SUPPORTING ELVIS CHILDREN

Stepping out of a deceased sibling's shadow

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FOREWORD

Everyone knows the feeling: as soon as you find out you're pregnant, it suddenly seems like you see pregnant women everywhere. Something similar happened to us. As we began talking about our experiences in therapeutic practice, we realised how many people in our professional circles shared a strikingly similar, and often painful, history: the death of a sibling shortly before their own birth. Sometimes this loss occurred through stillbirth, in other cases, through sudden infant death, illness, or an accident.

In this book, we refer to children born after such a tragic loss as *Elvis Children*: children who, often unintentionally and unconsciously, came to replace the deceased child within the family system. We explore this novel term further in Chapter 1.

When we shared our observations within our personal and professional circles, we were struck by how many people recognised themselves in this story. It quickly became clear that this experience is far more common than we had anticipated. Many of those who responded also shared that they had encountered emotional or psychological difficulties linked to this experience, some during childhood, others much later in life.

Naturally, not every child born after the death of an older sibling will experience difficulties. When parents are able to process their grief and are emotionally available to receive the next child as a distinct and separate individual, healthy development remains possible. When this process is disrupted, however, the emotional consequences can be significant and may manifest in a wide range of ways. In short, no two Elvis Children are the same.

Since the publication of the first edition of *Elviskinderen* (*Elvis Children*), we have frequently been asked whether children, who were already born at the time their sibling died, might also be considered Elvis Children. Strictly speaking, they do not fully meet the original definitional criteria. Nevertheless, many of them strongly recognise themselves in the experiences described in this book. For that reason, we have chosen to include them here as well. Important distinctions do, however, exist between children who were already born when a sibling died, and those who were born afterwards (these differences are explored in Section 1.1). The remainder of the book focuses primarily on the latter group.

It is striking how little has been written about Elvis Children in the Dutch-speaking world. While more research exists in countries such as the United States, Switzerland, Poland, and France,

these studies are often grounded in psychoanalytic frameworks and devote limited attention to a contextual-therapeutic perspective. This gap is one of the reasons we felt compelled to write this book

Another motivation lies in the way coaching, therapy, and supervision often focus predominantly on behavioural change. When someone presents with symptoms such as depression or loneliness, there is a strong temptation to concentrate solely on symptom reduction. While such approaches can be helpful, they risk falling short when deeper relational and existential issues remain unexplored. We believe that healing requires attention to the relational-ethical dimension: an inquiry into what lies beneath the surface of suffering.

This book is intended for anyone who works, or will work, with individuals who identify as Elvis Children, whether in healthcare, education, counselling, or related fields. We also hope it will offer recognition, comfort, and insight to Elvis Children themselves, as well as to their parents. In this revised edition, we have given particular attention to the parental journey. Many professionals and parents asked how grieving parents might be supported in processing their own pain, thereby reducing the emotional burden carried by the children who follow, or by those who were already alive at the time of the loss. In response, we have added a new chapter: "Challenges for Parents".

Elvis Children can be found across all age groups and walks of life. In this book, we offer tools to help practitioners explore the relational-ethical roots of their clients' experiences, using the framework of contextual therapy. While factual information is important, it is even more crucial to understand how those facts affect the family system and disrupt relational justice. Relational ethics form the backbone of contextual therapy and are central to our approach throughout this book.

Relational ethics are a core element of contextual therapy. Foundational works such as *Tussen geven en nemen* (Nagy, 1994), *Leren over leven in loyaliteit* (Michielsen et al., 1998), and *Geven en ontvangen in contact met jongeren* (Nieuwenbroek & Kimenai, 2021) emphasise the vital role of fairness, loyalty, and acknowledgment in relationships. We build on this tradition to encourage professionals to seek a more constructive balance within the helping relationship.

Contextual therapy leads to acknowledgment, not only of behaviours or symptoms, but of the deeper personal story behind them. This form of recognition allows the person seeking help to gain insight into what is happening within themselves. The unspeakable becomes speakable. Most importantly, they receive acknowledgment at the deepest level for the injustice they carry, often rooted in the early death of a sibling.

At the end of each chapter, we offer suggestions for initiating supportive processes. We do not present our approach as the only correct one; rather, these suggestions serve as starting points. For some Elvis Children, the processes described in this book may be sufficient. For others, additional support, systemic or otherwise, may be required. However, our experience shows that even these initial steps can foster meaningful healing, improve quality of life, and reduce the burden of suffering.

Throughout this book, we include stories drawn from our therapeutic work with Elvis Children over the past three years. These narratives have been carefully anonymised. In sharing them, we aim to honour those who entrusted us with their experiences. While details have been altered, the essence of each story remains true.

Finally, we would like to thank all those who inspired and encouraged us with their personal stories. Special thanks also go to Kristina Schellinski, Judy L. Mandel, Rita J. Battat, and Abigail Brenner, who through their books and forums have helped bring international attention to the topic of "replacement children", as Elvis Children are known in the United States. We are also deeply grateful to Carianne Burema for her dedication and expertise, and to Marleen Postma, Kees van het Maalpad, and Joost Weijmans for their invaluable support during this intensive process.

Sint-Oedenrode/Dongen
Fall 2025

Ard Nieuwenbroek
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FOREWORD (ENGLISH EDITION)

I was honoured when Ard Nieuwenbroek and Judith Kimenai asked me to translate this book into English. From the earliest stages of the first Dutch edition, I recognised the vital space this work fills within the current literature, and the importance of making these insights accessible to a wider audience.

From the moment I first encountered the concept of the *Elvis Child*, and became aware of their existence, I experienced a growing sense of recognition. As the authors describe in their own foreword, my awareness sharpened almost immediately, and I began to recognise how many Elvis Children were already present in my practice. While I had not overlooked the fact that there had often been a miscarriage or the death of a sibling prior to a child's birth, I had not fully grasped the depth and extent of the impact this could have on their lives.

This understanding has profoundly changed the way I work therapeutically. It has reshaped my clinical lens and, more importantly, it has had a meaningful and lasting impact on the lives of the clients concerned.

This book offers language and understanding for experiences that often remain unspoken, yet profoundly shape individual and family lives. It speaks not only to therapists, but to anyone interested in the lasting influence of loss, loyalty, and intergenerational dynamics. However you came across this book, I hope it offers insight, recognition, and depth, and that its impact on your personal life or professional practice is equally meaningful.

A few notes for the English reader: in translating this edition, I have aimed to remain as close as possible to the original text, while ensuring that it resonates clearly and naturally in English. My role as translator has therefore been both linguistic and clinical, guided by a deep respect for the original work and the people it represents. Some of the books and sources referenced originate from Dutch literature, and where relevant, their original Dutch titles have been retained.

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ELVIS CHILDREN

When a partner dies, we become a widow or widower. When our parents die, we become orphans. Yet there is no word to describe the loss of a child or a sibling. On the one hand, this absence is striking, given that language exists for so many human experiences. On the other hand, it seems almost inevitable that there is no term for a loss that so profoundly contradicts the natural order. Nevertheless, we feel a strong need to find language for these experiences. Naming them allows us to give voice to what is otherwise unspeakable, and to begin making sense of circumstances that resist ordinary expression.

1.1 THE ELVIS CHILD

We have chosen to refer to children who were born shortly after the death of the sibling immediately preceding them as *Elvis Children*. The term **Elvis Child** is derived from the name of the singer Elvis Aaron Presley.

> *Elvis Presley was born on 8 January 1935. Approximately thirty minutes earlier, his twin brother, Jesse, was stillborn following a very difficult delivery. Fearing for Elvis' survival, his father wrapped him in a warm blanket and placed him in a box inside an oven to keep him warm until a doctor could arrive. Elvis survived; for Jesse, however, medical assistance came too late. At the time, the family was living in severe financial hardship. It is therefore said that they had no option but to bury Jesse anonymously, reportedly in a simple shoebox.*

Elvis remained an only child. This existential event haunted him throughout his life. He was reported to say that he always felt that something was missing in his life.

An Elvis Child, like Elvis, is born after the death of a sibling who came immediately before them in the birth order. In most cases, the earlier child died at a very young age:

- the child was stillborn, either following a miscarriage or following a full-term pregnancy;
- the child died shortly after birth, for example from sudden infant death syndrome (cot death), illness, or an accident;
- the parents themselves chose to terminate the pregnancy prematurely.

Following the feedback we received after the publication of the first edition of this book; we have chosen to broaden the definition of Elvis Children. It has become clear that children who were already alive at the time of a sibling's death, are also placed in a vulnerable position by that loss, irrespective of whether the sibling was younger or older. However, there are important differences between the various groups of Elvis Children:

- **Elvis Children who were already alive** when their brother or sister died, frequently experienced personal trauma due to witnessing the death, or their parents' response to the death. In addition, the family system is profoundly affected by the loss of a child.

– **Elvis Children who were not yet born** at the time of the sibling's death did not experience personal trauma; however, they may be at risk of *intergenerational trauma*, trauma passed from parent to child. Even during pregnancy, the mother's stress and emotional pain can affect the unborn baby. After birth, the bonding process may also be severely disrupted by the unprocessed grief the parents still carry.

This book focuses primarily on Elvis Children who were born after the death of a sibling.

1.2 THE POWER OF LOYALTY AND DELEGATIONS

Elvis Children often carry an unconscious and invisible burden throughout their lives, unintentionally passed down from their parents. In some cases, an Elvis Child may even be given the same name as their deceased sibling. This can have a profound impact on them as they are expected (explicitly or implicitly) to not only live their own life, but also to live the life of their deceased sibling. This burden can manifest in many destructive ways.

> *Elvis visited his twin brother Jesse's grave regularly. We suspect that Jesse's death had a profound impact on Elvis' turbulent life. In the book* In Search of Elvis *(Chadwick, 2018), the author interviewed Elvis' friends and family and learned that Elvis felt guilty about his brother's death. It appears that the singer lived continually in the shadow of his deceased brother. That shadow had many facets, including addictions, depression, and suicidal tendencies.*

Within the contextual therapeutic framework, these types of destructive behaviours are understood as manifestations of destructive entitlement, arising from the injustice caused by a **delegation**. Delegations can be defined as roles or tasks unconsciously and unintentionally assigned by parents. These tasks are usually assigned with the best of intentions, with the hope of helping their child in some meaningful way later in life. Unfortunately, the result is often the opposite. Although unintentional, a delegation is never truly given in the interest of the child, it primarily serves the needs of the parent. Without realising it, the parent places a burden on the child that eases the parents' pain and suffering.

Delegations are described in the book *Tussen thuis en school* (Nieuwenbroek et al., 2021):

> *"Don't think of the word 'delegation' as in 'delegating': the top manager of a school or company delegates responsibilities to lower managers. In Contextual Therapy the word 'delegation' refers more to an imposed task, such as that given to a delegate or ambassador. They simply carry out the assigned task and are not themselves responsible for its content."*

In the psychological biography 'The Inner Elvis' (Whitmer, 1996), the author recounts the events surrounding the birth of Elvis and his twin brother Jesse. Elvis' mother reportedly said that Elvis would have the strength of two people and would therefore live for the both of them. In saying this, she placed a clear delegation on her son. This delegation was not meant to support Elvis' own development, but to meet her own emotional needs. If Elvis could live two lives, she would not have to let go of her deceased child. In that way, Jesse would continue to live on.

However sincerely this message may have been meant, it placed an enormous burden on Elvis' shoulders, a task he could never fulfil. Incidentally, it will always remain uncertain whether his mother consciously chose the name 'Elvis' as an anagram of the word 'lives', referring to the two lives her surviving son would have to lead.

Delegations like these often disrupt a person's capacity for happiness. Even though the chances of success at meeting these delegations are virtually zero, every child still longs to fulfil the task that has been given to them. A child's deepest desire is for their parents to be happy and free from worry or sorrow. To achieve this, the child often believes they must always be happy themselves. This deep-seated need is rooted in the loyalty a child feels toward their parents.

Loyalty to one's parents is not something a child can choose. It is always present, either expressed openly or hidden beneath the surface.

The following quote from Nieuwenbroek et al. (2021) describes the meaning of loyalty.

> *"A very special bond, and therefore a very strong loyalty, exists between parents and their child. This kind of loyalty is known as vertical or existential loyalty. Another word for existence is being, a child receives their life, and thus their being, from their parents. The term vertical signifies that this bond extends across generations. Vertical loyalty flows in both directions. Children naturally understand that they owe their existence to their parents. In turn, parents, having brought their children into the world, feel a deep sense of responsibility for them. This bond inclines parents and children to stand up for one another and to care for each other. When they don't, it is often because a serious problem or past event is interfering with this natural inclination. Loyalty is embedded in human nature. It provides one of the deepest forms of emotional security we can experience in life."*

This deep sense of loyalty between a parent and child often clashes with the messages the child receives from their parents. Out of loyalty, the child wants nothing more than to fulfil the delegations assigned to them, even if it is impossible. In linking this to the case of Elvis we can see that no matter how much he may have wanted to, he could not live two lives. In many cases this injustice results in destructive behaviour. We will explore this further in Chapter 6.

1.3 OTHER FAMOUS ELVIS CHILDREN

There are numerous other public figures who, like Elvis Presley, embody the characteristics of an Elvis Child.

One notable name in this group is **Lady Diana Spencer**. By the time she was born, she already had two older sisters. Merely a year before her birth, a baby brother had been born but tragically survived only ten hours. Because of this, the arrival of another girl was not welcomed. Diana's parents had strongly hoped for a son, who could carry on the family name. Their wish was so strong that they were entirely unprepared for another daughter. She was only given a name a week after she was born.

Vincent van Gogh was also an Elvis Child. His story is equally remarkable. Before Van Gogh was born, his parents had lost a son. That brother, who was also named Vincent, died shortly after birth. Exactly one year later, on the birthday of the older Vincent, the younger Vincent was born. The boy who would later become a famous painter, was registered in the civil registry under the same number as his deceased brother. In fact, he never received his own identity but shared one with his brother. Every day, on his way to school, young Vincent passed his brother's grave, where his own name and birthdate were inscribed – only the year differed. Van Gogh experienced many psychological problems in his adult life, and at the age of 37, he took his own life.

The last person we mention here is the British actor, and comedian, **Peter Sellers**. At birth, he was given the name Richard Henry Sellers. However, his parents immediately called him Peter, after his deceased brother. Sellers was known for his exceptional impersonations, being able to completely inhabit another person's character. Yet, by his own admission, Sellers felt he had no identity of his own. On The Muppet Show, he once said to Kermit the Frog: *"But that, you see, my dear Kermit, would be altogether impossible. I could never be myself... You see, there is no me. I do not exist... There used to be a me, but I had it surgically removed."* Sellers suffered from depression and struggled with numerous addictions. He died of a heart attack at the age of 54.

These are just a few examples of the many famous Elvis Children the world has known. It is no coincidence that all of these individuals strove to perfect their talents, while simultaneously struggling with significant psychological issues.

1.4 THE REPLACEMENT CHILD

As mentioned in the foreword, in English literature, children who are born after the death of a sibling, are referred to as replacement children. This term was introduced in 1964 in the article "On Replacing a Child" (Cain & Cain, 1964).

We have found that the terms *vervangend kind* and **replacement child** are not always well received. Parents who have experienced the loss of a child, frequently respond with discomfort or resistance to these labels. Such terms can stir deep emotional unease, particularly given the care, love, and intentionality many parents bring to welcoming a subsequent child into their lives.

It has never been our intention to cause hurt or offence by using these terms, least of all in the writing of this book. Nonetheless, we uphold the existing theory on replacement children, and do not wish to diminish its relevance. At the same time, we acknowledge that parents' responses to their "new child" are often shaped by unconscious processes. In other words, these parents are not consciously choosing to view the child as a replacement.

If you are a parent who has experienced the loss of a child, we hope that the open letter below offers both information and acknowledgment.

Dear parents,

You have endured the unimaginable, the most profound and unbearable loss: the death of a child. For such a loss, there are no words. When someone loses a partner, they become a widow or widower. When someone loses their parents, they become an orphan. But when a parent loses a child, there is no name. It is a grief beyond words, a sorrow that never truly fades, a loss that defies the natural order of life.

Such a loss can take many forms: through miscarriage, through stillbirth, or through the passing of your child shortly after birth.

Sometimes, after such heartbreak, a new child – a new life – is born. For this child, it matters deeply how much space the earlier grief has been given, how fully it has been acknowledged, held and processed. Even though the grief may never disappear, the way in which it is carried, shapes the emotional world into which the new child is born.

Grieving the loss of a child is never straightforward. It is a deeply layered process that often defies language. Yet the way this grief is acknowledged and integrated, profoundly shapes the emotional space available for a child born thereafter. When there is room for mourning, the next child can be welcomed simply as themselves, not as a remedy for the pain, not as a symbol of hope, but as a whole person. Without this space, however, the new child may, often unconsciously, take on an impossible burden: to mend what was broken, to carry sorrow that was never theirs to bear.

Of course, no parent intends this. Sometimes grief becomes stuck, frozen in time, despite our best efforts to move through it. When this happens, the new child may not be fully seen for who they are. Instead, they may become entangled in a role they did not choose that of a replacement. This book explores what that experience may feel like, and how it can shape a life.

Our hope is that this book offers you not only understanding, but also encouragement, to engage with your grief in ways that honour both your deceased child and your living one. Every child deserves to be seen, held, and loved for exactly who they are. And every parent deserves support in navigating this deeply complex journey.

In Section 1.1, we introduced the term *Elvis Children*. By Elvis Children, we refer to replacement children. Earlier, we outlined a number of situations in which an Elvis Child may be born. Importantly, however, Elvis Children are not limited to children who share the same biological parents as the deceased child. Adopted children may also fall within this category when they are implicitly, or explicitly, positioned to take the place of a deceased child. In such cases, adoption occurs shortly after the loss, and the adopted child is welcomed into the family as a means of compensating for that loss.

In some instances, children who are adopted because their adoptive parents were unable to have biological children, may also be considered Elvis Children. These children enter their adoptive families during a period of mourning and grief. The parents, after all, must come to terms not only with childlessness, but also with the loss of the imagined or unborn child. When this grief is insufficiently processed at the time the adopted child is welcomed into the family, the risk increases, that the child will unconsciously be drawn into a compensatory role and thus become an Elvis Child.

This places adopted children in a double bind. They are not only tasked, often implicitly, with compensating for the loss of a deceased or unborn child, but they must also carry the psychological burden inherent in adoption itself. Many adopted children experience an unconscious pressure to justify their adoption to their biological parents, by functioning well, behaving adaptively, and minimising their own needs.

The term Elvis Child is explained in more detail in the following paragraphs.

1.5 FROZEN GRIEF

It can be said that parents of an Elvis Child may be at increased risk of becoming stuck in their grieving process. This is sometimes referred to as **frozen grief**. As described in *Met mijn ziel onder de arm* (Fiddelaers & Noten, 2011):

> *"If grief is not processed (...), over time, difficulties often arise in forming relationships, experiencing intimacy and sexuality, managing emotions, and finding meaning in life. This can be described as frozen grief."*

It is hardly surprising that some parents find themselves trapped in grief. The loss of a child represents a profound and unnatural injustice, a trauma that defies the natural order of life.

The point, at which the grieving process becomes arrested, varies. For some parents, this struggle is most pronounced during the first three to four years after the loss, often the same period during which an Elvis Child is born. For others, grief remains unresolved throughout their lives, leaving a lasting imprint.

Unprocessed grief can have a profound impact on the Elvis Child. Often without anyone's awareness, the child is burdened with an impossible, unspoken task: to fulfil the emotional needs of

grieving parents and, in doing so, to facilitate their healing. This becomes the implicit condition under which the child grows up.

In some instances, the child is even given the same name as the deceased sibling. This amplifies the emotional burden, making the message even clearer: you are not only to live your own life, but also the life that was lost.

The Johnson family consists of four members: Paul (Father), Diane (Mother), and their two children, Ian (3) and George (1). They live a happy life until one tragic evening, when George falls down the stairs. He breaks his neck and dies. What follows are hours, weeks, and months filled with grief, mourning, and despair. On the advice of their family doctor, Diane becomes pregnant again a year and a half after Geroge's death. Their baby is born and given the name George. On the birth announcement, Paul and Diane explain that they chose this name to honour their deceased son. Beneath this is a small star with the words, "forever in our memory".

As the "new" George grows older, he begins to struggle for his right to truly exist. His uncertainty is fuelled in part by conversations he overhears during family gatherings. Whenever the name George is mentioned, it is never about him, but about his brother who died.

When George is nine years old, things are not going well. He eats very little and rarely speaks. He is referred to a therapist. After several sessions, with tears in his eyes, he says, "Maybe it would be better if I were dead too."

Essentially, the challenge for bereaved parents lies in finding a balance between silence and overemphasis, between avoiding any mention of the deceased child and speaking of them so frequently that the home risks becoming a kind of living memorial.

> Someone once told us in tears: *"At my house, there was a large colour photo of my deceased sister Marga on the mantelpiece. Every day, my mother placed fresh flowers next to it. Hardly a day went by without my mother saying to me in a corrective tone: 'Be as sweet as your sister would have been.' And every time, a knife of grief and anger stabbed my heart."*

It is crucial that parents are aware of the possible impact that unresolved grief can have on the other children in the family. This applies both to children who are alive prior to the death of a sibling, and to those born after such an intense and life-altering event. Because grief work is such an essential theme, we devote additional attention to it in Chapter 2. There, we explore how parents can engage with their grief in a way that minimises its unintentional, and potentially destructive effects, on their other children.

1.6 UNDERDEVELOPED SELF-VALIDATION

Due to the emotional wounding that parents carry after the loss of a child, they may become less, or even entirely, emotionally unavailable to the child born after the tragedy. As a result of their ongoing grief, they are often unable to form a healthy attachment to this Elvis Child. In other words, they cannot give the child what it fundamentally needs. This emotional unavailability can give rise to developmental difficulties in the child, such as impairments in the formation of a coherent sense of identity. At the core of these difficulties lies a disrupted development of self-validation.

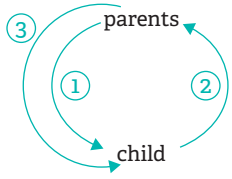
In *Between Home and School,* Nieuwenbroek et al., (2021) explain:

> *"It is precisely this interaction between giving and receiving, that is essential for creating a sense of inner grounding to develop autonomy. Only when both parents and children are able to give. and receive. can the circle truly be complete."*

In the book *Geven en ontvangen in contact met jongeren*, Nieuwenbroek and Kimenai (2021) add:

> *"We speak of healthy self-validation when someone can establish a sense of inner grounding. This foundational process begins when a child receives life from their parents, not only biologically, but emotionally and relationally. In that moment, the child is both entitled and naturally inclined to give something back. When the parents can truly receive what the child offers, and reflect that it has been received and valued, this reciprocal exchange becomes the birthplace of self-validation. It is one of the most fundamental, existential forms of giving and receiving, and it must be circular in nature. Only through this back-and-forth, can the fragile roots of self-validation begin to take hold in a young child. When this cycle of giving and receiving between parent and child is disrupted, or breaks down, the development of self-validation may be hindered, or may not take place at all."*

The image below shows how the dynamics of giving and receiving can lead to self-validation in the child.



1. Existential gift
2. Being supported and entitled to give
3. Acknowledgement of receipt; leading to the child's self-validation

Figure 1. The dynamics of giving and receiving (source: Nieuwenbroek & Kimenai, 2021).

In the passages above, we have seen how essential it is that there is a dynamic of giving and receiving between a parent and child. This dynamic lies at the very heart of the contextual approach. Horowitz (2009) describes it as follows:

> *The contextual approach centres on the pursuit of fairness and reciprocity in relationships. It highlights the necessity of interpersonal trust, which is cultivated through acts of giving, and reliable behaviour. Contextual guidance promotes growth through responsible connectedness and regards mental health as the capacity to maintain a just balance between one's own needs, and those of the other. It especially emphasises the importance of recognising the claims that the past places on the future."*

Parents who are mourning the loss of a child frequently find themselves less able to meet the emotional needs of a subsequent child. This results in an interruption of the natural cycle of giving and receiving between parent and child, making it difficult to establish the secure foundation necessary for healthy self-validation. When this foundational process is disrupted, the child may struggle to develop a stable sense of self. We will explore the concept of self-validation in greater depth in Chapter 5.

In the case of an Elvis Child, there is an added complication, the deeply rooted, often unconscious delegation they receive from their grieving parents. It requires that they give something they cannot possibly give: to take the place of their deceased sibling. In a desperate attempt to fulfil this impossible task, the Elvis Child's capacity for self-validation is placed in jeopardy from the very start. No matter what this child offers, it will never feel like enough. They may live with a persistent, if unconscious, sense that their life is overshadowed by another's. No matter how much they may wish otherwise, they cannot undo what has already happened.

Some Elvis Children go on to form symbiotic relationships with their parents. They remain stuck in the child role, giving their parents the continued opportunity to care for them. In doing so, the parents may redirect their grief into the care of the living child, driven by a deep need to prevent another loss. This over-availability may appear noble, but it is ultimately unhealthy for everyone involved. The parents remain trapped in their grief, and the Elvis Child is denied the opportunity to develop a healthy sense of self-validation.

An Elvis Child may often go through life feeling like they have "lost themselves". However, this goes deeper than mere questions of identity. Beneath that statement lie existential questions of self-validation:

- *Do I matter?*
- *Am I significant?*
- *Do I have the right to exist?*

In the chapters that follow, we will explore themes that are central to the experience of Elvis Children. We will examine both foundational themes, while also addressing the possible consequences of growing up as an Elvis Child. Of course, these effects do not unfold in a neat linear order. Rather, they intertwine as different components that together form a complex whole. This is both a defining and a challenging aspect of the contextual approach. As a result, support cannot proceed according to a rigid, step-by-step model. Instead, counselling is grounded in a number of core principles, which we elaborate further in Chapter 3.