

Book Review

Preparing for Parenthood: 55 Essential Conversations for Couples Becoming Families (2020) by Stephanie Dueger, PhD. Author Academy Elite Publishing. 199 pp. ISBN-10: 1647463181; ISBN-13: 978-1647463182.

Some say every book is born at exactly the right time...to do its work in the world when its message is needed most...and that the universality of its message will endure beyond the author's own lifetime. I believe *Preparing for Parenthood: 55 Essential Conversations for Couples Becoming Families* was meant to be born right now: when humanity is facing social, economic, and climate crisis amidst a global pandemic. It is a traveler's companion for slowing down and growing intimacy. One that will help us forge a better future together. I am grateful for its timely arrival, even as a mom whose children are already 8 and 13. Needs will be met for many, whatever our point along the journey.

Distilling her own and others' experiences, Dueger has developed this guide "to help you find your own way of becoming the parents you wish to be" (p. xvi). *Preparing for Parenthood* has a spacious and inviting format, laid out in three parts and seventeen sections. Each section contains conversation-starters and action steps. I appreciate the honest tone and humble inquiry resonating throughout; this creates a safe, stable space to explore the most potent aspects of our relationships and personal experience. I especially enjoy the variety of fun, excavating tools: grids, checklists, journaling, meditation, list-making, online research, field trips, ceremony-creating, and collage-designing opportunities.

Part One: The Couple Relationship begins with communication and intimacy. "These two critical pillars of your relationship foundation...support and sustain each other, and both benefit from focused attention" (p. 36). Making room for this groundwork strengthens relationships of every kind. Part One then moves into other major aspects of the couple relationship: finances, relationship roles, and self-care. Conversation 15, for example, poses these questions:

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What do your roles look like presently in your relationship? How do you split up household chores? Who pays the bills? Does your current arrangement feel like it works well for you? (p. 64)

It is, as Dueger suggests, “an invitation to dive deeply into conversations with your partner so you can begin to approach the parenting journey from the same perspective” (p. xvi-ii).

Part Two: Preparing for Parenthood is packed with potent topics: values, health care, discipline, personal history, pregnancy, and birth—all critical considerations when preparing for parenthood. Unexamined, multi-generational beliefs, social norms, and unpacked personal histories can cause unneeded tension. I am very thankful for the action item in Conversation 26:

Design a plan with your partner around how you imagine religion or spirituality will look in a practical sense in your family. For example, will you attend a particular house of worship, celebrate certain holidays, mark certain rites of passage, and/or create ceremonies of your own?

These questions are helpful reminders that we are free to explore change where it serves happiness and supports our growth. Revising and refining our beliefs when desired opens doors for new ways to enjoy our lives.

Part Three: Early Parenthood looks at the practical (but often underappreciated) postpartum & early parenthood periods. Today's new families can face lonely, frightening beginnings to one of life's most transformative processes. Dueger understands this challenging time:

Preparing for postpartum support ahead of time will likely allow you to avoid a great deal of discomfort during this time when you may feel too overwhelmed to reach out for help. (p. 163)

She suggests being flexible with ourselves and open to alternatives as we wander through the uncharted landscape of diapering, sleep deprivation, and feeding our newborn children. The action step for Conversation 51, for example, states:

Come up with a code word or phrase you can use as a couple to let your partner know you are suffering from lack of sleep and need support... (p.181)

The book closes with a section called Gratitude & Visioning, which includes these, and other, helpful tips (p.192-3):

- Keep the big picture in mind.
- There will always be opportunities to grow, change, and connect.
- There is no one right way to parent.
- Children are quite resilient and forgiving.
- An apology and the ability to repair will go a long way toward healing mistakes and will also model for your children that adults are human beings who sometimes make errors.
- Celebrate every precious day you have with your child, no matter what their age.

These messages are salve for my momma heart! I will post them on my mirror for the days I need extra support.

Preparing for Parenthood's enduring message is on par with two other well-loved books in my personal library: Julia Cameron's, *The Artist's Way* (1992/2002), and *Eastern Body, Western Mind* (1996/2004), by Anodea Judith. The spines are weak & covers tattered; their pages underlined, highlighted, splattered with sticky notes. Similar to Cameron in *The Artist's Way*, Dueger provides multiple in-roads for travelers to deep-dive their curiosities, needs, concerns, and desires. Both books are filled with creative practices where unexpected growth can occur in gentle, profound ways. And answers to the same questions change over time, opening new doors for personal growth. *Eastern Body, Western Mind*, is very information-dense—a combined library of chakra knowledge and developmental psychology in one volume. It is a treasure trove one can study for a lifetime and continue learning. Dueger's book offers the same engaging opportunity for self-transformation, but with a more open structure and a flow that is settling to my nervous system.

I look forward to seeing *Preparing for Parenthood* in the hands of all these influencers: therapists, doulas, midwives, parents' groups, fertility support groups, pediatricians, spiritual and community leaders.

It feels important to say: it is okay if we did not have the gift of this book before becoming parents. We can begin the *55 Conversations* right now. It is not too late to reflect and deepen our capacity for intimacy. We will discover compassion and personal confidence in unexpected moments. And everyone we love will benefit, too.

Keelee Lynn DeRosier
Mom, philosopher, PPN Consultant
Managing Editor for JOPPAH

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