
• Introduction •

Angie was a powerhouse on the job. As the editor of a small health and wellness magazine, she got things done efficiently, thoroughly, and on time. Although her staff sometimes felt micromanaged, she went out of her way to create an appealing work environment, offering generous perks such as flexible telecommuting options and a break room stocked with organic snacks. But Angie was committed to leading a life that wasn't all about being productive. Every morning she listened to a guided meditation before getting ready for the day ahead, and before they had children, she and her husband, Eric, had made a point of going to yoga retreats whenever possible.

Eric had a small Internet marketing company based out of their home. He was known for his ability to think outside the box and enjoyed growing success based on his creativity and can-do, get-it-done-on-time reputation.

Angie and Eric were thrilled when their son, Charlie, was born. They were committed to establishing a family different from the ones in which they had been raised. In Angie's case,

that meant providing a sense of cohesiveness and connection that had been lacking in her own family of origin; her mother was an alcoholic and painfully disengaged, leaving Angie and her sisters largely to fend for themselves. Eric's parents were involved, but overly so, controlling Eric's and his sister's activities and as he put it, robbing them of their voice. Both Angie and Eric were determined to give their children the combination of freedom and attention they had missed out on during their own childhoods.

As Charlie grew, Angie and Eric delighted in his big personality. But he had a feisty temperament, making him easily frustrated and difficult to soothe; as a toddler he had full-blown tantrums when he couldn't have his way. Because they wanted to be compassionate and caring, his parents tried to explain to little Charlie why he couldn't have what he wanted, but it only made things worse. And despite being excited about going to "big boy school," he did not do well with the restrictions imposed on him when he started preschool. It was nearly impossible to sit still at story time, and his poor impulse control meant that whenever a child had a toy he wanted, Charlie simply took it — grabbing or shoving as needed.

Soon after he was enrolled, Angie and Eric were called in to speak with the preschool director about an incident in which Charlie had forcefully pushed another child. This meeting turned out to be the first of many related to Charlie's difficulties in managing his behavior. The arrival of a baby sister when he was four only escalated his meltdowns. His parents tried to be understanding, but they were clueless about how to handle their temperamental son — pleading, bargaining, threatening, and mostly caving in to his demands. Charlie ran the household with his tirades, and his parents could hardly remember their peaceful preparenting days. They were embarrassed to be the mother and father of one of

“those” kids and on edge each morning about what might happen that day with their mercurial son.

Angie and Eric had believed that their commitment to personal growth would somehow translate into having a sweet and easy time raising kids. After all, weren't children influenced by their surroundings? Surely having a calm, loving home with attentive parents would ensure harmony within the family. But such was not the case. Angie's morning meditations became a thing of the past, and as hard as they tried not to, she and Eric often fell into blaming, saying to each other things like, “If you had only handled the incident with Charlie *this* way instead of *that*, today's crisis could have been avoided.”

This couple was like many I have worked with over the past thirty years as a teacher, parent coach, and psychotherapist. Whether parents identify themselves as traveling a path of personal development, or they simply want to raise happy children without drama or power struggles, they often have a difficult time coming to terms with the realities of raising kids, particularly when their child's needs or temperament prove challenging.

Even if we have children who are relatively easy to raise, we still have to adapt to putting another being's wants and needs ahead of our own, day in and day out. From sleepless nights to homework battles, we find ourselves having to develop new qualities as we go, such as tolerance, persistence, and the capacity to read the same picture book over and over . . . and over again. Those who consider themselves spiritually inclined sometimes confess to being mortified by how *unspiritual* they sometimes feel around their children.

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Words they never thought they would utter seem to fly out of their mouths — loudly — words that sound anything *but* enlightened!

But like Angie and Eric, we often discover that the child we have is the one who can teach us the most. And that is what *Parenting with Presence* is all about.

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We'll come back to Angie and Eric in a later chapter to discover how their challenges with Charlie paved the way for a much healthier parenting

experience and how it provided opportunities for both of them to heal unfinished childhood business. For now, allow me to share a little of my own story.

My Parenting Journey

When I was fifteen years old and living in Kansas, my older brother headed off to college, leaving behind a note recommending that I read a book he'd put in my room called *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda. It sat on my shelf for two years until the day I found myself diving into it, moved by the tale of an Indian man's journey to know the divine.

This unusual book awakened something in me so profound that upon reading the final page, I pedaled my bike to the Prairie Village shopping center, deposited a handful of coins into the pay phone, dialed the headquarters of Yogananda's California foundation, and said, "I want to know God."

For a year or so I meditated in Yogananda's tradition, based on instructions sent weekly in the mail from the Self-Realization Fellowship. I started doing yoga and explored other types of meditation, eventually settling on one that resonated with me, while weaving in other practices that nourished my heart and soul. I relied so much on the peace I experienced in my daily meditation that if I wasn't able to sit in the morning, I would feel out of sorts all day until I could grab some time to go within.

Eighteen years later, I had a baby. My once regular morning routine fell by the wayside as I struggled to balance inner-focused activities with the pragmatics of family life. Whenever I was rigid about my “spiritually uplifting” pursuits, I ended up feeling resentful and uptight. I had to figure out how not to *tolerate* but to *savor* the moments of ordinary life — changing a diaper, reading a story, or cleaning up after a hurricane of boy-play.

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One day I was in the kitchen, making my son a grilled-cheese sandwich. As I stood beside the stove waiting for the cheese to melt, I fell into an expanded awareness of what was going on in that moment. There, across the room, was a miracle in the form of someone I loved more than the beating of my heart, and I was getting the chance to express my love in the form of a sandwich. I felt intoxicated with gratitude, realizing that what I was feeling did not have to be an isolated experience; I could live more intimately with this kind of openheartedness as I went about the ordinary activities of my day, if I so chose.

Raising a child turned out to be the greatest transformational experience of my life. I sat for meditation as often as I could — rarely, at first, but more often as my son got older. It is an enormous pleasure to drink from my inner well of stillness and joy, and meditation no doubt influences the “me” that shows up for the world. But I also came to understand that living spiritually means leading the life in front of me as fully present to spirit as possible, regardless of what ritual I might have practiced that morning.

In *Parenting with Presence*, I invite you to embark on your own journey of bringing greater peace, joy, and personal transformation to your day-to-day parenting. You will discover strategies to help you navigate the ups and downs of real-life child rearing with more consciousness, and learn how to subdue the triggers

that make you lose (or temporarily misplace!) your equanimity. And you'll be invited to explore ways to bring spirituality into your home — even if you are not religiously inclined or have kids who think anything remotely spiritual is “uncool.”

Throughout the book I will share some of the qualities I have come to believe are helpful in transforming a child into an adult who is conscious, confident, and caring. Finally, you will learn practical tools to help you parent *with presence*, responding with flexibility and choice instead of reacting out of frustration, anger, or fear.

When our relationship with our children is permeated with our whole-hearted engagement and presence, they are more inclined to turn to us, rather than to their friends, for guidance and support. In addition, children who feel liked, seen, and cherished — just as they are — are naturally more motivated to do what their parents ask; it is human nature to cooperate with those we feel solidly connected to.

Whether you are an avid spiritual practitioner or you simply want to parent more consciously, raising children with greater presence will open you to more of the love, learning, and joy that the adventure of parenting can bring.

I welcome you on this journey! Let's begin.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

For this section and the others like it throughout the book, please visit www.SusanStiffelman.com/PWPextras to hear me guiding you through the exercise.

Whenever I do a coaching session with parents, I begin by asking them to imagine hanging up the phone when we've finished, feeling that our time together was well spent. I invite them to consider what would make that true. "Will you feel better because you now have a plan for dealing with a problem or perhaps because you're clearer about what is fueling a particular issue with your child? Or do you imagine you'll be relieved simply because you're more willing to take baby steps toward shifting things in your family rather than believing you have to change everything at once? Perhaps you're more forgiving of yourself or better able to understand why you get triggered by your kids and what you can do to maintain your cool even when things get difficult."

I find that doing this exercise helps my clients clarify what sort of changes they would like to manifest from our work together.

Allow me to ask you to do something similar. Pause for a moment — perhaps closing your eyes or placing your hand over your heart — and imagine yourself closing this book, feeling happy and excited because you've had a breakthrough. Where are you struggling most as a parent that perhaps will have improved as a result of reading *Parenting with Presence*? What is going well that you want to do more of? What would you like to change?

Become conscious of what you would like your ideal parenting life to look like, picturing a more loving, healthy relationship with your child, as well as with yourself. By setting a clear intention or hoped-for outcome, you may find that you will get more from working with the material in this book, particularly if you're

willing to jot down a few notes that you can refer to from time to time.

Please use your journal to reflect on what is working in your parenting life and where you would like to stretch, grow, or transform the relationship you have with your child, your co-parenting partner, and yourself.

CHAPTER 1

You're Living with Your Best Teacher

*Parenting is a mirror in which we get to see
the best of ourselves, and the worst; the richest moments
of living, and the most frightening.*

— MYLA AND JON KABAT-ZINN

In India they're called householder yogis — women and men with an unshakable commitment to their spiritual path who have decided to have a family rather than live in a cave or an ashram. They choose to grow and evolve through their experiences at home and in the workplace, embracing the challenges of everyday life as the means to their transformation.

Many of us subscribe to the belief that spiritual growth happens as a result of daily meditation, mindfulness retreats, and inspiration from wise luminaries. But one of the greatest teachers you could ever hope to learn from is living right under your roof, even if (*especially* if) he or she pushes your buttons or challenges your limitations.

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In parenting, things get very real, very fast. Figuring out how to cope when your child spills juice on the new sofa or managing your reactions when your kids tease each other nonstop on the long

ride to Grandma's is the equivalent of an advanced course in personal growth. Do you fall apart, or are you able to stay present, deepening your ability to be with "what is," responding rather than reacting?

True spirituality doesn't happen in a cave at the top of a mountain. It's down here, wiping a runny nose, playing yet another round of *Candyland*, or rocking a colicky baby at two in the morning. The Buddha is crying in the next room. How you handle that is as evolved and as spiritual as it gets.

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What Is a Teacher?

Many of us are charmed by the image of our sons and daughters as divinely appointed teachers who can help us transform our hearts and souls. But while the idea of seeing our child as one of our teachers has a lyrical, enlightened ring to it, there's a difference between accepting the *idea* of something and embracing the *reality* of it.

Our children may indeed catalyze a love within us that we could not have imagined possible. But they can also elicit powerful elements of our shadow selves, calling forth aspects of our nature, such as impatience and intolerance, that leave us ashamed and overwhelmed.

Maintaining equilibrium is key to living in the moment, but nothing tests our ability to stay centered like parenting. Raising kids can be anything *but* peaceful, with sibling squabbles, homework meltdowns, and arguments over video games all-too-familiar features of the landscape of family life. It's easy for soulful principles to collide with the realities of day-to-day life with children underfoot. Even the most seasoned meditator or yogini may find