

Held Together: A Shared Memoir of Motherhood, Medicine, and Imperfect Love

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Discussion ideas for reflection, conversation, and community groups

For a list of all available resources, please visit www.rebeccanthompson.com



Tess

Love Letters

- Did you ever imagine your future children before they were born, or even before they were conceived? What did they look like? When you actually met them, what surprised you? What about them was exactly as you had expected it to be?
- Did Tess's description of the scent of her strawberry shampoo deepen your ability to imagine her days at the pool or transport you to a memory from your own life? Are there smells that remind you of your childhood? Do these smells evoke positive or negative emotions, or something more complicated? Why is smell so intimately connected to emotion?
- What would you write in a love letter to your child? What would you write in a love letter to your childhood self?

Shreya

Contrasts

- Shreya experiences many contrasts in her life. She is learning to assert her own independence as a young adult while her dad is losing his independence to his illness. She is given a diagnosis of life-threatening cancer but finds it all the more difficult to accept because she feels physically well. She finds both devastation and relief in losing her hair to chemotherapy. What kinds of emotional contrasts have you experienced within your life? What kinds of physical contrasts have you experienced within your body?
- Parenthood itself is a land of contrasts: The value in maintaining control and the value in letting go. The need to sometimes hold back when we want to intervene and to sometimes intervene when our natural response is to shy away. The expectation to care for small and vulnerable

humans in ways that make our own roles obsolete as we teach them to care for themselves. What contrasts have you experienced as a parent? Which bring you comfort, and which challenge you?

- Shreya says, “Our children might become our lives, but they should never be our only purpose.” What do you think she means by this, in the context of her life and experiences? How has this played out in her choices and priorities? What might it mean in your life? In what ways might this sentiment inspire us to remain connected to something larger than our immediate families?

Erin

Blood and Promises

- Erin says that when she first encountered hard times she thought they were just an anomaly, and that life would eventually get back to more typical routines, but that she later realized that she was off the path altogether. Is there such a thing as an ordinary path? Why do we try to compare our experiences, especially of suffering? In what ways have you stopped comparing yourself to others? In what ways do you still do so? Why is it “both liberating and terrifying” to stop making these comparisons?
- From pregnancy to childbirth to raising a child with a complex medical condition, Erin realizes that some of the “inevitably broken promises” that she and Michael made to each other “were never really ours to keep.” What does this mean? How does this idea relate to what is within, and what is not within, our control? How does this reflect the reality that conditions may change in unforeseeable ways between the time that we make a promise and the moment when that promise is put to the test? Have you ever made a promise that wasn’t really yours to keep? To a partner? To a child? To yourself?

Rachel

Enough for Today

- After watching so many people in her circle of family and friends struggle to have a baby, Rachel is surprised to get pregnant easily. How have the experiences of others influenced your expectations for pregnancy? Do you expect your experiences to be more similar to those of family members with biological connections to you, even if they’re older, or to those of friends who are similar in age? Did you expect parenthood to come easily? Did you experience pregnancy complications or losses that were similar to those of anyone else you know? How do your expectations influence your interactions with family and friends around issues of pregnancy and parenthood? How accurate have your expectations turned out to be so far?

- What does it mean to have enough for today? When was a time that having enough for today was all you could really focus on because looking farther ahead was too difficult or uncertain? Does the idea of evaluating *enough* only in the moment increase your anxiety, because it doesn't allow for planning and anticipating, or decrease it, because focusing only on the present means that you're giving less attention to challenges that are hypothetical or distant? Right now, do you feel like you have enough for today?
- How much do you know about the biology of human reproduction? Have you or your partner, like Joel, ever believed that if you stopped using birth control you would be likely to get pregnant the next time you had sex? What do you know about the timelines of the menstrual cycle and your patterns of fertility? What does your partner understand? How has your understanding changed over the years, and how has it been influenced by pregnancy, parenthood, or attempts to conceive or prevent conception? Where do you get your information, and how do you know if a source is reliable? What questions do you have about reproduction that you've never had a chance to ask a health professional, or that you continue to be confused about even as an adult?

Anna

Fairy Tales

- Reflecting on their experience as Miranda grows, Anna feels that she and Peter made the choice to try to have a child, and then nearly every other event that unfolded during her pregnancy and Miranda's early life was out of her hands. What does choice mean in pregnancy? In parenthood? How does Anna cope with the powerlessness she feels when confronting the discrepancy between the ordinary, healthy pregnancy she feels everyone is told to expect and the complex, far-beyond-her-control complications that she and her family actually experienced? Just before Miranda's birth, Anna feels "responsible for how complicated everything had become yet powerless to change the course of events." Have you ever blamed yourself for something that was completely out of your control? How did you handle this contradiction?
- Looking at Miranda in her incubator, Anna's mind spins with "the strangest comparisons," likening her tiny daughter to a pack of butter or a squirrel. Why do you think Anna's thoughts went here? When have you been surprised by comparisons, analogies, or metaphors that came to you in situations that felt foreign or unfamiliar? Did you share your thoughts with others or keep them to yourself? Did they bring humor to a difficult situation or help you cope in some way, or did they distress you more?

Maya

So Far

- Maya says that “[g]rowing another being made [her] feel like a queen, with the power and dignity to take on anything in this world,” and remarks on the contrast of feeling both connected to “all the families who had traveled this road before us” and completely unique because “[n]o other woman had ever been [her], pregnant with this very baby...with every experience new to us.” How did you experience pregnancy, physically and emotionally? Did you feel empowered? Dignified? Exhausted? Excited? Terrified? All of the above? Did pregnancy make you feel part of a collective tradition of growing families? What felt special and unique to only you during pregnancy?
- Maya reflects that “[r]eading books and stories about others who were feeling sad let [her] wallow in sadness, absorb memories of loss, and fulfill [her] unspoken promise not to move on too quickly.” When you’re going through a struggle that makes you feel isolated, do you seek out ways to connect with others who’ve had similar experiences? Or do you need to process things primarily on your own? Do you prefer to connect with people in real time, or to read or listen to others’ told stories of loss and grieving? Have you ever felt voyeuristic to be seeking out others’ stories in these times? If these stories brought you comfort, did that outweigh any reservations you’d had?
- Although Maya was reluctant to join large get-togethers in the first couple of months after Ethan’s death, she appreciated individual visits with family and friends, as well as cards and messages coming from those who reached out without any expectations of a reply. Even now, more than a decade after Ethan’s birth and death, she recalls the soothing effect of holding these beautiful cards in her hands and is grateful to those who still carry on Ethan’s memory by reaching out to her on his birthday. How do you show up for your friends and family to carry on the memory of loved ones who have died? Are there ways you’d like to be more active in doing this? What strategies might you use to remember important dates and milestones, so that you can offer a loving note or thoughtful gesture? How do you wish to show up for those around you who haven’t forgotten their losses, even as the rest of the world moves on?

Kelly

Breathe

- Kelly wryly observes that “[t]here is nothing like the immediacy of children to remind you that you’re finally home,” and notices that her experiences with her illness make her “all the more

determined to participate in our family's beautiful ordinary moments." How does your health shape your perception of day-to-day activities, and your ability to be present for what's happening with your children or partner? Have you ever had a health crisis that sharpened your resolve to participate fully in something you had previously taken for granted? What dictates which moments we see as ordinary and which extraordinary?

- Kelly thinks a lot about how the effects of her illness impact her family, especially her young children. Did any of the adults who raised you manage significant medical conditions or face new diagnoses that impacted their day-to-day functions or threatened their lives? What was difficult about seeing that as a child? Were there any especially difficult parts of your childhood that became "a gift rather than a wound" as you grew up?
- Both of Kelly's children, at a young age, ask her questions about how her death will impact them. Have your children asked you questions about death in general? About your death specifically? If they haven't raised the topic, have you? What do you say to them? Have you thought ahead of time about how you want to convey your beliefs about death, or have you come up with your responses in the moment? Is there anything you would change about what you've told your children about death in the past?

Victoria *Body Of*

- Many of Victoria's insecurities arise from not feeling safe. For her, this often manifests as trying to change herself in the present while perseverating on the past and fearing for the future, which then leads to catastrophizing. Even as her mental health improves dramatically, she struggles with the bittersweet nature of life's impermanence. Is it possible to live in such a way that we appreciate the beauty of small moments, such as the touch of a partner or the smile of a child, without letting our fears about losing the people we love sabotage our ability to relish their presence in the moment?
- Victoria repeatedly overcomes challenges to her mental health and wellbeing and says, "I didn't think to call it brave." How do her manifestations of bravery compare and contrast to the stereotypical bravery that our culture celebrates? What's the bravest thing you've ever done? Have you done things that others might call brave but that you're not used to thinking of in this way? Has there ever been a time when being brave upset you? Confused you? Angered you? What does brave mean to you?

- When have you felt “done” as a parent? Are we ever allowed to be done? How can we step away safely when we need to? What if we can’t? How can we find and create safe spaces to protect each other from becoming overwhelmed, or from the overwhelm becoming a threat to our safety or our children’s? What parts of this nearly universal experience of parenthood must we learn to cope with on our own, even when we’re part of supportive families and communities?

Marissa

Carry

- Through her life, Marissa has gravitated toward taking on tasks and responsibilities—as when carrying the obligation to stand up to bullies on the playground as a child, undergoing fertility treatments and carrying a pregnancy, and carrying Adrien’s things in and out of their home during his transitions. What different meanings does *carrying* take on over the course of Marissa’s life? How does the weight of what she carries change over time? Do you have a tendency to take on challenges in a way that aligns with Marissa’s tendencies to carry the burden of others? Or do you tend to let others step up in times of challenge, conflict, or intense emotion?
- As Marissa grapples with what’s next for Adrien, she begins to feel that “[t]he line between being loved and being needed [is] blurry and unsettling.” When is it important to distinguish between being loved and being needed? When are these factors inextricable? How might growing up in the foster care system impact a person’s relationship to love and need, and to the interactions and overlap between them?
- Some of the points of conflict in their family arise when Adrien is with friends, particularly as Marissa and Isabel try to navigate what their response should be when Adrien speaks disrespectfully toward Isabel in front of his friends, or comes home later than they’ve agreed upon because he loses track of time while out with others. How do we support our kids’ connection to peers and honor the relationships they build outside our families while also setting limits around acceptable behavior? How much rebellion is acceptable, and how do we decide when to hold strict boundaries? How does this differ when an older child joins a family, bringing prior relationships along with them? How much extra grace do we give neurodivergent kids when they inadvertently violate agreements because of the delayed development of their executive function skills? When does the importance of maintaining a kid’s connections to friends and community supersede the importance of family rules and expectations?

Eriko

Lines

- How does the metaphor of kintsugi play out in your own life? What are the positive effects of embracing imperfections rather than hiding them? What things do you hide about your past that might serve you better if you claimed them as part of who you are? How have you made something beautiful out of something difficult or traumatic?
- As a child or teenager, did you ever fantasize about your wedding, married life, or having children? How have your imaginings aligned with or differed from your current reality? What did you think you wanted as a child that you no longer want as an adult? What did you want that you've never experienced but still wish you could?
- When Eriko moves away for medical school, she notices that Azhar—"even from three thousand miles away—[becomes] the most consistent presence in [her] life," and that he makes her feel connected "to a piece of home." Do you have any experience with being in a long-distance romantic relationship? What factors played into if you were able to maintain it, and for how long? Was there anything about being physically apart that led the relationship to go on for longer than it might have otherwise, or to stop sooner? In what ways did it connect you to your past, and in what ways were you able to preserve it even while moving ahead in the present? What do we get out of long-distance relationships, both romantic and otherwise, when we are the ones who are moving away? When the other person is the one who's leaving?

Stacey

This One Thing

- Initially, both David and Stacey see the decision about having children as an isolated issue, and each thinks the other should consider doing "this one thing" for them. But as Stacey's thinking evolves, she questions if it's even possible to "measure his demand for [her] to leave something so important out of [her] life against [her] longing for him to welcome something into his." What is the difference between actively choosing to exclude something from one's life and actively seeking to include something? Can omission and addition be measured against each other? How does Stacey's thinking about this decision change over time? Do we understand how, and if, David's thinking changes too? Do you agree with Stacey's later realization that the question of having children was actually "the one thing that meant *everything*," or do you feel that it's just one aspect of a couple's relationship?

- Stacey reflects that she used to interpret “destructive relationships full of conflict and challenge...as adventure.” When have you mistaken some kind of danger for adventure? Are you ever drawn toward physical danger? Emotional danger? Other kinds of peril? Or do you try to avoid danger at all costs? What is one risk that you’ve later regretted taking? What is one risk that you’ve later regretted not taking?
- Considering the idea of compromise, Stacey realizes a fundamental disconnect between her perspective and David’s: “I heard it as a noun: *I’m sure we can work together to find a compromise*. He heard it as a verb: *She’s asking me to compromise myself and all that I believe in.*” What does the word *compromise* mean to you?

Bree

Maker

- Bree reflects on events in her life that have split her time into a sense of *before* and *after*, including becoming a mother and experiencing the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. What events in your life have defined a shift of this magnitude? How have these events influenced your relationships? In the *after*, have you found yourself more eager to connect with others about your experience, or more inclined to turn inward? Has this changed over time, as you’ve processed your experience? How might you harness the perspective you’ve gained to engage more deeply with others or in your wider community?
- Bree reflects on the fact that sometimes we feel very alone as parents, and sometimes we rely on each other. When was a time that you felt very alone as a parent? What factors contributed to this feeling? Were you isolating yourself by choice, believing that others wouldn’t be able to help with or relate to your situation, or did external forces leave you feeling unsupported? Did you eventually find a way into community around this particular struggle? If so, did connecting with others make you feel better, or did it highlight the ways in which you felt different? How could you identify a community that would be more likely to make you feel welcome, in spite of, or even because of, this sense of feeling different or alone?
- If you came into parenthood either earlier or later than the average parent, do you think this affects how you’re treated in clinical settings? Have you ever been mistaken for a role other than your child’s parent (such as sibling or grandparent)? Do you ever feel like you’re being assumed, based primarily on your age or appearance, to be less capable or more capable than you actually are? Is there anything you wish you could say to members of your healthcare team about these

assumptions but that you've been hesitant to share? What might it take to move you from hesitant to eager, or at least willing, to bring up these concerns?

Olivia

Anticipation

- Before reading Olivia's story, what were your associations with the word anticipation? Did you think of anticipation as largely positive or negative? Do you see the word differently after reading? How does anticipation shape the expectations you have for your children? The hopes you have for yourself? Has anticipation ever interfered with your ability to appreciate or enjoy something? Or increased your enjoyment of something?
- What would you change today if you knew or suspected that your life would be much shorter than average? If you knew your mental facilities were likely to fade before your physical body gave out? What would you keep exactly the same? What does Olivia lose in knowing her carrier status? What does she gain?
- Does your family have advance directives or other healthcare planning documents in place? If you were to lose your ability to communicate, would your family and clinicians have a good sense of what priorities and values would dictate the medical care you'd want to receive? What steps can you take now to increase the chances of your wishes being honored?
- Olivia says, "So much of fear is simply love. Fear signals that we value something deeply enough that it would break our hearts to lose it." Do you agree with this idea? What do you love so deeply that your love manifests as fear?

Lia

Third Child

- Different kids are affected differently by a family crisis. If you have more than one child, do you tend to talk with them separately or together when dealing with a challenging situation? Is this impacted by their age? By their gender? By their temperament? By which other family member is most involved? By if it presents a physical or emotional threat? Do you counsel them about how much to share with a sibling, if you're providing siblings with different levels of information?
- As she reflects on her friend's belief that struggles and losses can bring important growth opportunities for kids, Lia thinks about her role as protector of her children. How much should we shelter our children from the complexities of the world? How might that change as they age?

As we age? Do we do them a disservice if we protect them too much, and how do we decide when they're ready to know more? How do we decide which challenges will make them stronger, and which are too much for them to handle, if we have the luxury of deciding how much to reveal? Can we be honest without scaring them? Is the challenge in the fact that hard things happen, or does how we navigate difficulties and model our responses matter more? What might change if we choose to linger in discomfort with our children as we sort things out together?

- Initially, Lia and Tyler have very different reactions to the news of her pregnancy. He is “immediately excited about the news” while she admits that “the best word I could come up with to describe my feelings was *indefinite*.” If you have a partner, did each of you have the same initial reaction upon learning of your pregnancy? Did your reactions converge or diverge over time? Did one of you find yourself trying to bring the other around to seeing things your way? If you terminated or considered terminating a pregnancy, did one of you have more say than the other in this decision? Did you talk through your options together, or with the help of a therapist or reproductive health professional? Did you find any community resources to guide you in having these kinds of conversations?

Nancy

Remotely

- When you were little, did you assume you'd be a parent someday? Did this assumption change when you were a teen or a young adult? Did the idea of being a mother or father ever seem alien in any way? If you're a mother, did becoming one change how you thought about your own identity, or how you were able to express your identity? Did it change how others seemed to perceive or identify you as a person? Do you see motherhood as inherently feminine? What parts of your experience are specific to motherhood, and which are more broadly related to parenthood in general?
- When was a time that you've received parenting advice that felt alienating or disconnected from your experience? Have you ever felt judged by others for activities you do with your kids or for how you raise your kids? How do you handle the discomfort that arises from these kinds of conflicts? Have you found ways to connect with other parents who are more supportive or like-minded? Have you ever tried to connect with other parents and utterly failed? How could this failure set you up to succeed next time you try?

- If you're a parent of multiples, are you part of a support group? Have you explored the resources of Multiples of America, the Mothers of Multiples Society, or other national organizations? Where and how have you sought out advice from other parents of multiples, and have you passed on advice to others? What would you tell a parent-to-be who just found out they're expecting more than one baby?

Tina

Solving for Unknowns

- Tina writes of having an infant, "We had both realized that, like so many things in life, parenting looked much easier from the outside." Were there things about parenthood that looked easier to you from the outside? What surprised you most about parenting a young child?
- Tina goes through "the most surreal moment [of] selecting my own burial plot." Do you think Tina will still choose to be buried in Wisconsin? Have you done anything to prepare for your own death or thought about how you'd like your physical body handled after death? How much would you want to have a say in this versus letting your loved ones decide for you? In what ways would your actions (or non-actions) be a burden and in what ways a gift?
- Tina talks about working through her grief until "my sorrow condensed into a shape that those around me could accept." Do we owe it to others to minimize or contain our emotions in a way that eases their discomfort? How does presenting our emotions in ways that are more palatable to others help us? Hurt us? While Tina endures the immense grief of losing a beloved spouse, she also recognizes the incredible good fortune of having had a spouse that she loved so deeply. As a reader, how do you experience this paradoxical intersection of loss and abundance? What combination of sadness, pity, joy, or envy do certain parts of her story evoke in you? Do you find anything about your response confusing, contradictory, or counterintuitive?
- One of the primary lessons that Tina hopes others will take from her story is that no one ever knows how much time we have in this life, so we should tell those around us that we love them and never take our time together for granted. How can we live with this mindset without being preoccupied with our own mortality and the impermanence of life? How can we reach out to others in a way that is genuine and meaningful without being intimidating in our intensity?

Eileen

Doing the Math

- Think of a time that you've "done the math" by comparing yourself to others and their families' milestones. Did this happen to you before having children? In the process of having children? As a parent? Has it made you feel better or worse—or both, in different ways? How might we use comparisons to find similarities that unify us rather than to highlight our differences?
- Eileen pictures herself as an old woman, and considers how she'll see her life looking back. What memories do you think you'll hold most tightly as you get older? What do you think you'll be nostalgic for? How does the distant future that you imagine relate to the life you're living at present? Are you currently on a path that would predict your projections to come true, or do you need to take specific active steps to make this future a reality, if you want it to materialize?
- Eileen feels like she's failed both her sons when she misses Sam's first birthday to deliver Spirit Max. If you have more than one child, has caring for or honoring one child ever interfered with your relationship with another? How does age spacing and birth order influence your feelings and your actions around these issues? Do you have children whose birthdays fall in close proximity to another birthday or to an anniversary, either happy or sad, within your family? How does this affect how you mark the occasions?

Lydia

Given

- Lydia grew up in an environment of material scarcity and poverty. While this was a dominant stress on her parents as providers, Lydia felt the lack of parental time, love, and attention as the more acute deficit. She reflects that her mother "didn't understand that I didn't mind not having much. I just wanted to connect with her." How might scarcity of financial resources create, or be related to, scarcity of emotional resources for a parent? Can love compensate for a lack of material wealth? Can material wealth compensate for a lack of love?
- The psychological theory known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs describes humans' drive to satisfy basic survival requirements before more elevated goals can be considered. While Lydia does not have a solid foundation of shelter, clothing, safety, or love in her childhood, she taps into her creativity to define herself, particularly in high school and as she moves into her career in architecture. How have her creative pursuits, which are categorized as a luxury of sorts in this framework, actually become a survival skill to her? Is it necessary to have our basic needs met in order to strive for creative expression? Can creative success supplant basic needs? What does the

eventual collapse of Lydia's creative energy mean to her, both literally and symbolically? Have you noticed a connection between how well your basic needs have—or haven't—been met and how much attention you've been able to give to creative or self-actualizing pursuits in different phases of your life?

- Lydia and her siblings seek each other out on the playground to cope with feeling excluded from the social groups at their new school. As adults, however, they have not maintained a close relationship, and they compete with each other for scarce family resources, such as when Lydia's parents ask her to move out of their home to make room for her brother to move in. Lydia understands this to be a direct result of how her mother herself was raised, with no one to model familial support and kindness. If you have siblings, how has your relationship with them been influenced by your parents' relationships with their own siblings or by how your parents expected you to behave toward each other growing up? Has this changed over the years? How has your relationship with your siblings, or the fact of having no siblings, influenced the expectations you have for your children's relationship as siblings? How has it impacted your own relationship to your child? How does your relationship with siblings and birth order within your family influence your friendships? Romantic partnerships? Other important relationships in your life?

Carolyn

Anyone Else's Family

- Carolyn grows up in a matriarchal family, with her father having left when she was two years old, and she believes that her father's absence from their family led to her placing too much emphasis on her romantic relationship with Will. How do you think lacking a strong male influence might have influenced the experiences Carolyn sought out as a child and teenager? Did the absence of anyone in your childhood life make you feel drawn toward particular kinds of relationships outside your biological family? Who were the most influential adults in your life when you were a child? How did the genders of these adults influence the relationships, romantic or otherwise, that you sought out as you grew up?
- Carolyn notices, in her relationships with both Will and Landon, that she's drawn to the mens' families as much as to the men themselves. Have you ever been attracted to a romantic partner because of a larger group or community they were connected to? How did this relate to the connection you had to the individual him- or herself? Did this connection complement your attraction? Distract from it? Overshadow it? In what ways do connections to our families and

communities beyond ourselves inform the romantic relationships we seek out, and how our relationships grow over time?

Mitra

Other Women's Children

- How did the family Mitra grew up in influence the expectations she brought to her relationships with men? How did you feel when you read her descriptions of her father's role in their family, particularly his assumption that she would "live at home under his watch, under his jurisdiction, until [she] got married"? Why was Mitra unable to recognize the inappropriateness of her fast-food supervisor's behavior at the time it was happening? What role might the prevailing social norms at the time, outside of Mitra's own specific family circumstances, have played in preventing her from understanding her power to speak up against this kind of treatment?
- Have you ever made a large decision in your life very impulsively? Were your actions directed more toward actively embracing something or escaping something else? Mitra, especially in her younger years, describes a feeling of drifting, of accepting what came next in her life without seeking experiences with intention. Does this approach resonate with you? How much do you tend to define what you want then go in search of it, and how much do you tend to wait to see what options arise then make your choices based on opportunity or convenience? Has this changed over the years?
- What do you think Mitra was hoping to find in joining the military, aside from a way to extract herself from her childhood home after high school? Do you think wanting to be part of a larger organization or community played a role? What is your perception of military service, and what is this based on? Do you have any personal experience with the military or does your understanding come from media portrayals and third-hand accounts? If you, or someone close to you, has served in the military, what kinds of connections has this service fostered in your life?
- When Mitra first steps into the Montessori classroom, she feels like she is "coming home." Have you ever had an experience like this? Was your reaction about the physical and sensory aspects of the space? A personal sense of your ability to fulfill a life purpose in the setting? A connection to other people you'd be working or living with there? A sense of shared mission and values?

Devorah

A Good Story

- For a time after her mother’s death, Devorah finds that her emotions are so raw that “[a]ny finesse, any mustering of energy to be pleasant while feeling stressed or tired, was no longer within [her] skill set.” When was a time when all of your energy was directed at essential tasks, leaving little ability to filter your responses? How have you gotten through times when you had trouble caring what other people thought of you but knew that you needed to perform to their expectations in order to achieve your own goals?
- Devorah identifies motherless mothering as the hardest thing she’s ever done, noticing that “every milestone has been clouded with the sadness of not being able to share it with her.” Have you had any experiences that make events that used to be joyful—such as attending weddings, celebrating holidays and birthdays, or witnessing children’s growth—feel heavy or bittersweet? If grief complicates your experiences of rituals or the passage of time, how does the grief you feel in moments that are supposed to be happy differ from the grief you feel on the anniversaries of difficult or tragic events themselves?
- Making her mother’s Passover recipes with her children holds great sentimental value for Devorah. How do traditions around food and home life keep us connected to our deceased loved ones? To our living family members? To our wider communities and cultures?
- Seeing herself as so physically similar to her mother, Devorah is surprised when her induction initially seems to be likely to lead to a vaginal birth. What expectations do we put on ourselves, physically or otherwise, based on what our parents have been through? What assumptions do clinicians put on us as a result of our family history? How might we think of our family history in ways that boost confidence in our bodies and encourage us to model our behaviors based on positive examples set by those who came before us? How can we break free of family patterns and expectations that hold us back?

Becca

- At work, Becca made a deliberate choice not to share details of her personal life, including her pregnancy complications and losses, in order to maintain professional boundaries, but her withholding of information from family and friends arose from a much less intentional unfolding of events. She recalls that “the complications had mounted so swiftly and so relentlessly that [she] hadn’t decided who to tell [she] was pregnant each time before [she] suspected [she] wasn’t pregnant anymore. [She and Ian] barely had time to grasp what was happening [them]selves, let

alone consider how to seek support.” How and when have you revealed your hope to become a parent or shared news of a pregnancy? Looking back, do you wish you had done so later, or waited longer to do so? Becca also discusses feeling surprised by how quickly things kept changing as they faced their complications, like she’d “gone from noticing a drifting snowflake one moment to finding [her]self buried in an avalanche the next.” Has a quickly evolving medical situation ever made it challenging for you to figure out how and when to reach out to others for emotional support?

- “Learning to be a doctor while learning to be a mother was doubly humbling,” Becca recalls as she reflects on her training. “Residency had sometimes felt all-consuming and sometimes like the least of [her] concerns.” When was a time when you were in the midst of multiple simultaneous phases of change or transition? How did they intersect with or impact each other? How does humility, especially during major life events, allow you to be more patient with yourself? To be a better friend or parent? To remain more open to learning from others and considering new perspectives? In what ways can humility help counter potential negative impacts of the Dunning-Kruger effect—a cognitive bias in which our limited competence in a particular situation can lead us to overestimate our abilities—in favor of acknowledging the realities that we do not always know what we do not know and we are often best served by embracing our own imperfections and limitations?
- What has been most unexpected for you about parenthood? Where did your expectations about pregnancy or parenthood come from before you had children? Where do they come from as your children grow up? How much are they influenced by society as a whole? By individuals and smaller groups in your social circles? By memories of your own childhood? How do your expectations around parenthood and family life influence your communications with the clinicians who care for your family? What sources, both in-person and written, do you turn to when parenthood brings an unexpected and difficult medical situation to your family?
- Toward the end of the book, Becca observes that “[s]tories are always harder to tell in the present tense” and remarks that “knowing at least this much about how our narrative ends, it's no longer too painful to share the beginning.” When was a time that you felt you had to wait to reveal your story until you knew more about a stressful or uncertain outcome? Did you have trouble making sense of an intense experience even for yourself while you were in the thick of it? At what point did processing and sharing this experience become easier—or at least possible? Do you agree that stories are harder to tell in the present tense?