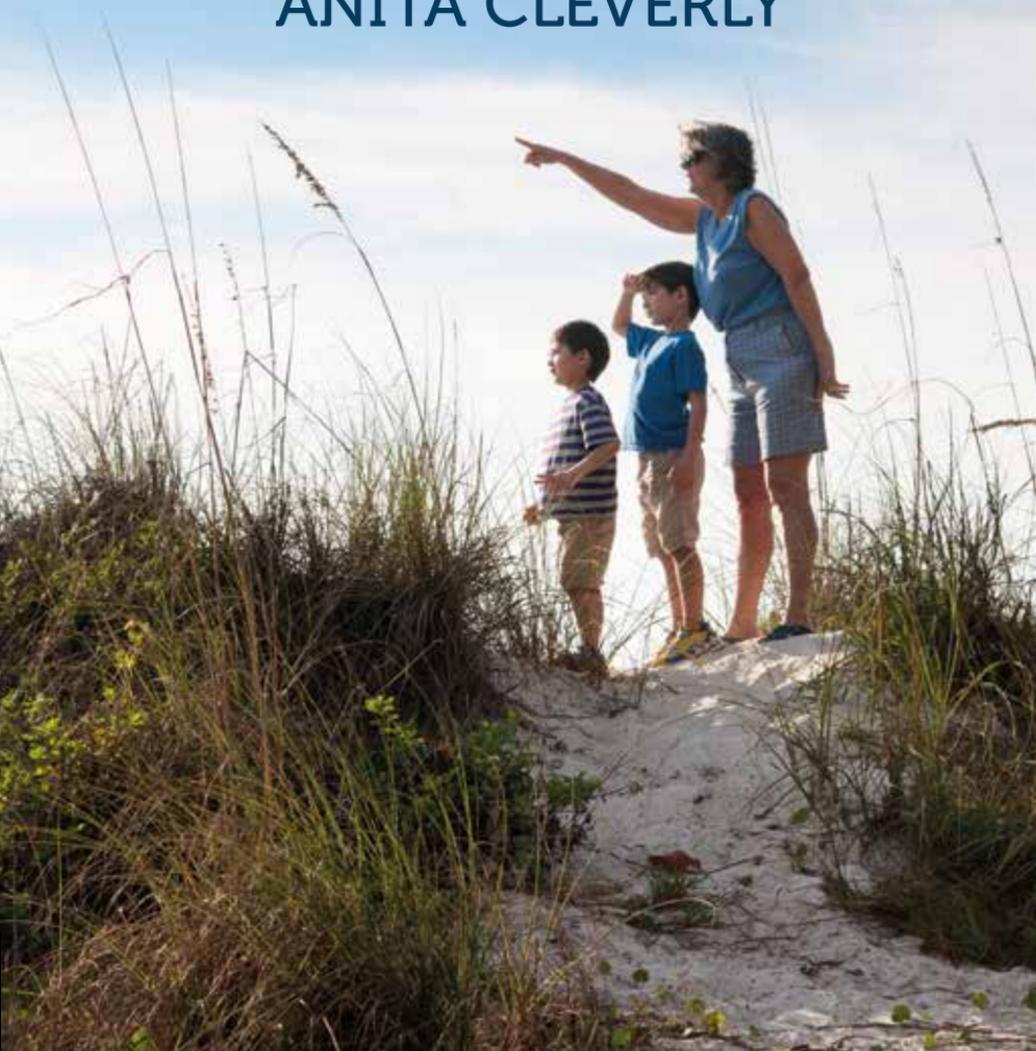


FAITHFUL GRANDPARENTS

Hope and love through the generations

ANITA CLEVERLY



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Contents

<i>Foreword by Katharine Hill</i>	10
Introduction: The heart of a grandparent	13
1 Twenty-first century grandparents	20
2 Memories of the future	35
3 The art of listening	46
4 This sunrise of wonder	54
5 A grandparent's creed	67
6 Books and the book of books	86
7 Wonderful and terrible: the Bible's grandparents	98
8 The body beautiful	110
9 Shifting tectonic plates: culture's changing landscape	122
10 Keeping faith when faith is in question	135
11 A grandparent's prayers	145
12 What about me? Soul-keeping	160
<i>Appendices</i>	177
<i>Notes</i>	182
<i>Select bibliography</i>	192

Foreword

The old saying goes, ‘You don’t miss what you never had’, and in one sense, that was certainly true for me in respect of my grandparents. They died when my parents were young, and I never knew them, so it was only when I had children of my own that I began to understand the vital role that grandparents can play in a child’s life.

I have so many memories of seeing my parents sitting on the floor with my children doing jigsaws, making jam tarts, teaching them to sew, collecting autumn leaves, reading bedtime stories and doing a hundred other things besides. In my work at Care for the Family, I have come to see how precious the nature of the grandchild–parent relationship is. As one little girl put it: ‘Everyone should have a grandparent, because they are the only grown-ups who have time.’ I’m not sure all grandparents would agree with that – life can be just as busy as it ever was – but the relationship can certainly be very special. One psychologist described it as ‘an uncomplicated form of love’. Maybe it’s because most grandparents can have all the fun of enjoying children’s company without bearing the ultimate responsibility for them.

I have had the privilege of knowing Anita as a friend for many years, and, as a wife, mother, speaker and church leader with over 30 years’ experience, she could have chosen to write about many things. I am so glad that her passion for her grandchildren has prompted her to write *Faithful Grandparents*. Reading it caused me at times to ache for the grandparents I never knew and gave me a renewed thankfulness for the influence that my children’s grandparents have been in their lives. They have taught them patience, kindness and integrity and, perhaps most of all, have shared with our children something of their own journey of faith.

I have been so grateful for that. Research has shown that one of the key elements in passing on faith to the next generation is for parents to have the support of the wider family – especially grandparents – and this truth is the *raison d'être* for *Faithful Grandparents*. While much of the content is helpful whatever one's personal beliefs, the heart of her book is to encourage Christian grandparents to play their part in passing on their faith, hope and love of Jesus to their grandchildren. Anita puts it like this: 'I dream of one day being able to help my grandchildren grasp the amazing truth that it's possible for men and women to encounter God and become his friend.' She urges us not to take this privilege for granted and to accept the challenge of helping to disciple grandchildren in their young faith. Anita acknowledges that this task is too great for parents and grandparents on their own, which is why she writes powerfully about the part the local church can play – whatever its shape or size – to nurture and guide children in their faith.

It is no surprise to me that Anita has ended the book by speaking about the power of prayer. Prayer undergirds her life, and her example over the years has taught me so much about how we can bring our most heartfelt needs to our heavenly father 24-7 – any time, any place. She gives lots of practical ideas about nurturing children's faith, but emphasises that the greatest thing a grandparent can do for their grandchild is to pray for them – for their character, for their friendships, for wisdom, for protection, but above all that their hearts will be soft and responsive to the love of their Father in heaven.

I love this prayer for grandchildren that she has written using Paul's words in Ephesians 3:

Father, show them how wide and long and high and deep your love is; show them you care about them more than anyone else does, much more than us or even their parents; show them that your love isn't restrictive, and that you delight in the person you've made them. Show them the immeasurable dimensions of your love, Lord. You can do that!

I don't yet have grandchildren of my own, but if I ever do have that privilege, I want to be a grandmother who prays like that. And I want to be a grandmother like Anita, who laughs and has fun, who spoils with ice cream, treats and too much chocolate. I want to be a grandparent who cuddles, listens and helps build foundations that can last a lifetime. And most of all, I want to be a faithful grandparent, one who does everything I can to 'declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come' (Psalm 71:18).

I believe this wonderful book will help me do that.

Katharine Hill

UK Director, Care for the Family

Introduction

The heart of a grandparent

All my longings lie open before you, Lord.

PSALM 38:9

We paced up and down, looking out of the window at the garden in its drab winter clothes; looking at each other, each playing our own inner video, and in my case with that nervous knot in my stomach. We hovered by the phone, waiting for the call that would tell us our first grandchild had arrived. Finally, after a long, long wait, with every passing minute adding to the list of possible disasters, the news came. A baby boy had arrived in the world, and we set out to meet him, filled with the heady mixture of fizzing joy and relief. But when we got there, it was to find that the labour had been long and agonisingly difficult, with enough blood lost to necessitate a transfusion, and to see our daughter emptied of strength, pale and in pain. It's impossible to exaggerate the power and passion of feeling that washed over me like a rolling sea as we entered the ward and saw our exhausted firstborn, somehow diminished after her ordeal, and beside her in the hospital bassinet her tiny son, practising sight, as he slowly opened and closed his eyes, and moving his arms in the slow-motion way of newborns.

The initial impact of such an encounter is huge, and for a while everything seemed a whirl, my feelings lurching like a roller coaster from acute anxiety for my daughter to knee-weakening adoration for this tiny boy and back again. But my heart rate slowed with the

passing minutes, and after a while I found myself able to stare and stare at Reuben, drinking in the perfect and minute fingers and toes, the scrunched-up facial features, the silky-smooth wrinkles of skin and limb – this whole new person, who had been carefully put together in his mother’s womb, as David’s marvellous song in Psalm 139 says:

For you created my inmost being;
 you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 your works are wonderful,
 I know that full well.
 My frame was not hidden from you
 when I was made in the secret place,
 when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes saw my unformed body;
 all the days ordained for me were written in your book
 before one of them came to be.

PSALM 139:13–16

This is a beautiful manifesto for the sanctity of human life – the initial creation (v. 13), the slow and precise process from embryo to foetus. Human life begins at the moment of conception, and there is general consensus that the embryo becomes a foetus, a developing baby, at around the tenth week of development, by which time the brain, heart, lungs, internal organs and limbs will all have formed, as will the sex of the infant, who is now about two inches long. There is such a sense of care and tenderness in the psalm. Knitting and weaving take time and precision, and every stitch and thread counts.

If we stop to consider the biological minutiae of pregnancy, we cannot but say with David, ‘I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful’ (v. 14). Then he adds, ‘I know that full well.’ There is something much bigger than itself in this simple phrase, that shines through its five unremarkable words. There’s an epiphany here, a revealing to David of the utter miracle of the

creation of human life. So David's certainty of God's exact and intimate knowledge of our earthly existence from conception's spark to last breath naturally follows (vv. 15–16). He marvels at the omnipresence of God even in the most secret of places, and praises God for his limitless knowledge of the future.

All of these thoughts tumbled through my mind (in much less orderly fashion!) as I stared at Reuben. What a moment, what a miracle, what a life experience rooted in time and place, yet far beyond and outside both! If you are a parent or grandparent, this sense of miracle resonates with you, for you know it too.

Birth is always a mixture of joy and sorrow, peace and panic, pain and bliss. And this is what families are too. Every human life contains the experiences of triumph and tragedy, celebration and commiseration, and has times of peace and steadiness and times of conflict and turbulence. Every human being is born into a family of some kind, and so every family is visited by the panoply of trial and testing as well as blessing that is given to humankind.

It's into this reality that I hope to speak, with an aspiration to offer some thoughts that may help other grandparents. This is a book about what it means to be a grandparent today. But it is not just about what it might mean to be a grandparent, but also about being one who identifies as a Christian – a disciple of Christ – one who believes that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, without consigning the vast history of humanity's spiritual quests and discoveries, expressed in all sorts of philosophies and religions, to the not-important or insignificant box. It's a book for people who respect the spiritual explorations of human beings through the ages, yet believe that the incarnation was the most complete revelation of God to humanity, and is the ultimate explanation of who God is.

But who cares what grandparents believe, and why should it matter? Well, this is also a book for grandparents who want to communicate these convictions to their grandchildren, principally through who

they are as well as what they may say; through actions and attitudes as well as words. It's a book for people for whom their faith matters, for whom belief in God is non-negotiable. It's a book for people in the second half of life, whose faith has stood the test of time, through tragedy as well as triumph. It's a book that I pray might bring you comfort and strength if you are in a season of testing as you read it.

For some such people it will be a matter of reinforcing and backing up their children, the parents of their grandchildren, who are committed to bringing their children up with a strong faith in Jesus Christ. For others, whose own children do not share this faith, for whatever reason, it will be a question of aspiring to set a good example to their grandchildren and praying for 'conversations that matter' at different times, all the while clearly respecting their own children's opinions and convictions on matters of faith.

And then it's a book for curious grandparents, who wonder what has happened to the world since they were children, who perhaps feel afraid or dismayed by some societal developments, and for whom an explanation that makes sense and offers hope would resonate. I asked many grandparents for their thoughts about such a book and you'll hear their voices from time to time through the pages. Here's one response:

My request is for a book of hope and reassurance. And a book to help me *not* be an old fogey who goes on about the state of the world and saying things like, 'It's not how I would bring up my children.' I don't want to be a grandmother who is so disapproving that my grandchildren won't come to me because they know I won't understand.

So maybe in the end it's about us and not about the children! How to be an older man or woman today. How to find peace as our families implode and explode. It is happening to us *all*. We are having our lives shaken like never before, and we need to know how to hold on to Jesus.

This is a book, therefore, that will look at the cultural changes that have taken place so rapidly since the childhood of the present generation of grandparents. 'Constant change is here to stay,' goes the saying, so maybe it's also a book for those who at present are parents and therefore may become grandparents in the future, when the world will almost certainly look very different again from how it does today.

I write from the perspective of one who has travelled far and found the hand of Jesus to have proved faithful. He has not let go, even in the dark and desperate times. While I am perplexed and troubled by many things in our beautiful world, my hope is that whether you are reading it as a Christian, an agnostic or an atheist, this book will give you food for thought, and that whatever your convictions you will find in these pages something to nourish you, something to touch you and something to woo your spirit.

While I write chiefly as a grandparent for other grandparents, I pray that our sons and daughters and our grandchildren might also find here food for thought, encouragement for the journey and comfort for the soul.

In Psalm 78, the psalmist speaks of this matter of handing faith in God from one generation to the next:

Listen, dear friends, to God's truth, bend your ears to what I tell you. I'm chewing on the morsel of a proverb; I'll let you in on the sweet old truths, stories we heard from our fathers, counsel we learned at our mother's knee. We're not keeping this to ourselves, we're passing it along to the next generation – God's fame and fortune, the marvellous things he has done. He planted a witness in Jacob, set his Word firmly in Israel, then commanded our parents to teach it to their children so the next generation would know, and all the generations to come – know the truth and tell the stories so their children can trust in God.¹

While Eugene Peterson's translation makes comprehension easy, the NIV conveys a real sense of generational descent:

[God]... established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors [generation 1] to teach their children [generation 2], so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born [generation 3], and they in turn would tell their children [generation 4].²

For the Christian, faith in Jesus as the Word made flesh and the eternal truth is not understood as something that is subject to alteration or modification by cultural developments, scientific discoveries or philosophical theories. Rather, it is understood as something that is outside time and history, something that is unchangeable and ineradicable and of which the driving force is love.

'Love' is a big word, which can mean many things and has been used to communicate many things, not always easily connected with the generally beneficent meaning of love. For our purposes, it includes peace, patience, joy, sacrifice, suffering, endurance, perseverance, trust and many other qualities that are esteemed in a character.

Writing to his niece from prison shortly before his execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer addresses her and her husband in the wedding sermon that he was not able to deliver in person:

Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God's holy ordinance through which he wills to perpetuate the human race till the end of time. In your love you see only your two selves in the world, but in your marriage you are a link in the chain of the generations, which God causes to come and to pass away to his glory, and calls into his kingdom. In your love you see only the heaven of your happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your

own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal – it is a status, an office.³

In the same way that Bonhoeffer draws a distinction between the personal relationship of marriage and the public calling conferred by the office or status of marriage, we might draw a distinction between an individual's personal convictions about faith and religion and the permanent or overarching centrality of Christ – his birth, life, death and resurrection – to the Christian faith.

As little as perhaps 20 years ago, that paragraph would not possess the inflammatory potential that it does today! In the new era of post-truth and the more jaded era of relativism, the suggestion that there are permanent truths, such as those expressed in Psalm 78, can be greeted with anything from cynicism or pity to outrage. I hope such a suggestion will not prompt such a reaction in you, but rather pique your interest and draw you into thoughts more inspired than inflammatory, more consoling than contentious.

When researching material for the book, I was sent a blog post entitled 'Gifts grandparents give'.⁴ The writer listed celebration, companionship, community and character as these gifts, and summed up her thoughts like this: 'Grandparents recognise and call out the good, offering us roots while honouring our wings.' Poetic, true – and aspirational!

We'll be taking a closer look at all the aspects of being a grandparent that are highlighted here. All of them reflect the longing that is at the heart of this book. Please come with me to think about being faithful grandparents, keeping faith alive against increasing odds and being committed to communicating it in a myriad of ways as we pray and long for its safe passage from one generation to the next.

1

Twenty-first century grandparents

Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.

PSALM 71:18

I am where I am today because my grandmother gave me the foundation for success.

Oprah Winfrey¹

Quite late in his life, my father undertook an imaginative and touching project. He interviewed my mother at some length about her unusual childhood, and made a CD recording of their conversation. He did this for posterity, and he did it with heart-breaking love, asking his questions with great tenderness and patience. He died eight years before my mother and not until two years after her death could I bring myself to listen to voices I loved but could no longer hear.

The conversation between my parents was in a way a study of grandparents, which is a rare thing. The last thorough study of grandparenting was conducted over 50 years ago, in 1965. University of Chicago's Bernice Neugarten, one of the leading gerontologists at the time, identified five patterns of grandparenting.² I wonder whether you can relate your grandparents or yourself to one of these:

- 1 Formal: follows what are believed to be the appropriate guidelines for the grandparenting role, which include providing occasional services and maintaining an interest in the grandchild, but not becoming overly involved.
- 2 Fun-seeker: emphasises the leisure aspects of the role and primarily provides entertainment for the grandchild.
- 3 Surrogate parent: takes over the caretaking role with the child.
- 4 Reservoir of family wisdom (usually a grandfather): the head of the family who dispenses advice and resources but also controls the parent generation.
- 5 Distant figure: has infrequent contact with the grandchildren, appearing only on holidays and special occasions.

My own grandparents fell into the fifth category – distant figures with whom we had infrequent contact and who we saw only on holiday visits and special occasions. This was not for any relational reason, but simply because of geography. My parents were both born and brought up in the Republic of Ireland and moved to England after their marriage so that my father could take up a teaching post at an English public school, where he taught classics and later became a housemaster. Typical of her time, my mother abandoned her training as an occupational therapist to marry my father. Both had previously been in the army.

As a consequence, my grandparents were mysterious and fascinating, especially my maternal grandmother, who had married a man 27 years her senior (who died in the year I was born.) Theirs was an unconventional marriage, according to my mother, although it was typical of the time in its remoteness and formality. They lived on a farm, where my grandmother bred smooth-haired fox terriers and Dobermanns, which she showed at Crufts and elsewhere for many years. It was perhaps this aspect of her life that accounted for her elegant and flamboyant dress sense.

My paternal grandmother was altogether different: small and very cosy, not at all fashion-conscious, and perpetually buying and giving

presents. Her husband, my grandfather, was tall and thin, with a serious face, and worked for the pharmaceutical company Allen and Hanbury, as well as having enlisted in the army and fought in both wars. I found them both fascinating, intriguing and somehow exotic, as a child might, but in those pre-internet days, distance took its toll, and I hardly knew them at all. Even their deaths didn't make much of an impact. Away in France, at the age of 17, I received from my host family's mother a blunt announcement one day, with no warning at all: '*Votre grand-mère est morte.*'³ I think I was more upset by the woman's total absence of emotional intelligence than by the loss of my grandmother.

As well as recording the long conversation with my mother, my father had the wisdom to write a sort of family history for his children and grandchildren, in which he paints a portrait of these figures who are so dimly lit for me. He writes of my mother's father:

[He] was what was called in those days a gentleman farmer. On [my mother's] birth certificate it just says 'Gentleman'! He was born in 1866. In his prime he was a fine figure of a man, a person of strong principles and character. In the years before World War I, he looked after the three family farms, going about a good deal on horseback. He was a well-known rider, nicknamed 'Brave Dean'. Being a gentleman farmer did not mean being rich. The land on which you farmed – mostly fattening livestock for the market – had its value, but the income to be had from it was uncertain, and the lifestyle was plain and simple.

During the first war he served in the Army Service Corps, becoming a captain, and travelling overseas to Thessalonica. Soon after the end of the war, he, now 46, married your 19-year-old grandmother. With a clutch of contemporary, fashionable names – Winifred Lorna Gwendoline – she was always known as Johnnie (and much later to us as Granjohn) possibly because she was a true tomboy, or maybe because her

parents had hoped for a boy. She learnt to ride and shoot as well as any boy, and for the last two years of the war was in London serving the war effort by driving and maintaining quite heavy delivery lorries with massive engines and solid tyres. However, she also enjoyed dinners and theatre trips with a series of admiring young men!

My mother went to the village school for a short time, but after the family moved to the farm, she never went to school again. Her older cousin, who was an intellectual and literary woman with an honours degree from Trinity College in Dublin, used to ride out from Slane on her bicycle five days a week, and teach my mother and her brother 'all that anyone needs to know about reading, writing and arithmetic, plus a love of English literature and a great respect for beauty and truth'.

All of this describes my mother's unusual childhood. My grandmother was, I think, far more interested in her dogs than in her children, and as result my mother's affections were more readily given to Lizzie the housekeeper, who almost certainly offered 'Miss Betty' more maternal care than my grandmother did.

This exotic, eccentric woman was my last surviving grandparent. In her late 70s, she moved from Ireland to west Wales to live near my parents, themselves nearing retirement. Myself now an adult, I was therefore able at this late stage to get to know this feisty, fascinating woman a little.

I cleaned house for her for a while, and eventually discovered that she would place a little pile of cigarette ash under a table to see how thorough my cleaning was. She often smoked two cigarettes at the same time, holding one in each hand, which was a source of anxiety for my parents. And she had a fascinating turn of phrase, always delivered in the Irish lilt that I adored, and still do: 'Ach, the traffic in this village goes so fast it takes the sight out of your eyes.'

Invited to supper at my parents' house, she asked my father what she should wear. 'Oh, nothing,' he replied. 'It's just a simple supper.' She duly turned up and flung open her coat to reveal just underwear! 'Well, you said I was to wear nothing,' she explained.

Towards the end of her life, when she was in hospital with a broken hip, I went to visit her with my new husband. Trying to be thoughtful, I suggested he wait downstairs while I scout out the lie of the land. 'Where the hell is Charlie?' came her voice from the far corner of the ward. 'I haven't seen the sight of a decent man for weeks.' This was a woman who even in her 80s was an ardent fan of boxing on the TV, claiming to love the bodies of the men she watched fighting, just as she loved watching bare-chested builders working on her house or other houses in the village.

My mother could not have been more different from her – a shy, reserved woman, who perhaps because of her lack of education (though the education she received from cousin Emma was better than many) lacked confidence and was not at all outspoken like her mother, though her quiet temperament was almost certainly a response in part to her mother's extroverted nature.

The story of my grandparents, and in particular my maternal grandmother, is a reminder that, while grandparents may be relegated to the past and regarded as sweet but irrelevant, every individual is completely unique, with their own fascinating history. It's a no-brainer – getting to know your grandparents opens up a whole new world, another time, another place. I wish I'd had a chance with the rest of mine.

Who are we as grandparents? One thing to note is that we have a rich, diverse and complex genetic history. Every sexually reproducing person has a maximum of four genetic grandparents, eight genetic great-grandparents, 16 genetic great-great-grandparents, 32 genetic great-great-great-grandparents, 64 genetic great-great-great-great-grandparents, and so on. Each of us is a refined composite of a whole

host of genetic individualities. While we and our children have added to the rich tapestry of our grandchildren's genes, we mustn't forget that our own tapestry is equally marvellous, stretching back through the generations as it does. We're not like iPhones, each version adding improvements to the basic first model.

Grandparents are a rich source of learning about the past, a lot more interesting than a school textbook. In addition, we're quite likely to relate more easily to our grandparents, given the normal separating tensions that occur between children and parents.

With the role of grandparents rapidly evolving, more study is now taking place, mostly in the United States, but also in Europe. Three of the different 'types' of grandparent identified by Neugarten – 'formal', 'reservoir of family wisdom' and 'distant figure' – provide an immediate contrast with today's generally much more involved grandparent. What were believed to be the appropriate guidelines, as seen in the 'formal' type (to be polite but remote) and the 'reservoir of family wisdom' type (characterised by control), are both becoming much less common, thankfully in the latter case.

Here are some current definitions of contemporary grandparenting, with a touch of humour, which highlight the contrast:

Grandparent: one who breaks most of the rules and loves every second of it.

Grandparents: parents, but with more sleep, fewer rules and an endless supply of sweets.

Grandparents: so easy to operate, even a child can do it.

So different from the grandparents I never got to know well. No one would deny that becoming a parent is a defining moment in a person's life – many people describe the birth of their first child as one of the most momentous events of their life – but becoming a

grandparent is also a rite of passage and is often a profound and emotional experience. Gransnet, and other similar internet sites, are full of little sayings (albeit often sentimental) that try to express this, such as, 'Just when I thought I was too old to fall in love again I became a grandparent.'

Being a grandparent is more complicated than being a parent, because we don't choose to become one; someone else chooses for us. Lots of emotions accompany becoming a grandparent – pleasure, tension, anxiety, gratitude and for some there's even a bit of resentment, as they are moved away from the centre of the relational circle. The new arrival brings positive and negative expectations for the grandparent, both of themselves and their adult children. At the same time, many grandparents experience a love almost as overwhelming as they felt when their own child was born.

Grandparenting is just what it says: grand. The dictionary definition of 'grand' is 'magnificent, splendid, noble, wonderful or very pleasing; of great importance and distinction'. Who wouldn't want such a title? Yet the title 'grandparent' seems less grand than that of 'parent', perhaps because it's often seen as synonymous with old, which is considered bad in our youth-obsessed, age-rejecting culture.

But grandparenting today is not necessarily about old age; many healthy, active, working baby boomers are becoming energetic grandparents. TV and children's books often portray grandparents as fussy, aged and sedentary, perhaps with infirmities (Roald Dahl, guilty as charged for your portrayals of irascible, unpredictable grandparents!), but many children today have grandparents aged between 40 and 60. The typical screen grandparent should really be a great-grandparent. The woman who has infant grandchildren is not likely to have silver hair in a bun, but would be portrayed more realistically in jogging clothes on her way to the gym or in a suit coming home from work.

It hasn't always been like this. The role and influence of grandparents have changed beyond imagination, and generally for the better, over the centuries. Here's a brief overview of some of the changes.

During the 18th and early 19th centuries grandparents, especially grandfathers, exerted considerable economic and social influence based on land ownership. Older male landowners generally retained both their land and their authority over their families until they died.

With the industrial revolution, however, this authority and control diminished as new technology made the talents of the old seem obsolete, and the new economy provided an attractive alternative to following the family business. As life expectancy increased, so did the number of tri-generational households, with the elderly increasingly requiring care. Yet it was the elderly and infirm who traditionally held authority, so the evolving situation naturally led to conflict and dissension in families, with younger generations ready to assume leadership and take the initiative.

In 1885 Samuel Butler wrote:

I believe that more unhappiness comes from this source [tri-generational households] than from any other. I mean from the attempt to prolong the family connection unduly and make people hang together artificially who would never naturally do so... and the old people do not really like it so much better than the young.⁴

The view of old people as burdensome and unproductive slowly emerged, stemming from the growth of tri-generational households. Ageing was viewed almost as a disease, leading to older people being less valued, especially as workers, and sometimes also within the family.

As a consequence, households started to include two rather than three generations. In 1900 over 60% of older adults lived with adult

children; by 1962 it was 25%, and by 1975 only 14% cohabited with adult children. By now older adults had started seeing autonomy and leisure as the goals of the 'golden years'. Grandparents no longer had an important economic role in family life, but nor did they now pose any threat. Mutual independence meant they could become friends with their grandchildren. While it's still true that many children are encouraged to be polite to their grandparents, the onus is on the grandparents to invest their energies in making friends with their grandchildren, rather than waiting to be venerated. They have travelled a long way from being in charge of the family to having to build their own role in the family. This isn't a bad thing; it's a real – and good – example of giving without counting the cost.

The dramatic increase in longer and healthier life expectancy has steadily produced a society in which many of us can expect to become great-grandparents as well as grandparents. This is true across the social spectrum. A minister friend remembers the presence of great-grandparents in his congregation, each generation of girls becoming pregnant in their teens. At the other end of the childbearing spectrum, with children sometimes, if rarely, being born to mothers in their 50s, and many now delaying childbearing until their 30s or 40s, there are some who become parents at the age previous generations were grandparents.

Grandparenting has also become more difficult to define than it was in earlier times, and the baby boomer generation (to which I belong) is changing both grandparenting and the concept of ageing in general. Those born in the years immediately after World War II grew up in a time of radical social change and taboo-breaking, and they still are an outspoken, rather than quiet and acquiescent, generation. As the family changes, grandparenting changes, and it's becoming a much more complicated picture to paint. Lots of factors contribute to this.

First, hugely increased mobility means that families are often spread out geographically, so lots of children aren't able to see their

grandparents regularly. This can sometimes lead to a lack of interest in the lives of grandparents, so that grandchildren may grow up without any sense of their family history or of the now-distant youth of their grandparents.

Second, the pace of life has quickened exponentially, as electronic communications have taken centre stage in our lives. This means that even families who live near one another may not be able to, or may choose not to, spend so much time together as was natural for former generations.

Third, declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy mean that families today are often shaped like a beanpole, with a more equal number of people in each generation, rather than a pyramid, as used to be the case, with a few older members at the top and lots of young members at the bottom. This is further accentuated by people choosing to have fewer children, a choice often influenced by pursuing a career before having children at a later age.

With fewer family members in the clan, it becomes more important to maintain intergenerational relationships if family contact and coherence is not to be lost:

Contact with grandchildren generally declines as grandchildren reach adulthood and embark on their own independent life – unless proactive steps are taken by the grandparents to counteract diminishing contact.⁵

One thing that will help us in this is to understand as much as we can of the different things that being a grandparent might mean today. Consider the huge diversity of situations that a grandmother might find herself in today:

- A woman holds a full-time managerial position in a multinational company, and on the weekends also makes it a priority to spend at least a couple of hours visiting her four-year-old granddaughter.

- A 52-year-old housewife can hardly wait for her twin grandchildren to be born.
- A 43-year-old divorced woman goes to the hospital to see her first grandchild.
- A 62-year-old grandmother helps her teenage granddaughter through the divorce of her parents.
- An immigrant grandmother, living with her daughter and son-in-law, participates in child-rearing and passes down traditions from the 'old country'.
- Another grandmother helps her teenage daughter care for her new baby as they all share a home.
- A woman and her husband, hoping to retire, must now continue working, as they are raising their grandson because his mother is addicted to drugs.
- A couple goes to court to try to get visiting access to their three young grandchildren, because the parents are denying them access.
- A remarried woman buys Christmas presents for her three biological grandchildren and two step-grandchildren.
- A son brings his mother to live with him, his wife and two teenagers after she is diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

This is just a handful of examples, by no means exhaustive, among which we note that grandparenting brings sadness as well as joy. A number of the examples above reflect the pain and suffering that is part of being human, and one of the most troubling is that of a couple going to court to gain visiting access to their grandchildren, something that has become increasingly common. Some 2,000 grandparents applied for child-arrangement orders in 2016, an arduous and very costly process. Even if the court rules for access, there is little that holds the parents to abide by the court ruling. And who among us wants to access our grandchildren via the law?

When access to grandchildren is blocked, it can feel like what some grandparents call a 'living bereavement'. It can have very negative effects on physical as well as emotional health. Studies show that:

Grandparents who are unable to maintain contact with their grandchildren due to parental divorce or disagreements within the family are likely to suffer a variety of ill consequences, including poor mental and physical health, depression, feelings of grief, and poorer quality of life.⁶

Tragically, there are even stories of grandparents sending gifts and cards for birthdays, only to receive a visit from the police investigating an accusation of harassment.

The good news is that in 2018 the Ministry of Justice in the UK began to examine proposals for giving grandparents an automatic right to see their grandchildren. MPs from all parties in the UK are backing an amendment to the Children's Act of 1989 to enshrine in law the child's right to have a relationship with their grandparents and other close members of their extended family.

As journalist Allison Pearson wrote:

To say this reform is long overdue is putting it mildly. The law has failed quite abysmally to keep pace with social changes which have seen grandparents assuming an ever-greater role in youngsters' lives... Two-thirds of the nation's grandparents – that's five million people – now provide regular childcare for their grandchildren.

She goes on to say that many women feel confident about going back to work because 'not only is granny cheaper than childcare, but she's one of the few people who loves your child as much as you do... This vast unpaid contribution to the well-being of society is scandalously unacknowledged.'⁷

Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England, is behind the push for reform. Speaking specially, but not exclusively, of children from broken homes, she says, 'Children should have the right to keep in touch with their grandparents.' She is anxious about

the fact that there is now a whole generation of parents who deal with behaviour management through ‘super-nanny’ instruction, from websites or TV, and she’s keen to see parenting, including sex education, put back in the hands of parents:

If you go back a couple of generations you would have family members who would live in the same town, the same street, the same house... You would gain information because you would have your own mum on hand... I grew up in a household with grandparents – I know how it anchors you in life, and the benefits it can bring.⁸

For some, the grandparent season can be a second chance. Grandchildren can offer a fresh start. Maybe we feel that we didn’t spend as much time with our children when they were young as we would have liked, perhaps because of work demands or what we now see as missed opportunities. We learn from the mistakes we made in our parenting days from the new batch of little ones – hindsight is a beautiful thing! Grandparenting offers many of the joys and benefits of parenting, without many of the hassles, constraints and day-to-day responsibilities.

Apart from all this, the grandparent–grandchild relationship is second in emotional importance only to the parent–child relationship. One of the goals of this book is to bring hope and encouragement to grandparents that, whatever our unique context, we can enjoy loving and being loved by our grandchildren, and that there can be close and valued relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren. In one survey, many respondents said they wished they could see their grandchildren more often. And one of the most popular answers to the question ‘What is most satisfying about being a grandparent?’ was ‘Passing on family and religious values.’⁹ As Christian grandparents, we want somehow to convey not so much religious values, as the joys of knowing the fatherhood of God, the friendship of Jesus and the help of the Holy Spirit, and to be a good ambassador for the truths all these embody.

Grandparents generally receive a good press today, certainly when compared with the results of case studies from the 1930s to the 1950s,¹⁰ which reflected the interfering and didactic ways of past generations, when grandmothers were often stricter and more authoritarian than mothers. Both my mother and mother-in-law (both born in the 1920s) describe their grandmothers as stern and frightening:

My maternal grandmother was rather wealthy – she had a chauffeur, and she was a bit frightening. My paternal grandmother lived with us, and I didn't like her because my mother didn't like her. I suppose I just copied my mother.¹¹

My grandmother was a very old lady, looked after by my maiden aunt Kathleen, herself a rather fearsome figure to a child. I didn't really like visiting her, because we had to go up to the bedroom where she resided in bed, with a fire in the room... We were taken up to the bedside and I suppose we were kissed. It was all rather horrible, really. She had black on, with a black ribbon round her neck and a cap. I think it only happened once a year.¹²

While writing this chapter, a newspaper article caught my eye: 'Evolution dictates you tell us a story, Gran!' The article reported that 20 years of research by American anthropologists among a remote Amazonian tribe of Amerindian people in Bolivia suggests that time with Granny and Grandpa is not just about family bonding, but that grandparents may have evolved specifically to pass on information to younger generations. This, it said, could help answer the much-studied question of why humans live longer than most other primates. Most primates rarely live beyond their 50s, while women often survive for decades after the menopause. The research discovered that with fading strength and productivity came increasingly powerful storytelling. While parents in the tribe provide day-to-day instruction, the grandparents provide the bigger picture, transmitting history and culture. Of the younger members of the

tribe, 84% said they heard most of their stories from older relatives, mostly grandparents.¹³

In the light of this, we have so much to offer our grandchildren, because in a way this book is all about providing the bigger picture. So come with me and we'll explore what we expect of ourselves as 21st-century multipurpose and multifunctional grandparents. I want to hold out encouragement to grandparents who, often with a deep longing, desire to communicate their faith and their conviction that knowing God is a wonderful thing.

We've seen that if we want to be close to our grandchildren, we need to take proactive steps to plant, water and tend our precious friendships with them right from their earliest days, if we can. Let's look at the many and diverse ways grandparents can connect and love without being intrusive or seeming bossy.

But just a word to you if you're reading this and thinking, 'I've missed the boat; it's too late.' In the upside-down (or right-side-up) economy of the kingdom of God, the last shall be first and the first shall be last. With God, it's never too late to start again or to start something new, and it's my prayer that if you're reading this from a place of loss or family suffering, you'll find great hope for the days ahead as we travel on together.



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