

Discussion Questions/Journaling Prompts for
Chaos, Wonder and the Spiritual Adventure of Parenting:
An Anthology
edited by Sarah Conover and Tracy Springberry
(Skinner House Books, 2011)

Questions created by Tracy Springberry

Waking

- What are the similarities and differences in the ways Alexandra Fuller and Noelle Oxenhandler experience the births of their children? How are they similar to or different from your experience of the birth of your child(ren)? If your child(ren) came to you after they were born, think about that moment when you first saw them. How was that similar to or different from the authors' experiences?
- How do Fuller and Oxenhandler change when their children are born? How did you change when your child(ren) came into your life?
- Noelle Oxenhandler observes that "everyone is either the child of a parent or the parent of a child, or both." What are the repercussions of this insight?
- Scott Russell Sanders writes, "My quarrel with Jesse changed nothing about the Rockies, but changed everything about the experience of the place. What had seemed glorious and vibrant when we set out that morning seemed bleak and bare." Discuss your own experiences of conflict with your child(ren). Did they make the world seem "bleak and bare"? Conversely, have harmonious experiences with your child(ren) made the world seem "glorious and vibrant"? If so, why does the parent/child relationship have such power?
- Jack Nisbet considers carefully which stories to tell his daughter about his mother. Are there stories you tell often about your family and life? Do you have other stories you tend to keep private? What is the difference between these two kinds of stories?
- Barry Lopez shares the ways he explains nature to children. Have you ever had the experience of trying to help a child understand something and finding your own perception deepened in the process? If so, why do you think this happened?
- Beth Kephart claims her son "taught her wonder." Do you think this is a universal experience of parenthood? Why or why not? Have you learned wonder from your child(ren)? If so, how?

- What does each author in this section awaken to? Has your relationship with a child ever awakened in you something surprising or significant?
- Part of the title of this book is “the Spiritual Adventure of Parenting.” By naming the first section “Waking,” the editors imply that a spiritual adventure involves waking. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Struggles with Love

- Gerald Early writes, “I always assume that people should be interested in learning about two things: themselves and everything that is not themselves.” A running theme of this section is the desire of parents to transform themselves into more accepting people. Have you tried to be more accepting of your child(ren) or other members of your family? What strategies have you used? Have they been successful? Have you become more accepting of yourself? In what ways?
- Anne Lamott reacts angrily to her son in a way that makes her feel “terrible all day.” She finally forgives herself. Have you ever behaved toward your child(ren) in a way you regretted? Were you able to forgive yourself? If yes, how? If no, why not, and what might help you forgive yourself?
- Debra Gwartney describes trying desperately but unsuccessfully to be close to her children. Can you think of times when you wanted closeness with your child(ren) but were unable to attain it? Why didn’t it work? What did you learn, or what could you learn, from the experience?
- “The most assiduous task of parenting is to divine the difference between boundaries and bondage,” asserts Barbara Kingsolver. What do you think she means by this? Do you agree? What experiences with your child(ren) have helped you to understand the difference?
- Gina Petrie writes that her solution to the challenge of blending her family is “to act with love.” Do you agree that choosing “to act with love” is enough when family life gets difficult? When has it worked for you?
- Nadine Chapman describes how her daughter has been treated as an object and the “torquing of the soul” that resulted. Chapman suffers for her daughter and has no idea how to help her, but puts her faith in love. What role has such a faith played in your parenting? Have you experienced or witnessed healing through love?
- Nancy Mairs confronts the idea that love is “an upwelling of delight.” Instead she wonders if love might be a kind of absorption or attention. Is your relationship with your child always filled with delight? How would you describe your feelings when you don’t experience delight? Would you define this as love? Why or why not?

- By naming the second section “Struggles with Love,” the editors imply that struggling with love is part of the spiritual adventure. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Embracing Life

- D.S. Butterworth writes that we can find transcendence in the ordinary. His family’s ordinary, he says, is the kitchen table. For Marion Wink, the ordinary is picking up children from school. Is there an ordinary activity in your family’s life where the transcendent sometimes shines through?
- Laura Read struggles mightily with her desire for a daughter, while she only has sons. Have you ever wished your child(ren) were something they’re not, such as a boy or girl, athlete or reader? Do you know where your longing comes from? How have you resolved it or tried to resolve it? At the end of her essay, Read concludes, “By not being what I always wanted, my sons have been what I always wanted.” What does she mean? Have you had this experience?
- Rosemary Bray McNatt writes that having children “broke her heart open” and gave her “a palpable desire to make the world brand new for their sake.” Has being a parent given you the desire to improve the world for your children and grandchildren? If so, how has this felt and how have you acted on it?
- In three of the essays in this section, the authors deal with death and loss. Jonathan Johnson loses his mother, Cora Schenberg has a miscarriage, and Betsy Wharton gives birth to a seriously disabled child who dies at less than two months of age. Have you grappled with the loss of a child or parent? How is your experience similar to or different from those described here? Why do you think these essays are found in a section called “Embracing Life”?
- Jess Walter ponders the question, “What saves?” A seeker, he explores some of the options he finds in the world and in his family. What spiritual paths have you explored, and what is the relationship between your parenting and your spiritual journey?

In their introduction to the book, the editors assert:

“Having a child throws us, whether we are willing or not, whether we recognize it or not, onto the path toward spiritual wisdom.”

Do you agree? Disagree? Why?