

Transcript - Grand Design: Aging, Alloparenting, and Evolution

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If the child is beautiful and perfect, never cries or fusses, sleeps on schedule and burps on demand, an angel all the time, you're the grandparent.

When you and your grandchild laugh so hard you both pee your pants, you know it runs in your jeans.

OK, I'm going to pause the jokes because I want to plant a seed here at the beginning. Every time I reference grandparents or grandparenting in this message, see if what I'm saying isn't also true, to some extent, of aunts, uncles, parents' best friends, teachers, mentors, and members of the child's church community. OK, for now, a few more jokes:

"I want to die like my grandpa did, in his sleep. Not screaming like the other people in his car."

An hour with grandkids and I feel young again. Longer than that, and I just feel decrepit.

Grandmas are like websites - you know you're gonna accept their cookies.

Grandmas are like moms... with frosting.

Those last two observations remind me of my own grandmothers. My two were pretty different from each other. Both were great in their own way, but one of them had ridiculous amounts of sugary treats waiting for us kids when we visited. Stuff we just never had in our own house. My mom says my father's mother would have a half-gallon of ice cream ready for *each* of us when we went for a one-day visit. There was candy waiting at our places at the table, bottomless soda-pop in our glasses, and a bowl of mints in the living room. Serious spoilage. We didn't visit their house anywhere near as often as the other grandparents.

I have never thought it a mere coincidence that that grandmother died of cancer at a fairly young age. But I sure did like the unlimited sweets when we visited. Her husband, however, lived to a few months over 100 years old. Grandpa was always up for showing us his extensive coin collection, and teaching us about genealogy.

My mom's parents were a grandchild and a great-grandchild of German immigrants, and very down-to-earth. They spoiled us with attention and engagement in our family life.

Even though they lived six hours away, my mom's parents made several trips each year to visit us, and about as often, all six of us would pile into the Volkswagen bus, the station wagon, or the retired ambulance, to drive to New Jersey to see them. I remember long games of pinochle in the late evenings after my younger siblings were in bed, and how confusing Pinochle was for my growing brain.

My father's parents lived only a little farther away in South Jersey, so we'd go there sometimes, too, as part of the same trip.

Why am I regaling you with stories about my grandparents. Hearing others my age talk about their grandchildren gets me thinking.

When I was a young parent, I felt the huge weight of responsibility that comes with a child. Every little thing they did that wasn't in line with my vision for them as adults had to be attended to, from table manners to tooth-brushing to thank-you notes. And of course, every bit of it has to be negotiated with the other parent, so that sense of responsibility is exacerbated by not being able to "do it right" without running afoul of a different way of "doing it right." So much pressure!

As Ann will tell you, the version of parenting she learned as a child included the dismissal of a child's feelings in favor of serving the needs of others. Good girls should feel this way rather than that. Good girls also had perfect table manners at all times. On the other hand, if she didn't finish her vegetables, she only lost access to the *second* dessert! Everyone got dessert.

My childhood was almost the opposite of that. Open communication was a high value; one of the biggest no-no's in my family was interrupting someone when they were talking. Other kinds of table manners were casual; I didn't really understand that it's considered rude to talk with food in your mouth until I married Ann. On the other hand, sweets were pretty tightly restricted in my childhood. "You want something sweet? Here's an apple." Maple syrup was exactly measured onto a stack of pancakes with a tablespoon. One. Tablespoon. Does that give a hint as to *why* we visited my dad's parents a bit less often, where an entire half-gallon of ice cream awaited each of the four of us?

As you can imagine, our different childhoods generated some friction when it came to raising our own children. We each brought those conflicting expectations into our parenting. We fell right into that trap of having to correct every little behavior, in our kids and each other. When you're a parent, it's really hard to let your kids just be kids, stupid mistakes and all.

Watching my students interact with their parents over the years, I saw it so clearly, that weight of responsibility. When I interact with children now, any children, all of that tension falls away. Older adults with grown children, *we know*—all too well—the ways we screwed up raising our kids, the things we neglected or over-did, and yet, there are our grown-up children, doing OK. By the time our kids are grown, we come to realize that those things we sweated and argued so intensely over really didn't matter nearly so much as we thought at the time. "Let the kid have a second piece of cake on her birthday; it won't kill her, I promise!"

I think grandparents bring something essential to family life, easing the burden of responsibility in several ways. Grandparents soften the hard edges of parents' expectations, and offer children, if not unconditional love, at least less-conditional love, and a fundamental acceptance that's crucial for self-love and personal confidence.

In the vast family tree of life on Earth, grandparenting is rare. Reptiles, fish and amphibians mostly don't even parent; they lay eggs and take off. It works great for them, especially since a frog can lay 20,000 viable eggs at a time, and do so every year for ten years.

Most birds parent their young, but never grandparent them, as far as we know. Even more rare among non-humans is continuing to live past reproductive age. Menopause is extremely rare, even among mammals. Besides humans, only orcas, short-finned pilot whales, and, just discovered in 2023, wild chimpanzees, go through menopause. So why DO we live so long after we're done reproducing? Why are we in such an exclusive group among mammals? In other words, what good is grandparenting?

All species that grandparent are social species, though the reverse isn't true: not all social species grandparent. Bees and ants, for example, are highly social, but don't grandparent. Hold that thought though; what they *do* do is related.

Social species have evolved to take advantage of the tremendous benefits of cooperation, and grandparenting is just one mode of cooperation. Cooperation evolved because it offers huge survival benefits. There are lots of examples of cooperation, within and between species.

Here's where we can come back to bees and ants. The honeybees nurturing the eggs and larvae laid by the queen are neither parents nor grandparents, but rather are sisters and aunts of the young ones they raise. Cooperation is most beneficial evolutionarily when it's between genetically related individuals, and

social animals like bees are making use of that. The lesson is that cooperation in raising children isn't limited to genetic grandparents.

Cooperation in child-rearing brings benefits even when the care-givers aren't related. Sperm whales, for example, baby-sit one another's calves while parents dive deep for food.

If we're open to learning something from non-human role models, the lesson here is that offspring do better if they're raised and looked-after by more elders than just their parents, especially in social species. Being a highly-social species, this offers humans two key opportunities: (1) Elders can play a huge role in the survival and success of youngers, a role that's not available in most other species, and, (2) you don't have to be a genetic grandparent to serve in this way. I can't speak for orcas and chimps, but it's clear to me that in humans, there are benefits to the grandparents, too.

A 2017 analysis of data collected by the Berlin Aging Study showed that grandparents who baby-sit for grandchildren live longer, even after controlling for physical health, age, income, and various characteristics of the children and grandchildren. There's a limit, though. Prior studies had already shown that when grandparents are the sole custodians raising grandchildren, it actually shortens their lives. Taken together, we might call these studies "How We Know It Takes A Village." Or, we could shorten it to "Ubuntu studies." Ubuntu is a term from the Nguni language, which roughly translates to "I am because we are." It takes a village, but where's *our* village here today, in the U.S.? [ooboon'too]

Shortly after January 6th, 2021, I had a long conversation with an acquaintance of mine who regretted that he wasn't there to help stop the certification of the rigged, stolen presidential election. Our conversation ranged widely, but one thing he said was, "Black Lives Matter is just crazy; they don't even like the nuclear family!" That was a new one on me, so I pushed back on it. He said, "It's right there on their website, you can look it up yourself!" He had seen some news report about this outrage.

Well I did look it up, and he was right. Sort of. At that time, BLM's website included a page titled "What We Believe." It's no longer there, but I found Google's cached archive of it. Here's what it said about nuclear families:

We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear-family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and "villages" that collectively care for one another, especially our children, to the degree that mothers, parents, and children are comfortable.

In other words, BLM supports grand-parenting, and raising children in rich extended-family environments, or small villages of chosen family. Doesn't sound crazy to me, not at all. I imagine that my friend's "news story" quoted only the part that goes, "We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear-family structure," and then went on to rail against welfare moms and other dog-whistle non-issues.

That brings us to the central message of this morning's service. Almost everything I've said about grandparents and grandparenting applies equally well to other forms of alloparenting. That term "alloparenting" was first used by evolutionary biologist EO Wilson, and it refers to any form of parental care provided by someone other than the biological parents. Adoptive parents are alloparents; grandparents babysitting are alloparenting; baby-sitters are alloparenting; Nannies are alloparenting; ants and bees, and aunts and uncles also alloparent. In a way, teachers and coaches are alloparents, too.

Please note that this is a technical term; it's not meant to diminish the truth that adoptive families are real families. Adoptive parents are parents—*period*. But this term alloparenting helps remind us that humans are raised in villages, and villages happen in societies.

For both care-givers and children, the benefits of grandparenting are available for all of us. There used to be billboard from the Ad Council in Harrisburg. I wish I could remember the exact wording, but it was something like "A pension is society's invitation for you to give back."

I can't help but think that there ought to be more formal avenues for retired people to alloparent younger generations. Church provides that to some extent, through Religious Exploration, OWL, and Coming of Age programs. I know some K-12 schools are now affiliating with nearby elder-care communities, to great mutual benefit.

Catholic families do something I admire. When a child is born, someone is chosen to serve as a godfather or godmother. It's a role that asks for a special kind of attention to the child's welfare, not necessarily on a daily or weekly basis, but just extra attention. I am a godfather to one of my nieces. It works; I was somewhat more attentive to her growth and welfare than to my other nieces and nephews just by virtue of having said yes to being her godfather. You don't have to be Catholic to do this. Just talk to the child's parents. If you're tempted to start talking like Marlin Brando as a mafia boss, you can rename the role to whatever you want.

Our daughter likes to tell about her “two other fathers,” men my age who she felt, and still feels, a special kinship with. They still check in regularly, embodying that extra attention, a kind of mentorship for the child and some relief for parents. Since one is a Black gay Quaker, and the other is a professional musician and card-counter, I like to think their presence in her life has enriched her UU ministry.

In turn, she has a mentoring relationship with a younger, too. While she was in seminary, Robin worked part time as a nanny for an elementary student in Harlem, walking him home from school, and staying with him until his parents got home from work. On paper, it was just a job, but she made it more, continuing to maintain that bond after she graduated and moved away. One day when this kid was in middle school, he arrived home to news that his mom had died that afternoon, suddenly, unexpectedly. Some of the first words out of his mouth were, “Can I call Robin?” It was Robin he wanted in that awful moment, an alloparent of a different race, who he knew would listen and understand like no one else.

Who can a teenager turn to for advice about their relationship with their parents? About their sexuality, their gender dysphoria, inter-racial crushes, peer pressure, homework and so on? Who in their life doesn't have an agenda for them, but can listen with compassion and wisdom? Is it you? Could it be you?

I've worked with kids my entire career, and you'd be amazed at how many adolescents struggle with the belief that their parents simply don't understand them, and won't ever understand them. So who do they turn to? Other kids? Siblings? Maybe you. Hopefully you.

We evolved to live in small cooperative villages, where people of all ages and abilities mixed fairly freely. In our society, we live with an awful lot of segregation, by age but also by class.

Think about who is where during your average weekday. Most children are in rooms filled with other children who are within a few months of their same age. Their parents are at work, with other adults who are mostly within a decade of their age, and mostly of the same social class and profession. By and large, people older than 65 or 70 are in neither of those environments. They should be.

At this time in human history, we don't live in small villages of relatives and extended family. Maybe we should, but until our economic system changes enough to encourage that, chosen family may be our only option. We could choose to see the large numbers of millennials living in their parents' basements

less like a darned shame of hard economic times, and more as a tremendous opportunity to re-learn how to live in extended family communities again.

I think we could reap far greater benefits if we expanded our conception of grandparenting to include other kinds of alloparenting, and took back an Ubuntu mindset about the raising of children. I'm not suggesting that you discipline children you don't know in the supermarket. I am suggesting that actively seeking ways to be supportive of young families with your time and attention brings immeasurable benefits to everyone. We evolved to do this. Church families are an easy one, but also young families in your neighborhood, or in other social groups.

We can volunteer at a school or pre-school. Big Brothers Big Sisters is a tremendous opportunity, as are scouting organizations, 4H, community theaters, karate studios, and on and on.

Even if you're in your twenties or thirties, you can be part of the village it takes to raise children well, relieving parents of some of that burden of responsibility, taking the pressure off, and giving children a more diverse set of influences as they explore the world.

Be the change; be the village. Spoil some grandkids, yours or anyone's. Maybe not with a half-gallon of ice cream, but with your attention and engagement in their lives.

If the child is beautiful and perfect, never cries or fusses, sleeps on schedule and burps on demand, an angel all the time, you're in the right village.

OK, one last joke:

Grandpa whispers to grandson with a mischievous grin, "I farted during the sermon, but it was silent." Grandma whispers to grandson, "Grandpa needs a new hearing aid battery."

May it ever be so.