

Discussion Guide for *Parenting for a Better World*

Introduction – “It’s Just Too Hard” (Susanna Snyder and Ellen Ott Marshall)

- Could you relate to the authors’ struggle to integrate making a difference in the world with parenting?
- How have you responded to this tension between parenting and working for justice? How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the way you address this tension?
- Have you adopted any numbing techniques that you’re ready to consider releasing?
- The authors believe that “[p]arenting for a better world has got to be about the piecemeal and the ‘good-enough’ as well as about high ideals and courage” (3). How well do you accept “good-enough”? Might this journey involve letting go of unrealistic standards?
- How have your beliefs about justice developed? What people, institutions, experiences, or other influences have formed your convictions?
- What spiritual practices are already a part of your life? Do any of them involve your family? Are there practices that might be spiritual that you did not already recognize as such?

Sending out: “Be brave and gentle with yourself at the same time, embrace the good enough, and affirm the small, imperfect attempt.” (4)

Chapter 1: Cultivating Kindness (Chine McDonald)

- The author begins with a reflection on how parenthood almost instantaneously transformed her perspective on the world. Could you relate to this experience, and if so, how? What are some ways parenthood has caused you to view the world differently?
- Kindness “demonstrates what it is to be a human being in relationship with God” (9). Can you think of any specific examples in your community of ways that the behavior of Christians has been either a positive or negative reflection on God?
- Is there something about which you are being unkind to yourself? How does this self-judgment affect you? What might it look and feel like to reimagine yourself as God’s image bearer?
- What communities do you belong to? Are there actions you can take to promote connectedness and kindness within one of those communities?
- Are there any children’s or young adult books or activities that have been particularly impactful with teaching your children kindness?

Sending out: “Kindness and compassion for our communities is a symbol of a relationship with Christ, the living God, the One who calls us not merely to worship but to manifest our faith through our impact on our world” (9).

To learn more about the author: <https://www.chinemcdonald.com>

Chapter 2: Edible Gardening (Susanna Snyder)

- Could you relate to the author's anxiety around how to respond to the climate crisis?
- Has your family made any changes to help protect the planet? Do the steps you have taken feel fruitful?
- What is your relationship with gardening? Do you garden? Do you have memories of family members gardening? What are some lessons you have learned from digging in the dirt?
- What practices in your life provide the opportunity for the type of "contemplative attention," or "seeing with God's eyes," that the author found while gardening (24)?
- The author talks about the value of intentional small actions in our daily lives. What are some micro-actions you have taken that have been meaningful?

Sending out: "The cultivation of a vegetable or fruit plant protests in a small and almost imperceptible way the broken relationships that lie at the heart of all injustice. It quietly reasserts the caring, mutual, respectful, gentle, and generous relationship that should exist between us human beings and between human beings and the rest of creation of which we are a part" (24).

Chapter 3: Singing Subversive Lullabies (Ingrid C. Arneson Rasmussen)

- How familiar were you with Mary's Magnificat before reading this chapter? Did your perception of this passage change after reading this chapter?
- Are there any subversive rituals -- lullabies, stories, or the like -- that you have taught your children?
- The author compares the Magnificat to a summons calling us to address injustice. After reading Mary's words again, what injustice might you be called to address? What action could you take to begin?
- How do you balance the urgency of addressing injustice with the delays sometimes incurred (and sometimes required) by discernment?
- Note: There are multiple recordings of the version of Mary's Magnificat referred to by the author on YouTube if you would like to hear the words set to music.

Sending out: "The opportunities for us to go—to begin—are plenty. Few are dramatic; most are mundane. Daily life is where we cultivate the capacity for courage" (37).

Chapter 4: Praying (HyeRan Kim-Cragg)

- How did you learn the Lord's Prayer? How is it incorporated in your church's worship?
- Different communities read the Lord's Prayer very differently based on their circumstances. As you were reading this chapter, was there a part of the prayer that took on new meaning as you heard it interpreted from a different perspective?
- The author discusses how prayer forms us as moral agents and helps us imagine a different world. Has this been part of your experience with prayer? Can you think of a specific time where prayer generated a more expansive vision of the future for you?
- How can you expand the Lord's Prayer for your current context? How might the Lord's Prayer be expanded for a group that is marginalized in your community?
- Are there other prayers you can or do use as intergenerational tools in your family?

Sending out: "In order to dream a different world, we need different words, different stories" (44).

Chapter 5: Give Back Packs (Ellen Ott Marshall with Carlton Mackey and Isaiah Mackey)

- What are some ways you can (or already do) encourage your child to celebrate their unique identity? Does your child see you celebrate *your* identity?
- How is your relationship with money? Have your views on money evolved over your life?
- What were you taught about giving and/or tithing as a child? Do these ideas reflect your current beliefs, or has your perspective changed?
- What conversations do you have with your children about money and possessions? Did Carlton and Isaiah's conversation cause you to rethink your approach to money with your child?
- Is there a specific, tangible way your family would enjoy giving back to their communities?

Sending out: "So this platform was largely built around the idea that you can communicate ideas to transfer knowledge and inspire action. Making the video is about realizing that sharing it can inspire action by others. It can catalyze action, but it can also just inspire people" (59).

To learn more about Black Men Smile: <https://blackmensmile.com>

To see the video of Isaiah referenced in the chapter:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjp9_Rdxxys

Chapter 6: Interruptive Listening (Luke Larner)

- The author discusses the importance of not just listening, but *interruptive listening*, “pausing one’s own agenda and desire to speak in order to fully attend to the other person” (63). Can you think of a time where you wanted someone to practice interruptive listening to you but they didn’t? What about a time when you almost did not take the time to listen, but were grateful that you did?
- Did you feel heard by the adults in your life as a child? What was the power balance like in your family? How has this affected the way you parent?
- Can you think of a time that an interruption from your child caused you to see God working?
- Is there a person or group in your life that you might not be hearing as much as you should? What agenda (even an unconscious one) might you have that could be getting in the way of you hearing them?

Sending out: “To hold our power lightly with our children is a way to prepare us and them to be a force for good and liberation in the world” (67).

To see the film about violence affecting young people referenced in the chapter:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1rxuVfuOgs?>

Chapter 7: Waiting for One Another (Brian Brock)

- Before becoming a parent, how did you view the role of caregiver? Did that perspective change after having a child?
- How did the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions and lockdowns affect your views on caregiving?
- The author believes Paul’s vision for the Christian ethical life is found by attending to differences, especially the differences of those found at the margins of society. Does this resonate with you? Does this reflect the perspective of your religious community?
- Who in your life do you need to learn to wait for? Is there someone you keep telling to hurry up? What or whose needs in your family need to be addressed in order to better stay together? What or whose needs in your larger community are being overlooked?
- If you are a caregiver of someone with a disability, what are some ways that people can support you? If you are not the caregiver of someone with a disability, who in your community could you encourage?

Sending out: “Those who know themselves as broken, as united in a broken Christ, never rush ahead without the others” (82).

Chapter 8: Pilgrimage of Solidarity (Anton Flores-Maisonet)

- Can you think of a time when a personal encounter with someone whose life experience is very different from your own changed your perspective?
- What cultural blinders have you recognized in yourself?
- For readers who live with privilege, are there realities of injustice in our world from which you have intentionally shielded your children? Did this chapter cause you to reconsider what conversations you have or activities in which you engage as a family?
- Are there spaces in which your family regularly engages with people whose life experiences are different from their own? If not, how can you be intentional about participating in these spaces going forward?
- The author states, “To cultivate prophetic courage in our children, we help them to confront their fears, especially those conditioned by society” (88). Are there any fears that came up in reading this chapter that you may need to address first before cultivating courage in your child?

Sending out: “Let’s raise our children so that it will be their generation that sees ‘the resurrection of all flesh and the renewal of heaven and earth,’ for that is the destination of the timeless Exodus journey” (95).

To learn more about Casa Alternativa: <https://casaalternativa.org>

Chapter 9: Street Protesting and Self-Esteem (Leah Gunning Francis)

- The author asks, “Can you imagine what it is like to live ‘on guard’ with your sons all of the time?” If this is a reality for you, is there anything else you would like others to know about your experience? If this is not a reality for you, what was most impactful about the author’s experience?
- Do you live in a community where there were protests in response to the death of George Floyd or other tragic police violence? If so, what kind of conversations took place about them within your family?
- Where are places you have seen God within the movement for justice?
- Listen to Nina Simone’s “Young, Gifted, and Black” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTGiKYqk0gY>. If you are a Black family, what are some ways your family has worked to help your children “see themselves as full human beings created in the image of God, and not as the prescribed stereotypes promulgated by racist ideologies” (102)? If you are not Black, what are some ways you have or can work to counter the “racialized imagination” of so many in our communities (100)?
- Do your children see themselves as active participants in the work for justice? If so, what are some ways they have taken action? If not, what are some issues they care about? How could they become involved in those causes?

Sending out: “For the act of street protesting, I draw strength and courage from Esther’s story. I, too, realize that the stakes are too high for me to sit on the sidelines and pretend that it is not my problem. Like Esther, we, too, are called to leverage the resources that we have to create a more just and equitable world. And our children must be part of it” (105).

Chapter 10: Mourning and Imagination (Melissa Pagán)

- What are the “ordinary, everyday messages” about social justice in your family (108)? Do these conversations foster intimacy between your family members and marginalized people? Are there conversations you have avoided that perhaps need to be revisited?
- How does your family create space for lament and mourning?
- Was vulnerability modeled in your family of origin? Are you able to be vulnerable with your children?
- What does being made in God’s image mean to you and your family? Does this understanding connect with how you relate to those in your community who are marginalized?
- Consider your own community. Are there groups whose struggles you have become numb to? Are there structures of violence that need to be torn down? How can your family begin to build intimacy with those affected and work alongside in solidarity to dismantle oppressive institutions?

Sending out: “A just moral imagination is not constructed with a “one and done” protest. It is formed by consistent witness to the ugliest of events oppressed persons bear in *lo cotidiano*, by strategic and compassionate framing and questioning that enables rather than stifles their ability to remain intimately connected to their fellow humans and to mourn” (115).

Chapter 11: Meditation with Collage (Ellen Ott Marshall and Katherine Marshall)

- For readers who are white or otherwise privileged, could you relate to the authors’ struggle to process emotions without centering yourself in the work for justice?
- How do you connect your activism with your faith? Is there a particular scripture at the core of your motivation?
- The authors address the contradictions that exist for those who are privileged in the pursuit of justice and caution that “[w]e need to prepare for the widow turning to face us” (122). What tensions have you experienced in your justice work? Have you had moments of uncomfortable accountability from others? How did you respond?
- Are there meditative practices that you or your family currently find helpful? If not, did any of the ones discussed in this chapter interest you?
- What are some ways that you find balance between reflection and action? Have you ever felt off balance? How did this affect your work?

Sending out: “Faithfulness looks like relentless persistence in the pursuit of justice; it looks like continually bothering those with power until they do the right thing” (121).

Chapter 12: Community Organising (Keith Hebden with Martha Hebden)

- Have you ever been involved in a social justice movement where you began to question its effectiveness? What were the warning signs that caused you to reevaluate your participation?
- What encounters or experiences in your life have spurred your involvement in a cause?
- What did you learn about anger as a child? How is anger viewed in your family?
- What voices in your community need to be given a platform for their testimony in order to expose violence? Are you in a position to help amplify their voices?
- Have your kids had experiences that have cause them to ask questions about injustice in our world? Where are your children exposed to relational power, and are there ways you can support them in working for justice in those groups or communities?
- What community organizing groups are active in your area? If you aren’t already involved, is there one working for a cause your family cares about in which you could participate?

Sending out: “But we do not want to train another generation that social activism is more about moral victory—being seen doing the ‘right thing’ – than about making substantive change” (130).

Chapter 13: Table Talk and Music Making (Don E. Saliers)

- Does your family have practices or rituals that are meaningful for you? Were they intentional, or, like the author, “an emergent discovery”? What conversations, ideas and activities do these times provoke?
- What was your relationship with your parents like? Were you able to ask questions? How does this experience inform the way you approach questions from your children, especially difficult ones?
- The author speaks frequently about the things that he learned from his daughters while parenting. What are some lessons you have learned from your children? Did you enter into parenting expecting to also be taught by your children, or did this surprise you?
- If you have more than one child, how are you developing individuation in your children while also promoting mutual support and encouragement?
- In your experience, do you also see a connection between beautiful things (like music and art) and acting for justice? What are some ways you have seen this play out in your family?

Sending out: “Perhaps the process underlying all of family life was more akin to Mary Oliver’s poetic mantra, ‘Pay attention’” (149).

Afterword

- Did anything about this book surprise you?
- How did it feel to read about the experiences of other parents?
- Was there a particular chapter with which you resonated?
- Did the experience of reading about the practices of others generate ideas about practices for your family?
- If someone were to ask you to write a chapter for this book, what would you talk about? Please share your ideas with us at parentingbetterworldbook@gmail.com.

Sending out: “Practices are not just activities we *do*; they shape who we *are* and who we are *becoming*” (153).

For more information about the authors, visit parentingbetterworldbook.com.