

What we hold tight and what we let go

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I finally tossed the stack of papers into the recycling bin, the post-op instructions we brought home [after surgery](#). That laundry list of every possible complication and horrific side effect, the worries you watch for like a hawk when you first come home from the hospital, clutching the doctor's instructions as if they were a lifesaver.

I felt a little sheepish when I realized the papers had been sitting on the bathroom counter for so long, spying at me each time I helped a child brush his teeth or wash his hands. Why did I think I needed to keep them around for weeks, even after surgery went fine and healing went as hoped and that healthy boy now runs around laughing and shrieking, never skipping a beat?

But this is what you do when you're struggling to keep your head above water. **You hold on.**

After each birth it took me weeks to throw away the official discharge papers from the hospital. What if something awful happened to me or the baby? What if we didn't know what to do?

When nursing got hard after each newborn, I desperately clung to the lactation consultant's suggestion sheet until it fell apart in my hands. What if what she said held the answer? What if I could just find the secret trick to make everything magically OK?

When we came home from well-check visits during each baby's first year, I dutifully kept every list of developmental milestones, as if I could simply check off what I wanted like a shopping list. What if they didn't grow on track? What if I didn't catch the warning signs in time? What if I failed the ones entrusted to me?

Secretly I convinced myself as a new mom that the secret to surviving—healing, adjusting, learning how to live anew after each transition—lay hidden within some expert's black-and-white words on the page.

But it didn't. **The secret lay within my growing ability to trust.** And to learn what to let go. I remember the day I gave away my stack of parenting manuals, the ones I pored over as a first-time parent. Sleep, feeding, development, illness, milestones—I read every chapter religiously. Those books became Bible to me in the wee dark hours with a screaming newborn or a sleepless baby or a feverish toddler.

But then one day, when baby no. 2 was nearing two, I realized I never read them anymore. Sure, I sought Dr. Google's advice on the regular like any modern parent. And I had long ago memorized our pediatrician's phone number. But I had started to trust my intuition more, too.

And I learned the hard way, as every parent learns, that children never match the ideal descriptions in any book. We are all more mysterious and unpredictable (see also: human!) than any expert could predict with perfect precision.

This, I am discovering, is a huge relief.

Guideposts are helpful along the way. We would be lost and frantic without them when we start down an unfamiliar path.

But then we have to set down the map, leave behind the guidebook, get our own bearings, and make our way into the wilder and wondrous world of getting to know reality as it looks us in the face.

Which, for parenting, means learning to read and respond to another human being's needs, wants, fears, faults, temperament, and challenges. Another human being who is as messy and stubborn and delightful and frustrating as we are, too.

Today the only [books and guides I keep](#) on the subject of parenting are wise ones that offer more questions than answers. These are the companions I want on this journey.

Because what I am learning now is this: At each stage of life, a key question will arise, **what do I hold tight and what do I let go?**

The measure of my peace will depend on my answer.

Right now I know there are plenty of things I cling to that I should let go. (A few small examples: my need to exert control over young children's temper tantrums, my delirious desire to sleep eight straight hours, my frustration with a home that will

never stay clean for more than 4.5 minutes.)

I want answers to these questions, solutions for these puzzles, experts for my uncertainty. I am still holding tight to what would serve me better to let go. In time I will grow some more and let these slip through an open hand. I hope.

There are deeper lessons here. About what faith means. What trust invites. What we let ourselves learn as we grow in courage to leave the experts behind.

This is another kind of knowing, a way [in the darkness](#), a calling within the stillness of soul where God dwells. Because nestled deep in the heart center, when all is stripped away and we are left alone with our God, there is nothing to let go but fear.

Nothing to cling to but love.

And love, it appears, has been the answer all along.

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