relationship and provide us with a sense that our life has had meaning and purpose.

The Witness and Presence of Grandparents in the Family also Involves Suffering and Sacrifice.

One of the deepest anxieties for grandparents can be the loss of faith practice amongst their children and consequently their grandchildren. The inability to pass on the values we hold dearest can be a source of deep distress combined with a sense of helplessness when it seems that all we can do is to stand, like Mary and John at the foot of the Cross.

It is our impression that the hurt of the older

generation over loss of faith practice in their grandchildren can be similar to a bereavement but without the support systems normally associated with the death of a loved one. Often friends will make comments such as ‘Well, that’s how things are these days’ or ‘They are really quite spiritual but they just don’t express it the way we do’.

Such statements contain some truth and sometimes they are all that can be said in a short conversation. However, they ignore the hurt and create a culture of denial. If hurts are denied, then they can remain unresolved and can lead to apathy and withdrawal. Since such hurts are widespread, we believe that it is an area of pastoral care that requires particular attention.

Another common source of suffering is related to divorce. Divorce radically alters the relationships within the extended family. For grandparents the pain is compounded by a greatly reduced contact with grandchildren. However, when contact can be retained, the presence of grandparents can be highly comforting and reassuring for the youngest generation as they grapple with radically changed relationships.

Grandparents as Primary Carers

A growing and specially distressing phenomenon is the number of grandparents who are engaged in primary care of grandchildren. They are only 1% of the grandparents but that is well over 20,000 in our country and the numbers seem to be growing steadily. Most often their care results from a sudden crisis related to drug or alcohol abuse amongst the parents of the grandchildren. The challenges to the older generation are enormous. They not only have the personal grief and possible sense of guilt about their own children but their grandchildren often are emotionally disturbed. There are also issues such as loss of income, loss of dreams of a quiet retirement, the re-learning of parenting skills in a very changed world and an increased stress on their own marital rela-

tionship. Suddenly they face the reality that they may die before they retire from the heavy burdens of child-rearing.

The primary care of grandchildren by grandparents occurs at all levels of our very multicultural Australian society, not just the affluent middle class and not just one particular ethnic group. Two per cent of our population is indigenous and experiences one of the worst poverty levels in the world. In these dire circumstances, the extent to which grandparents, often the grandmother, care for grandchildren is quite inspirational.

It is worth stressing that the law does not require grandparents to undertake the primary care of their grandchildren. They could walk away from it, but rarely is this the case. Jesus was led 'like a lamb to the slaughter'² but his role was not weakness but an act of extraordinary love. Similarly, though they will feel quite desperate at times, such grandparents are acting primarily out of love.

As one such carer, talking about his grandson put it, 'Our main fear was that we would die and then what would happen to the children ... we could go another ten years without health problems but who knows what is around the corner³.' A statement such as that is an expression of selflessness with the focus on the needs of the grandchildren. Or, as another carer put it, 'It seems like you've lost your life completely and there is no end in sight, but you

wouldn't have it any other way. In the end, it's all about love'.

Grandparents Witness to the Value of Life.

The final point we want to make is that grandparents witness to the importance of life. From the growing sense of their own mortality and the long experience of many years of life, they come to appreciate the wonder of each person. Nowhere is this more evident than in their appreciation of grandchildren. As a doctor I deal constantly with patients whose health brings them face to face with the serious issues of life. A yearning that is very evident in older people is for grandchildren. They may hesitate to mention it a lot to their own children for fear of putting too much pressure on them, but their longing is very evident to me.

Recently, a friend put it this way: 'Being a grandparent is like a birth three times over. This hit me in one sudden instant as I watched my first born walk from the birthing room at the hospital with *his* firstborn in his arms. It was like going in one instant from my own conception to childhood, then changing from son to parent, then from parent to grandparent. What a blessing to live this long! I had no idea what I did for my parents when our kids were born. Being a grandparent allows me to swim in an ocean of questions that only more reveal the wonder of our creator.'

NOTES

1 Australian Census Bureau, 2006

2 Is. 53:7

3 'Grandparents raising their grandchil-

dren', 2007, Mission Australia Research and Social Policy, www.missionaustralia.com.au

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