FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Family & Relationships

At Work in Life's Garden
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Tracy Springberry, editor
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Compilations of essays, if not skillfully edited, can often dart and ramble, leaving the reader a bit disheveled trying to hold on. Not so in this treasure of a book. These essays, organized into three sections—Waking, Struggles with Love, and Embracing Life—flow elegantly one to the next, never redundant, as no parent-child relationship ever is. Each piece illuminates another surprising example of the extraordinary to be found in the ordinary. This is not a book about religion; nor is it a book about how to parent; yet, it is a profoundly spiritual collection, which every parent should read. The authors bravely share intimate moments from their own parenting journeys. Readers, the lucky recipients, are privy to the sacred surprises that surface even during the most difficult of times with kids.

In the introduction to this lovely compilation, editor Springberry writes that “children help us say yes to living.” These twenty-six essays gently remind readers to examine whether they have become rote in their interactions with the children in their lives, and, if so, to say “yes” again. Inspiring in vastly different ways, the essays touch readers to experience life as it is lived, and to bring the self fully to routine days, to catch a glimmer of the spirituality that lies in wait.

Scott Russell Sanders, in his essay, “Mountain Music,” tells of a tension-filled camping trip with his teenage son, and how his boy’s simple smile jolted him to the present. He writes, “That one look restored me to my senses, and I felt suddenly the dazzle of sunlight, heard the river’s rumble and the fluting of birds, smelled pine sap and wet stone.”

This gathering of skillful writers reminds readers again and again, through their stories, that adults who assume that they are the responsible caretakers for children’s every need are actually the students, if they would but pay attention. Beth Kephard’s piece “Palsy” captures an hour in the life of her seven-year-old son, Jeremy, as he takes part in an unusual talent show.

Her opening line, “We do not expect what we find,” could be the subtitle of this collection.

Editor Conover teaches high school English, and is the author of three books on world religion, including *Ayat Jamilah / Beautiful Signs: A Treasury of Islamic Wisdom for Children and Parents*, winner of the 2004 Aesop Prize from the American Folklore Society. Springberry’s essays have appeared in *The Sun* and *The Christian Science Monitor* and on Spokane Public Radio. She is studying to be a Unitarian Universalist minister.

The essay contributors were well selected: their voices vary and yet complement one another. Many writers are quite well known, and some are extraordinary, such as Martha Beck, author of *Finding Your Own North Star* and monthly columnist at *O: The Oprah Magazine*; Alexandra Fuller, author of the New York Times Notable Book of 2002, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*; Barbara Kingsolver, author of *The Poisonwood Bible*, a finalist for the Pulitzer and PEN/Faulkner awards; and Anne Lamott, best-selling author of *Traveling Mercies*.

Half of the royalties from sales of this book are being donated to Mercy Corps to provide humanitarian aid to people in eighty nations. It seems a fitting match for a book that illuminates the beautiful give-and-take between parent and child, with the role of giver constantly changing.

Everything about this book makes it accessible for parents. Its size and binding make it perfect to slip into a briefcase, backpack, or diaper bag. The length of the essays allows for a sense of completion—ideal for those in-between times throughout the day. The tone is welcoming and honest, providing a glimpse into vulnerable parenting moments rather than preaching perfection. Debra Gwartney in “The End of Summer,” for instance, writes of her reunion with her four young daughters after they spent the summer with their father. Gwartney had had a vision of how she wanted their first day back together to unfold, and she shares her rigidity in playing out this romantic image of picking berries together in beautiful family harmony. Readers will feel that they are along on that hot trail, as the day takes on a very different tone.

All parents are on their own hike, with their own children, with their own lessons to learn. *At Work in Life’s Garden: Writers on the Spiritual Adventure of Parenting* is a wonderful companion on the journey.

Mimi Doe