

THE GROWTH OF LOVE

Understanding five essential elements of
child development

KEITH J WHITE

CONTENTS

Foreword6
Introduction7
Chapter One	The place where we started16
Chapter Two	Five-finger exercise30
Chapter Three	Security.....50
Chapter Four	Boundaries72
Chapter Five	Significance98
Chapter Six	Community120
Chapter Seven	Creativity.....147
Chapter Eight	Hands together172
Chapter Nine	Hands apart.....185
Chapter Ten	Villages and compost heaps.....199
Notes213
Acknowledgments233
Index235



INTRODUCTION

This book has been gestating for a period of 20 years of more—so long that in the process it has been trailed and prefigured in many lectures, papers and articles in different parts of the world.¹ The raw material from which it draws is the daily practical experience of living alongside children and young people at Mill Grove. The rest is a reflection on this life together using mainly, though not exclusively, psycho-social theory and theology.

Since 1976 my wife Ruth and I have lived with hurting children and young people, and, as we have tried to understand their stories, resilience, strengths, needs and growth, the themes about which I am writing have gradually emerged.

As I have studied the way love grows, from the perspectives of both psycho-social theory and theology, I have been drawn to the conclusion that much of their wisdom and many of their core insights are mutually enriching. So you can read this book as an endeavour not only to link the two but also to see if it is possible to arrive at a new place of understanding enlightened by each of them. Significantly, both are informed by encounters with the realities of human life and suffering and have been forged in the crucible of experience.

SOME SOURCES OF MATERIAL, AND INSPIRATION

Others, of course, have sought to work at this interface before me, and I would like to acknowledge some of those who have helped to light the way for me. One is Dr Frank Lake, the founder of the Clinical Theology Movement. His major work, *Clinical Theology*, is subtitled 'A theological and psychological basis to clinical and pastoral care'.² My wife Ruth studied Clinical Theology under Frank's daughter Janet, and his attempted integration with all its challenges

and unresolved dilemmas is still a formative influence on our life and work. Then there is the work of Bruce Reed (whom I came to know as a friend), notably *The Dynamics of Religion*.³ This represents a lifetime of analysis of personal and group dynamics, with particular reference to creative regression and its place in wholeness and growth, drawing widely from psychoanalytic and therapeutic literature as well as a rich experience of the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

James Loder, in *The Logic of the Spirit*,⁴ has provided some creative insights into how theology and models of human development might engage with each other. He is prepared to offer a completely different starting point from that of the prevailing psycho-social theory and his argument deserves careful reflection and study by Christians who sense that something important is missing from contemporary theories of child development.

The books of the Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier provided wonderful companionship during the 1970s. We have most of his books, including *The Meaning of Persons*⁵ and *A Place for You*,⁶ and have drawn from both his wisdom and his humble approach. Like Lake, Loder and Reed, his life's work is an attempt to integrate his Christian faith with his professional (in his case, psychiatric) training.

I read R.S. Lee's *Freud and Christianity*⁷ as a research graduate. Lee was a pioneer indicating some of the contours of the road before those of us travelling in these two related fields. Victor Frankl, notably *Man's Search for Meaning: an Introduction to Logotherapy*,⁸ and Carl Jung, particularly *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*,⁹ were early mentors. In different ways they sought to span the worlds of faith (spirituality) and psychoanalytic theory. A more recent British writer committed to this task of integration is Roger Hurdling, *Roots and Shoots*.¹⁰

All these writers were thinking primarily about adults, even if they saw many of the seeds of the adults' personalities, identities and relationships in their past childhood experiences. One of the

challenges less often attempted is some form of integration that focuses on children and young people.

In my reading of literature from different parts of the world, I have often found some of the deepest connections in the works of poets and novelists, who may not have used technical terms but have seen into the human soul with clarity and discovered that no one discipline is adequate to describe its riches, potential and depths. It is only since I have been engaged in Child Theology that, in rereading some of my favourite writers, such as Dostoevsky, I have realized how important children are to their understanding of the world, life and death.

This far from exhaustive list indicates the range and variety of those who have operated somewhere along this intersection between the history of psycho-social theory and theology. I am indebted to them and to many others who have been willing to share their questions, doubts and ideas so openly.

While mulling over the contents of this book over the years, I have also been working on a new edition of the Bible (*The Bible, Narrative and Illustrated*), and this process has been a challenging and informative resource throughout. It has helped me to work on the full canon of scripture with care, and I have become increasingly convinced that Christians alongside children are often unaware of the scale and depth of the resources available to them in this remarkable library of 66 books.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

The reason I have chosen the five words that are at the core of this book (security, boundaries, significance, community and creativity) rather than many suggested alternatives is that they serve best, in my view, to connect these two fields of operation and enquiry. They enable committed people in either discipline to bring what they know into contact with those coming from a different perspective,

without compromise on the one hand and without imperialism on the other. None of the five words is the copyright or exclusive property of anyone. A fuller explanation is given in Chapter Two.

If you ask me which—either psycho-social theory or theology—is the dominant partner, I can honestly say that I will never know. My continuous journey of discovery informed by reflection on practice, and aided by equally continuous reading and discussion in theology and psycho-social theory, has provided a wide-ranging conversation comprising many reciprocal insights and discoveries. Again and again, my reading of the scriptures has been enlightened by the works of pioneers in the field of child welfare, and likewise my study of how children develop has been enriched and guided by the timeless insights of the scriptures.

One of the most practical examples of such an insight concerns the relationship between little children and the ‘kingdom of heaven’. Jesus taught that they were inextricably linked: to enter the kingdom, adults needed to change and become like little children (see Matthew 18:3). In 1999, I began tentatively to explore the nature and possible meanings of this relationship, and one of the simplest ways of doing so was to apply what I knew about the kingdom of heaven to children and vice versa. When theologians talk of this kingdom as being ‘now’ and ‘not yet’, I find it a very apt and practical description of childhood (see Chapter Two for further explanation of this idea). In fact, you could see any imbalance between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ as leading to problems in understanding and relating to children. Likewise, keeping a child in mind—and acknowledging that ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ apply equally to adults—might help to ensure that the kingdom of heaven does not become trapped in the adult discourses of politics, size, power and territory.¹¹

My primary reason for this work has been not so much the attempt to find an academic synthesis and new theoretical models as the desire to understand better the lives, struggles, growth and development of particular children and families. Daily life has

provided the context in which this interaction has taken place, so I owe the children and young people among whom I live a debt of gratitude: it is their resilience and honesty that have inspired and informed my journey of discovery.

REIMAGINING PARENTHOOD

One of the reasons I am writing this book is my conviction that ‘parenting’ is not restricted to the nuclear family of those adults immediately related to the child. Love’s growth is not confined to the quality of these biological relationships alone, although they are of great importance. In my view, parenting is a responsibility and gift of everyone directly or indirectly involved in a child’s life, whether parents, family, neighbourhood, school or society. I likewise resist any tendency to equate ‘care’ with home, religion with church (or place of worship), and education with school. It seems to me that if we are to understand the growth of love in a child, we need to see that the process is likely to involve and transcend any of these groups as it engages and interweaves with each of them.

Of course, this is hardly an original view of things, even if we do need reminding of its long history. The phrase ‘it takes a village to parent’ has become well known in recent years. There are many suggested sources for this quotation, and I am happy to accept that it represents much of the wisdom from around the world. As it happens, I have beside me, as I write, the book by Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village*,¹² in which she develops the idea drawing from her unusually extensive experience.

One of the arguments of my book is that it takes a village (or some equivalent) for love to grow within and between human beings. I use the term ‘village’ metaphorically, so what I write is equally applicable to urban and rural life. Likewise, when speaking of ‘villagers’, I am imagining all of us to be members of what is sometimes thought of as a global village. The village is not, of

course, the instrument of love's growing. Love is not produced in this functional sort of way. It would be more accurate to say that individuals grow within community. This leads me to a point I want to make clearly and sensitively at the beginning of this book: the growth of love is not completely dependent on only one strand of a child's life and experience, or limited to one or two significant adults at a particular stage of life.

This is of critical importance not only to my argument but also to all of us, whatever roles or tasks we have in the global village. We may or may not be biological parents. We may or may not be teachers or people engaged alongside children in the Christian community. Yet we all have a part to play in creating the environment in which love can thrive. To look at it another way, we need not despair if we feel (or even know) that we have failed in our responsibilities towards a particular child. We are not alone, and this failure, real or imagined, is not the end of the story.

Let me describe an experience I had in Switzerland, as a way of explaining what I mean by this broad and inclusive understanding of parenting, represented by the words 'village' and 'villagers'. It was a mid-morning in the Easter holidays, and I was with some of the family of Mill Grove, driving through a Swiss village between Heiden and Teufen. As providence would have it, the village was Trogen, site of the famous Pestalozzi Children's Village. Three kindergarten-age children carrying satchels came up to the kerb on our right where there was a road crossing.

We slowed down until our car came to a halt. They skipped across the road and continued their walk home from school. It was an unremarkable event in the sense that the scene is replicated all over rural Switzerland every day, so why was it so memorable for us? Quite simply because, although there were no adults to be seen, the children obviously felt safe and were completely at ease.

It is difficult to think of a place in the UK where this would have happened, outside the Western Isles of Scotland and a few equally remote rural areas. Everywhere else, it would have been considered

gross negligence on the part of the parents or the kindergarten. Who was protecting these little children against physical dangers, strangers and paedophiles? The answer, of course, is that we were. By virtue of driving into the area, we had become ‘villagers’—part of the village that was raising these children—and immediately our awareness was heightened. We looked behind as we moved off to make sure they were safe and kept our eyes open for other youngsters as we drove through other villages.

How is it that in one country this is the norm while in another it is virtually unthinkable? I have pondered this long and hard and have come to the conclusion that it is something that goes right to the heart of culture and tradition. In Switzerland there is a very different sense of community (*gemeinde*) from what we understand by the word in English. The Gemeinde (that is, the local authority) will inspect your house each year and, in the case of wooden farmhouses, will pay particular attention to the state of the chimney. The same Gemeinde will take responsibility for its citizens throughout their lives, and those who serve the Gemeinde will generally do so with a sense of diligence or pride. (I am referring here to the teachers, postal and transport workers, and those who tend the parks and footpaths.) The evidence is to be seen in the general upkeep of the village, but everyone has a part to play.

I am led to wonder whether the comparative tidiness and absence of litter in Switzerland is socially significant and can help us here. It seems to me to represent some ownership of responsibility for the public spaces and environment of which the citizens are part, or through which they pass. There does not seem to be the same working distinction—made largely unconsciously, in my view—between ‘my personal space’ for which I accept responsibility and that I like to see clean and tidy, and ‘the outside world’ (village) for which I take no responsibility and possibly don’t even notice.

In reality, there are problems associated with societies like Japan and Switzerland that have tight-knit communal bonds—they are not utopias, either for adults or for children—but as an ideal type I

believe that a child-friendly society will tend to celebrate communal relationships alongside individual privacy. If there were absolute family or personal privacy in every area of life, then there would be neither village nor villager. Parenting of the sort that I am advocating would be impossible.

I quote this example because it was in Switzerland that I saw the truth of what it really meant to become part of the village that parents. We were in no way related to those kindergarten children, biologically or culturally, but they accepted us as part of the social canopy in which they felt safe. One of the key elements of that canopy is that it is made up of a number of different threads and textures. For this reason, it is important for every reader to understand that I am not proposing one type of intervention, theory or model of care.

Perhaps we tend to be allured by a system or theory that offers a quick fix. Perhaps we believe that we can chart outcomes in relation to input. That may be true of the production of baked beans but it will simply never do when it comes to the growth of love. So this book is not about a particular method or theory. It is about identifying the qualities of the psychological, social and physical landscape in which children may best thrive, and it is written in the belief that we all have a part to play in the construction and nurture of that environment.

JOHN BOWLBY

A final comment before we start: I harboured the desire for many years that this book would be meticulously researched and perhaps even, in a very limited way, a successor of sorts to John Bowlby's great, groundbreaking work, *Maternal Care and Mental Health*,¹³ which became better known in the summary, *Child Care and the Growth of Love*.¹⁴ Bowlby rarely uses the word 'love' in either book, apart from the title in the second, and in research it is a difficult

word to define or measure, but when he talks of ‘mother-love’¹⁵ there is little doubt about what he means: ‘a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother... in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment’.¹⁶

Often, the meaning he has in mind is evident when he describes the opposite: ‘superficial relationships; no real feeling—no capacity to care for people or to make true friends; an inaccessibility, exasperating to those trying to help; no emotional response to situations where it is normal—a curious lack of concern; deceit and evasion, often pointless; stealing...’.¹⁷ This list is useful as a starting point for describing some of the attributes of love—that is the giving and receiving of affection, promises, tenderness, and the capacity for, and willingness to, sacrifice one’s own comfort for the sake of another.

There is little doubt in my mind that whatever John Bowlby would have made of this book, he would recognize the same basic understanding of what love entails and share an acute concern about the potential effects of its absence. He drew from experience and research involving children who had been separated from their parents for health or social reasons, and that is the source of my own evidence and information. We both write with the conviction of those who realize that poverty of love is one of the worst forms of deprivation on earth.

It will quickly become apparent, however, that although this book draws heavily from Bowlby and his successors, it is not as carefully researched as their material. In fact, I have found myself snatching odd moments in a busy winter schedule, and what follows is largely dependent on memories and recollections rather than reading and research. The book is written in the heat and under the pressure of daily life and practice. Because it comes from the crucible of life among children and young people, I hope you will receive it in that spirit.



Chapter One

THE PLACE WHERE WE STARTED

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *Four Quartets*

On 20 November 1899, while Victoria was still Queen of England and Empress of India, my grandfather Herbert White was moved with compassion by the plight of an eight-year-old motherless girl called Rosie. He arranged for a female Sunday school teacher in his church to care for Rosie in the little flat above the shop where she worked in the east of London. That was where and how 'Mill Grove' started.

Mill Grove is the name given to two large houses situated in South Woodford, London. They are both Victorian, although one looks a lot older than the other. They are the original buildings but have been adapted over the years. You will find the neighbourhood on the Central Line of the London Underground, east of Stratford and Leyton.

Over the years after Rosie was taken in, more children were cared for in larger accommodation, with a maximum of 60 at any one time. Had you visited the place in the 1920s, it would perhaps have reminded you of a boarding school, with uniforms, 'houses', long scrubbed white tables and wooden forms for meals, and lots of sports competitions.

In the 1950s it would have seemed like a children's home, but by the 1970s there was a growing awareness that it had become quite unlike anything else. This is why the name Mill Grove was chosen—as a way of allowing the place to develop in its own way rather than having predetermined labels attached to it.¹

Since 1901 it has been the home of a biologically related family descended from Herbert White. It is also the home of children and, more recently, families who for whatever reason cannot live in their own homes. As the community of those living here has mushroomed, Mill Grove has become the hub of a worldwide extended family, and it is a place where neighbours know they can come for support and practical help. There is lots of informal contact with local people of all ages, as well as a pre-school nursery, a toddler group, a school for children with cerebral palsy, and various local groups that use the premises.

Since 1931 Mill Grove has been an interdenominational Christian charity with a board of trustees, and it has a threefold purpose: to care for children in need, to seek to introduce them by example and word to God's love as revealed uniquely in Jesus Christ, and to rely on God alone to meet all the needs that arise.²

Residential communities, notably those called communes, often set out to pursue a particular form or way of living. By way of contrast, Mill Grove has evolved as it has responded to the needs of others rather than as the outcome of a master plan or vision. In some important respects, it is an unintentional extended family or residential community. Part of what we do is registered as a 'children's home' for practical purposes,³ but those whose roots are in Africa and Asia see it as much more typical of an extended family. Only last week, a visitor from Uganda told me while we were chatting at the kitchen sink that it felt just like home. Some who have reflected theologically see it as a way of 'being church'.⁴

Although the dynamics and nature of Mill Grove have been shaped in the course of its mission and by its response to the needs of particular children and families, there has also been sustained

reflection on how we live together. We have studied and learned from much writing about, and practical experience of, residential communities.⁵ Alternative living requires not only conviction and determination but also careful monitoring and analysis.

When analysed, Mill Grove is rather unusual in that it comprises both a biological family and a residential community with patterns of life distinct from, and a range of activities some way beyond, those of more ordinary families and households. So while those who are part of this 'family' enjoy life together without undue need for definitions and categorization, others remain puzzled by what it is and how it should be classified.⁶

Since 1899, over 1200 children have lived at Mill Grove and probably an even greater number have been supported through its life and work. All things being equal, it might have grown into a national organization by now, but it has resisted the usual growth and publicity. Perhaps that is how and why it has become such a radical alternative community where there is lifelong commitment to every child in the name of Jesus.

A PARADOX

I was born at Mill Grove and have lived here most of my life. The place in which I am writing the major part of this book was the bedroom of my grandparents, where I sat on their bed and opened a present from them on my fifth birthday and where I put a little posy of flowers on my grandfather's coffin. Apart from about ten years away, first as a student and then in the early years of our married life, this has been my home. The large houses and garden are in an unexceptional neighbourhood and suburb of London. It is no modern-day garden of Eden! As I look out of the window I can see the busy intersection between the M11 motorway and the North Circular road. There is a power pylon dominating the horizon and factories on two sides of our garden.

For over a century this has been my family home (it is now five generations that have been involved), and we have opened the doors of our home and hearts to children and young people who have been unable to live with their own families. Some of these children were told before they came that it was an awful place, to which they were being sent because they were naughty, and generations of social workers have dedicated their practice to keeping children out of places like Mill Grove, which they see as a last resort.⁷

If you live in a place for as long as I have lived here, you become acutely aware of its besetting difficulties, weaknesses and imperfections. You realize that it could be much better given more resources, wisdom and training. You recognize the tensions; the unresolved dilemmas and contradictions. You know that all who have been there in the role of caring adults have had more than their fair share of needs and problems. You have heard anguished, angry outbursts and observed the withdrawn behaviour of children who feel they have been unheard or poorly served by the community.

Mill Grove exists because there is hurt, separation, loss and cruelty in the lives of children, and children have come mostly because others have sent them here, not because they have chosen to come. This has changed in recent years but in general it is true—and yet, in and through all this, two notable things continue to happen.

First, those who come to experience the place as visitors often say that they find a deep sense of spirituality and peace. These are not occasional comments, but an almost universal reaction. I recall one youngster coming home after years away. He was hungry and feeling rejected yet again. We were chatting as he consumed a substantial meal, when he suddenly paused and said, ‘That’s it! That’s what I had forgotten about this place—the peace.’ It is that very word that I have heard again and again. Others have used the word ‘spirituality’. When I have prodded them to defend and explain what they mean, they have never once withdrawn what they have said despite my challenges.

The Growth of Love

On the occasion of our centenary service in May 2000, the extended family that had gathered from all over the world was invited to sing Albert Mallotte's setting of the Lord's Prayer. As people streamed forward, a bishop and a professor of medicine, who were sitting in the front row absorbing the scene, both remarked to me that it was like a 'foretaste of heaven'. That was perhaps understandable because it was a remarkable and unforgettable experience for us all, far removed from the ordinary grind of daily life, but there are also those who have found a glimpse of heaven amid the sheer plod and struggles of each day.

Here is part of a recent letter:

Thank you for welcoming us to Mill Grove. It is difficult to put into words what we all felt while we were there, but we continue to talk about our visit and try to describe it to our friends. Each of us ended up by saying something like 'This place is bizarre' ... But it was admiration... I know that we saw Jesus at work.

A second remarkable thing is more directly linked to the theme of this book. As we have listened to the stories of those who have lived here over the past decades, we have begun to discover that love has grown in and between them while they were living here, and has continued now that they are dispersed. Despite all the pressures, limitations and difficulties, it has been a place where love has grown.

Here is part of a letter written by the daughter of someone who came to live at Mill Grove as a young girl in 1944. The grandmother of the letter writer had been unable to care for her children, which is why they came to Mill Grove. At the end of the grandmother's life, there was reconciliation:

That was a picture of forgiveness that will never leave me; part of a legacy that began when God provided a home for the girls when they had none. Our extended family is deeply aware of the instrument of love that Mill

The place where we started

Grove has been and the impact of so many obedient and godly people in God's plan... I truly believe that through the love of the White family the girls were able to offer grace and forgiveness to Granny, and thwart the Enemy's plan to see the perpetuation of evil and bitterness.

Here are the words written in a Christmas card by the mother of one of the children we have helped over several years, a child who is with us today as he always is on a Sunday:

So hard to put into words what is inside and exactly how I feel. But I'll try. You have become very dear to us. And Mill Grove has provided and given so much in so many different ways. I'm thankful for the love and for the sense of belonging, the acceptance, love, time, commitment you show. We love you dearly.

Recently I was present at the funeral of a woman who had married one of the boys who used to live at Mill Grove. Their marriage, their family life as parents and grandparents, their church engagement and friendships all spoke of love, and the bereavement of a member of the Mill Grove family had stirred memories around the world. In South Africa, Australasia and North America there were those who had grown up with him and spoke of him as a brother, whom they still loved 40 years after having lived together.

I cannot say how many who have lived at Mill Grove have found this sort of experience to be true through the generations, but in the lives of many I have known over the years, love has grown. One of the things I try to do in what follows is to identify and describe some of the factors that may have contributed to and nourished that process, but this book is not a research study using statistics or describing techniques.⁸

If Mill Grove were planned, purpose-driven, not to say professional, then we might be tempted to describe our methods and advocate them as a model to be copied elsewhere. Because we are so aware of the limitations, that way is thankfully not open to us.

As youngsters have described and told their stories again and again, we have tried to piece together the varied, angular and precarious processes by which love grows.⁹ I have become aware of the elements that are described repeatedly in these stories, like recurring motifs, and in the process I have been struck by how often these motifs replicate the themes not only at the heart of the biblical story and stories, but also in the observations of the psychotherapists and analysts.

A WAY OF LIFE

It may be useful for you to have a little background information about the context of my life and work at Mill Grove. Let me summarize its most important characteristics by using the five words listed in the Introduction, which provide the structure for this book.

First, Mill Grove has been a place of permanence and *security*. It has remained where it began. It has not changed location, address, telephone number, family or mission. It is a bit like a rock that those who knew it as children can rely on to be there, unshakeable and immovable. They assume that it always will be there. A letter I have beside me, which arrived a day or two ago, from another 'former boy' who had recently lost his wife, says, 'Thank you for your support and prayers. It means so much to know that you are there...' A moment's reflection reveals how significant and unique this is. There have been many other causes that started in the UK in the 19th century concerned with the care of orphans and destitute children. The names continue but the nature of their operation has changed dramatically. In many cases the adults who used to care for the children, and the places where the children were cared for, have gone.

By contrast, Mill Grove is marked by a commitment which means that no leader of the community has ever moved away or been intentionally unavailable should one of the family be in need. It is

simply 'there' and can be taken for granted, in the very best sense, by the children and former children. It is not that the place has remained impervious to changes in culture and technology or, for that matter, theory. It has, like any organism, adapted to changing conditions and with changing times, but its calling is to provide a similar function to some of the special sacred places in the world religions: they are there so that, wherever you are, you have the security of knowing your bearings.

Of course, we cannot predict or shape the future in any reliable way so I do not know what the future of Mill Grove will be, but, a century after its beginnings, it remains a place that is 'there', and in any planning the issue of security will be the prime consideration.

Secondly, Mill Grove has provided a number of *boundaries* for the children who have become part of the family. One of the common characteristics of their lives before coming to Mill Grove is a sense of unreliability, unpredictability and even chaos. When they arrive, they begin to discover a shape and form to each day, week, month and year. Although there is much that is unexpected and spontaneous, whether by way of celebration or crisis, the family has always tried to function in a way that is predictable and reliable. Patterns of life have provided a context for growth and development.

Looking back, perhaps these boundaries were more pronounced than those in ordinary families of the time, but it meant that the children knew where they were. It was possible to anticipate what would happen and therefore to plan accordingly. Moral and social boundaries were lived out by the adults as far as they could in line with what they understood to be God's will. The marriage covenant of the three couples who have led the community has been sacred in each case.

We have a good deal of space, and over the years we have tried to organize the way it is used to provide secure privacy for members of the family, opportunities and frameworks for shared living, and a sensitive, welcoming yet discerning relationship with the outside

world. We have discovered the truth that ‘good fences make good neighbours’.¹⁰

Thirdly, Mill Grove has been a place where everyone who lives there is known by name. Each child has mattered as an individual, has been known personally, and has known that there would be people who would never forget them as long as they lived. The word used in the book for this is *significance*. It is not just about policies and rights, although these have their place. It goes deeper than that. Every person needs to know that there is someone else on earth who cares about them enough to be there for them (to hold them in their hearts) whatever happens—someone who matters to them and will receive their affection and honour their trust. It is a two-way process, or ‘inter-subjectivity’, that is the essence of what we mean by the word ‘relationship’.

One of my childhood memories is of sitting on the carpet beside the table where my grandmother was writing with her Conway Stewart fountain pen. For some reason, I have always been inordinately fond of fountain pens, so I recall the scene vividly. She was writing letters to members of the Mill Grove family around the world, and each day we would remember family members by name in our prayers.¹¹

Although the family is a large one by conventional standards, it is small enough for every former child to have been known as an individual. I have been present when people have come back 60 or even 70 years after living at Mill Grove, to be welcomed by my parents or relatives with a warm embrace. Over cups of tea there has been a seemingly never-ending sequence of stories of times shared together, and the names and stories have been handed down so that the next generation is part of the process of remembering and valuing each person by name. To my knowledge, there has never been a person who has returned without being immediately recognized and welcomed (without recourse to records, files and photos).

The fourth characteristic is a sense of belonging and *community* that goes beyond the walls of Mill Grove. The residential

community belongs to a neighbourhood, to the local and wider Christian community, and has grown into an international family of several generations. There are many layers to the links, with interlocking groups and associations. In this way, children find that, far from being separated and isolated from the rest of the world, they are encouraged to be in touch with social groups so that they can join them should they choose to do so.¹² Our holiday home in North Wales likewise links the children into another set of relationships and a wholly different community with its own language. Our global personal connections mean that we regularly have people from different continents visiting and coming to stay with us. So, in a number of simple ways, the life of the family is anything but self-contained and inward-looking.

Finally, there is a lot of *creativity*. I hope the meaning of this will become apparent as the book proceeds, but suffice it to say at this stage that it includes enjoying and valuing fun, games, play and improvisation. Part of the prevailing ethos is that laughter and jokes, and the enjoyment of being and playing together, are right at the heart of things. Such an ethos cannot be programmed into a place: it is part of its very being and nature. My grandfather and father are remembered for their interest in sport, and a fondness for puns and jokes seems to be part of the family's genes. If you look at any issue of *Links*, the newsletter,¹³ it quickly becomes apparent that this is a place where play and exploration are the stuff of life together.

Creativity thrives on and generates new experiences, individual and shared, even in familiar surroundings, and context and resources are important elements in the facilitation of play. It is not about mechanical provision of crayons or toys with an expectation of what is to be produced, but more like introducing children to settings where, through relationships, imagination and serendipities, something unexpected is discovered or shaped. Again, the house in North Wales is a great blessing: not only is it a passport to the natural adventure playground of Snowdonia, but it also has a resource room full of materials, information and equipment to aid every kind of creativity.

It is often easier to define something by saying what it is not. In the Introduction, I noted how John Bowlby, for example, described the opposite of love. So it may be helpful to say that Mill Grove is not a place of mechanical routine, grey walls and clothes, rotas and an institutionalized way of living, with the members of the community functioning like cogs in a machine. If you are thinking historically, it could be seen as the very opposite of a workhouse or asylum. To be present at just one birthday party would dispel any lingering doubts about that.

Perhaps it is helpful to emphasize the fact that although Mill Grove seeks to provide a safe therapeutic environment in which children can discover acceptance and healing, this context is not dominated by treatment regimes and techniques. The overriding ethos is that of a family sensitive to and in tune with seasons and patterns of life. The belief is that, through these seasons and processes, children (as individuals and as members of a group) will be helped to discover that they are creators and creative, their contributions valued and valuable—that they matter and that they count. Play is one of the key elements of the whole process and way of life.

This brief summary is not intended to disguise the reality that some of the children who have lived here have always felt insecure, insignificant (lacking self-esteem) and anxious. Rather, it is an attempt to describe the beliefs and values that are the very stuff of the place. Those values explain why it is still here and why it is still very precious to many people of different generations. Despite its imperfections, it has provided a 'good enough' context, in and through which many have found that they can begin to be able to give and receive love. Sometimes this has only been possible after a number of mistakes and misguided attempts.

I hope this short and honest overview will encourage and provide hope to readers: if people maintain connections with children and young people, whatever their limitations, there is always hope that love will be kindled and come alive, even amid the unlikeliest of

stories and circumstances. Love does not require the equivalent of an emotional and psychological greenhouse in order to thrive.

In the Introduction, I argued for an understanding of parenting congruent with the traditional wisdom that it takes a village to parent. In case there is any doubt about it, I would like to emphasize the fact that Mill Grove is not a self-sufficient ‘village’ or ‘family’ in which all the resources for the growth of love are to be found—very much the reverse, in fact. As I have tried to show, it has always recognized that it is but one part of the context of the life of children. It seeks to tap into other networks and caring systems, so schools and churches, friends, clubs and neighbours are all highly valued. Bonds and attachments with the child’s own family and roots have been preserved and nurtured where possible and desirable.

We do not seek to offer the sort of environment typical of ‘total institutions’—like, say, a monastery or a prison—in which the whole of a person’s life can be lived during the time they remain there. This has helped me to see the way in which the different elements and pieces of a child’s life may together contribute to the context in which love can grow. Mill Grove is part of a village. For some children it has functioned like a self-contained womb for a period in their lives; for others it has been much more like a temporary resting place or launchpad. What it seeks to do is to be there for each child, to offer what that child most needs and desires, and to receive what that child may wish to give.

You will have gathered by now that it is not possible to say exactly how Mill Grove has helped each child: individual teachers, families, neighbours, friends and Sunday school teachers have all had their part to play. This book does not seek to encourage readers to become or create all-round environments for every child, sufficient and entire in themselves, but to play an appropriate part in parenting.

SUMMARY

It is the longevity of a community based in the same place, with its sustained relationships, that has provided me with such unique source material for this book. If connections with the children had ceased at the moment they left Mill Grove or, for that matter, a few years afterwards, I guess we would have concluded that there was sometimes little evidence of the shoots, buds or blossoms of love. But from a vantage point that enables me to scan whole lifetimes and to trace what happens in the next generation or two, I am able to see sustained and remarkable evidence of love given and received by those who had experienced traumas, loss and abuse at crucial times of their lives.

Some see Mill Grove as a very special place—a respected model of Christian residential care for children and families. It is as if it were put on a modest pedestal, setting it apart from ordinary families and communities, and therefore it is assumed that it cannot be replicated. As it happens, I don't think that any family can be replicated or cloned: the individuality and diversity of families, whether around us or in the Bible, are more striking than anything that they have in common.¹⁴

Whatever conclusions people draw about Mill Grove, it has quietly tried, over the decades, to live as a community by simple truths, committed to well-trying principles and wisdom. For this reason, it exemplifies what is happening, largely unsung, in many families, nuclear and extended, around the world. Mill Grove could be any family if that family is allowed to grow and develop through the generations, living in the same place and committed to the same vision.

The story, of course, continues to unfold as I write. In fact, it has been continuing with such vigour and making such demands as I have been working on this book that I have often wondered about my priorities. No doubt there will be surprises ahead, including our fair share of disappointments, but they will only help us to

The place where we started

learn a little more about human potential and resilience, frailty and blindness, and perhaps make us a little wiser.

This is the place where I started, and after 60 years I am coming to know certain aspects of the place for the first time. That is why it seemed worth trying to encapsulate a little of this journey of discovery in a book.