raising resilience

THE WISDOM AND SCIENCE OF HAPPY FAMILIES AND THRIVING CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

off the cushion

Years ago, when my wife was pregnant with our first child, I went to the local meditation center to make an appointment with my teacher, Madeline Klyne. "How on earth am I going to maintain my meditation practice, let alone be a good parent?" I asked over a cup of lukewarm green tea.

Maddy paused and then laughed. "Don't even bother!" she declared with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Let your meditation cushion collect dust for a while, and just focus on what you can do *off* the cushion. Focus on the *paramis*—the ten perfections of the heart."

The paramis—generosity, ethics, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, honesty, determination, kindness, and equanimity—are concepts from a number of Eastern philosophies that I believe anyone can get behind, regardless of spiritual (or nonspiritual) background. These days, words like *virtue* and *values* can garner an eye roll given the hypocrisy of so many self-appointed virtuous folks. But perhaps we've thrown the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. I mean, who can really say that they're against such values as honesty and patience? Different cultures may have their own ways of teaching virtues such as these, but what intrigues me is how neuroscience soundly backs not only the benefit of such concepts in achieving lifelong happiness and resilience but also the ability of such concepts to spread virally from person to person.

After the birth of my son, life was undeniably happening *off* my cushion, and my spiritual life had to change—but I believe it was for the better. I dove into this new form of practice, deliberately acting with kindness toward strangers, practicing patience with my family, and simplifying my life by speaking more plainly and honestly about

my needs. I was following and living the paramis inside and outside of my family life—or at least I was trying to. I also dove headlong into books and lectures about Eastern philosophy (in addition to the parenting books I was frantically reading). Gradually, I began to piece together a new way of approaching parenthood, spirituality, and the drastically altered landscape of my life as a parent.

These ten virtues might seem straightforward, but they're not always so easy to follow in today's world—neither for ourselves nor for our children. To make matters more difficult, the paramis are often translated as "perfections"—a challenging word for those of us, like me, who compulsively consume parenting books and blogs to make sure we get it all "right." Thus, it may be more helpful to think about these virtues as qualities that we (and our children) are forever perfecting, just like meditation, yoga practice, or even our golf game. We are looking for practice and progress, not perfection. To paraphrase psychologist Elisha Goldstein, we can turn these values into verbs and live them.[1]

What's more, practicing the paramis triggers tremendous benefits in our brains and promotes behaviors that improve the quality of life for us and those around us. Yet each of the ten virtues actually comes hardwired into us. We can understand this fact in various ways: We could use the spiritual metaphor of seeds (karma) that need watering by parents and caregivers. Or we could see it through the lens of evolutionary biology, which asserts that these traits are inscribed in our DNA for survival and that, when we practice the virtues, our genes express themselves in different ways in a process known as epigenetics. Or we could examine the neuroscience and learn that toddlers have three times the neural connections as adults—connections that are "pruned" as children grow. We adults can influence which networks are pruned and which are cultivated, so they use it and don't lose it, with these kinds of values and behaviors. Lastly, we can look at the exciting research in emotional and behavioral contagions—that is, how behaviors and emotions spread from person to person through our mirror neurons and other parts of the brain that we are just now discovering.

As you'll discover in this book, robust research supports the cultivation of these ten values in yourself and your family. For example, generosity rewires the brain to release antidepressant neurotransmitters, and generosity is literally contagious—it positively affects people three degrees of separation away from the giver. Practicing ethical behavior helps children build strong attachments and promotes emotional and physical safety, as well as happiness. Renunciation (meaning fewer activities and less stuff) teaches kids how to compromise, concentrate, and creatively solve problems as those problems arise. Ancient practices for cultivating wisdom mirror what modern scientists recommend for healthy brain development, integrating all parts of the growing brain in order to be flexible and agile. When we encourage our kids' independence and when we teach them to focus their energy on effort over outcome, they grow up to be resilient in the face of life's inevitable challenges.

Of course, we could all use more patience. Learning to delay gratification has been linked to improved executive function, happier relationships, and higher educational and vocational achievement into adulthood. Likewise, practicing honesty leads to more happiness and optimism—not to mention it keeps us out of trouble! The benefits of determination and grit are particularly well known these days, and we can use the power of mindset to cultivate them. Kindness actually changes the shape and structure of the brain, boasting evidence of improved health, happiness, and thriving. Lastly, equanimity—the ability to take life's inevitable challenges in stride—may itself be the very essence of thriving and resilience.

In this book, you'll find a lot of idealized scenarios, as well as some parenting flops of my own. (In case you haven't noticed yet, parenthood doesn't usually work out according to plan.) What this book does not offer, however, is a magic three-step technique or formula, though it does share the causes and conditions that science and spirituality tell us lead to happy, thriving families. I once heard someone say that raising a child is more like tending a garden than creating a flower. As this book illustrates, all we can do is create the conditions under which our children are likely to blossom; we can't force them to bloom in the exact way or time we wish.

Although we tell our kids to do as we say, not as we do, we all watch as our kids imitate us—whether it's the positive, when they say thank you, or the negative, when we realize we need to cut out some of our more colorful language and less-than-healthy behaviors. Research also illustrates, time and again, that behavior is far more contagious than mere words. Thus, *you* are your child's most important model for behavior. The bad news (or the good news, depending on your viewpoint) is that the best way to teach these virtues to your children is by practicing them yourself. You can talk all you want about generosity with your kids, but if you don't model giving and encourage that behavior in your family, it's unlikely to take root.

In fact, the more you live these values in your life, the easier they become. If you're kind today, it becomes easier to be kind tomorrow; if you're unkind today, you are more likely to be unkind tomorrow. As with any physical training, we can build our mental and emotional muscles with practice, but building anything must start with a solid foundation. In addition, it's easier to promote these values in ourselves and our children when our bodies and brains are healthy with the sleep, nutrition, and feelings of safety they need. Remember this when things are going south: if you're hungry, angry, anxious, lonely, or tired, your ability to be at your best will diminish. As Lao-Tzu said, "Put things in order before they appear." In other words, the wisest use of our energy is to cultivate these qualities from the beginning—not just when something goes wrong. So take care of yourself—it will make all the difference down the road.

Is this a spiritual book? Yes and no. If you are a spiritual person, this book will speak to you; but even if you're an avowed scientific atheist, you'll find research aplenty. I understand that any book on values and virtues can easily come off as self-righteous (you likely have enough judgmental friends, relatives, coworkers, and strangers telling you how to parent). My intention here isn't to add to your to-do list. In fact, you may want to consider all the creative ways you are already helping your kids live these values through your family traditions. This isn't intended to be a book telling you what you *should* do; rather, it's a book of ideas for what you *could* do as a parent. My hope is to

offer a few more ideas. I examine both Eastern and Western wisdom traditions, weigh them with modern science, and share the surprisingly large overlap of the best practices for raising thriving kids. Here, you'll read stories of the Buddha's helicopter parents, alongside references to Judaism, Christianity, and some of the world's other sources of wisdom.

As I mentioned earlier, although the paramis may be referred to as "perfections," please go easy. In fact, when you push yourself to be too perfect, that effort often backfires in an effect known as "moral licensing," which we look at more in the ethics and honesty chapters (chapters 2 and 7). So set a course for a middle way between not trying enough and trying too hard, knowing that you'll be blown off course from time to time. These are not commandments to make or break; they are aspirations, representing our best selves at our best moments, and we can create the conditions to live up to them. The paramis are about celebrating and bringing out your best; they are not about beating yourself up emotionally for falling short. Likewise, not every suggestion in this book (and these *are* meant to be suggestions) needs to be clung to blindly. If it works for you and your family, great! If not, let it go. Science and the wisdom traditions tell us to experiment and see for ourselves, and I encourage you to do just that.

I hope it's apparent that the values explored in this book aren't just for kids; they're also meant to help us become better parents, a job that often pushes us to become better people—or, perhaps more accurately, imperfect people who are just more effective. Someone recently pointed out to me that we put more effort into parenting than ever before, so here's some advice: Don't just *try* to parent; *be* a parent. Better yet, enjoy the lifelong process of *becoming* a parent. It reminds me of the spiritual axioms that say it's better to be Christ-like than to call yourself a Christian and better to be more Buddha-like than Buddhist—and while we're at it, remember that it's better to act like a saint than to act sanctimoniously.

If you're not familiar with my work, you might be wondering who I am to write a book like this? Well, for starters, just like you, I've been a kid, and I didn't feel like I was very good at it. As I got older, I was a

difficult teen who had some challenges and rebellions (some of which you'll hear about). By the time things improved in my mid-twenties, I'd largely returned to the values that my parents had instilled—the seeds had blossomed. My parents (as well as several other important adults in my life) helped plant those seeds in me as a younger child, and they continued to water them during my difficult times until I learned to water them myself. I grew up to become a special education teacher; then psychologist, researcher, writer, professor; and now father who teaches around the world. I've brought all of these experiences into my writing and teaching; in this book, you'll find anecdotes from my own personal and professional life alongside references to the latest science of child development.

Lastly, I want to emphasize that this book is not a formula for greatness. It does not guarantee your child Ivy League admission, a seat on the Supreme Court, or spiritual enlightenment. What it is, is a guide to goodness. Specifically, this book examines how goodness can thrive and even spread through generosity, ethics, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, honesty, determination, kindness, and equanimity.

reflection In what ways are you already teaching and practicing these values in your family? What from the list of paramis jumps out at you as challenging for you or your family? What feels natural given your upbringing and values? How can you cultivate goodness in your growing children?

CHAPTER 1

getting through giving

(Raising Generosity—Dāna)

Imagine a two-year-old walking up to you. She has something in her hands that she wants to share with you—perhaps a toy or another treasure. We all know the look on her face and the utter delight of freely offering something—her glowing desire to share her joy. What response does this picture provoke as you imagine it in mind and body? Maybe you find yourself smiling as you bring the image to mind. Now think of this same two-year-old, but this time she wants something from you. I mean, she *really* wants something—say, that stuffed tiger from the advertisement or that chocolate bar from the checkout aisle—but she can't have it. Visualize her response—stomping rage, screaming, inconsolable tears. What's your response now?

Even from a young age, humans are simple. When we act with generosity, we and those around us are happy; when we act with craving and selfishness, we all end up miserable. Yet even when we all know this to be true, it can be so hard to put generosity into practice.

Our children might always struggle with sharing. For that matter, *we* might always struggle with sharing. It doesn't matter—we're all capable of more when we water the seeds of generosity with which we are born. We can actually cultivate the innate generosity in children's brains (and in our brains) by encouraging the neurons of generosity to grow, while pruning the neurons of greed, just as in a garden. Like all natural things, those seeds of generosity (which are there from birth) need attention to grow and blossom. In fact, the instinct to share with parents is one of the first markers of social development.

We're wired to be generous. What's more, science (as well as the cliché) suggests we feel more joy in giving than in receiving.[1]

Greed and yearning are clearly painful, and most spiritual traditions advise against the dangers of craving and coveting. In fact, neuroscience now tells us that wanting and jealousy light up the same receptors in our brains that are stimulated when we experience physical pain.[2] This makes intuitive sense, but think back to the two-year-old. How does it feel to be that child who absolutely *needs* the chocolate bar *right now*?

If generosity feels so good, why do we need help to encourage it? Our genetic blueprint has been evolving for millions of years—nature tells us to want and hoard more than we need in order to survive. What's more, our culture bombards our families with messages that *getting that thing* will make us happy. Even our politicians prescribe retail therapy for emotional pain. George W. Bush famously encouraged Americans to go to Disney World and go shopping after the tragedies of 9/11.[3] All of these messages run counter to the spiritual wisdom and scientific findings that show that health and happiness come more through *giving* than through *getting*.

Our culture and our economic system encourage unlimited desires in a world of limited resources, when what we need is something entirely different—to reduce our consumption in order to live in harmony and compassion with others and the planet. No wonder philosophers and spiritual leaders are often considered rebels in their time—they are existential threats to the systems in which they live. Imagine our families receiving just as many messages urging us to give as messages to get. Imagine people camping outside stores for days just for the opportunity to donate to a brand new charity. The consumerism that drives our economy will not change overnight, but we can start changing ourselves today.

Spiritual beliefs from around the world place a value on generosity. Buddhism offers one system to codify generosity as a practice of liberation. Judaism emphasizes service for others. In Christian theology, charity (*caritas*) is considered the greatest of virtues. Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and the Sikh faith all stress the importance of almsgiving,

and indigenous traditions across the globe emphasize generosity and community sharing.

But what does generosity really mean? Much of Eastern wisdom describes *dāna* as unconditional giving within our means. Western traditions, too, teach the importance of giving without expectation of gratitude or being paid back, praising anonymity in giving. For example, the Jewish concept of *tzedakah* refers to right and just actions—specifically, donating to others anonymously and offering gifts that promote self-reliance. We should aspire to give without expecting appreciation and applause—something we are particularly unlikely to get as parents.

This idea of generosity also holds true for us, as parents. It means parenting our children how we would want to be parented, speaking to their teachers how we would want them to speak to our child, and driving how we want others to drive when we have our newborn or aging parent in the back seat. It means neither reenacting the imperfect parenting we received nor reacting, rebelling, or rejecting that parenting altogether and spoiling our children. But how do we find the middle path between generosity and obligation, between giving and indulging? We give so much as parents that it's often difficult to discern the difference. Personally, I find it helpful to check in with my intention: am I offering this gift to teach my child, or am I merely trying to get him to stop whining in the checkout line? Most often the answer lies somewhere in between.

reflection How can you tell the difference between true generosity and the kind of giving that isn't helpful? Do you know when you are being generous as opposed to spoiling, feeling obligated, feeling pressure, or even giving more than you can afford, whether financially or emotionally?

The Science of Giving

As we give, our sense of generosity grows stronger, making us more likely to give, and that spreads to those around us like ripples in a pond. Regardless of how you describe this effect (karma, neuroscience, or social psychology), it's a simple matter of cause and effect that you can actually see working in yourself, your family, and the world.

I remember rolling my teenage eyes at a Driver's Ed movie lecturing us that "courtesy is contagious." I rolled my eyes as a jaded adolescent, but it turns out that "social contagions" are real. Ivy League researchers James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis found that acts of kindness and generosity actually do spread from one person to the next. In numerous studies, they demonstrated that merely observing acts of generosity could inspire a ripple effect of "downstream reciprocity" in others up to three degrees of separation.[4] It isn't just that letting a car merge in front of you in traffic will increase the likelihood that the driver will later hold the elevator for someone at the office (and then that next person will be more likely to grab doughnuts for the kids on the way home, who will cuddle with the dog, and so on). Christakis and Fowler also found that just *witnessing* such generosity releases the brain's feel-good chemicals and inspires generosity in others.

Let's look at the biochemistry. Research shows that we get boosts of serotonin (the hormone that regulates mood and anxiety), oxytocin (the "love hormone"), and dopamine (a feel-good neurotransmitter) when we give *and* when we receive. The implications suggest that generosity on either end regulates mood and anxiety and strengthens our immune system; it makes us feel loving *and* loved. We also feel good when we grab our officemate a coffee (getting what my friend Fiona calls "the boy scout buzz"), because we're activating the parts of our brains associated with connection and trust.[5] We also experience an elevation of oxytocin for a few hours, which makes us feel all warm and fuzzy.[6] Oxytocin also blocks cortisol, a stress hormone that has been shown to disrupt growth in children.

All of this means that giving or receiving makes us less likely to snap at our kids, who in turn are less likely to take it out on each other, their classmates, or the family dog. Researchers observe the