

SOME THOUGHTS ON BEING A GRANDPARENT:

Being a grandparent is possibly the best reward to arrive with age. It compensates rather marvellously for the assaults of the ageing process and in some ways represents the fulfilment of years of one's own parenting. A friend said that seeing her own children become parents was the most unexpected and profound experience. Grandchildren enter life as a great mystery. Who are these little people? Family resemblances on all sides may appear fleetingly, or remain, but the real joy is in discovering completely new and unique individuals. A natural bond often exists between grandparents and their grandchildren, and the relationship between the spring and autumn seasons of life can be one of mutual delight and fruitfulness.

In his book, 'Landmarks', Robert Macfarlane expresses regret over the culling of words from the Oxford Junior Dictionary. Words deemed as 'less relevant' to children's lives in modern-day childhood have been removed. The list includes: *acorn, adder, ash, beech, bluebell, buttercup, catkin, conker, cowslip, cygnet, dandelion, fern, hazel, heather, heron, ivy, kingfisher, lark, nectar, mistletoe, newt, otter, heron, ivy, pasture, and willow*. The deleted plants and animals live in me as a reality. I looked for newts, played conkers, made small bouquets of bluebells and buttercups, even though it was not an especially rural childhood. I threaded daises, thankfully absent from the excised list, and marvelled at the 'teeth of the lion' plant, which I was told, if picked, would result in a wet bed that night. Will we find these wonderful plants and animals if we don't know how to look for them without their names? I hope I can help my grandchildren discover the experiences behind the lost list of words before they must accommodate themselves to the new language added to the Junior Dictionary - words such as *block-graph, MP3Player, voice-mail, chat-room*. Grandparents hold tight to the threads of the past and create a continuity of experience by weaving them into the present and I'm certain that they will ensure that such wonderful words, and knowledge and love of their living counterparts, will not be lost.

My children remember so much about their grandparents and what they did together and what they said, and they have some wonderful memories to treasure. My daughter, now in her thirties, recently told me a story about her grandmother. During the last War, she was a young nurse working in a large hospital in Liverpool. One day a bomb exploded and the Matron immediately threw herself upon my mother to shield her from the blast. What a marvellous act of selflessness this was, and for my daughter, a little story, which provided subtle guidance in her mind for all these years.

Trevor Mepham, Head of the Steiner Academy in Frome also suggests that good memories of childhood have a long reach.

'Dostoyevsky, in the *Brothers Karamazov* (2003) offers what I think is an enduring truth for children and childhood. "...there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome for life in future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about education. But some good, sacred memory preserved from childhood – that is perhaps the best education. For if a man has only one good memory left in his heart, even that may keep him from

evil . . . And if he carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe for the end of his days.”¹

Grandparents also tell stories. I notice that I am singing some of the same songs and telling and reading the same stories to my grandchildren that my own children heard – as well as enjoying new ones. We can sing songs to our grandchildren, which will be appreciated no matter the quality of the voice. We can talk about a child’s parents as children themselves - always a great delight. ‘And what did Daddy do next, Grandma?’ asks a wide-eyed, amazed face.

The power of stories is conveyed in the preface to The Routledge edition of Grimm’s Fairy Tales (1975). The poet, Padraic Colum, draws attention to the storytellers of old who passed on traditional tales in rural areas. Not everyone could read and there was no light at night, or at best a dim oil lamp. In Ireland, the Spinning Wheel was sign of a storyteller in the cottage or neighbourhood. The stories told were not just for children, adults also listened to these Household tales. The tales embodied a ‘wonderful achievement of pattern and language’ and the ‘mysterious relation of parts, which so strengthens the memory.’ Even within the cottages of the listeners, there were traditions: the table the bench, the grandmother’s chair. ‘Outside, the geese, the goats, the sheep and the cattle were folded; within the cat purred, the dog lay in a corner, and on a beam in the opening of the roof the hens roosted. It was from that reverie that tales were told of transformation and a real faith in human powers.’ The closeness and intimacy of listening and the sense of continuity and the power of repetition nourished the whole community: young and old together.

I remember both my grandfathers with affection but I never knew either of my grandmothers. I was very fortunate, however, to have a close neighbour who took care of me during the long period my mother spent in a TB sanatorium. This kind neighbour became my grandmother in all but name. She had no grandchildren herself, so we were a perfect pair. She had white crimped hair and blotchy legs from sitting too close to the fire (no central heating then and her house was bracingly cold). She tended raspberries in her garden and made jam, which was stored in her pantry – a mysterious place of endless fascination to me. On Sundays, she wore a hat and looked very smart as she rode her wobbly bicycle to church. I loved her unconditionally and my love was returned. Other children have found that the term ‘grandparent’ can have a wider reach than within the immediate family.

Grandparents can connect to the past; they can also help and heal in practical ways in the present. They can provide rest and child-minding services to tired parents, and even the odd bit of advice – if requested. They can hold their tongues (most of the time) and above all they can love. An article in ‘Information Now’ comments on the involvement of grandparents in children’s lives today.

“In 2015, 82% of grandparents were caring for their grandchildren. Grandparents, great aunts and uncles, and great grandparents have always played a positive part in young people’s lives, often providing valuable additional role models. The strength of the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren often lies in being a step removed from the parents. Grandparents can have a continuing involvement in family life and stay in touch with a child’s world without the responsibility of

parenting. Grandchildren can have a safe way to move beyond the confines of the parental home; sometimes away from tensions within the immediate family.”²

One special affinity between these two stages is SLOWLINESS. Grandparents are not usually as rushed as busy working parents, who have schedules to meet, places to go, people to see. There is time for generational friendship to grow. It takes hours to take a two year old for a walk: patience and shared interests are needed. Children are bouncy and fast, it’s true but they are also slow. They need their time to stand and stare — and why would they not be fascinated by things seen for the first time? An earwig, a spider’s web, a bud, a drain cover, a special stone — all these things are all jewels in a child’s eye. I often see a child’s outstretched arm, as it leans downwards, peering to see something while attached to the parent who is leaning forward eager to hurry on. There is a natural fit between the pace of life of young children and their grandparents and our time is one of the best gifts one can give to a child. Children tell us themselves that the most common injunction they hear in the morning is, ‘Hurry Up!’ Grandparents, having done all of that in the past, have time now, to take their time and slow down.

In a web article³, entitled ‘What is a Grandparent?’, children share their views about grandparents. The following are taken from papers written by a class of eight year-olds:

- Grandparents are a lady and a man who have no little children of their own. They like other people’s.
- When they take us for walks, they slow down past things like pretty leaves and caterpillars.
- When they read to us they don’t skip. They don’t mind if we ask for the same story over and over again.
- They wear glasses and funny underwear.
- They have to answer questions like ‘Why isn’t God married?’ and ‘How come dogs chase cats?’

Jane Fearnley-Wittingstall gives some good, practical advice for grandparents in her book, *The Good Granny Guide* (2005). Three of her suggestions follow:

- Eccentricity is not usually considered desirable but is quite acceptable in a grandparent
- A good tip is to find out what the parents view is on sex, God and Death and stick to it.
- Don’t give advice – it may be outmoded – warm bedrooms and lying on tummies are both no’s today.

Grandparents can help in so many ways. Children love to be around them as they work in the garden, or the house, or at projects. Children like to help us, and mostly, we grandparents have the patience to let them, even when their work undoes some of ours. Tolerance is easier when there is more time – and the rewards of taking grandparenting in one’s stride are plentiful.

Sometimes the help we can give is unexpected. I was once told about a child who

had behavioural difficulties at his kindergarten. It had proved hard to find the right solution to help until the child's teacher remembered having read Rudolf Steiner's words on the special relationship between children and their grandparents. She knew that this boy was very fond of his grandfather and invited him to visit. The little boy was deliriously happy. The grandfather, who had been at sea in his younger years, arrived with a block of wood and a carving tool. His weathered face was etched with signs of sea and wind, and his gnarled hands bore the evidence of hard physical work. He sat quietly and carved a little ship to the delight and amazement of the group of children who had gathered around him. His grandson was beside himself! "That's my grandfather!" he repeated with undisguised pride. After the visit, the child's difficult behaviour disappeared. His grandfather had helped him by giving him the gift of a new standing amongst his peers.

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Reading List:

Macfarlane, R. (2015) *Landmarks*. London: Hamish Hamilton

Grimm, W., Grimm J. (1975) *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Books

Fearnley-Whittingstall, Jane (2005) *The Good Granny Guide*. London Short Books

¹ <http://www.waldorf-resources.org/articles/display/archive/2015/02/05/article/the-ideal-of-compromise-no-such-thing-part-2/af2e6f0dc048b6da313d634b716ecef3/>

² <http://informationnow.org.uk/articles/501/grandparent-issues>

³ Unverified primary source but certainly with a ring of truth at <http://www.reshareworthy.com/children-answer-what-is-a-grandparent/>