

*The Adult*  
Faith Formation  
Library



*The* SPIRITUALITY  
*of* PARENTING  
*Connecting Heart and Soul*



KATHY HENDRICKS

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# *The Adult Faith Formation Library*



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## INTRODUCTION

“BEING A PARENT MEANS WALKING AROUND WITH YOUR HEART OUTSIDE YOUR BODY FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.” This quote has made its way around parenting circles in various forms for years. It expresses the heartfelt experience of parenting, one entailing vulnerability and a letting go of outcomes and control. It’s not a role for the faint of heart.

There are over one thousand references to the heart in the Bible, more than those referring to the body, the mind, or even the soul. The Hebrew word for heart, *lev*, denoted the seat of wisdom and understanding. It encompassed the vast range of human emotion, something we continue to associate in metaphoric fashion with the heart today. In addition to understanding the heart as the emotional center of an individual, *lev* included the collective mind, or mind-set, of the people. It was, in essence, the mental heart as well as one of flesh. The heart was the spiritual meeting place between God and God’s people. In his book *The Awakened Heart*, Gerald May describes the heart as the place “where we are in most intimate contact with God’s presence and with our essential union with others, where the deep, ongoing love affair be-

tween God and human beings actually takes place.”

One of the most beautiful references to this connecting place is the passage from Ezekiel: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26). An enfleshed heart pulses, throbs, and beats in rhythm with God’s own heart. I once heard this passage likened to a spiritual heart transplant. It entails conversion—a change of heart—something that is ongoing in the lives of those who seek to enter into God’s heart. Jesus called for such conversion by inviting his followers to enter into love—love of God, love of others, love of self.

The heart *in love*—one immersed in love—is a heart that has gone outside of itself. The object of one’s love becomes the focal point, and all sorts of energy are directed toward that relationship. While we usually associate falling in love with a romantic relationship, it can also be applied to the parent who falls in love with his or her child at the moment of meeting. Over the years, a range of emotions unfolds and draws the parent’s heart outward in joyous, strange, frightening, wondrous, and mysterious ways.

### ***Parenting and the States of the Heart***

The term “spirituality” might seem a bit overwhelming when juxtaposed with the day-to-day reality of parenting, particularly when children are moving in and out of phases and stages that baffle the mind. Nonetheless, parenting as a spiritual endeavor resonates with a transformative movement of the heart. This makes the experience rich ground for spiritual growth and reflection. Parents lay a foundation for the faith

of their children but are also formed and shaped by God in the process. This happens through the very ordinary tasks of raising children and guiding them toward adulthood. Each task is rooted in the sacred. Ezekiel's image of a heart plucked out of the body and then placed back makes an apt description of a parent's heart.

There is no shortage of books about how parents form, educate, and nurture their children, particularly in religious and spiritual values. I have added to the mix myself with books on faith formation and prayer in the home. There seem to be very few books, however, inviting parents to reflect on their role and to nourish their own spirituality in the midst of their busy and complicated lives. Such is the purpose of this book. Thus, it won't contain a lot of helpful hints about managing family life; rather, it will offer insights into how a parent can care for his or her own heart.

While children go through various stages and phases in the course of growing up, parents do too. These are not necessarily sequential, however, and they include, at the deepest spiritual level, an expansion of the heart. It might be more appropriate to describe the movement of a parent's heart as one of "states" versus stages. The next four chapters will examine four "states of the heart": **vigilance**, **joy**, **heaviness**, and **hope**. In each one, the heart of parenting will be explored as we look at ways in which the heart expands, rejoices, breaks open, and sometimes shatters as children are anticipated, born or adopted, raised, and let go.

The challenge of parenting is as old as history, and so we find it embedded in the Scriptures. The "first parents," Adam and Eve, set the stage as their sons duke out their conflicts to



a bloody and tragic end. Happily, the challenges most parents face will not be as extreme. Even so, they tax the heart. They are also offset by the blessings that come with parenting—the joy, pride, and moments of delight that arise in watching children grow into themselves. **Scriptural stories** lay a foundation for these blessings and challenges. Thus, each chapter of this book includes a connection with parents in the Bible, especially Mary, and how they embody the states of the heart.

The African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” is another familiar adage. For many parents today, however, the “village” is shrinking. Households have become more mobile and, as a result, less connected with extended family and neighborhoods. Such mobility weakens the connection with institutions that support the family, such as churches and schools. This situation makes the value of **companionship** all the more vital. The need for support systems, particularly through the parish and school, is critical. Companionship is also an essential component of spiritual growth and development. As the states of the heart are examined in each chapter, I will offer ideas about particular companions who bolster the heart of the parent.

I don't know any parent who went through a training program prior to welcoming a child into their lives. Parenting is pretty much a learn-as-you-go endeavor. What often takes us by surprise is the way in which particular **gifts** of the heart arise as we meet the challenges and bask in the blessings of parenthood. Each of the four chapters will offer a look at some particularly important gifts that help a parent move more deeply into their roles and relationships. One gift common to all states of the heart is **prayer**, and so I will also

offer ideas for various spiritual practices pertinent to parents.

My husband, Ron, is a trail runner. Every once in a while I see him standing still and holding a finger to the pulse at the side of his neck in order to check his heart rate. This is a marvelous metaphor for the spiritual life. By taking our spiritual pulse on a regular basis, we become more aware of ways to maintain a **healthy heart**. This is particularly important for parents who find themselves spent at the end of a day and too exhausted to tend to their own needs. Caring for others, particularly children, is a demanding task. I don't know how we go about it effectively if we aren't careful to mind the state of our own hearts. Ideas for doing so could fill another book. Instead of trying to cover the entire spectrum of self-care for parents, however, each chapter concludes with ideas for maintaining good spiritual health and how to tend each state of the heart.

While the primary reader of this book is the parent, it is also written for those who walk alongside parents as family members, friends, neighbors, ministers, and coworkers. **Questions** at the end of each chapter invite reflection and discussion to help both parents and those supporting them deepen their understanding of the spirituality of parenting.

ONE



## *The* VIGILANT HEART

“QUICKENING” IS THE MOMENT DURING PREGNANCY WHEN A WOMAN FIRST STARTS TO FEEL OR PERCEIVE THE MOVEMENTS OF HER CHILD. It’s akin to the fluttering of butterfly wings—almost imperceptible but nevertheless real. I have given birth to three children, and with each one the quickening was a moment of heightened awareness. It made the expectation of a baby less ethereal. It helped me recognize that I wasn’t going to *be* a mother; I already was one.

During my first pregnancy, my mother-in-law sent me the *Better Homes and Gardens Baby Book*. Over the next several months, I pored over each chapter, particularly the ones detailing the baby’s growth and development. Each stage brought a new wave of anticipation and awe. The BH&G book predat-

ed *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, the ultimate how-to guide to pregnancy that sold millions of copies and inspired a movie of the same name. While the information in the BH&G book was less extensive, I was still mesmerized by its description of fetal development. Thus I tracked with wonder my child's growth from zygote to embryo to fetus and then the transition from womb to the world through childbirth. The latter was heightened by participation in Lamaze classes in which each phase of the birthing process was described in fascinating, and somewhat terrifying, detail. What neither book nor class could prepare me for, however, was the after-birth experience of being with my newborn baby. It's a breathtaking experience that leaves a parent changed in ways she or he could never have imagined.

Expectant parents—be it those awaiting the birth of a child or arrival through adoption or remarriage—learn to watch while they wait, attentive to the movement of the child into their lives. There are many such parents in the Bible. Abraham and Sarah give up on their dream of having a child until an unexpected guest tells them to wait just a little bit longer. Hannah, throughout years of infertility, prays fervently for a son and awaits an answer after promising that he will lead a life of consecrated service to God. Elizabeth and Zechariah are stunned by news of a child that will be given to them in their old age. And, of course, Mary receives the incredible news of her impending motherhood through the working of the Holy Spirit. Rather than knowing exactly what to expect, each figure remains open to the workings of God in their lives.

Mary's "yes" in the account of the Annunciation opens

the door to redemption. She cooperates with the divine plan, thus becoming a critical part of the incarnational event—God made flesh. Her openheartedness is all the more touching when one recalls that she was just a young girl—perhaps only thirteen—when she received the startling news from an angel. Nevertheless, her song of praise for a God who has asked more than she could imagine is a model of faith and trust. “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...” (Luke 1:46–47). The exuberance in her prayer is an exquisite illustration of her abiding love for God and respect for God’s inscrutable ways.

### *The Sanctity of Vigilance*

I once read an article that described vigilance as the most defining characteristic of a saint. While the saints shine in particular ways through their piety, generosity, compassion, mercy, or commitment to justice, it’s their willingness to wait upon God’s time that draws them all together.

I know a lot of parents who qualify for sainthood by dint of this description alone. All parents know in some way, however, what it means to be vigilant. Consider the various types of vigils parents keep, from awaiting the initial arrival of a baby into the household to a teenager making it home safely from a first date. While the expectant parent is associated with pre-birth moments, other forms of expectation arise throughout a child’s life. Parents understand the need to be vigilant—to expect and anticipate, to wait and endure, to remain attentive and alert to a child’s feelings, moods, needs, wants, and growth. It’s at one and the same time the most agonizing part of parenting and the most wondrous. Sometimes it feels as

if you'll never again get a good night's sleep. At other times it makes you feel as if you have finally woken up to life. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

I gained another insight into vigilance while directing a women's retreat on openheartedness. The parish priest provided an entrée into the theme by showing a picture of himself as a toddler. He was just learning to walk and the photo showed his father holding his hands as he struggled to keep upright. The priest then asked the mothers to describe the experience of teaching their children to take their first steps. "There was a lot of bending over," one responded.

That "bending over" extends throughout a parent's life. Sometimes it reaches extremes, as in the case of "helicopter parenting"—the tendency to hover a tad too much and thus impede a child's movement into independence. When kept in balance, however, the protective love of a parent is vital to a child's well-being. One of the most beautiful passages in the Bible is the account of Jesus' baptism, when the sky above him opens and "the Spirit of God [descends] like a dove..." (Matthew 3:16). The image is akin to a mother dove hovering over her nest, beating her wings to keep her hatchlings safe. It's a touching illustration of the "bending over" that is intrinsic to parenting.

### *Different Kinds of Vigilance*

My BH&G book also didn't prepare me for the unexpected turns along a parent's road. The day after she was born, the doctor told us our little Jenny had Down syndrome. A few weeks later she was diagnosed with an underdeveloped colon that required immediate surgery and left her with a colosto-

my. The latter condition threw Ron and me into a different kind of vigilance—that of sitting by an ailing child’s bedside. It was a time of heart-stopping anxiety.

After her recovery, still another form of vigilance took hold. I set aside the BH&G book, with its neat and tidy stages of a child’s first two years of development, and opened myself to discovery. Jenny was born in 1977. At the time terms like “special needs” and “mentally and physically challenged” were not yet part of everyday parlance. Down syndrome was a mysterious term as well and, since we didn’t know what to expect, we watched and waited as Jenny grew in her own time and way. Down syndrome opened a door for us into the lives of parents who have a whole different understanding of “normal.” Even though I didn’t articulate it at the time, I was experiencing a “bent over” God who watched over us with tenderness and love. It was the infusion of the Divine into our everyday lives, something the fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich described in one of her beautiful visions. “See that I am God. See that I am in all things...See that I have never stopped ordering my works, nor ever shall, eternally. See that I lead everything on to the conclusion I ordained for it, before time began, by the same power, wisdom and love with which I made it. How should anything be amiss?”

After Jenny recovered from her surgery, life took on a normalcy that would characterize any new parent’s household. Aside from learning to change her colostomy bag, taking care of her was no different than what we did for her two siblings—Eric and Anna—who came along later. Routines were set in place and everyday tasks became mundane.

Everyday vigilance can trigger different reactions. For me, it was relief. I was happy to trade the vigilance of the hospital for that of the home. For other parents, however, it can be a time of strain and self-doubt. In an issue of the Christian spiritual journal *Weavings*, author Gayle Boss describes the experience of many stay-at-home parents in which each day seems to resemble the next. “It’s not so much the relentlessness of meals and all the mop-up that gets me muttering. It’s the boredom. Another desert mile that looks just like the last desert mile” (“Leaning Forward,” *Weavings*, XVIII, No. 2). Within a society that judges people by their economic worth, parenting can feel like an endless desert walk. Even so, there is inestimable value in the parent’s role. The repetitive work of parenting, Boss notes, is also redemptive. God had taken her back to the basics, she writes, to “nurse the baby, scrub the bathroom, find something to eat. Listen.”

In the article “Reflecting Home,” in the same issue of *Weavings*, Gerrit Scott Dawson, a Presbyterian minister, notes the importance of building a home as a gathering place, “ordered by love and filled with constant effort.” The father of teenage children, he also observes how the occupants are often less than appreciative. “We love,” he writes, “in a million mundane ways.” In doing so, we instill the “welcoming love of Christ inside each member.”

I’ve lost track of the number of times Ron and I have watched the 1989 film *Parenthood*. This story of a large extended family is a hilarious and touching portrayal of the anxieties of parents who want the best for their children but are sometimes stymied by how to provide it. Gil, the father of three young children, is beset with anxiety and tries his



best to be a good father while also holding a stressful and demanding job. Having received little direction or modeling in this regard from his own father, he is often plagued with self-doubts. His father, in the meantime, is trying to deal with his youngest son, Larry, who shows up at his door with a huge gambling debt and a young son none of the family knew about. Going to Gil with his concerns, the older father laments the long-term vigilance that is part of parenthood. “There is no end zone,” he says. “You never cross the finish line, spike the ball, and do your touchdown dance. It never, ever ends.”

I am paraphrasing the exact conversation, but the scene never ceases to make me laugh—and then to sigh. With my children now well into adulthood, I understand the never-ending part of vigilance. Hearing an adult child sob over the phone about the death of her beloved dog is as gut-wrenching as recalling her tears over a friend’s snubs when she was in kindergarten. The parent’s heart requires a unique capacity for endurance and for making the mundane into something truly sacred.

### ***Parental Peer Pressure***

Looking back, I am glad I set aside the BH&G book. Down syndrome, in a sense, let me off the hook when it came to having the “perfect” child or being the ideal mother. While I was unsure how Jenny’s development would progress, so were those around me. Thus, I was spared the kind of parental peer pressure that besets many mothers and fathers today. This isn’t to say it didn’t creep up on me later. Eric and Anna each went through phases of childhood and adolescence

that threw me into doubt about my parenting abilities. The thought that others were observing my massive mistakes was unsettling. Thus, I am ever-grateful to Eric for once telling me, “If I ever go into therapy, I won’t blame you.”

The anxiety level among parents might be at an all-time high in this age of television reality and talk shows as well as access to instant news via the Internet and social media. I recall, for example, the afternoon of the terrible shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. While students were still streaming out of the building in a panic, newscasters were ruminating about the shooters and what kind of parents they must have. This rush to judgment around the parents’ role in a child’s violent acts is distressing and unfair. Children will go astray, to be sure, and parents have varying parts to play in such situations. Holding ourselves accountable for a child’s well-being is an essential part of self-vigilance.

There are limits to what we can do, however. No matter what messages are given through the media, it’s important to remember that children are not a reflection of us. Each one is an individual. Holding the tension between protecting a child enough to feel safe and secure and allowing him or her increasing levels of independence is a delicate balancing act. Helicopter parenting constricts their growth and tethers them to a parent’s aspirations. Parental peer pressure ties a parent to a child’s behavior and proffers the illusion that parents are or should be in absolute control of their children’s lives. A critical task of parenthood is raising children to be self-defined. While parents teach and model for them, in the end they are responsible for who they are and what

they do. The vigilance involved in parenting requires letting go in slow but steady ways so that children grow up to be responsible, loving, caring, and compassionate adults. Lots of “bending over” is required between those first steps, however, and the ones that lead out into the world. None of it is meant to be attempted on one’s own.

### ***Vigilant Companions***

A saving grace for Gayle Boss turned out to be a Friday morning playgroup that provided “socialization opportunities” for young children. In truth, Boss and the other mothers found the greatest amount of socialization with one another. She found in these companions “a sisterhood of women wounded in our self-confidence and uncertain of our worth and identity in a land that offered us no rewards other than lip service.”

Boss’ experience is not unique. A number of young moms groups around the country provide a vital form of mutual support and encouragement. My own work as a spiritual director and public speaker gives me the opportunity to direct retreats and hold conversations with some of these groups. Each time, I am touched by the way the mothers care for one another. Some live in neighborhoods where other households are empty during the day because the occupants are at work. It leaves these women lonely and isolated. Others hold full- or part-time jobs outside of the home and struggle to find a balance between the two. Still others are raising a child on their own, caring for a child with special needs, or dealing with stressful circumstances in their family. Whenever I gather with a group like this, the tears as well as the laughter

flow freely. They truly know what it's like to walk in another mother's shoes.

A father's companions are more likely to be one-on-one friendships rather than groups. With the rise in the number of stay-at-home dads, however, this is also changing. Online support systems are cropping up, thus offering fathers another way to connect with one another. However it is found, the chance to talk to other fathers provides a way to maintain and strengthen the vigilant heart. For both mothers and fathers, the need to connect with other parents for companionship, information, caring, and support is crucial.

### *The Gift of Patience*

Hal Walter is a pack burro racer from Colorado who became a father later in life. As a stay-at-home dad, he cares for his autistic son on a day-to-day basis. During an interview on the radio program "Colorado Matters," Walter told how he never expected to be a father let alone deal with autism. Though noting that the experiences are wildly different, he draws a parallel between dealing with the varying temperaments of the pack burros he races up mountain passes and the day-to-day care of an autistic child. Both burro and child require extreme patience in order to allow them to go their own way. In his book *Full Tilt Boogie*, he writes, "It's how you handle what happens and go with the flow that determines success, whether that means winning or merely finishing some days. That's how life works, too." All one can do is wait and see.

I wonder how much time I spent in waiting rooms at the orthodontist or waiting for a temper tantrum to end, the eye-rolling to be outgrown, or the Christmas holiday that

would bring my children back home. There is no way to remain vigilant without the gift of patience. Check a thesaurus, and the word “vigilance” is equated with endurance, tolerance, persistence, stamina, and unflappability. My favorite is “staying power.” It affirms a biblical sense of patience that is rooted in trust and hope. “Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” (Psalm 27:14). That might just be one of the most perfect prayers a parent can ever utter.

The gift of patience is certainly needed with children, but it’s also needed with ourselves. Since there is no basic training for parenthood, we must learn as we go. The root of the word “courage” comes from the Latin *cor*, which means heart. Francis de Sales noted the importance of courage in maintaining a healthy sense of our own limitations. “Have patience with all things, but chiefly have patience with yourself. Do not lose courage in considering your own imperfections but instantly set about remedying them—every day begin the task anew.” Along with patience, then, comes an ability to forgive ourselves for being less than perfect. It also takes waiting upon God to show us the way forward.

The biblical characters described earlier in this chapter certainly exemplified what this means. Abraham and Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth and Zechariah are models of patience as they await the movement of God in their lives. Those longing for children through pregnancy or adoption can certainly relate to the “staying power” these figures had while also holding onto hope. It makes the old saying “patience is a virtue” all the more relevant.

Mary, on the other hand, was young and certainly not ex-

pecting to become a mother prior to her marriage to Joseph. The “yes” she gave to God at the time of the Annunciation was not just once and for all. It bore repeating throughout the arc of her life—from the visitation of an angel while she was a teenager to the wizened woman who sat among the disciples at Pentecost. In between those two events, how many times did she draw upon the reserves of her spirit to summon the patience needed to follow the path chosen for her? Prayer had to have been woven in and out of each experience.

### *Prayer for the Present Moment*

Prayer is vital to all states of the heart. In order to maintain a vigilant heart, however, the practice of contemplation is particularly vital. Contemplative prayer is not something attainable only by monks and nuns but weaves itself into everyday experiences and the rhythm, however chaotic, of family life. The Jesuit theologian Walter Burghardt called it “a long, loving look at the real.” Thomas Merton described it as a “loving sense of this life and this presence and this eternity.” Both descriptions make it ideal for cultivating a heart of vigilance. It sharpens our attention to where we are and what we are doing. As such, contemplation provides a way to pray without words or particular formulas, opening our heart to see beyond the mundane. It’s a prayer for the present moment.

Contemplative practice also teaches the importance of surrender. This is no easy task in a culture that values independence and promotes the illusion that we can maintain absolute control over everything that happens to us. Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel is a huge contrast to such a mindset. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with

me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

I, for one, have a very hard time with this kind of response, since I often have such great advice to give God about my family. Sitting by Jenny’s bedside during the early days of her life taught me a critical lesson, however. Our children are not our possessions. The best we can do—and I do mean the *very best*—is give them over to God and ask for the kind of wisdom, understanding, grace, and patience we need to guide them toward adulthood. Rather than mere passivity, however, such a stance places us in the spaciousness of God’s heart. Catherine of Siena described patience as “the very marrow of love.” Waiting upon God opens the heart and invites us to relax into our role as parents.

### ***Tending the Vigilant Heart***

Our youngest child, Anna, came along in unexpected fashion. I didn’t realize I was pregnant right away because nursing Jenny and then Eric had interrupted my menstrual cycle. As a result, it was difficult to predict an actual due date. This made each day of my pregnancy, especially toward the end, a process of heightened vigilance. Anna was born with her eyes wide open, something the doctor said is a rare occurrence. From the moment she entered the world, Anna had a gift for being in the present moment. She’s taught me a great deal about this over the years.

When it comes to practicing vigilance, little children can be the best instructors. They are ever aware of their surroundings, and they are great practitioners of what Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century friar, called “little interior glances.” Gerald May describes these as “simple things: unadorned

remembrances...happening within the ordinary activities of our lives. They come and go. They are not to be held on to” (*The Awakened Heart*). Given all the distractions, anxieties, fears, and details that beset a parent on any given day, being drawn back to the present moment is critical. It not only builds a routine of ongoing prayer, but also offers a way to counter some of the challenges to vigilance.

Dealing with the mundane is one of them. Without a vigilant heart, parents can veer in two opposing directions, each one a threat to a healthy spirituality. One is drifting—a perpetual restlessness and inability to anchor oneself anywhere. Such a tendency not only keeps the parent in a state of endless dissatisfaction but also puts the rest of the family on edge. The other is entrenching and making routines so sacrosanct that any deviance is met with intransigence. David Steindl-Rast, author of the book *Common Sense Spirituality*, describes both tendencies as well-disguised forms of fear. “We fear to be still, and we fear to be ‘still moving.’” Once we are aware of the tendency we are drawn toward, however, we can take steps to resist it and open our hearts to the now. Other parents who understand what we are experiencing help to keep us on track.

It is also important to retain interest in things away from and outside of the home. After all, we had a life before children and will have one after they leave home. Having a life while they are still growing is a necessity. I learned a valuable lesson about this from my mother. While raising six children, she was also involved in a number of activities and organizations. Once a week she served as a volunteer at a local hospital. She attended monthly gatherings of the Sacred Heart



Alumnae—women who attended schools run by the Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Heart. I was always taken with the intelligence of these women and how they used their monthly gatherings to not only socialize but also to plan outreach to the poor and to grow more deeply in their faith. Their meetings generally included a guest speaker, and their chaplain, a Jesuit priest, kept them abreast of the changes happening in the Catholic Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council. They modeled for me the importance of growing in faith as adults.

For parents in circumstances that preclude such activities and limit involvement in outside activities, there are still a number of ways to stay active and engaged. Reading, watching uplifting films and documentaries, listening to podcasts that inform and inspire—all are great ways to feed the mind and heart.

Another threat to vigilance is parental pressure that ramps up the “deadly Cs” of parenthood: comparison, competition, and criticism. Each one does damage to the heart by putting us on a fast track toward false standards of perfectionism. We can counter each by making an intentional effort to move in more positive directions.

#### **FROM COMPARISON TO ACCEPTANCE**

Accepting ourselves as we are moves us to let go of the “never enough” syndrome, one that keeps us perpetually dissatisfied and tempted to drift. Each of us is gifted, but as Paul reminds us, our gifts are not identical. For example, I never did have the gift for making our house the hub of the neighborhood and hosting the extemporaneous meals that characterized the

homes of our children's friends. What I was able to do, however, was create memorable experiences more suited to our more introverted natures. Ron and I relished smaller gatherings over large ones and brought our children to quiet places in nature that created some of our most cherished family memories. Discernment of a parent's gifts doesn't need to be complicated and involved. Instead, it might entail reflection on a few simple questions. What do I have the heart for? Where do my daydreams take me? What ignites my passion? Follow the trail, and the gifts will open up.

#### FROM COMPETITION TO COMPASSION

Women have a great capacity to gather and support one another in times of need. Nowhere does this surface more strongly than among mothers. Consider groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), for example, or the original intent of Mother's Day as a day of peace supported by and for mothers around the world. These were movements of solidarity. Nevertheless, there is a lot of competition bred into women—competing over men, for example, or using our children to prove how good, capable, and competent we are. Fathers are likewise prone to competition, particularly in the areas of sports and business. Competing for the “most perfect parent” award devalues those we love as well as ourselves. Try to imagine Mary and Elizabeth stressing over who is the better mother, or Joseph and Zechariah squaring off in a contest to prove who was the more faithful and long-suffering spouse. Each one faced enormous challenges as a parent and as a woman or man. Elizabeth probably experienced years of shame over her inability to have children.

Mary faced humiliation and even death for being pregnant outside of marriage. Joseph and Zechariah had their own share of perplexity over circumstances that were completely out of their control. Each one emerges in the gospels as a figure of compassion. This is extended not only to others but also to themselves as they accept their circumstances with humility and remain vigilant to the presence of God in their lives.

Parenting offers a marvelous opportunity to grow more deeply as compassionate people. In my own life, having a child with special needs broke open the reality of the kind of parenting Hal Walter and many others provide each day for their children. In like manner, sitting by a sick baby's bedside made me all the more attentive to the pain of those who ache with and for their children. Compassion for families suffering from poverty, hunger, disease, exile, estrangement, and other maladies of body and soul breaks down tendencies to compete and compare ourselves to others. In the end, we humbly admit we are doing the best we can.

#### **FROM CRITICISM TO SELF-LOVE**

“Monkey mind” is the habit of picking at ourselves through criticism and negative self-talk. It can entail overthinking things to the point of mental exhaustion or second-guessing decisions until we back ourselves into a corner of continual self-reproach. Needless to say, it's not a healthy state of the heart. The antidote is learning to love ourselves.

Self-love is not a process of continually patting ourselves on the back or an exercise in narcissism. Instead, it simply embraces who we are and recognizes our own needs. A vigi-

lant heart enables us to deal with our own failings with grace and good humor. By letting go of unreal expectations around perfection and by loving ourselves for who we are, we learn a great lesson about doing the same for our children.

In order to move from monkey mind to tender heart, we also need moments of respite in order to step back and take stock of our lives and circumstances, to breathe deeply and cut ourselves some slack. This allows a spaciousness of heart in which love for God, for others, and for ourselves grows more abundantly. One of the greatest practitioners of self-love was Jesus. While his public ministry had him on the go, with people crying out for his attention and healing on a non-stop basis, he took regular time-outs—for prayer and reflection as well as to be with family and friends. He is a reminder of the need to care for ourselves as tenderly as we do our children. Doing so opens up another state of the heart—that of joy.

### QUESTIONS *for* REFLECTION *and* DISCUSSION

Why is vigilance such an important part of parenting?  
How does it change in light of different stages in the life of the family or in the circumstances of a parent (single parent, stepparent, adoptive parent, etc.)?

Adult “peer pressure” is one form of stress for parents.  
What other pressures do parents face?

In addition to patience, what other gifts do parents need to maintain a vigilant heart?