

PARENTING AS A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

*Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary
Events into Sacred Occasions*

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Ch. 2
Dawn / Birth

For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds
JEWISH LIGHTS PUBLISHING • WOODSTOCK, VERMONT

...said, with my child I experienced the strongest, most unambiguous, pure love. If that's what God is all about, then I certainly knew something of God that I had never known before."

Chuck, finishing the interview on the porch while ensconced in his old rocker, mused about those long-ago 4:00 A.M. feedings. "I could not believe it," said Chuck. "We would link eyes and it could last a half hour or more. I had always suspected that on some deep level, I was fundamentally alone in this world. But now I knew I was wrong. Being together with my child was the realest thing I had ever known. Something I had read years before by Martin Buber began to make sense. God was here in the space between our linked eyes, in the relationship, the encounter."

When recalling those early days of parenting, some mothers and fathers mainly remember the fear, others the elation. Some parents already possess a sturdy cocoon of tradition in which to raise their children. Others have to build one painstakingly, over many years. Some chat with God throughout the day; others catch only glimpses of "something more"—and that only at 4:00 A.M.

But most are filled with wonder and wondering. Wonder at the miracle of gallons of milk alchemized into yet another pound of baby. Wonder at the linked eyes (and we thought we had known something about love!). And wondering. Wondering if we have what it takes to do this job, if we can fulfill the trust. Wondering, too, after a long 4:00 A.M. feeding, how in the world we will greet the day again in just three hours.

Chapter 2

DAWN

Birth

*"When the world was first created,
it probably looked just like this morning."*

When I told people I was writing a book about the spiritual experiences of parents, many assumed that I meant the experience of giving birth. It seemed clear to them that participating in the arrival on earth of a new human being would be a "religious high." The drudgery of the next eighteen years has a less obvious connection to holiness. This chapter is about both—the extraordinary, unique experience of birth and the ordinary, quotidian experience of waking up early each morning with children. Both evoke the mystery that religious people call "creation."

For many years, on Friday mornings I went with my child to "play group." (In the interest of honesty, we should have called it "talk group" since the adults' agenda was clearly central.) One winter, we moms spent weeks on a single topic: How did other women combine children and jobs more efficiently than we? *What did they know that we did not?*

One week, Joan arrived at play group full of excitement. She had met a professional woman with three children who was publishing articles at the same rate as when she was childless. What was more, she had told Joan her secret. "All you have to do," Joan explained to a hushed and attentive audience, "is set your alarm to wake up two hours before the earliest rising child."

We were dumbfounded. It was brilliant! Why hadn't any of us thought of that? We were so desperate (and sleep deprived) that we actually believed it would work.

That night I went home and made a list of what I would do with the extra two hours. First, I would say morning blessings—something I had not done alone in years. Then, I would write in my journal. Next, I would take an aerobic walk. Finally, I would work at my computer until my daughter awoke. That night, I set the alarm, full of anticipation.

The next morning, the alarm rang. I turned it off—and promptly went back to sleep. Two hours later, my four-year-old daughter climbed into bed and woke me up, a practice she gave up just in time to turn it over to her younger sister, who has continued it to this day.

At the next play group, we checked in. The method had not worked for anyone. Then someone asked Joan who this woman was. When she told us, Susan said, "I know her! She's not even a nice person!"

Anne was exultant. "Of course not! How could she be nice? She's probably too tired!"

"Besides," Andrea pointed out, "She might get sick from so little sleep."

We all agreed that waking up too early was unhealthy at best, immoral at worst, and undeniably undoable—at least by us. We all agreed we would not wake up a minute before we had to. But once awake (admittedly, earlier than we would like), we would try to treat it as a spiritual opportunity.

What is spiritual about being up when you wish you were still asleep? For one thing, the world has been created once again. Cindy told me she had never fully grasped how beautiful morning was until her child, who had picked up some Bible stories somewhere, announced, "Look, Mom. Do you see the sky? When God created the world, it probably looked just like this morning!" This child had not heard the old Protestant hymn that begins, "Morning has broken, like the first morning." But she understood it.

Andy wanted his daughter Lena to believe the world was created, just so she could sense the mystery of it all. But he didn't believe the Bible creation story any more than he believed any other myth about the world's origins. So he bought his daughter a beautifully illustrated book filled with creation stories from all over the world. Andy's goal was not that his daughter learn how the world came to be. Clearly, on that issue opinions differ. But he wanted her to feel in her bones that it was worth pondering that there is *something* rather than nothing.

Some parents find morning a good place to begin a prayer life. Morning is such a rushed and harried time, so often lacking in moments of quiet

and sanctity, that it cries out for something to elevate it, to introduce thoughts beyond "Why are there never two matching socks?" (My friend Debbie solved this problem by asking her children to safety-pin their socks together before they throw them in the laundry basket. Each time she lifts a pinned pair of socks from the basket she thinks, My children are telling me that they care, that they know these socks will go from their hands to mine and back to them.)

Harry said, "When my baby was little, if she didn't wake up in the middle of the night, we would wake up anyway and go in just to check her breathing!" (More than one father and mother made that confession.) He went on, "It just seemed so natural to start saying the Jewish prayer for waking up—'Thank you for restoring my breath to me.' When I woke each morning, I would put on my prayer shawl and just say that one verse; it was all I had time for. My daughter would often curl up in my lap while I said it. When my daughter was six, she started sleeping later than I did, but she'd often instruct me to wake her up so she wouldn't miss the prayer."

Sometimes, perhaps most times, morning prayers are uttered in a rote fashion, and the whole business is over in a few minutes. These times are not useless. A Hasidic master, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, was once asked, "Why does it say (in Deuteronomy 6:6) that God's words should be *al levavecha*, 'upon your heart'? Shouldn't it say that they should be *in* your heart?"

"Of course they *should* be in your heart," the rebbe replied. "But that is not always possible. At the very least, you can put them *on* your heart. They may just sit there for a very long time. But someday, your heart will crack, and if they are already on top of your heart, they can slip right in."

Ritual creates its own feedback. We hold hands with a child as the sun rises, and we sense, in a way we never did before, that the world is being reborn before our eyes. Suddenly we are in the presence of the unutterable. Believing now in the world's rebirth, we choose to make that hand-holding part of our daily lives, perhaps adding some word of prayer, perhaps creating a miniritual. Along with our child, we find a language to express what cannot be spoken. Using that language over and over, we are confirmed in our initial hunch. The world is as pregnant with meaning as the sunrise with the day.

Marsha has a childhood memory of mornings when her immigrant grandmother slept at her house. "Grandma had her own morning ritual.

house and the yard. We would say, 'Good morning, tree! Good morning, sun! Good morning, mirror!' Sometimes we would spend twenty minutes saying good morning to our world."

Mary Lou grew up in a very religious Catholic home. Every morning, her mother would gather her family together for morning prayers. "Praying wasn't a big deal. It was like breathing. You never questioned it. I still remember what we said in the morning: 'Oh, Jesus, I offer you my prayers, works, and sufferings of this day.' I remember as a child thinking, 'I don't really do much work or suffering,' so I just moved my mouth for that part." I asked Mary Lou if she continued to say that prayer when she was the mother of ten and did not lack for work or suffering of her own. "By then I didn't have time! When I had ten children, I woke up every morning and said the shortest prayer I could—the one that I needed the most. 'Oh, God, please give me patience.' That was it."

Myrna suffered for two years with an undiagnosed, debilitating malady. Then, inexplicably, she got better. "I try to tell my children every day what it feels like to be reborn. I have no words for it, and I don't think I'm very successful, but every once in a while it feels like I am getting through. Once, in the morning, I told my daughter that just as she was getting up from sleep a new person, I got up from being so sick."

From the time he was twelve, James was a physics whiz and a cynical atheist. He still shuns all organized religion, but since his days as a graduate student in computer science, he has made room in his life for a dimension beyond hard science. One form this takes is his daily practice of yoga before breakfast. I asked James if he included his children in this practice. "They watch sometimes, but it is not a part of their lives, at least not yet." "Do you do any morning ritual for them?" I asked.

He thought about it and then responded, "I do. But I never realized before that it was a ritual. To me, one of the most amazing clues that we don't really understand everything is dreams. I have always been fascinated by my dreams—not interpreting them, just acknowledging them. Where do they come from? When my daughter was old enough to understand, I started asking her every morning, 'What did you dream last night?' For the first year, she could not answer the question. I kept asking it anyway. Then, as she became more verbal, she began to share bits of dreams, often before I even asked. Two or three times a week, she shares

something with me. Often, I will tell her a part of one of my dreams. Sometimes, she informs me that her dream was private, and that is fine too. It is a precious time for us."

Judaism prescribes blessings for ordinary events and blessings for extraordinary ones. The ordinary event, the daily rising of the sun, is greeted with a blessing that evokes a time when the world had just come into being: "We praise God who daily renews the works of creation." When it comes to extraordinary events, there is also a blessing, not well known among modern Jews, that mentions creation. The blessing is to be said "upon seeing lightning, comets, falling stars, vast deserts, great rivers, high mountains, experiencing a great storm or an earthquake, or seeing a strikingly clear morning after an all-night rainstorm." It reads, "We praise you God who provides us with moments reminiscent of creation."

When I first heard that blessing, shortly after the 1994 Los Angeles quake, I thought it was a wonderful way to frame what was otherwise a random, frightening, and senseless event. I was struck, however, that the authors of the blessing had not mentioned what by all counts is even more "reminiscent of creation" than an earthquake: the birth of a child. Alas, amazingly, there is no official blessing in Judaism for the moment of birth! But parents have confirmed what I already knew. Being present at the birth of a child, like witnessing the clear morning after an all-night rain, makes the whole miracle of creation more real. The ancient Polynesians also saw the connection between the arrival of a new life and the first stirrings of life itself. At the birth of each royal child, they would chant their creation myth, the Kumulipo.

There was a time when the world began. Having witnessed a birth, parents seem to find that notion a bit less implausible. "There we were in a room with three people . . . and suddenly there was one more!" said one mother. A midwife I interviewed told me, "Every time I assist a mother giving birth, I always prepare her in advance. I share with her my belief that at the instant she looks into the face of her newborn child for the first time, just for that second, she will see the face of God."

"I tell both my children," one mother said, "that God gave them a kiss the second before they were born, to send them on their journey. They like to hear that. And I believe it's true. They came out looking like they had just been kissed, at least to me." A father said, "I had read in *Spiritual Midwifery* [by Ida May Gaskin] that 'every child born is a living Buddha.'

I had no idea what that meant until I saw it with my own eyes. For a minute there, it seemed like the universe paused and shifted slightly to make room for this new being, totally pure and totally wise."

Several parents agreed with Rivka who said, "When my first child was born, I felt, just for a minute there, like this was the first child ever born. It felt like the ultimate miracle, and I was sure no one had ever seen anything like it." Just as a morning can feel like the first morning, so can the creation of a new human being feel like the beginning of all life.

Janet decided to have a child even though her partner Susan was not convinced she wanted to be a coparent. Susan was a skeptic. She wasn't sure she felt hopeful enough about the world and its possibilities to raise a child in it. She saw deciding to have children as a major act of faith, one she was not prepared to make. Yet when Susan was present at the cesarean birth of Janet's daughter, all that changed in an instant. "It was incredibly hard for Susan to watch someone she loved being sliced open," Janet said. "But she was amazed by the degree of sacrifice it entailed and by the whole miracle of birth. Susan was transported by the birth experience into committing herself as a coparent."

When I asked fathers about religion and birth, I cynically expected at least some of them to miss the point. One man fulfilled my worst stereotype. "It was a very long pushing, over three hours, and my wife was unable to talk. So the obstetrician and I had a long discussion about the Talmud." Most fathers, however, in almost equal measure to mothers, spoke about the birth experience as a time when they knew "something more was going on than I could ever understand."

One father told me about the personal imagery that summed up the birth experience for him. "There was a time in my life when I lived in a stone farmhouse in the hill country of Tuscany. The windows were just open spaces, no screens or panes, covered with heavy wooden shutters. At night, we would close the shutters. In the morning I would awaken in a room that was completely dark. I would get out of bed, walk to the window, and throw open the shutters. In one second, everything was transformed. Suddenly, the room was filled: with the sight of lush green hills, with golden light pouring in, with gentle breezes, with the smell of wildflowers, with the sound of hummingbirds. That was the way I felt in the minutes after the birth of our baby. Someone had just opened a window."

It is not gender that divides people so much as openness to the experience. Caryn knew something special was going on at the birth of her child, but she had nowhere to go with that knowledge. "I had been raised in a very strict Catholic home and had bought the whole thing, hook, line, and sinker. When I was twenty-one, I heard a priest praying for our boys in Vietnam, that they kill many of the enemy and come home safely. I literally walked out of that church and also *the* Church, forever. My first child was born when I was twenty-six. It was my first inkling that spiritual experience could exist outside of organized religion. I expected it to be a completely physical event—that is all my childbirth instructors talked about. Actually, the physical part turned out to be insignificant. There was something way beyond the physical that was going on. I didn't have words for it, then or now. I also had no context for carrying those spiritual feelings forward or developing them in any way.

"It was ironic! I had rejected Catholicism because it was so rigid. But in my new life as a secular person, I carried on the tradition of rigidity. I maintained a rigid idea of what religion had to be; therefore I knew it wasn't for me. My birth experiences were just that—experiences. I was with them while I had them, but they seemed confined to the event. I wish I had been more imaginative then."

Jeffrey calls the birth of his child "the most spiritual moment of my entire life." He went on to explain: "When we first discussed having children, it was hard for me to believe that I could be a nurturing, caring father. But I had nine months to get used to the idea, to put my hand on Jane's belly and feel the baby kicking, to attend childbirth classes with Jane and read all the books. The truth is, I thought the classes were for show. I was convinced that when it came to that awesome moment when the child was born, they would lock me in the closet."

I wondered why.

"I had been in the marines in Vietnam. I saw myself as a person who had been participating in organized murder and mayhem from the age of eighteen. I had killed a ten-year-old child at close range. I didn't think I could possibly be allowed to witness a birth. But I was wrong. I was there every minute. When we had counted the fingers and toes, the baby was laid on Jane's breast to nurse and I just cried my eyes out. It was only later that it even occurred to me to ask if it was a boy or a girl.

"As far as religion goes," Jeffrey continued, "my father had been a pro-war minister, and after Vietnam, the whole issue seemed settled for me once and for all. It was 'God and country' that had gotten me into that nightmare. I had no use for any of it. After my daughter's birth, I was open to new possibilities, including looking at religion in an entirely new way." Jeffrey's experience had restored his sense of the holy. For a long time, he had believed that the spirit of God was blotted out in him. Witnessing a birth rekindled that flame inside his own soul. And if it was in him, it could be throughout the universe as well.

When I asked parents about their birth experiences, they were eager to tell me the story, often in far more detail than I wanted to hear. One mother, when asked about her first delivery, began, "I called the doctor when my contractions were five minutes apart and he said to come right over." As I listened and typed, I slowly realized she was going to answer my question in exquisite detail. "... Then, I was at four centimeters, and Joe went out for coffee; that was at three o'clock..." I typed on. "The pushing was the hardest part. It lasted two hours..." She had been speaking for almost twenty minutes when, to my relief, "the head crowned at seven in the morning."

I realized that this mother was not answering an interviewer's question but rather engaging in a ritual recital of a religious narrative. Having studied many religious narratives and knowing the way in which their retelling functions for people, I understood that there was no use asking her, or most other parents, to "hurry up and get to the point." *Getting there* was the point. And I might as well not count on their memory being hazy. The woman I just quoted was describing a birth that had occurred forty-eight years before. And she had four more children! (Had I asked, I am sure she would have been happy to tell me about *their* births.) As she observed, "I cannot forget my own Scripture." These were events outside ordinary time, carved in her memory in a special way. Their power was evoked in the retelling.

Said one mother, "I kept a journal during the weeks just before and after my son's birth. I wanted to remember everything. It was like living in another dimension of time. I wrote down every detail of the hours leading up to his delivery. Now, each year on his birthday, I take out the journal and read aloud some part of it. He acts enormously embarrassed, but I think he secretly likes it. We are letting him know that we think his birth

was a pretty big deal. As for me, it reconnects me to the magic. Some years I really need that!"

Some parents find, in the birth of their child, the birth of feelings that lead them to explore spirituality further. Said one mother, "My labor was a fairly ordinary one, but suddenly in the middle of it, I was hit by the idea—one that I had obviously known intellectually but avoided emotionally—that for millennia women have been doing this. For most of that time, for many women, giving birth might also mean dying. All of a sudden, I was in this place that was midway between birth and death, on the edge of every boundary. I was freaked. But I also knew nothing would be matter-of-fact for me again. And it was not."

I know a woman whose skills as a liturgist and ritual specialist I particularly admire. I was eager to ask her what she had created to mark the moments immediately following the birth of her one, long-awaited child. She looked at me in surprise. "Ritual? Prayer? That was the one moment in my entire life that did *not* need a ritual or a prayer! I just was there, in that moment, fully, like a tree is there. There was nothing we could say or do that could possibly have enhanced the holiness of that time."

As I talked to adoptive parents, I learned that the miracle of creation is great enough to impress itself in a variety of ways. Alana believes that because her daughter was adopted she is "even more amazing to me. I didn't create her, but when I think of all the love that it took to bring her into this life and then the wonder that of all the souls in the world we ended up together, it is fantastic!"

Barbara had assumed, ever since her hysterectomy at age twenty, that she simply wouldn't be a mother. When she and her husband finally decided to adopt, she was apprehensive. At the airport, the tiny Korean baby girl was placed in her arms and all doubts vanished. "That I could give my heart so fully to a total stranger from across the globe seemed utterly fantastic. The heavens opened. Right there in the middle of the terminal." About missing the chance to be a biological parent, Barbara says, "I know I'd feel differently about my child if I had borne her. But I cannot possibly believe that I'd love her more."

Families handle the rituals celebrating the adopted child's birth in different ways. Alana sees the day of her child's actual birth as a time to think about the woman who bore her daughter. Together Alana's family lights a candle for that faraway woman, unknown to any of them, and they say a

prayer for her, giving thanks for her and wishing her blessings. The party and presents are reserved for "Welcome Ellen Day," the anniversary of the day she was adopted, the day the miracle occurred when they became a family.

Barbara, on the other hand, celebrates with cake, balloons, and all the usual hoopla on the day her daughter was born. "After all," she reasons, "she came into the world just like any other kid and should have a party on her birthday just like them. Adopted kids need to know they are like other people, born of flesh and blood in that same miraculous way. The day she came to our home is an anniversary we like to mark, but in a quiet way. Our tradition is to go for a special walk in the woods."

Whether it occurred in delivery rooms or airport terminals, women and men report that "the heavens opened" when their life as parents began. And that, as they say, is the least of it. "Sure, I fell in love when I first saw each of my children," my friend Judy said. "If you want to call it a moment of revelation, go ahead. But to me it is like falling in love with my husband. The first date was only the beginning. I fall in love with Steve over and over again, as we go through our lives together. I am much more in love now than I was the night we met. It is the same with the children."

That is why the blessing says God *renews* creation daily. Each morning is an opportunity to relive those moments of birth and connection and also the moment at the beginning of time—the one we can only imagine through stories. Each morning our souls are returned to us, our world is recreated for us, we are reunited with our children. Each morning we can celebrate this.

What if it were not so?

One of my favorite stories is about the first man, Adam, on the very first day of his life. Night came, and since this was the first time Adam saw darkness, for all he knew, this was it. The black would envelop him and he would never again see the sun, see the animals he had named, see the woman who had been created as his soul mate. So he sat through the night wondering, fearing. And then, as dawn approached, the process he had watched with such sadness the night before began to reverse itself. The sky grew lighter, the birds sang again. Another day had begun. With relief and gratitude, Adam rejoiced.

Our first child was born at 1:00 A.M. on a Friday in December. At ten later that morning, my husband taught a hundred law students the last session of the semester's course. Years later, I ran into a former student of his who had been in that class. I had always assumed that not having slept in over twenty-four hours, Seth had dragged himself through the period. "I still remember him that morning," the student said. "Someone in the back row scratched his head, and the professor noticed it. I have rarely seen anyone so awake."

One of the great religious traditions of the world is devoted to the teachings of a man named Siddhartha Gautama. Once someone stopped him on the road and asked, "Are you a god?"

He denied it adamantly.

"Well, then, are you a celestial being?"

Again the answer was no.

"Perhaps you are a wizard."

Once again, he disagreed.

"Then what are you?"

The man replied, "I am awake."

The Buddha and those who followed him understood that really to be awake is no small matter.

True, with children around, we see more dawns than we might choose. On the other hand, really to see a dawn is no small matter.