

A Generous Lap

A Spirituality of Grandparenting

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Introduction



This book celebrates the spirituality of grandparenting. It would make a fine gift for those just becoming grandparents, an appreciation of those who've been so for many years, an encouragement of those still deeply involved. Most of all, it offers affirmation of what grandparents do naturally—love the grandkids. While not skirting the challenges and difficulties, it shows how for many, a renewed involvement with children can lead to the unveiling and flourishing of the truest, best self.

Two themes are interwoven here: the experiences of one grandparent, and the spirituality that saturates them. To see the former without the latter might be like seeing the world without color. How sad it would seem to miss the sunburst through the flaming maple leaves, or the crystalline path that light lays on blue water. In my own Catholic tradition, much of the spirituality has been contributed by celibate clergy and religious women. So the viewpoint of a mother of four and grandmother of six is somewhat unusual, still forging a tentative way.

The focus here is on grandchildren ten and under. Although the interview section contains the voices of older grandparents speaking of older grandchildren, the primary age group discussed is younger children.

So, we learn from unique small people, sent into our lives at this precise moment to teach exactly what we need for the final chapter. In this last act, we learn anew how “everything in our lives is another lesson in the continual school of conscious loving.”¹ Even the times we fail one another because we’re tired or distracted become opportunities to appreciate the divine mercy that gives us the oomph to start over. In Grandparent School there are no tests or grades, but what stakes could be higher than contributing to the growth and development of a healthy human being? Just as with Jesus, “the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (Lk 2:52). Lucky grandparents—we get to watch, and sometimes contribute to that miraculous process!

A scripture text I’ve always liked for its long arc rings especially true now: “We always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith” (2 Thess 1:11). So grandparenting seems a natural continuation of the messy-splendid work of child-rearing. Our family weathered many of the challenges that all families confront: small mistakes, big failures, illnesses, arguments, accidents, miscommunications, deaths, disappointments, but somehow, through God’s unearned grace, we’re doing okay—even laughing sometimes—and are graced by six lovely grandchildren.

¹ Richard Rohr, *A Spring within Us* (Albuquerque, NM: CAC Publishing, 2016), 74.

Four live nearby in the Bay Area in northern California, and two are in Seattle, Washington, giving us the experience of both close-up and long-distance grandparenting.

Many Varieties

So I write from this experience, the only one I know. But it is my hope that some bits will resonate with readers, that they might smile, or get misty eyed, or chortle, seeing themselves. I am aware of the challenges many grandparents face, caused by ill health, distance, finances, custody battles, addictions, difficult in-laws, or some sticky combination of all these obstacles. Many grandparents ache for closer contact, but are sadly denied that. Many are tangled in family configurations that make it unclear exactly what their role is. Many people, only distantly related, soldier on, attending the birthday celebrations, holidays, and graduations, not exactly sure what to do or why they're there, but trying, with that background echo of "showing up is 90 percent of the game." I hope that readers will find at least a toehold in these pages, no matter what their official title or lack of one.

Like many roles, grandparenting comes with its own Hallmark card stereotypes: grandmas bake cookies, have large, comforting laps, and want only to feed you, while grandpas want nothing more than to take you fishing. It can be a process to work with little humans to expand their worldview and identify the uniqueness each person brings to the role. "Grandmum works on spreadsheets, and she needs her quiet time in the mornings." "Granddad is not alive anymore, but he loved holding you and still loves you." Or, "Neither one can hear or see very well but they like telling you bedtime stories."

I've recently discovered what psychologists call *fading affect bias*, which means that unpleasant feelings fade faster than pleasant ones.² If all the stories here seem relentlessly cheerful, this may explain it. How quickly I've forgotten the tantrums, projectile vomiting, inconsolable midnight crying, flus, viruses, sleepless nights, unexplained maladies, wasted time or money, and garden-variety meltdowns. To say nothing of the angry words, failed promises, miscommunications, and failures. Rest assured: all of that happened, whether or not it's emphasized. A family with haloes we are not. A family with some experiences worth sharing, maybe.

So, too, in many families grandparents have been hurt or made mistakes, yet they still come to events, give a gift, or try to encourage grandchildren innocent of adult complexities. Praise to all who are doing the best they can; may they find affirmation in these pages.

Scripture

Scripture is sprinkled throughout this book, seen as Jesus saw the Hebrew sacred texts, through the lens of his own experience. So if I read about the cure of Peter's mother-in-law, I wonder if her grandchildren were peeking from behind a bundle or chair, hushed into quiet by the unusual circumstances. They'd rarely seen their beloved granny lying down—usually she was up and cooking for them, or chasing away flies from the bread cooling on the table. Now, she was eerily still, and there was a stranger in their house!

² Arthur Brooks, *From Strength to Strength* (New York: Penguin, 2022), 195.

Stories like that one show Jesus enmeshed in dailiness: the birthday party as well as the funeral, the laughter as well as the long, dull stretches, the meals and hungers, seasons of feasts and fasts. He knew the wedding dance at Cana as well as the painful trudge to Calvary.

Surely when Jesus welcomed the children, some grandparents watched at a discreet distance, relieved their dear ones hadn't been shooed away or treated as nuisances. Sometimes a different Bible translation can give a new angle. We're all familiar with the story of Jesus's disciples having an argument about who's the greatest. (Indeed, we've been part of these arguments ourselves, often hoping *we're* the brightest, healthiest, wealthiest, most achieving, all-round Best in the Bunch.) Jesus doesn't add a word to the verbosity, much of it surely pompous and self-aggrandizing.

Instead, he pulls a child into their midst. (Consoling, that there were children conveniently running through his life.) Some versions say he took the child in his arms, but I was struck by the NRSV translation, which says he "put it by his side" (overlooking for now that odd pronoun), then continues to say that "whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me" (Lk 9:48). Jesus's gesture is tangible, visible proof that there is never any separation between God and us. Like BFFs in grade school, we are always side by side.

How often have I been blessed to have children by my side: sometimes walking together, sometimes pressed close for a story or a snuggle. It's a warming, wordless reassurance of presence, much like A. A. Milne's characters in *Winnie the Pooh*: "Piglet, taking Pooh's hand: 'I just wanted to be sure of you.'" In a world that can seem chaotic and terrifying, we

have each other at our sides, just as those fortunate children had Jesus. And according to his promise, we have him too.

It's Not about Biology

It may seem odd that some of the people who have most influenced my spirituality aren't grandparents. But the two to whom this book is dedicated, Bill Kueppers and Vince Hovley, SJ, despite having no biological children, are indeed kindly and grandfatherly guides. My first meetings with each one were remarkably similar. I was lost and late, and they stood outside, like the father of the prodigal son, awaiting my arrival.

Father Richard Rohr, another non-grandpa who is quoted often throughout the book, coined the term “grand parent” (note the space between words) to refer to people of a certain age who've grown so spacious and comfortable that children and adults feel safe around them. “All you have to do is meet one such shining person and you know that he or she is surely the goal of humanity and the delight of God.”³ We can all attest from a few we've known that one needn't have children or grandchildren to become like that!

This is also a unique opportunity: a book like this probably couldn't have been written a hundred years ago. In the United States the life expectancy for men in 1920 was 53.6 years; for women it was 54.6 years. Compare that to average life expectancy in 2022: 78.93 years. Even if children were born to younger parents, few would've had the luxury of many years to enjoy grandparenting.

³ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 125.

Some websites on grandparenting seem designed primarily to sell us stuff. Subtly or not so subtly they suggest that if we just buy that game, costume, or gimmick, grandparenting success and trophies are ours! It's the same tired trap they laid for us as parents: for a painless charge to your credit card, ensure your child's success in school/sports/society! But now we're old and cynical, more willing to invest the only things that really count: our time, our talent, our crazy-smitten love. The book's focus on the spiritual side will unfold in the next chapter.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What has been your experience of grandparenting?
2. How do you interweave your grandparenting with your spirituality?