



THE HOPEFUL FAMILY

*Raising Resilient
Children in
Uncertain Times*

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Morehouse Publishing
NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTION

Parenting with Hope



The primary goal of parenting, beyond keeping our children safe and loved, is to convey to them a sense that it is possible to be happy in an uncertain world, to give them hope.

—GORDON LIVINGSTON, *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart*

This book is written in a spirit of hopefulness. I believe we can live well amidst the uncertainties of life and that we can help our children do the same. That said, hope finds its true wings in the winds of doubt and so we could also say this book started in a place of searching.

For the past several years, I've heard an increasing number of parents and grandparents wonder about the kind of world we're leaving to our children. They aren't generally melodramatic people, but it's hard to pay attention to the news and not wonder about where we're headed. I asked a parent the other day, "How are you?" to which they replied, "Other than the existential angst, I'm doing really well." Another parent was prompted into similar reflection after a science update about climate change. "Sometimes I wonder if any of the stuff I've spent my life doing is worth anything. I mean, I've spent my whole career trying to make the world a better place for children and now issues like affordable childcare and educational equality seem futile in the long term," she said.

Sometimes it's healing to hear our own fears voiced aloud. I also wondered how many others were feeling this pressure. In 2017, the American Psychological Association published a report examining the impact of climate change on mental

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health, concluding that “the tolls on our mental health are far-reaching. They induce stress, depression, and anxiety; strain social and community relationships; and have been linked to increases in aggression, violence, and crime. Children and communities with few resources to deal with the impacts of climate change are those most impacted.”¹ Since then, the number of people self-reporting that they experience anxiety about the future of the planet has risen, and that number increases if we include people who have already been directly impacted by the effects of a changing climate. Increasingly severe weather patterns lead to more people experiencing hurricanes, heat waves, and blizzards, which create their own trauma.

And while climate change is posing an unprecedented threat, it’s only one of the challenges we parents find ourselves facing. Rapid technology changes mean we don’t know what job skills our children will need. Artificial intelligence is either going to save us or destroy us. Safety at school (or the movie theater, or the mall) hasn’t been assured since we were kids ourselves, if even then.

This book came out of the questions that are at the root of all of these fears: how do we raise our children in an uncertain world?

There is, of course, our deep desire to make the world a better place for them. I would definitely start there. But chances are, if you picked up this book you’re already working that angle. The question that comes next is, “How do we help our children find hope if we can’t assure them that everything will be okay?”

It’s in solidarity with the deep worry of children and adults alike that I began to look more deeply at the spiritual practices woven throughout Christian history. You know what I mean,

1. Susan Clayton, Christie Manning, Kirra Krygsman, Meighen Speiser, “Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance,” American Psychological Association, Climate for Health, and ecoAmerica, March 2017, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf>.

even if the phrase “spiritual practices” is new to you: prayer, generosity, gratitude, Sabbath. I wondered what wisdom they might hold for this time. Were they quaint but archaic practices? Meaningless navel-gazing? Or could they help us shape our lives in a way that would build our sense of hope?

In other words, was there a connection between spirituality and resilience?

What I’ve found is that this is an area of a growing interest, not only from religious leaders but from mental health professionals, educators, and developmental experts. While religious teachers have been lauding the value of spiritual practices for eons, modern research is now backing that up. Consider Dr. Lisa Miller’s research-based book *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*. On her website, she notes that kids with a strong spiritual foundation are less likely to abuse substances, have unprotected sex, or suffer from depression, and they have an increased sense of meaning and purpose.²

Often, when I talk to parents about being a Christian parent, they’re anxious about answering all of their kids’ questions, preventing spiritual suffering, and ensuring that their children stay in the faith. I want all of these things, too, desperately. I want my daughter to grow up with a vibrant, loving faith. No matter what happens to her in life, I want her to be grounded in the idea that God loves her and that her ultimate worth is as a child of God. Ideally, I’d love for her to skip the whole “crisis of faith” stage I went through. But I can’t control that any more than I can ensure that she has a great job, a great spouse, and never struggles with anything.

What we can do is give kids the tools they need to navigate life. We can raise them with spiritual practices that will be their

2. Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2015), accessed May 6, 2019, <https://www.lisamillerphd.com/>.

anchor when life is hard, or when God seems far away. We can give them a love for exploring and questioning, so that if at some point they're in need of spiritual guidance, they'll know how to search. Of course, the benefit of this is that we'll also be building their spiritual resiliency right now.

The Urgency of the Work

When I began this book, I thought I was preparing for the future. After all, that's how we talk about hope and resilience. They are forward-thinking qualities, so we approach them like they're things we will someday need.

My thinking shifted as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded around the world. We were thrust into anxiety upon anxiety, at an individual, nationwide, and global level. In terms of learning practices of hope for uncertain times, we aren't just preparing for some eventual take-off, we're building the plane while flying it. While this pandemic will end, life's challenges will continue.

As I finish this book, the novel coronavirus hasn't yet released its hold. I can't speak about the "lessons we've learned" with the authority of a historian looking back at the past. But I can highlight some of the lessons we are learning, with an eye to how they help us understand the role of spirituality in resilience.

It's encouraging to see that almost immediately, people turned to spiritual practices to understand this hard time in their lives. They spoke of the downtime as an opportunity for rest, or Sabbath. They shared the story they were telling with their children. They talked about rediscovering silence as the noise of the world subsided. They reclaimed family mealtimes and rituals that went along with them. They responded with courage and compassion to the needs of their neighbors amidst illness and economic instability.

Hope has both an inward component and an outward one. Practices of resilience help us find courage and trust. They comfort us in times of struggle. But they also inspire us to believe

in the vision Jesus gave us, that God's reign will come here on earth. This is why throughout the book I'll highlight the ways that spiritual practices speak to our inner needs. I'll explore how the age-old ways of living answer some of the stresses and anxieties we face today. I'll also explore the issues of justice inherent in these practices.

Family Practices Help Us Learn Together

Several years ago, my friend Sam adopted a child. I remember talking to her just a few months after the adoption was final when she said, "I have so much love for this little person, the fierceness of it scares me sometimes. I understand God's love in a whole new way now. And I also understand how we're supposed to love others, like we're all children." Like so many others before her, Sam had discovered that parenthood can be a spiritual awakening.

Day after day, I hear stories from parents about spiritual lessons their kids have taught them. Preschoolers have a way of opening our eyes to wonder and awe. Elementary school kids are beginning to put language to their experiences. They can talk about beauty and truth in a whole new way. By middle school, the quest for spiritual knowledge is branching out into questions of ethics, theology, and logic. When we engage on this level, we find ourselves challenged to think and rethink how we live. I cannot tell you how many times a family has started coming to church (or, I imagine, other houses of faith) at the urging of their children.

I was a pastor and a teacher before I was a parent. I've had my life transformed time and time again by seeing the world through a child's eyes. Still, when I had my own child, I felt overwhelmed by the desire to "get it right" when it came to teaching her about the faith. I forgot one of the things I'd learned years ago: that I didn't have to bring God to children. Children already experience God. They just need an environment that

nurtures their spirituality. In a parenting group for progressive Christians, our covenant became, “Embrace a spirit of play. Invite experimentation. Enjoy questions. Lighten up.”

Spiritual practices lend themselves to this because the practice itself is the teacher. We don’t have to think our way of practicing silence or gratitude is correct. We can just try it and see what happens.

When we keep this in mind, we encourage our children’s spirituality with creativity and playfulness. This is important because rituals and rhythms change over our lives. These nine spiritual practices don’t have to be done a certain way. Experiment with them. One of the rules I’ve made for myself is, “whatever works, works.”

Spiritual Practices across Religions

Throughout this book, I’ll sometimes point out how certain spiritual practices look in other faith traditions. I do this for a few reasons.

The first is because understanding another tradition often helps us understand our own. We gain insight and clarity from seeing what others think and do. I’ve learned much from my friends and clergy colleagues in other faiths and other denominations. It’s a joy to lift up their wisdom in these pages so that it might inspire others.

The second is because spiritual practices can be a unifier across religious differences. My family is mixed-belief, meaning that my husband and I don’t share a faith.³ Some people start out their marriage that way; others may begin in the same faith tradition but one person’s faith changes along the way. In either

3. The term “mixed-belief” comes from Dale McGowan’s book *In Faith and In Doubt: How Religious Believers and Nonbelievers Can Create Strong Marriages and Loving Families* (New York: AMACOM, 2014) and is used here to describe marriages where one person is religious and the other is not.

case, navigating these differences takes a great deal of love and respect. It also means figuring out what you do together as a family and what you do individually.

Connecting the dots between resilience and traditional spiritual practice has helped us align our family practices. Seeing how sacred storytelling can build a foundation of courage for a child has inspired us both to share the stories that are important to us. Reexamining the power of forgiveness has helped us be more intentional about how we practice reconciliation and repair. We might understand the religious significance differently, but we can still participate and learn together. My non-religious husband is much better at practicing both sabbath (meaningful rest) and silence (listening to an internal voice) than I am, even though I have a certain theological understanding about their importance.

I embrace these diverse insights because I believe God's love and grace are big enough to include them. From my Christian lens, I trust that the God I know in Jesus will come to us any way we make room.

The Shape of This Book

This book begins with Sacred Reading practices, where we'll think about the role of story to shape our lives, including biblical stories, family stories, and personal stories. From there, we'll look at Forgiveness. This is the practice that first inspired me to look for the connection between mental health and well-being and spirituality, after a renowned psychologist mentioned that the religious teachings on forgiveness had been foundational in the development of psychology's insights on personal healing.

In the next two practices, Sabbath and Sharing the Table, we'll look at how our daily rhythms of rejuvenation and physical nourishment can offer spiritual nourishment. I was especially intrigued to see the strong connection between these practices and care for the earth.

Our next three practices are also related. We'll begin with Gratitude, a practice that's been well-documented for its mental, physical, and spiritual benefits. Gratitude naturally flows into practices of giving, and so from there we'll turn to Hospitality and Generosity.

As we move to Silence, we'll explore our biological need for silence as well as our spiritual need to make space to hear God. Closing with Blessing, a close cousin of prayer, we'll think about how the practice of blessing helps ease our anxieties and builds our faith.

Much is left unsaid in this book. Each time I wrote a chapter, I found myself meticulously narrowing down what I could cover. Without fail, I would finish a chapter and say to my husband, "I could write a whole book about that!" My hope is to help others get started on their own explorations of hope, connection, and resilience. May you find something here to inspire you to embrace play, invite experimentation, and enjoy questions.

A Blessing for This Journey

May the path be challenging enough to open you in new ways, and familiar enough to lead you home.

Questions for Group or Personal Reflection

1. How has being a parent, grandparent, or teacher been a spiritual journey for you? What deep truths have you learned from the children in your life?
2. The advice in this introductory chapter is to "Embrace a spirit of play. Invite experimentation. Enjoy questions. Lighten up." Parenting and spirituality are both important, even serious, matters. How do you balance being light-hearted and taking things seriously?

3. Spiritual practices are embodied theology—what we do tells us something about the God we believe in. What qualities of God are you're hoping to explore as you explore these nine spiritual practices?
4. As you think about preparing your children for the world, what is the one trait you most hope they will develop? What gifts, or strengths, do you see in your children already?