

# PARENTING AS A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

*Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary  
Events into Sacred Occasions*

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Ch 3  
Bodies

**For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds**  
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## GETTING DRESSED

### *Bodies*

*"Why is Grandma uncomfortable  
with my clothes? It's not her body!"*

Having greeted the dawn, the parent must now face the day. Having connected your soul to your child's soul or not, as the case may be, you now must address the question of bodies. For years before we can talk together, read together, pray together, we parents take care of our children's bodies. We feed them, diaper them, dress them, bathe them, watch them grow. As we engage in these processes, those of us whose spirituality had been ethereal or intellectual begin to see things differently. They have bodies, and (in case we had forgotten) we too have bodies. "I was a person who lived in my head," said Norman. "Then the baby arrived." Often, surprisingly, some of the great spiritual moments of parenting come when we are up to our elbows in stuff.

Caring for the bodies of children is an opportunity to reflect on their beauty, on their quality as images of the divine. The Bible forbids making pictures or statues of God because every human being is God's image. Caring for the image of God is a commandment. A story is told about Rabbi Hillel and a bath. Once, his disciples asked where he was going.

"To perform a commandment," he replied.

"But where are you going?" they asked again.

"I am going to the bathhouse."

"Is taking a bath a commandment?" they challenged him.

"The king's statues set up in theaters and circuses all over the city are scoured and washed down by officials," he replied. "How much more am

I required to scour and wash down myself since I am created in the image of God!"

Parenting may be a spiritual journey, but it is never far removed from bodily realities. During pregnancy, as a woman's shape changes to accommodate the growing fetus, she is often more aware than ever that she is a body as well as a mind and soul. Debbie remembers being pregnant and watching the family cat nurse her kittens and purr. "It got me in touch with my animal sense. I wasn't so different from the cat after all. It gave me permission to give in to that part of me."

My own first pregnancy unfolded during the summer and fall of 1982 while I was serving as a rabbi in New York City. The congregation drew its members mostly from my grandparents' generation. I approached the fall High Holidays (the Days of Awe) seven months pregnant. Several of my congregants suggested that I consider wearing a robe to lead these important services, although neither I nor my predecessors had ever been so formal. I accepted their suggestion, agreeing that the solemnity and awesomeness of those holidays would be enhanced by making my distinctive body a nonissue. Later, when I thought about it, I decided that I had made the right decision for the wrong reason. I had thought that my huge pregnant body might be an affront to the holiness of the occasion. In fact, it was simply *too* awesome.

While all women feel physically altered by the birth of a first child, some feel utterly transformed. Jane told me, "When my first child was born, I had a strange physical reaction. My face swelled up and there were hemorrhages in my eyes. The doctor said it was due to a minor blood-clotting abnormality and that for a few weeks I would look like I had been severely beaten. Every time I saw myself in the mirror during that time, it underscored that I had really gone through a big deal. It was an outward manifestation of an inward change."

When I told other new mothers this story, they understood immediately and seemed almost envious of Jane. Said Rosalie, "I looked the same in the mirror as I had before, which somehow seemed weird. I certainly didn't *feel* the same!"

Alice reported, "Right after the birth of my baby, I was very proud of my body and felt most warmly toward it. After all, look what it had accomplished for me! Sure, it was still much bigger than I was used to, and I wanted to lose the weight I had gained. But that had nothing to do with

my love for my body. I would stand in the shower, watching the water bounce off my skin, off my flabby belly, and rejoice. In the shower I composed a whole series of poems that I never had time to write down. Their title was 'Ode to My Body.'"

The baby arrives, squirming and howling, very much a body. Kevin confessed that he was enthralled by his newborn's smell, as if it provided a whiff of another world. "I never told anyone, but for over a week after we got home we did not give her a bath," he admitted. "We didn't want anything about her to change."

I never understood the Christian idea of God's incarnation until I had a child. A few months after my pregnant High Holidays, Seth and I were sitting in our living room on December 24, marveling at our six-day-old first child. The doorbell rang and there was Father Gerard Sloyan, the chairman of my doctoral dissertation committee. Fearing that he was in search of some finished chapters, I hastened to inform him that I had accomplished nothing much in the last month except this small bundle in my arms. Father Sloyan assured me that he had no thought of my dissertation but had stopped in only to visit the small bundle. "It is the Lord's birthday tomorrow," Father Sloyan explained, "so I wanted to hold a baby in my arms." Having studied Christianity, I had read about incarnation, but for the first time I really "got it." In the Christian imagination, God was once a tiny body just like this!

Mothers who used their own bodies to nourish their child's bodies through breast feeding wanted to talk about it. A lot. Magda, a nurse and a single mother of one son, insisted that she was "not at all religious." Nevertheless, near the end of our interview, she told me that she did have a spiritual experience "that lasted not for minutes but for months." It was breast feeding. "I am moved most by nature and by camaraderie. Breast feeding is both. For me, feeding my child with my own body was the perfect interconnection, the linking of the physical and the emotional. It was the ideal circle in which there was no glitch. The first time I nursed I had a revelation: so this is what breasts are for!"

Gloria, a psychotherapist, told me about going to work during her breast-feeding months and listening to her clients talk. Whenever they began to speak about need or longing, she could feel her breasts fill up with milk. "My body was actually responding to what I heard. It was the most extraordinary thing my body has ever done."

Cathy went back to work while still breast feeding. While sitting at her desk across town, she would notice her breasts beginning to leak—in effect, crying out to be nursed. She'd call home to check in with the babysitter, and sure enough, the baby had just begun to cry. "I believed my baby and I were communicating across the miles. It was the most intense experience of connection I have ever had."

For some, breast feeding is a new experience of bodily connection, different from the sexual, adding another dimension to their lives. Lila remembers, "For me, the milk was a living metaphor of God's love. The more the baby needed, the more milk there was. If the baby took less, there was less. Now, how did the breasts figure that out? I could never get over it. But the more love we need from God, the more there is."

Along with feeding a child comes its inevitable complement, the child's excretion of bodily waste. Here we come to perhaps the most mundane and earthy side of the whole baby business, yet it, too, has its spiritual lessons. "My husband and I were amazed to realize how much time we spent discussing bowel movements," laughed Jeanette. "In our whole married life, we had *never* discussed bowel movements. Now we did, even at the dinner table—once, even when there were guests! It made us less pretentious. After all, this is basic human stuff, and we were not exempt."

The business of toilet training is for some parents a fascinating study in bodily autonomy. "My son was the toughest case of toilet training you will ever hear of," Melinda complained with only partially disguised pride. "He wanted no part of any of it. He refused to even sit on the toilet to give it a try. We talked and talked about it, but there was no action. Nothing. He and the toilet never made contact." Then the time came for his three-year-old checkup. "The doctor said I needed to bring a urine specimen. I explained this to my son, and he agreed to sit down on the toilet the next morning. And he did, at 6:30 in the morning. At 11:00, he was still sitting, still refusing to pee. At noon, we had to leave for the doctor, so I gave up and put a diaper on him. He just flooded that diaper! I cannot imagine how he held all that in for so long! I drove off to the doctor without the sample, certain I would be buying diapers for the rest of my life. But the very next morning, my son woke up, took off his diaper, walked over to the toilet and peed, went back to his room, and put on a pair of underpants. We never discussed the topic again. I guess he had proved to himself that it was *his* body and he was in control, so now it was OK to use the toilet."



How was all this a spiritual experience for Melinda? "I so respected his passionate journey to figure out what his body was capable of," she says. "I saw him for the first time as bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, and yet so completely his own flesh, his own being, not prepared to part with what was his until his own good time. I found myself in awe of the process we all go through to become our own people, to claim our own space, and I was much clearer than ever how it all starts with the very bodies we inhabit. No, not inhabit, *are*. It was an occasion for wonder."

Parents often must face the reality of their child's essential separateness. I called Stuart, expecting a wonderful "body story" because I knew about Stuart's own interest in the physical. "When I was younger, I played a variety of sports, and now, I am happiest when I am hiking or rollerblading," Stuart said. "For me, exerting myself physically, being 'in my body' is the most important part of the day. It is the time when I am most alive, when I am uplifted psychologically and also spiritually. As a scholar, I devote much of my research to issues of the body."

Stuart is now the single father of a seven-year-old daughter. Naturally, he expected her to join him in his love for physical activity. But Tammy, like many children, challenges her father to give up his expectations. "It turns out Tammy doesn't like being physically active. I had so looked forward to the joy of teaching her each of the sports, of running and hiking with her. But she is simply uninterested, at least so far. Her own passions are all sedentary pursuits. When I try to cajole her into engaging in my agenda, we both end up frustrated. Only when I respect her own way of using (or not using) her body do we really do well together."

The tiny bodies of our children often seem to evoke powerful emotions. Janet said about her infant son's body, "I keep trying to figure out why I react so strongly to Jack's body. What is it about him and the way his skin is so smooth, the license I have as a mother to indulge in the sensuality of touching it, the innocence and sheer beauty of it all?"

Said another mom, "Once I was sitting with my two-year-old on the floor watching a video, and he decided he wanted to play with the control panel on the TV set. I set myself up as a barricade so that he would have to crawl over me to get to the TV. He was climbing all over me, having an absolutely fabulous time, and it occurred to me that the best jungle gym, the best toy for my son, was my own body. He was climbing up my back and I thought, We are a sculpture. Somebody looking down at the two of

us would see a living, breathing sculpture of two human beings. It was a moment of awe for me—we were art."

Suzi said that the responsibility for her children's bodies ultimately led her to take better care of her own. "When my first child was born, I spent hours in the library reading about health and medicine. I did not want to trust doctors; I wanted to think everything through for myself. I felt my children's health was a precious gift with which I was entrusted. As I learned more, I started to feel that way about my own health."

"I had always taken the workings of my own body pretty much for granted. But now I began to really care for myself. At this point, I would not even dream of smoking, drinking, taking drugs, or driving fast—activities I tried out when I was childless. It is not just because I want to stay healthy to see my children grow up, though I do. And it is not just to set a good example for them, though that is important too. It is mainly because I feel, in ways I never did before, how precious my body is."

Then there is the matter of dressing our children's bodies. Not the spiritual high point of the day, you say? For a long time, it is something we simply have to do, part of the daily routine. God clothes the naked, and we clothe our children. But as our children grow older, the whole issue becomes more complex. Can they put on their own clothes? How much help do they want? Sometimes more than they need, sometimes less. Most toddlers want to dress themselves independently *and* want someone to take care of them. They often don't know which they want more. Parents want their kids to grow up and take care of themselves, yet they also want to maintain the closeness and control. And speaking of control, who decides what gets worn?

At stake here are not just shirts and pants. Do we really see our child as an autonomous body or as an extension of our own bodies? When children are small, we dress them exactly the way we want. We impose on their bodies our vision of who they are. When my younger daughter was a baby, I occasionally found myself engaged in minor warfare with her baby-sitter over what my daughter would wear. In the morning, I would dress her in a comfortable stretchy sleep suit, one of several worn hand-me-downs from a friend. When I came home, I would find my daughter turned out in a starched, lacy dress, a birth present that I had hidden in the back of one of her drawers. Barbara, the baby-sitter, would mutter something about her "needing to be changed," but I knew better. Barbara was

indeed “changing” my daughter so that she could look more like an extension of Barbara than an extension of me. I didn’t mind. (At least that is how I like to remember the story.) It is part of what we do with babies.

When children get older, however, they want to use their bodies to display their own identities, not ours or the baby-sitter’s. One wise mother let her daughter feel her oats. “For a year or two, she would wear only purple—ever. So we went out and bought a lot of cheap purple clothing. My mother and I had had horrible battles over my clothing, and I didn’t want to replicate that. I figured, it is a safe arena for her to be herself.”

Other parents I spoke to agreed. “Kids don’t have many choices,” one of my friends said, “so I let them use clothes as an expression of themselves and their autonomy.”

Sometimes, however, children’s choices conflict with the parent’s agenda. Valerie told me how important it was to her that her sons dress up for the Sabbath, to honor the specialness of the day. Unfortunately, the boys did not see it that way. They wanted to wear sweatpants just like they wore all week, not uncomfortable dress clothing.

Finally, Valerie came up with a compromise that respected their instincts and her concern for the holiness of the day. She took them to the store and let them pick out wild, colorful, patterned sweat suits. These suits would be worn only on the Sabbath and then laundered so that they would be clean the following week. They were comfortable but special. Valerie confessed, “The truth is, the clothes aren’t really fancy so much as they are funny. But at least they are designated.”

In the teen years, the battles over whose body it is recur, with issues about appropriate dress, makeup, ear piercing, tattoos, hairstyles and dyes, and the like. It is not surprising that these become important battlegrounds between parents and children as children claim their bodies as their own.

Nina understands the power of clothing. She grew up among the Old Order Amish in Lancaster County. At the age of twenty-six, Nina chose to break a central rule of her religion and to attend college, even though she knew this would result in her excommunication. The night before the church service in which she would be officially dismissed from the community, she went out to the field and talked with her bishop; they both cried. Then, on the train to Chicago, she went to the ladies’ room, changed into modern clothing, and wrapping her Amish dress and hat in a small bundle, threw them out the window.

Linda, a feminist who lives in Los Angeles, faced the greatest clothing challenge that I heard about. As usual, the magnitude of the challenge was directly correlated with the magnitude of the learning it afforded. At age two, Linda’s only child, Jeff, grabbed one of Linda’s T-shirts and happily announced: “This is my dress!” He often would wear a long T-shirt to day care. Soon he began asking for dresses of his own. At the store, he would beg for all manner of pink, frilly, lacy clothing—especially skirts and dresses. Linda was unsure how to handle the situation. She wanted to let him play it out in his own way. He was a happy, friendly, industrious boy.

By the age of four, Jeff—still happy and well adjusted—understood that at school he needed to wear pants and not dresses. Home, however, was another matter. As soon as he got in the door, he would run to his room and change into “something pretty”—a bride’s dress, a Cinderella costume, his mother’s skirt. When the family went visiting, he would ask if this was the kind of place where he could wear what he wanted. If not, he would content himself with regular boys’ clothes. But if it was, he would pack a huge suitcase full of his beloved outfits. Once, his mother explained that his dress habits made his grandmother uncomfortable. Genuinely puzzled, he asked, “Why do they make *her* uncomfortable? *She’s* not wearing the clothes. It’s not *her* body.”

Jeff is now thirteen and has ceased showing any interest in girls’ clothing. But Linda believes she learned a great deal from her son. “For one thing, I have been forced to confront my own prejudices and fears,” she explained. “I thought I was a pretty hip, tolerant person. But Jeff made me wonder. When he was so interested in dresses, I thought this may all blow over in another year or two, or it may mean something about him. So I had to read and consider how I would feel if my son turned out to be gay. I even have had to imagine how I would feel if he were a transsexual and ultimately chose to have a sex-change operation. This pushed me to a point where I made a wonderful discovery: I loved my child deeply and totally, no matter what his sexual orientation or even gender turned out to be. I didn’t love a little boy, I loved a little person.

“This led me to some new realizations about God. When feminism first began and a lot of us became skeptical of all the male God language in our tradition, I—along with many others—began to experiment with calling God “She” or “Mother” or even “Queen.” But it always felt to me a little like dressing the male God up in drag. Now, I think I see this even more clearly. The names for God are just like clothing. Just like the

essence of my son was not tied up with his gender, so the essence of God is beyond gender."

While we are busy diapering, toilet training, dressing, and fighting about clothing, a miracle occurs. The little body we cared for becomes bigger and bigger, more and more its own separate person. "In only twelve years," Joe said, "my daughter went from a tiny creature, smaller than the chicken we roasted for dinner, to a shapely young female, taller than any woman I ever dated. One day she seemed part of us; all of a sudden we turned around and she was a being of her own."

We had a kind of sacred shrine in our home for years, a place that evoked wonder every time I walked by it. The shrine was created around an idea in a work by Mordecai Kaplan, a great American Jewish religious thinker whose version of Judaism—Reconstructionism—is the kind I practice and teach. In one of my favorite passages, Kaplan writes, "There can hardly be a more real and more God-revealing experience in the inner life of a child than that of growth. Every child realizes how much bigger and stronger physically . . . he grows with every year. . . . It is not something he can get himself to do at will. . . . It happens to him as it does to [plants and animals]."

Because the physical growth of our children seemed as miraculous to Seth and me as it did to Kaplan, we began marking on our front hall archway each of our children's heights, along with the date, every six months or so. While the realtor who appraised our house for possible future sale disapproved of the defacing of our walls, for us, this chronicle of the children's growth definitely belonged in a privileged place in our home.

One summer, we arranged to have our house painted while we were on vacation. Alas, we returned to discover that we had forgotten to tell the painters about our shrine! It was all neatly painted over, a clean white hall that would make a realtor rejoice. Saddened by the loss of nine years of records, we resolutely picked up where we had left off, using bold markers to make permanent the mystery of bodies growing.

## Chapter 4

### SIBLINGS

#### *Connection*

*"My favorite part was when my brother said he was connected to me."*

At 12:30 P.M. on April 4, 1991, the playground at our local elementary school was filled with noisy, carefree children. Two minutes later, two small airplanes, one carrying a U.S. senator, crashed in midair and landed in flames on the school playground, killing all the passengers. When the chaos had abated and the schoolchildren had all been accounted for, two had died, one was seriously burned, and the rest badly shaken but physically unharmed. Five years later, people in our community still talk about that afternoon.

I asked a third-grade teacher what she remembered most vividly. "I'll never forget the reaction of the children. They were terrified, of course. We were trying so hard to get the kids back to their classrooms, but the kids had a different agenda. 'Where is my brother? Where is my sister?' Every one of them with a sibling in the school had the same concern. That morning at breakfast, two brothers may have been teasing each other mercilessly, but now their only thought in the nightmare was to make sure the other was OK."

As Marian Sandmaier, the author of a book about siblings called *Original Kin*, points out, our sibling bonds are the longest-running relationships of our lives. In most cases, we encounter our siblings before we meet our friends and partners, and we continue to know them after our grandparents and parents are gone. We compete with them, we live out roles