

# Trauma and The Growth of Love in Children

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at all those seeking to understand, respond to, and help children suffering trauma because of the full-scale War of Russia against Ukraine that began in 2022. It draws from three main sources: personal experience of living alongside children and young people who have suffered the trauma of separation and loss; studies, reflections, and practice of those who have sought to understand children in a holistic way: biological; emotional/psychological; social and spiritual; Christian faith and tradition, including the Bible, human resources and activity, and theology. The paper is based on the conviction that “it takes a village to raise a child,” not least in a time of war, and that all villagers who have the well-being of that child at heart have a potential role to play in the process. The author points that “parenting” in its widest sense is not restricted to biological relatives or designated carers. The paper seeks to imagine the context from outside the war zone, acknowledging the complicated, secretive, messy, and unpredictable nature of conflict. In its conclusion it brings a message of hope, based not on wishful thinking or utopian dreams, but on experience and evidence collected from around the world, and close to hand, that demonstrates how the trauma of children can and has been overcome.

**Keywords:** biblical narrative, boundaries, child theology, Christian households, community, creativity, identity, loss, parenting, play, resilience, seasons, security, separation, significance, trauma, trust, village.

## Context and Background

Trauma is usually defined as a long-term emotional reaction, conscious or unconscious, caused by experiencing a distressing event. The event may involve physical, mental, emotional suffering; individual or collective. In very young children a cause of the deepest trauma is separation from and loss of the significant, mother, or parental figure on whom little ones depend for their survival, safety, and well-being. This has been extensively studied, notably in the period following the Second World War, and gave rise to what is now known as Attachment Theory.<sup>1</sup>

Military conflict puts every person in a war zone at risk of injury, hunger, thirst, loss, and death, and children are particularly vulnerable because of their dependence

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<sup>1</sup> Key figures are Dr John Bowlby, Rene Spitz, Mary Ainsworth, helpfully summarised for example in Thomas Lewis et al., *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Random House, 2001), 69-76.

on others for the basics of survival. Among the many long term effects of trauma are: a loss of security, trust, desire to live, identity, understanding, an inability in tune with personal feelings, or the feelings and emotions of others, a sense of helplessness, powerlessness, chronic anxiety and fear.

The ways in which separation, loss, injury, suffering and abuse in early childhood affect a growing child's feelings, moods, attitudes, and behaviour throughout life have been observed, studied, and charted in the second half of the twentieth century with major breakthroughs in understanding the functioning of brains and memory. Neural networks are open-ended in the newborn child, and events and how the child's mother reacts to them affect not only immediate reactions and responses, but also lay foundations and patterns, through emotional memories and temperament, for the rest of life.<sup>2</sup>

It follows that in cases of separation and loss, how a "village" (in the sense described above) responds to a child's pain and anguish is critically important, not just at the time of suffering and separation, but in the long-term, because of the known consequences if the cries of the child go unheard, her needs, unrequited.

The author of this article has experienced and studied the nature and effects of trauma on children's lives and development at close quarters, and continuously over several decades in the lives of individual children. He has also collected the life stories and case studies of children across the continents of the world.

I have not lived in or visited Ukraine, but am familiar with Soviet literature and history, including notably the Holodomor (1932-33), which I came to know first through the harrowing descriptions of starvation and trauma by Vasily Grossman in his monumental account, *Everything Flows*.<sup>3</sup> More recently my wife and I welcomed a family of Ukrainian refugees into Mill Grove, the home of our extended family, in February 2023, learning firsthand of their experiences of war, disruption, separation of families, the destruction of communities, and the struggle for survival against seemingly overwhelming odds. The paper concludes with reference to them.

War zones often involve nearly every possible type of pain and loss, affecting individuals and groups, but even so they do not have a monopoly of such comprehensive human suffering and trauma. Other events that engender such deep and extensive suffering are natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and famines. This means that it is possible to learn from responses to human disasters from all continents, and from historical records, as well as recent or contemporary experiences.<sup>4</sup>

There is a substantive record of what are known sociologically as "total institutions": prisons, mental hospitals, residential schools, monasteries, and convents.<sup>5</sup> They

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *A General Theory of Love*, 121-144.

<sup>3</sup> Vasily Grossman, *Everything Flows* (London: Vintage, 2011). English translation by Robert Chandler.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Keith J. White, "Making Sense of War with a Child," *Reflections of Living with Children* Vol. III, 42-44.

<sup>5</sup> The term was coined by the American sociologist, Erving Goffman (1922-1982) and has been used extensively since.

have in common the fact that the whole a person's life is lived within them while they are residents. Counter-intuitive though it may seem, in some respects, a war zone or area engulfed by a natural disaster, resembles such an institution: everyone lives within, survives, or suffers within a bounded space. There is, for the majority, no escape or alternative, no additional place of help or refuge. It can, like a ghetto, be sealed off from the rest of the world.

Although the suffering of adults, whether parents, grandparents, relatives, neighbours, professionals, colleagues, results in trauma, this paper focusses on young children.

Because it is informed by firsthand experience of the severe and chronic trauma of those who suffered as young children, at no stage does it minimise the depth, extent, and scars of such trauma throughout life. But the writer has also witnessed remarkable and inspiring resilience in many who have suffered in this way. When alongside those who helped respond to the effects of the tsunami in 2004, there was unanimity among professionals worldwide that, for whatever reason, little children spelt hope. Whatever their experiences, children are wired at a deep level for the future: they look forward and ahead, however much their neural networks have been disturbed by the disastrous events that they have lived through.<sup>6</sup>

The most profound loss a child may suffer in a time of war is that of the mother/parent figure. This affects every part and aspect of the child's life. It provokes an existential crisis: physical survival, and long-term emotional well-being, are at stake.

This paper suggests ways in which a person or a group can understand, empathise, and help as part of the village that it takes to raise any child, but especially a child experiencing this most harrowing and terrifying of losses.

## Five Elements or Dimensions of Trauma

For over fifty years the writer has been seeking to understand what separation and loss mean to those experiencing them as children, or as adults, reflecting on them later in life, in search of appropriate ways of responding.

The findings are distilled in the book, *The Growth of Love*.<sup>7</sup> It is supported by over two hundred case studies and reflections in *Reflections on Living with Children (Volumes 1-3)*,<sup>8</sup> teaching resources, and numerous papers and articles. It draws from the same three main sources as this paper (personal experience of living alongside children; psycho-therapeutic insights and support; and the Christian faith). The writer is also a soci-

<sup>6</sup> This is explored in the work of James Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (New York: Jossey Bass, 1998), where he argues that children only go through stages of development because of the creative spirit at work in them. See also in Haddon Willmer and Keith White, *Entry Point* (London: WTL, 2013, 137-145).

<sup>7</sup> Keith J. White, *The Growth of Love: Understanding Five Essential Elements of Child Development* (Abingdon: BRE, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Keith J. White, *Reflections on Living with Children*, Volumes 1-3 (London: WTL/The Therapeutic Care Journal, 2010, 2016, 2022).

ologist focussing on global and cross-cultural issues, groups, and group dynamics; and an educationalist with interest in radical philosophies and models of learning.<sup>9</sup>

Events such as war, and the resulting experiences that cause major, existential suffering and trauma for children put the development, growth, well-being of those children at risk in the following five ways.

First, there is a fundamental threat to the safety or *security* of a child. It is no overstatement to describe that as like falling into a terrifying Void, dark and bottomless. This is perhaps the ultimate fear of all human beings represented by death itself. It is an experience of complete separation from all living things, and any potential help. There is nothing to grasp or hold on to, let alone a mother's arms. And empty silence in place of the warmth and succour of her breast, and the familiar rhythms of her heartbeat and breathing. The instinctive, reflex action of a child is to shut down all other activities in search to be held again in the absent safe arms. Nothing else matters at all: tomorrow, eating, play.

One of the reasons aggressors start wars is to create fear and terror: to demoralise, destabilise the lives of those attacked by whatever means are available. This is obvious in the current conflict in Ukraine. Many children live in terror, having suffered the loss of parents, homes, communities; some have been physically injured; some have been transported out of their own communities and country into enemy territory. The very ground of their being has been shattered. All security is gone.

Second, and closely associated to this loss of security, is the interruption of predictable patterns of life, rhythms, rituals: the breaking down of the *boundaries* integral to ordinary, good-enough family and social life. Before the onset of war, there was an unstated, but accepted, orderly, reliable pattern of life for most children, with daily routines such as getting up, brushing teeth, dressing, meals; familiar places such as bed and bedroom, the sink and table in the kitchen, the sun shining through eastern windows in the morning, and the western in the evening, familiar voices and sounds; and play with favourite toys and dolls or teddies.

In a moment, with the loss of, or separation from a parent, and possibly the home itself, the child finds herself as if in suspended animation, lost and bewildered, not knowing what to expect, what will happen next. Their predicament resembles that of a fledgling bird being driven out of a nest, friendly and homely with its familiar routines, and on to the floor of a jungle, hostile, full of strange and threatening noises, creatures, and trees, with no sense of place or time. All known patterns of life have been savagely destroyed in a moment: everything is now unpredictable and bewildering. Personal space has been invaded, and the basic rules of life learned to this point in time no longer exist. It is not obvious if there are any new rules at all, let alone what they might be.

Third, there is an overwhelming sense of being abandoned, forsaken: a person of no worth or *significance*: a nobody. In early life a child's identity is bound up with that of

<sup>9</sup> See Keith J. White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice! The Life and Work of Pandita Ramabai* (London/Bangalore: WTL/Primalogue 2022), for example for a study of how Froebel's educational philosophy was integral to Ramabai's model of change for girls and women in India (1858-1922).

significant others, and familiar toys, often pets, objects, places. The “I” of the child (how a child sees herself) relies heavily on the “me” (how others see, affirm, and treat her). Now the emerging, fragile, ego is overwhelmed to the point of destruction. Perhaps the child has begun to construct a comforting, imaginary world: this is common. But now this is smashed to smithereens along with the actual world in which she lives.

To a young child, the absence of any known and loving person is as serious as this. There is no one who recognises the child, or knows her name, let alone anyone who seems to empathise with, or care about or for her. There is in all children a primal longing for a known, friendly, smiling, and empathetic face. But in a war zone that some children find themselves in a situation where they recognise no one, and no one recognises them. With no one to take the place of the separated and lost parent, the child is as insignificant as a grain of sand on a beach.

Fourth, the fabric of social life that has surrounded and supported the family and household of the child is destroyed. In many ways home and neighbourhood are the world for a little child: and so, all *community*, all social life has ceased to exist. Places such as a shop or bazaar, a temple, mosque, church, school, park, a village pump; visitors such as relatives, neighbours, a milkman, are no more. It is as though the earth itself, the whole world of the child, has been torn to shreds. It takes a village to raise a child, and now as far as the child is concerned that village no longer exists.

In contradiction of contemporary concepts of independent, self-made human beings, the witness of history and research relating to human development is that “relatedness and communal living are at the centre of human life...”<sup>10</sup> When this centre is removed or collapses, it follows that human life, physical and emotional, is at risk. Promises of help (“a place for us”) somewhere else have no meaning, for somewhere else may never have existed in the child’s experience, but if it does, it will not be part of the known world familiar to them.

Fifth, as part of the reaction to painful events, and the shutting down of feelings, longings, activities, is a loss of any form of *creativity* or imagination. Memory itself may be suspended, or be scarred, for life. There is nothing to smile about, to get ready for. There is no play: the roads and paths no longer have children skipping, hopping, running, laughing, playing on them. The basic building blocks of creation for a child, including toys and familiar objects, books, musical instruments, are no more. But in any case, what is there to sing about, what reason to dance? The unbearable reality of the present predicament has sucked the air of any oxygen on which creative dreaming and imagination depend.

When these five elements or dimensions (*security; boundaries; significance; community; and creativity*) in view, it is painfully apparent how young children suffer in war zones. Loss and separation combine with other forms of hurt and fear to create a perfect storm: the magnitude, the horror of trauma becomes terrifying real to any who observe, or seek to understand, what a child is going through.

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis, *A General Theory of Love*, 86.

## Building Bonds of Attachment and *The Growth of Love*

It is with the seriousness of the matter established beyond doubt that we come to identify what villagers can and should do to help children affected by such traumatic realities.

What follows is not intended as a manual for individuals, organisations, or professions, but as a way of describing the elements that need to be put in place over time, if a child is to find “good-enough” security, and the basics or framework, of an environment conducive to her growth. It uses the five elements or dynamics that have been used already to describe some of the effects of war on young children.

### Security

The paramount response to such desperate trauma and the crying needs of such a child must be to provide a place of safety. All else is subservient to this. There can be no “diversionary” tactics when the physical and emotional life of a child is at stake. And this “safe space” will resemble as closely as possible the tender, loving and safe embrace of the child’s mother, the nest of the fledgling bird, the haven for a boat battered and dis-masted by a storm.

In war zones, there are limited options in that a school, hospital, refugee camp will not remotely replace or make up for what the child has lost. If there is another member of the child’s extended family, a close and familiar neighbour, then they need to be identified and the child entrusted to them. If the child is injured and in hospital, then the regime of the hospital needs to be organised to meet this fundamental need. There cannot be a succession of nurses or doctors: a rota. The child is looking for a consistent face that recognises her, that is attuned to her, that will weep or smile with her.

What goes to make up a safe space is not primarily about the physical location or characteristics of a building, but about the creation of an environment that a child feels to be non-threatening, and responsive to her feelings and basic needs. I have been privileged to be part of a programme dealing with the aftercare of children in the Philippines who have suffered from sexual exploitation and trafficking. The team has created a remarkable safe space called the Round Home.<sup>11</sup> The whole environment physical and social has been constructed to avoid any rough edges that would trigger memories of previous hurt and ill-treatment. This is exceptional, but the good news is that a simple room, hospital ward, or tent can be settings where a child can “be held” in such a way that she experiences reassuring comfort and safety. If there are any remaining toys or personal effects that are important to a child, these will be valued as “transitional objects”.

Given the need to improvise and act swiftly in the confusion of a war zone, it is encouraging to know that there is no one type of place or person: they come with different names, and sometimes in the most unlikely places and guises. But the goal of

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<sup>11</sup> See Dr Gundelina Velazco et al., *The Curriculum of the Certificate Training Program in Aftercare* (Manila: CTPA 2013).

all villagers engaged in seeking a child's well-being is the creation of this basic security. Somehow the child needs to know that she is no longer falling in an endless Void. Otherwise, like caged animals in a zoo deprived of their parents, the child will begin to despair, displaying worrying universal signs of distress such as rocking, wandering in circles, listless and disinterested in the world around them, trapped in their primal fear.<sup>12</sup>

## Boundaries

Integral to the establishment of security in the form of safe space is the creation of reliable, friendly, rhythms, rituals, and patterns of life. The behaviour of the significant adults or young people who are alongside the child will be predictable, reliable and child-friendly. There will be no shouting or outbursts of temper. Promises will not be made lightly, but they will be kept. A "Yes" means yes, and a "No" means no. Both are equally important in assuring a child that she is being held, as distinct from abandoned in a jungle or wilderness. In this way over time, life begins to become dependable again.

Rhythms, routines, rituals, patterns of behaviour are the stuff of this sensitively bounded daily life of the child. Where possible they will mirror or connect with her previous experience. Whether or not this is so, they will be attuned to her feelings, reactions, responses and expressed needs or wishes. They make sense her level. They will be sensitive to the "seasons of the day" that the child lives through: from the dark hours of the night (winter), through dawn (spring), to summer (midday) and autumn (evening), with appropriate activities, and opportunities for relaxation and sleep.

Perhaps the key aspect of these boundaries is that they are lived by the responsible villagers close to the child: rather than being spelt out as rules, whether by word or notice. Given the trauma of loss and separation there will always be someone close at hand, usually within sight, but within earshot, so that the child knows they will respond immediately to anything that seems at risk of getting out of hand.

## Significance

With the basic security provided by safe space, and the boundaries of daily rhythms of life in place, the search continues for the person who will take the place of the missing or lost mother/parent. The scenarios will be varied: a mother may be injured or sick, traumatised, for example, and responses will be sensitive and practical. But whatever the permutations, a person must be found who is willing to be unconditionally committed to the child, and who the child knows is there for them. Someone the child can trust, over time, and who cares for the child beyond all other considerations.

This is, of course, a tall order. But how can the bar be set lower? Where a mother has died, or is absent, the child's world has been shattered. The heart of the mother

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, *A General Theory of Love*, 76-81.



no longer beats, the centre of that world no longer holds. In some respects what is lost is irreplaceable. It was in the mother's womb that the child grew and developed, at whose breast the child fed, into whose face the child gazed, and whose smiles and frowns returned the feelings of the child intuitively. That dance is over. Someone else needs to begin to take the child into their tender embrace.

There cannot be a one-size fits all solution to this challenge of finding an unconditionally committed "Significant Other". For example, adoption is not practicable everywhere and in all circumstances; neither is the extended family however extensive the support; large institutions by their nature are unlikely to be able to provide or support such a dedicated person.

In my experience of listening to the stories and reflections of those who lost their mother at an early age, there have been many kinds of people who have become some sort of substitute. They have included older siblings; members of their extended family; neighbours; a teacher from day or Sunday school; a nun; an adult carer in a children's home; other young people who have lived with them in a residential setting. It is not the label or the setting that seems to be crucial, but the nature of the commitment, the attunement of that person, and the chemistry of the relationship.

## Community

Only when this person has been identified, and is in place, can the reconstruction of the community that makes up the child's social world get underway. And this means always proceeding at the child's pace, not passively asking their wishes, but by anticipating and being responsive to them. Wherever possible the child should be invited to be part of the process of creating that community. Building a home together is one of the best ways of relating to others.<sup>13</sup>

But the process cannot be rushed. A practical implication of this, is that it will not be appropriate to expect a child to go to pre-school or school, to be part of a group, to attend classes, religious worship and the like, until there is the unconditionally committed adult to be alongside her and to help her navigate such social interactions. The mother or mother substitute is a prime mediator between the child's inner world, household, and the wider social world.

This is, of course, where the concept of a village, and villagers kicks in. Everyone has a part to play. It is for the mother figure attuned to the child, to help identify which villagers and which roles. In the process, trust in what has been a hostile and unfriendly world begins to be re-established. In place of bombs and shells, shrieks of fear or pain, the chaos of people running in all directions, sirens and fire engines, collapsing buildings, there are people aware of, and responsive to the child, but crucially, engaged purposefully and creatively in repairing and keeping the village together.

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<sup>13</sup> Anton Makarenko and Jonathan Sacks are two writers who have described this process.



## Creativity

As this often protracted and far from predictable or time-specific process of re-engaging with social life gets underway, a sense of play, engagement, a wish to make or create (as distinct from destroy, deface, or flee) may begin to emerge. And one of the surest ways of knowing whether a child is finding security, boundaries, is securely attached to a parental figure through renewed bonding and attachment, is to witness a sense of humour, a desire to sing, dance, move, draw, make, explore, and imagine beautiful things. Such creativity is both essential to the process of the development of the child, and a by-product of it.

War has the effect of defacing, warping, destroying every aspect of a child's world from the deeply personal, to the natural environment. By imaginative play, a child may begin to take her place as a partner in creation: a "care-taker", looking after perhaps a pet, flowers, or fruit. The village, which for many young children is their known world, may be in effect a microcosm of the planet, and perhaps even a kindergarten: a setting where the child feels at home in every sense.

The whole process, sketched so briefly here, may take years, even decades, with permanent scars, set-backs, regression as well as progress. How best to describe or frame it? Not as stages of development, so beloved and attractive in contemporary paradigms of childhood. But surely, taken in the round, as the growth of love. It will include physical, intellectual, emotional, social development and maturity, but ultimately it is a continuation of the loving bond between mother and child. All things being equal, a child will learn to love the significant other, to love herself, and to begin to love and receive love from others: an expanding circle of love.

The good news from testimonies and records worldwide, including Mill Grove the place where I live, to homes, communities in every culture, is that there is ample evidence to show that such love is possible, even in those severely traumatised caused or triggered by childhood experiences, including those in war zones. There are no short cuts, cheap "solutions": appropriate responses to trauma require unconditional commitment, tenacity, devotion, imagination and love. Because love has its origins in the mother child relationship and bonding, it will be rediscovered and nurtured only where there are alternative significant others willing and able to care for a child as if she were their own.

But as we have seen, this is not about an isolated relationship: every villager in a child's life has a role to play in the "parenting" or "raising" of the child. It is vital therefore that all villagers understand that one or two significant adults will have unique and unconditionally committed attachments to a child, and others, supporting roles. Equally important is the realisation that someone must be identified to play that unconditional role. It is not helpful for everyone to be busy seeking to help while there is a gaping hole, and insecurity, at the heart of a child's emotional and social life.

## Drawing from Psycho-social Experience and Knowledge

We turn now to identify some of the resources that are available to the villagers seeking to respond to the trauma of children among them. Some of these have been apparent in the argument so far. This is the place in the paper where they are spelt out, and references given.

### Therapeutic Support

As we have seen, the needs of children suffering from the traumas engendered by war will be complex, deep, and long term, some acutely evident and conscious, and some of which they are unaware. It is important to know where appropriate professional insights, experience and knowledge are to be found. This is not to imply that those closest to a child need to be knowledgeable or qualified in some form of therapy or psychodynamics, but that they will be supported by them.

Mill Grove, the place where a Ukrainian family was welcomed this year, functions as a therapeutic household, community, extended family, though not in a programmed way involving any formal treatment or counselling sessions. Rather the therapeutic milieu is supported and undergirded by study, training and the regular support of a consultant psychotherapist. In his ground-breaking work, *Building the Bonds of Emotional Attachment*, Dan Hughes,<sup>14</sup> describes how he comes alongside mothers or significant people in a child's life as a resource to them, and therefore indirectly to the child. No household or village should aspire to being a treatment centre or total institution: they have lives of their own and cannot be programmed or planned in this way, and they will intersect with many other communities. But a healthy household or village will know where to turn for support, when individual carers are out of their depth.

### Education and Learning

At no point in this paper, or in *The Growth of Love* is there assumed to be a divide between carers and teachers, or home and school, as far as learning is concerned. A child will be absorbing and processing sounds, sights, experiences, information intuitively and automatically all through each day. Where mothers and carers recognise and encourage this, the whole process of interacting with the physical and social worlds is enhanced.<sup>15</sup> And where there are wounds and trauma, sustained and careful contact between school and home is essential.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Dan Hughes, *Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening Love in Deeply Troubled Children* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> This is foundational to the educational philosophy of Friedrich Froebel. See White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice!*, 249-267.

<sup>16</sup> This contact needs very careful handling because it may be that a child needs psychological space between home and school.

Attunement between teachers and parents is as important as that between child and parent. There will be times when formal learning is not appropriate or possible, and when emotional blocks occur. Professional support for teachers as well as parents is essential. This requires sensitivity and cooperation within the village: space and opportunities for other activities with neighbours or friends perhaps.

But all the time there is the genuine possibility that, with appropriate support, some very wounded child will learn to become compassionate parents or companions later in life.

### Life Stories

One of the many casualties of war is the history of a family and its members, and this is where facilitation of the telling, listening to, and recording of the life stories of each child is vital. This story does not stand alone, of course. It is a thread in the tapestry of the bigger story of family and community. There is no single way in which this should be done, or a person who should help to facilitate it when the time is ripe. Sensitive, empathetic and non-intrusive listening to a child's story is one of the vital elements in rebuilding a sense of worth and identity.<sup>17</sup>

### Sympathetic and Contented Adults

One of the saddest effects of war is that children find themselves in ugly situations where their parents and families are under pressure, in a state of crisis, overwhelmed and unable to cope themselves, let alone provide safe arms or an experience of "being held" for little children. But there is a little observed or understood of how such reassuring emotional space can be provided. One of the most pleasant, reassuring and life-enhancing experiences for a child is to be in the presence of two or more adults who are relaxed and enjoying each other's company. They are aware of the presence or proximity of the child, but not engaged in direct activity with her.

The child is in a delightful space: with freedom to be and to explore, sharing a time and environment where those important to her are relaxed and content. It seems that this is often when a family or group is walking, for example in a forest, or beside a river or sea.

The key element of the dynamics is precisely that there is nothing consciously been done with, for, or to a child. Whatever the location, or environment, the dynamic applies to staff in schools and hospitals, as well as neighbours in their own homes or in local parks.

Much of the time that a suckling babe is with her mother is spent not in feeding or playing, but in being together, attuned and enjoying shared presence.

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<sup>17</sup> White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice!*, 690-1.

## Resilience

While it should never be seen as some sort of silver bullet, or panacea applicable to every child and their situation, research on how children survive trauma continues to throw up evidence of those who find ways of coping with and overcoming what can seem like overwhelming suffering, separation, and loss.<sup>18</sup> However difficult it is to pin down how and why this is, it is a reminder to villagers that not everything depends on them: children can be active in their own healing and development.

It is also a source of hope when things seem unpromising and bleak, when healing and progress by way of security, trust, and engagement with people or the surrounding environment are little in evidence.

## Play, Experimenting and Exploration

At the heart of all learning whether cognitive, physical, emotional, or spiritual, is a form of play: seeing how and why things move, relate to one another, and what they mean. Evidence points consistently to the truth that creating the space and opportunities for play is significant in the healing of hurt and wounded children. This can involve formal role-play, art, dance, and music therapy, but more often encouragement to explore the world inner and outside, self and others.<sup>19</sup>

Remarkably on reflection, people often talk of how it has been in war zones that as children they enjoyed playing in the rubble. There are obvious risks and dangers, of course, but it is a reminder that play is not about particular activities, formal games, and sport: playing is an attitude, a way of responding to concrete situations, the physical world, and others.

A project in Manila, in the Philippines, has developed starting with play as a way of helping to engage with, understand and help street children and their families.<sup>20</sup>

## Time and Seasons

The process of grieving following separation and loss is personal, contingent, and unpredictable. Frameworks such as “stages of grief”, or time-limited sessions of counselling, do not begin to do justice to the remarkable variety of twists and turns the paths of grieving and healing take.

And this is where a village, as distinct from an institution or formal counselling or treatment process, comes into its own. Nature with its weather, flora, fauna and creatures, including the human species, has seasons (we have already considered the seasons of a day), periods of gestation, times when the land lies fallow, spurts of growth, and periods of ripening and harvest.

<sup>18</sup> Keith J. White, “Resilience Revisited,” *Reflections on Living with Children*, Vol III, 87-9.

<sup>19</sup> Keith J. White, “It’s Only a Game”; “It’s Play Again!,” *Reflections on Living with Children*, Vol I, 104-6; 108-110.

<sup>20</sup> The organisation is called Jigsaw, founded by Tim Lee. It has taken *The Growth of Love* as a foundation and working model.

Having lived alongside, and listened to, traumatised children and adults for so long, I have learned that predicting the time that healing will take, or the ways in which it can happen, is impossible. It is irrelevant and can be harmful.

This is why the long-term commitment of individuals, or the community is essential. No one knows when the presence of a significant other will prove to be vital at a potential turning point in the process. Presence is the key word here, because what role, action or reaction is appropriate can rarely be predicted.<sup>21</sup> It is about being as attuned to seasons as any healthy animal, plant, or organism.

## Drawing from Christian Resources

The conference is focussed on doing and living theology in the context of trauma, and so this paper closes with some of the unique Christian resources available, relevant over time and across cultures in responding to children who are suffering from trauma.

### The Bible

One of the most basic, and commonly neglected or overlooked is the Bible. There are two aspects of the narrative and teaching in Old and New Testaments that are particularly relevant. First, children feature all through, and so child-attentive Christian responses to traumatised children can introduce children, when the time is ripe, to characters in the Bible with whom they can identify. In the context of this conference, it is significant that many of the children in the Bible are suffering because of the effects of conflict and war. Moses would have been killed as a baby were it not for the presence and quick thinking of his sister, Miriam; David was sent by his father to a war zone with the intention of taking food to his older siblings, but then found himself at the epicentre of the battle; the unnamed slave girl who was instrumental in the healing of the enemy army commander Naaman, had been taken captive during a hostile raid on her community.

Often this element of the biblical narrative is overlooked or marginalised. Stories at Sunday School or in children's Bibles are nearly always adaptations of the biblical text, and a feature of the adaptation is that both the stories selected, and the way they are told, always softens the harsh realities of the originals. They are in effect sanitised. In the process children who are suffering trauma find the Bible to be about world that is so different, often ideal, that it bears little resemblance to the one that they encounter day by day.

The second aspect concerns the nature of the biblical testimony or record taken as a whole. Congregations, not only children, are fed diets of selected passages, characters, and teaching. The full picture is one where a cosmic battle between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, dictators of kingdoms and empires and the Living God, human greed and the well-being of the created world, rages non-stop. Much that is

<sup>21</sup> Dr Cicely Saunders, pioneer of the hospice movement shared with me how the words of Jesus, "Watch with me" go to the heart of what a grieving or anxious person is looking for.

written could be set within Ukraine over the past 500 days since the invasion began. There are graphic descriptions of rape, torture, mutilation, terror tactics, mass destruction, genocide, and the like.

The Bible is not a fairy story depicting an idealised world or characters. The depravity of sin is starkly evident all through, from Genesis to Revelation. This means that its message represents wonderfully good news: it is ultimately a testimony of faith, hope and love, represented in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Death, darkness, ugliness, and falsehood are not the victors. Where sin abounded grace did much more abound. There is demonstrable hope despite the sorry state of the world caused by human wilfulness and rebellion, a persistent inclination to ignore the Creator's instructions. There are seeds germinating, buds appearing and fruit ripening. Harvest, with its justice and peace is promised.

Villagers who are seeking comfort, encouragement, and reassurance at times of oppression and conflict, will find in the Bible a source of peace that is to be found nowhere else. So it is that children and adults have a God-given well of living water to draw from. This is one of the reasons why we produced a Bible specifically for the children and young people living at Mill Grove.<sup>22</sup> It is unabridged and designed so that readers can follow the narrative for themselves all through. For whatever reasons, most denominations and publishers do not understand the relevance of this approach. Sadly, whatever else they offer, this deprives villagers from one of the greatest sources of comfort, hope, and inspiration at times of crisis, and when despair develops.

### Christian Households, Churches, and Organisations

A second resource is the corporate expression of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the form of households, fellowships, congregations, missions, organisations, groups, networks, residential communities, all committed in some way of form to following Jesus by serving others. This is where lived theology is to be found. Every aspect of human frailty and pride can be found within each group, but by God's mercy and grace, the light still shines in this extraordinary collection of people for whom the cross represents forgiveness, redemption and healing, and Easter Day the promise of the ultimate victory of love over hate.

An injunction to all of God's people running right through the Scriptures is that they should welcome orphans, widows and strangers, not as an act of charity or with any thought of reward, but because we are all one in Christ Jesus: there is no "Other": any division between insider and outsider, first and last, great and little, is deconstructed in the Kingdom of God.

At times of conflict these groups, both within the war zone, and outside (sometimes spread across the world) are available and ready to help. This has been in evidence since the war in Ukraine began.

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<sup>22</sup> *The Bible (Narrative)*, NIV (London: WTL/Biblica, 2007).

## Child Theology and Theology of Suffering

A third resource is Christian theology as it has developed over the centuries and across the world. Two aspects that merit particular attention for the purposes of this paper are Child Theology, and the Theology lived and written by those suffering.

Since 2001 there has been an international network of academics, practitioners seeking to develop theological insights by being child-attentive in their reading and interpretation of the Scriptures and in their engagement with the contemporary world. Suffice it to say that there is much available in and through its website that relates specifically to the subject of how theology is lived and done in the context of traumatised children.<sup>23</sup>

Two examples of western theology developed in the crucible of suffering are the testimonies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Miroslav Volf. In his *Letters and Papers* from prison Bonhoeffer is following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul. In *Exclusion and Embrace* Volf wrestles with the tensions and contradictions that arise for a follower of Jesus when war causes ethnic loyalties to clash with the example and teaching of his Lord.

The point of mentioning just two<sup>24</sup> of many through history is a way of assuring those affected by what is happening in Ukraine that they are not alone in the dark night of the soul.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to respond in a practical way to the realities of war-induced trauma, recognising the infinite number of permutations of suffering, and of personal and social realities. It is underwritten by the conviction that theory is irrelevant without committed and compassionate people in a child's life, and with the acknowledgement that because there are so many players and factors in a war zone, it must deal at the level of principles that can be understood and applied by any and all seeking to help.

It comes from the pen of a weather-beaten practitioner who has committed his life to being alongside traumatised children from around the world, in his family home, seeking to study, learn and reflect as an academic and theologian on how love grows in the most unlikely social compost. Mill Grove bears all the hallmarks and frailties of a human endeavour, but it has endured for over 123 years, and therefore has access to what happens throughout a traumatised child's life, her life as a parent, and grandparent: children, and children's children.

As an extended household set in an urban neighbourhood, it functions in many ways like a village, where each child and adult is seen as contributing to the dynamics of the place and its community.

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<sup>23</sup> See Child Theology Movement, [www.childtheologymovement.org](http://www.childtheologymovement.org) for extensive resources and links.

<sup>24</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1953); Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).



There have been setbacks and humanly speaking, many failures, but the fact is that love has grown in and through all things. And it is a joy to record that a little Ukrainian boy who came to live with us in February 2023, thrived in this setting. He evidently found it a secure environment, a safe space. He was centred, confident, learnt to walk, played happily with others. He and his parents found the boundaries firm, predictable and reassuring, after the chaos and random nature of life and events on the long journey from Kharkiv to London.

The little boy had his mother and father with him, and they were attuned. The community of Mill Grove supported them in their parenting, encouraging them when they were stressed, and despair was threatening to overwhelm them again. There was joy and spontaneity in life together, with the boy happy to share life and space with others, without frustration or awkwardness. And all the time the boy was playing, exploring, experimenting content to do so by himself, and with others.

As a Christian household Mill Grove seeks to live and do theology, drawing deeply from many others, past and present, Christians and non-Christians, professionals, and lay people, all making up, whether consciously or not the village that it takes to raise a child, not least a child born into or living through the traumas of war.

Its testimony is that often the main agents of healing, forgiveness and love are the children who have been traumatised. The final word is, therefore, one of hope.

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## Травма і примноження любові у дітей

Кіт Джей ВАЙТ

Засновник і голова Руху дитячого богослов'я, Мілл Гроув, Велика Британія

Анотація: Мета цієї статті полягає у тому, щоб заохотити всіх, хто прагне зрозуміти дітей, травмованих через повномасштабну війну Росії проти України, що розпочалася у 2022 році, та надати їм богословський ресурс у служінні дітям. Матеріал статті ґрунтується на трьох основних джерелах: особистому досвіді життя поруч з дітьми та молодими людьми, які пережили травму розлуки та втрати; дослідженні, роздумах і практиці людей, що прагнули зрозуміти дітей цілісно, беручи до уваги біологічні, емоційні/психологічні, соціальні і духовні фактори; християнській вірі і традиції, включно з Біблією, людськими ресурсами і богослов'ям. В основі статті лежить переконання, що для того «щоб виховати дитину, потрібне село», тим більше під час війни. Отож всі мешканці «села», які вболівають за добробут цієї дитини, можуть відігравати певну роль у цьому процесі. Це означає, що «виховання» в його найширшому розумінні не обмежується біологічними родичами або призначеними опікунами. Водночас необхідно зважати на контекст війни, усвідомлюючи складну, таємничу, безладну і непередбачувану природу конфлікту. Основний висновок статті — це послання надії, що ґрунтується не на видаванні бажаного за дійсне чи утопічних мріях, а на досвіді та свідченнях з усього світу, які демонструють, що травми дітей можна подолати.

Ключові слова: біблійний наратив, кордони, дитяче богослов'я, християнські родини, спільнота, творчість, ідентичність, втрата, виховання, гра, стійкість, сезонність, безпека, розлука, значення, травма, довіра, село.

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