
Introduction

Out of Sight, Ever Present

Draped with an old-fashioned checkered plastic tablecloth and mismatched plates and utensils, our kitchen table in the parsonage of my dad's church in the South Bronx of New York City was family-central for my brother Ralph, who was ten years old, my little brother Howard, who was sitting in his high chair, my mom, my dad, and me. We joined hands. You could always tell when my dad was hungry by the length of the grace before eating. That night he was hungry. I was nine and full of new experiences and questions as a third grader. As we started to eat, I blurted out a question about a word I had seen written on the bathroom wall at school. In polite company, one might say "Sugar, Honey, Ice, Tea," but—not being aware of what's acceptable at the dinner table—I said the full unadulterated word in all its glory. Well, I still remember the look of shock on the faces of my mom and dad. Sensing I'd said something dreadfully wrong, I darted my eyes to Ralph, who looked amused that I might be heading for a spanking for saying such a forbidden word. But instead of a spanking, and its painful aftermath, which would

have come and gone, I received a lifelong lesson that I carry to this day. My parents looked at each other, and my mom very calmly said, "Have you ever heard your father or me say that word?" I confidently shook my head no. "Well," she continued, "if you haven't heard us say it, you shouldn't, either." Those words became the voice in my ear

from that point on, because they provided me a guidepost to follow, even in my parents' absence.

In many ways, that experience helped me formulate a very important piece of my own parenting puzzle. In the same way that I looked to my parents for indelible markers, even in their absence, I promised myself that I would provide the same kind of out-of-sight guidance to my own children. And any partner in my parenting journey would have to feel the same way. We would have to back each other up, as the glances between my parents did that night at dinner. They were a team, and I was determined that one day I would be equipped to provide that kind of united front for my own children.

My parenting journey, however, turned out to have a very different trajectory. Through choice and circumstance, I would eventually carry the title "single mother."

The Pride and the Prejudice

I never imagined myself as a single mother. In addition to my parents, just about all my relatives and friends lived with both parents. So when I became a single mom, at first I thought I was heading into uncharted waters. But eventually I realized all the lessons my parents had passed on to me growing up had unknowingly helped prepare me for whatever my marital status would be. Their words of encouragement, their advice, and the survival skills they passed through my ears and into my heart proved to sustain me during my toughest challenges.

Probably first and foremost of their lessons on resiliency was not allowing society's expectations—in this case, of single motherhood—to define me as a liability. I thought back to how my parents had helped build community and a sense of family for anyone who needed comfort or assistance. They provided a presence for people in need, throughout the community or within our extended family. When

someone had my parents' ear, they knew they also had their heart so they need never feel alone. In writing this book, I began embracing this presence of family and community taught to me by my parents and modeled in the animal world. I thought about how lionesses live in groups called prides the only cats to do so and how they help raise each other's cubs, share their food, and provide protection when threatened by outside forces. I realized that like a lioness, I too relied on a pride. I became determined that our family would not only survive but also thrive because I would somehow re-create the kind of community I grew up in and become the ever-vigilant, ever-present voice in the ear for my own children.

The obvious challenge for me and other single mothers is that we don't have a parenting partner with whom to share impressions or discuss options, never mind pick up the slack when children have conflicting schedules. We often have to work multiple jobs because we don't have a fellow wage-earner in the home. I like to think that these adversities increase the need for us to be stronger, wiser, and more resilient.

But unfortunately, what with being head of household, financial gatekeeper, social activities director, moral compass, maid, nurse, therapist, schoolteacher, and philosopher, all while fighting mis-guided public policy and the feeling of being crushed beneath the weight of stress and anxiety, sometimes it can feel like we are the butt of a sick, cruel joke. More times than not, we may feel less capable, less competent, and less deserving than other women of reaping the rewards life has to offer. The concern that lives right beneath the surface and never ceases to buzz us with fear and overwhelm is, "Are the kids okay? Am I enough? Is there enough?"

I know because I've been there—and yes, there is enough, and I took advantage of any and all opportunities presented before our family to make sure I was enough. Throughout the years, I built on the lessons I had learned as a child to be as present a parent as possible. But whatever measure of success I achieved in my parenting,

I also know there are many more examples of single-mother households that are rarely celebrated or consulted to give inspiration, parenting tips, or advice. There is a deep untapped well of knowledge in single-parent families that can benefit and inspire two-parent families, grandparents, mentors—all caregivers in the lives of children. I hope this realization begins with this book.

My Journey to the Present

I've been a single mom three times: twice by choice and once by tragedy. The first time, I left a deeply troubled, increasingly violent marriage, uprooted my two-year-old daughter, Nikki, and moved into a friend's basement furnished with only a twin-size bed and a portable crib. It was two weeks before Christmas. I brought along a bag for me and one filled with diapers and a week's worth of cold-weather clothes for Nikki.

The second time, single motherhood came in an instant. My second husband, William Westley Moore Jr., died suddenly after only five years of a blissful marriage, leaving me alone to raise Nikki; our three-and-a-half-year-old son, Wes; and our twenty-month-old daughter, Shani.

After the ER doctors admitted flatly, "There was nothing more we could do. He's gone," and sent me off with their condolences, I had yet again become a single mother.

My husband's death shook me so deeply that I wondered how my family would survive. Day by day, the enormity of suddenly becoming a single mother of three rose up like a flood. I couldn't even see straight, let alone remain steadfast in the present, as a lioness does, when I returned from the hospital a widow. Even in those moments when I was physically with my children, I couldn't stop worrying about their future. All the details associated with a sudden death, plus the everyday responsibilities like paying bills and taking out the

trash, were pulling me in every direction. I could only see the have-nots of our situation.

The third time I married when the kids were teenagers, and I wanted to model a traditional two-parent family for them. He was a good man, a family friend whom I thought a safe alternative to single motherhood. But I soon learned that marrying for the wrong reasons never goes well, and I ended a union that was loveless and frustrating and turning me into someone I didn't want to be.

My children all had challenging moments, from academic problems to alcohol use to run-ins with the police. I faced the everyday, ordinary challenges so many single mothers face: from daycare issues to lack of male role models to, at times, extreme financial anxiety.

Despite all my mistakes and the obstacles placed in front of me, particularly as a black, single mother of three, my children's lives were filled with many more opportunities than my frightened mind could have imagined. It took me a while to notice them, to press the pause button on all the noise in order to assess the world around me, but when I did, I took advantage of as many opportunities as I could. Thankfully, all three of my children emerged strong, successful, and, most important, good people. Nikki channeled her creativity and keen attention to detail into founding a thriving event-planning business; Wes is a Rhodes Scholar, White House Fellow, president and CEO of the Robin Hood Foundation, and author; Shani graduated from Princeton and UC Berkeley before earning her law degree at Stanford and becoming an independent television screenwriter and legal and business executive at NBCUniversal.

When my son was grown, he retold the story of his father's death in his instant *New York Times* bestselling book *The Other Wes Moore*. He was critically acclaimed for his examination of, as he describes, "The story of two boys living in Baltimore with similar histories and an identical name: Wes Moore. One of us is free and has experienced things that he never even knew to dream about as a kid. The other will spend every day until his death behind bars for an armed

robbery that left a police officer and father of five dead. The chilling truth is that his story could have been mine. The tragedy is my life could have been his.”

As Wes traveled around the country raising awareness through his juxtaposition of his fate and the fate of the other Wes Moore, he encountered one recurring question that seemed to burn in the minds of the parents in the crowds:

“What did your mother do right?”

Soon the answer to that question, “What did your mother do,” became like a Holy Grail mothers in the audience went in search of—the elixir for creating successful children, as if there is such a thing. And this question resounded despite my son’s efforts to underscore the extreme social injustices that exist in our country that keep segments of the population trapped in a whirlpool of poverty. These mothers were desperate for just one thing—to get it “right.”

Because of the focus on how my son was mothered, I was launched into a role of parenting expert seemingly overnight a role I still reject. I am no expert; if anything, I’m an experimenter. I just did what I had to do, waited to see what worked, tossed out what didn’t, and started all over again. Just as the lioness focuses on only one thing survival I fought hard to remain present in the moment. That presence helped keep my eyes wide open so I could snatch up the inner and outer resources I needed to raise bright, kind, and happy children. Though I sometimes felt ostracized, misunderstood, and completely alone, my dedication to staying focused on the here and now enabled me to see clearly the opportunities and support the haves—that surrounded me, and put them to good use. Yes, I made a lot of mistakes, like worrying about the next day instead of what was happening at the kitchen table, and it certainly wasn’t easy to stay grounded in confidence and strength, but I taught myself to keep asking the important questions: *What kind of people do I want my kids to grow up to be, and how can I model that despite the daily pressures that crush me? What do I have to do (or not do) to teach the values I*

learned as a kid even when I feel like I can't breathe, never mind be a role model? How can I inspire them to succeed without nagging and yelling?

These guiding questions became my reset buttons when I felt a moment or situation getting away from me. During overwhelming days or just typical busy ones, I stopped and reminded myself of these questions because they pulled me back to what was important. In terms of what I *did* on a daily basis, I had no empirical examples to offer people who asked, so I turned to my children to find the more accurate answers. I've always believed children to be our guides, as they are wise and much closer to the truth than we think. Simply asking all three of my children, *What did I do that made a positive impact on you?* helped me remember moments I had either forgotten or not noted in the first place.

Wes: "The time we had two basketball games in two different states two hours apart and you made them both."

Nikki: "After Shani, Wes, and I argued, you pointed to the army of ants on our countertop, explaining that a family works together and always sticks together, or else nothing gets done." (Little did Nikki know I rushed to kill those suckers the minute she left the room!)

Shani: "The time you promised you would always keep my secrets, even from... *especially from . . .* my own brother and sister."

While the monumental stuff like working several jobs or stringing together loose change for a decent dinner came to mind as the "right" way to be present, my children's memories told me otherwise. Presence makes the little things much bigger; it takes a door that is ajar and swings it wide open.

Presence

Presence is the secret sauce of parenting, period. In fact, presence is what one survey revealed children crave most from their parents, married or not, and they get quite resentful when they don't

receive it. According to one study, 54 percent of kids say their parents check their devices too often. And 32 percent describe themselves as feeling “unimportant” when their parents are sidetracked by emails, social media, online shopping, and texts. This reminded me of when my kids would tune me out, and I would demand, “Look at me when I am talking to you!” But do we look at our kids, *really look*, when they are talking to us?

It is easy to see, especially in our mobile high-tech world, how being present is difficult enough when there are two parents in the home. My mother used to say that she chose the relatively predictable field of teaching because if one parent travels extensively as my dad did for work the other parent can’t “rip and run” at the same time. One of them has to stay close to ground zero. But once you are the sole parent, you lose your backup. There is no safety net at the bottom when you fall off the proverbial parenting cliff. Being a single mother doesn’t come with the checks-and-balances approach you get when you have two parents on the case; nor do you have a different perspective or opinion to counterbalance your own, or, most important, the support and reassurance of the other parent when you make a hard call for your family. When you’re tapped out at the end of the day, there isn’t someone there to pick up your slack, able to be present for you when you need to check out. All that and more went out the window when I lost my parenting partner. So I had to be doubly present, and figure out a way to be present even when I wasn’t anywhere near my children!

The voice in my ear was my consistent reminder that presence is more than simply being in the physical vicinity of my kids, or even providing for their basic needs. Presence is stopping in the moment with the intention of making a lasting impression of your own values, instilling them like pillars staked firmly into the earth. Presence is the “what” of successful parenting. The “how” is making sure there is a pride of people whom you trust and who can partner with you in the process. The “why” is that everyone needs help. The “when” is now.

Digging deep for this book, I thought hard about the pillars

I incorporated to make our family work. Seven emerged. It is said that through necessity, we invent, and I believe that it was out of

necessity that I frequently turned to my pillars as guideposts and reminders of what keeps me going. If these pillars represent my value system, then presence is the mortar that binds the pillars together, strong and erect, enabling them to be symbols of strength to this day.

I realize that telling you the secret to raising happy children is to simply be present in the moment might elicit one of two responses: an uncontrollable bout of belly laughter, or an eye roll. I wouldn't blame you. After all, chauffeuring kids around from activity to play- date to tutor, planning conference calls while paying bills and taking the dog to the vet, and having to take multiple trains or buses to accomplish all these things and more does not feel like a life conducive to "living in the moment," as presence is often described. But then I think back to what my grown kids have identified as being most impactful in their development, and I realize the irony: I *couldn't* have driven across the state line to two different basket- ball games, nor connected with my remorseful child by making an important promise, nor remained calm enough to turn an insect infestation into a teachable moment *unless* I was present in that very moment—the eye-on-the-prize kind of presence and, yes, much of the time the grasping-at-straws type of presence too.

My Guiding Pillars

Presence of Mind is about cultivating and adhering to the mindful- ness necessary for being present in the first place. Presence of Mind means trusting your gut and acting with your wit. It is about the ability to connect with the voice in your own ear that encourages you to see a difficult situation in a new way if you want a different outcome. Mindfulness also allows you to be in tune with your children so you can anticipate situations rather than just reacting to them. It is the voice in the ear that keeps generations united

through wisdom and experience.

Presence of Heart is what keeps you going despite all the ups and downs; presence helps the heart pump lifeblood throughout the family unit, keeping everyone focused on living their truth. Changes may have been made, but the family hasn't changed. Having Presence of Heart helps solidify this critical message and keep children feeling grounded and safe.

Regarding **Presence of Faith**, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Take the first step even when you can't see the end of the staircase." Presence of Faith lets you entertain the notion that there may be a staircase to better things even in the midst of great loss. It allows you to take an unknown path without knowing where you're headed. Faith allows you to quit a job and be confident that your next one will be better and more fulfilling. Faith allows you to leave an abusive marriage, leaving everything behind, and know that your life will be better when you walk out that door.

Presence of Courage helps us move out of our comfort zones. Heroes are celebrated for dramatic, daring acts and quick action in a crisis. If those are the criteria, all parents qualify! In hindsight I can see that some of the best choices I made came when I was acting out of desperation and seizing opportunities that were foreign and scary. Sometimes the most bravery we can show is to look within ourselves, admit wrongness, and make an about-face in the right direction.

Presence of Resources. Experts agree that one of the most predictable indicators of stress on a family is financial instability. But as I learned, there are ways to secure family financial freedom without losing the all-important connection to our children along the way. Learning to manage resources and accept limits, while teaching the wisdom of delayed gratification and embracing quality over quantity, decreases the financial anxiety that can threaten a family's well-being.

Presence of Connectedness has two facets: being physically connected to our kids and establishing the invisible connection that sends out our energetic presence in our absence. At some point, as your children navigate the world without you, they will

make their own decisions about how to behave. It's critical that they have the tools to keep themselves out of harm's way in the moments when you're not there to guide (or chastise) them. Connectedness means that your voice will ring in your children's ears even when you're not physically in front of them. It is also about keeping the people and practices around you as a single mother that will give you the energy—both physical and emotional—to be all things: cheerleader, referee, coach, chauffer, tutor, understanding friend, and shoulder to cry on.

Presence of Values means passing down characteristics and traits that will carry your children for life. Instilling such values as honesty, trust, humility, compassion, generosity, and so many

others is a great responsibility. The most effective way to teach values is to embody them ourselves. Children learn much more and much better by watching what we do than by us telling them what they should do.

For my family to succeed, I had to employ all seven of these pillars and call in all the resources I had at my disposal to amplify my presence. As a single mom, it wasn't always easy to remember to live by them, with all the myriad responsibilities facing me daily. Some- times it was easier to just plop the food on the table without taking the time to be thankful for whatever it was that a limited budget could afford. Sometimes at the end of an exhausting day, it was just easier to send the kids off to bed without being present enough to read a book with them or say bedtime prayers. But these are tools of survival in a world that sometimes makes no sense or in a situation cruel beyond belief. We arm our kids with boots and umbrellas when

it's raining, or sunscreen when they're exposed to the sun. A bag full of social and spiritual tools, like humility, empathy, kindness, high expectations, thankfulness, and faith in something bigger than themselves, is just as important to their well-being. While I relied on each of these pillars independently, it was the braiding and blending of all of them that propelled our family along a successful path.

While I share many stories about my family in this book based on these pillars, our success is far from unique. Therefore, I have also included the most striking and powerful stories I've heard from other single mothers. Some of these amazing women I've known for many years. Others I'd heard of or read about and couldn't wait to meet. From them I gleaned the essence of what single motherhood has meant to them and the moments that have most influenced their children's character. What were the crucial moments of presence in which they were able to see the world around their family with clarity and compassion? Some of these women had limited resources, some had plenty, but all had the intense challenge of balancing complex lives. All of them have made bold and sometimes heartbreaking choices and stuck by them with great discipline for the benefit of their children.

Throughout the book, you will learn the stories of these women. They add a new dimension to the conversation about single mothers, because this is not just my story. It is the pride's story. Their wisdom highlighted by the heading "Lesson from a Lioness" will inspire you to keep your sight and transform darkness into light.

Parenting in a World of Right and Wrong

When Mary Moore, the mother of a son named Wes Moore who is serving life in prison, and I appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to reflect on how we parented our children, I was asked the same question that audience members at Wes's speeches ask: "What did you do right?" I wanted to somehow make clear that the differences

weren't in me doing something right and Mary doing something wrong. We all want to fiercely protect our children and want to see them exceed our own accomplishments. None of us set out to do anything wrong for our children. The differences are in the opportunities available to each of us as mothers to be present in our children's lives. The presence of sound family-supporting public policy cannot be over-stated. If Mary's education had not been cut short because funding for Pell Grants was drastically reduced, her life trajectory and those of her sons could have been decidedly different. I had the support of a pride—my parents, my husband's family, teachers, friends, trusted surrogates, my own education and career background—that I solicited to help me be present for my children. Because of all of that support, I experience the joy of seeing my children thrive today.

If you are a two-parent family, I want this book to shine a spot-light on often overlooked examples of resilience, resourcefulness, and sources of inspiration and parenting advice that come from the experiences, challenges, and successes of single moms. They have a story to tell and wisdom to share that can benefit all those with a child in their life. If you are a single mother, I want this book to be a source of celebration and proof that you are in no way a liability. I began to open my eyes to the many other single mothers in this world while journeying through my own singledom. The image of the lioness was a huge comfort and helped me change the way I viewed myself and my family's journey. Single mothers are hunting for food, caring for their young, fending off danger they are able to do it by relying on one another. Lionesses' resourcefulness and power became emblematic of the spirit of single motherhood. If you think of yourself as one part of a larger pride, sharing ideas and championing others, you will succeed in ways beyond your wildest dreams.

The metaphor of the lionesses' pride was popularized by author Lisa Bevere, who notes in her book *Lioness Arising* that lionesses are resilient and quickly able to set aside failures in order to do better the

next time. They are said to see in the dark: “She can take the smallest light and transform it into sight.” The women I have interviewed in this book come from all walks of life and became single mothers through all sorts of circumstances, but all embody the ability to see through the darkness, remain present, and bring their children and themselves into lightness.

As we move forward together to be present, mindful parents for our children, I hope you will take pride in knowing there is a vibrant, robust, and fierce community of like-minded competent women actively raising authentic, fulfilled, happy, successful, and, most important, kind human beings who, through voices in their ears, have become recipients and providers of great joy and enormous pride.

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