

The Most Valuable Thing a Parent Can Do for Their Kids

By Glennon Doyle Melton

February 15th, 2017

oprah.com



My daughter Tish once came home from school and told me her friend's parents were getting divorced. She asked, "Mom, will that ever happen to us?" I looked straight at her and said, "No, baby. It won't. You're safe." A year later, her father and I split. When we delivered this news to our kids, I watched my little girl's face fall as it began to dawn on her that despite my reassurance, what she'd feared had come to

pass. As she processed the reality of our ruptured family and my abandoned promise, I felt like a witness to the end of her childhood. It was the single most difficult moment of my life because it was the hardest of hers.

My greatest fear is that I'll fail my kids. I agree with Jacqueline Kennedy, who said, "If you bungle raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do well matters very much." I'd bungled parenting. I felt like a failure. We did our best to transition out of being an intact, whole family gracefully and respectfully. We ate Sunday dinners together, my ex moved into a house seven doors away, and we spoke only kindly of each other. None of that eased what my children were going through. They were each suffering in their own ways. I resigned myself to doing the best I could as the new kind of parent I was: the failing kind.

Around that time, I was speaking at a conference, and a woman in the audience stood up and said, "Glennon, my family is broken. There's no way I can save it. My little boy is hurting. Every day I look at him and think, *I had one job*. It was to protect him from pain, and I couldn't do it. I feel like such a failure." I looked at her and swallowed hard. My eyes scanned the crowd, and I noticed many other women nodding in recognition. None of us could keep our children out of harm's way. Then this thought came to me: *Wait. What if we're not all botching our job as parents? What if we have just assigned ourselves the wrong job descriptions?*

I turned to the woman who'd spoken and asked her, "Can you give me three words you'd use to describe the kind of man you're trying to raise?" She said, "Okay. I want him to be kind. I want him to be wise. And I want him to be resilient." "Yes," I said, "so tell me. What does a human have to confront in life in order to earn those characteristics?" The audience fell silent. The woman stared back at me. "Pain!" I said. "Struggle. It's not about having *nothing* to overcome. It's overcoming and overcoming and overcoming yet again. So is it possible that we're trying to protect our kids from the one thing that will allow them to become the people we dream they'll be? And is it also possible that as parents we feel like failures because we've been assuming the wrong roles? What if it has never been our job—or our right—to protect our children from every incoming bump and bruise? What if, instead, our obligation is to point them directly toward life's inevitable trials and tribulations and say, 'Honey, that challenge was made

for you. It might hurt, but it will also nurture wisdom, courage, and character. I can see what you're going through, and it's big. But I can also see your strength, and that's even bigger. This won't be easy, but we can do hard things.'"

Soon after my divorce was finalized, I called a close friend to ask for advice on how to help my kids through this crisis. She doesn't have kids, which is why I trust her to guide me. I ask only child-free pals for parenting advice because they're the only ones sane and well rested enough to have any real insight. Here's what she said: "Glennon, your family is together on an airplane right now, and there's some serious turbulence. The kids are afraid. What do we do when we're afraid on an airplane? We look at the flight attendants. If they seem scared, we panic, too. If they seem calm, we stay calm. So what I'm telling you is that you are the flight attendant in this scenario, and you've been through enough turbulence to know you'll all make it. Your kids are new to flying, so they're going to look to you to see whether they're okay. Your job right now is to stay calm, smile—and keep serving the freaking peanuts."

Life is not safe, and so our task is not to promise our kids there will be no turbulence. It's to assure them that when the turbulence comes, we will all hold hands and get through it together. We do not promise them a heartache-free life, but we do assure them that the slings and arrows won't kill them—in fact, they will make them kinder, wiser, more resilient. We look them right in the eye, point them to their pain, and say: "Don't be afraid, baby. You were born to do this." Then we smile. And keep serving the peanuts.

Somehow this article struck me as appropriate for Lent. I think that the scariest "wilderness" that parents encounter is that conflicted space between nurture and empowerment. When all of our instincts tell us that we must protect them and enable success at all cost, yet also tells us that a goldfish never outgrows its fishbowl and...

...we don't dwell in this time with Jesus facing demons in the desert for nothing.

~Kathryn Carroll