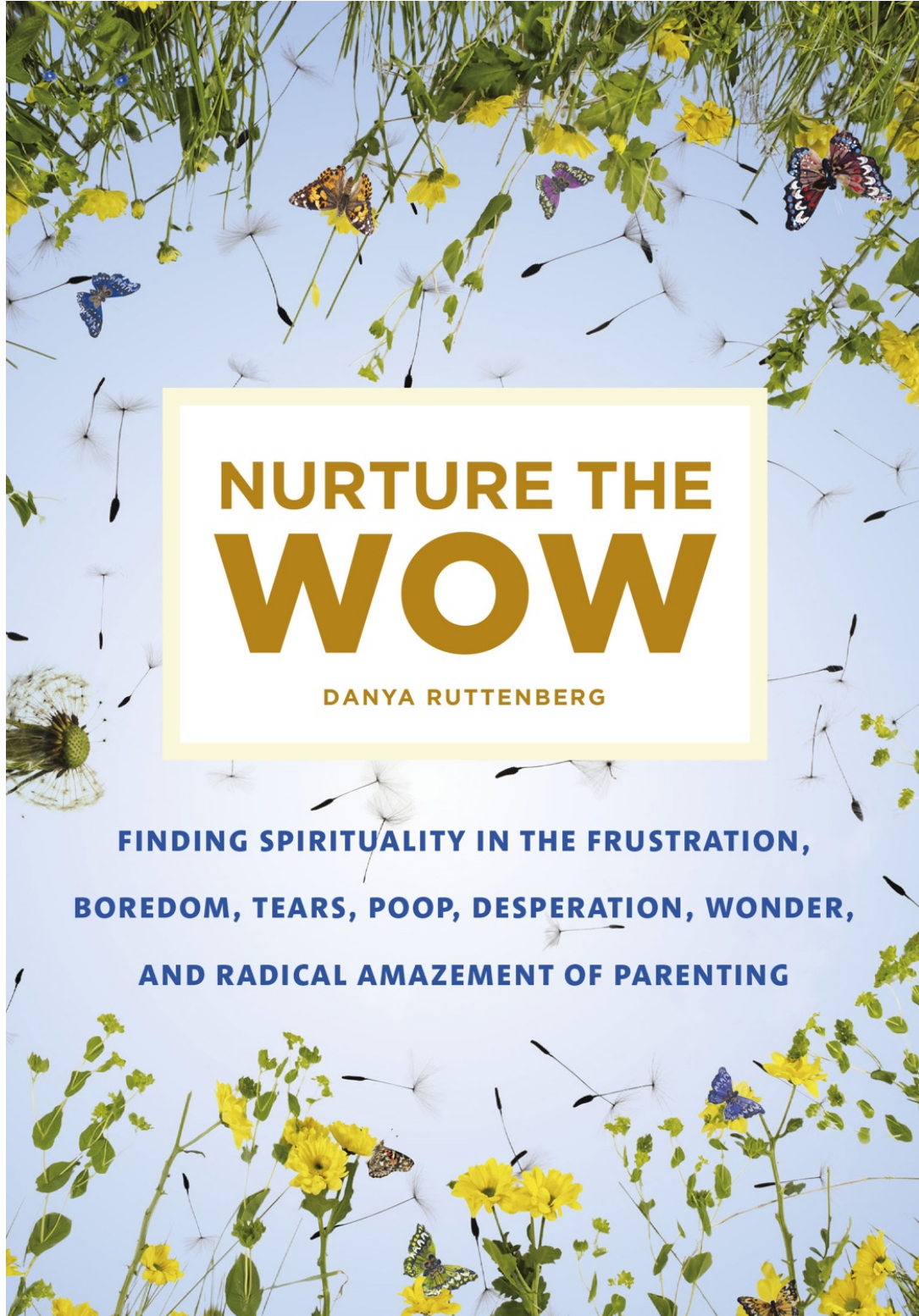


# READER'S GUIDE



*Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder and Radical Amazement of Parenting* by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg  
More information at <http://danyaruttenberg.net>.



# HOW DOES PARENTING CHANGE US?

## Welcome to the *Nurture the Wow* Conversations!

The discussion questions here offer parents of young children a chance to sit back and reflect on how parenting has impacted their hearts, lives, and spirituality. They're intentionally a bit more personal than the average book group guide; they were designed using the award-winning discussion model from Ask Big Questions ([askbigquestions.org](http://askbigquestions.org)). Here, the text and ideas in Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg's *Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder and Radical Amazement of Parenting* are an important starting point, but we hope that you feel comfortable venturing off the pages of the book sometimes and sharing your own ideas and stories.

These questions and prompts were originally designed for ten separate conversations, but a group may decide to focus on a few chapters in one conversation, or to use these questions to discuss larger themes in the book overall. There's certainly no one right way to do it.

Since this is a conversation series about parenting, those planning these discussions may want to take into account considerations around childcare—where will the children be while parents are engaging in a few rare moments of thoughtful, reflective conversation? Will this happen at a time when parents of young children will be able to make it? Is it in the evening, after the kids are in bed? If the discussion is held during the day, will there be childcare (or even parallel children's activities!) available at the same time?

### A few words on the format of these conversations:

We've found that these discussions are most impactful when they begin with a prompt on the theme of the chapter that invites participants to share something brief (a sentence or so) about themselves. A way to step into the room, if you will.

After that brief personal sharing, we move into discussing the book. We've found that it's helpful to read the suggested excerpt from *Nurture the Wow* out loud before discussing it—you can do so as a group with one volunteer reading the whole section, with different people reading each paragraph, or even splitting into pairs to read aloud.

You certainly don't need to discuss every question on every chapter—but for any given section, you should start with interpretive questions, and then move to reflective questions. You'll see for yourself what a difference it makes to proceed in this order.

Since some of these questions are more personal than many book club conversation guides, you may want to begin the conversation(s) (even before the brief personal sharing) with some shared agreements, such as:

*Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder and Radical Amazement of Parenting* by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg  
More information at <http://danyaruttenberg.net>.

- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.

Or any other “ground rules” that feel right to your group.

Enjoy! We hope you find these discussions to be powerful and moving.

## Chapter One

Please share of something that’s surprised you about being a parent—something that you hadn’t expected before your kid(s) entered your life.

Read page 19 (from the section break) to the bottom of page 20 in *Nurture the Wow*.

### Interpretive Questions:

- How would you paraphrase hooks’ preferred definition of love?
- What does hooks suggest changes in our thinking about love when it’s defined as an action, not a feeling?
- What does Ruttenberg think enacting this definition of love looks like? For children? For parents?
- How does she understand what “spiritual growth” is?

### Reflective Questions:

- Does the phrase “spiritual growth” speak to you? Why or why not? If not, are there ways that you might reformulate this language that would speak to you?
- If it does speak to you, do you agree with the way it’s understood here?
- When was a time that you experienced hooks’ definition of love in your own relationship with your kid(s)?
- Do you agree with Ruttenberg that giving love in this way changes parents as well as children?
- How have you been changed through the acts of love you offer your kid(s)?

## Chapter Two

Please think of an aspect of childcare and/or parenting that you find, well, tedious. (It’s OK, really—we won’t tell.) We’ll go around and share what came to mind.

Please read pages 56 (the paragraph that starts, “Kids live on the wonder channel...” ) and 57.

### Interpretive Questions:

- Why does Ruttenberg struggle with her kids’ preferred pace sometimes?

- What is “radical amazement,” as described here?
- How does Ruttenberg claim that children experience radical amazement?
- How does she think that parents can?

#### **Reflective Questions:**

- Do your children seem to experience radical amazement? What does it look like for them?
- Have you ever experienced radical amazement? When? What happened?
- Can every mundane experience be turned into one of wonder? Why or why not?
- What are the challenges for you in turning a mundane experience into one of awe and wonder?

## **Chapter Three**

Please think of a time recently when, as a parent, you felt like you were really going to lose it—or you really lost it—in frustration, anger, desperation, irritation, or something else. Then we’ll share what came to mind.

Read from the last two lines on page 91 through the second-to-last paragraph on 93 (that ends, “shift things around everywhere.”)

#### **Interpretive Questions:**

- What is *teshuvah*? How might you describe it in your own words?
- Why is getting clear on our failures part of the *teshuvah* process?
- How would observing one’s parenting help illuminate all of the issues in a person’s life?
- What does Ruttenberg suggest we might learn by paying attention to our less-than-perfect parenting moments?

#### **Reflective Questions:**

- In what ways does parenting serve as an uncomfortable mirror in your life?
- Have you ever done *teshuvah*—made amends—for something you said or did with your kid(s)? If so, what happened?
- Can a person “untangle the ways [they’re] stuck and broken as parents”? If so, how? What might that look like?
- How should we handle it when we don’t respond to our children in the way we might ideally wish to?

## **Chapter Four**

What’s one of your greatest fears for your children? Take a moment to sit with the question, but try to answer with the first think that you thought of.

Read from page 109 at the break to the first line on page 112.

#### **Interpretive Questions:**

- What does the Thackeray quote mean?

- How does Ruttenberg think that parents have power?
- In what ways does Ruttenberg suggest that parents are like the Biblical description of God?
- How does she think that the parenting relationship is covenantal?
- How does the Rebecca Goldstein quote apply to parenting?

#### **Reflective Questions:**

- How do you resonate or not with the language of “God” in this section? With the way that Ruttenberg uses it?
- Does the language of “covenant” appeal to you in your own parenting? If so, what might that look like on the ground?
- When was a time that you felt like a “knower” in your relationship with your child(ren)?
- When was a time when you felt like the “known” in your relationship with your child(ren)?
- When do you have power as a parent? When are you powerless?

## **Chapter Five**

What do you think of when you hear the word “prayer”? Take a moment to sit with the question before sharing.

Read from page 133, second paragraph from the bottom (“In other words....”) to the end of the first paragraph on 135.

#### **Interpretive Questions:**

- How does Ruttenberg define prayer in this passage?
- How does she think parents of small children can think about prayer in their daily lives?
- Does she distinguish between prayer offered spontaneously and prayer as part of a liturgy? If so, in what way? If not, why not?
- To whom or what does Ruttenberg think we can pray?

#### **Reflective Questions:**

- Does Ruttenberg’s definition of prayer match your own understanding?
- Have you ever had an experience of prayer while with your kid(s)? If so, what happened?
- Do you have to “believe in God” (whatever that means) in order to pray? Why or why not?
- What does praying do, if anything?
- As a parent, if you pray, for what do you pray?

## **Chapter Six**

Please take a moment to think about one way in which the physical nature of parenting stands out to you—one way in which your body, and/or your child’s body, has a particularly strong impact on your parenting experience right now.

Read pages 159-161.

#### **Interpretive Questions:**

*Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder and Radical Amazement of Parenting* by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg  
More information at <http://danyaruttenberg.net>.



- Try to paraphrase the post-bathroom liturgy in contemporary language.
- What impact does Ruttenberg suggest that reciting it as part of childcare could have? Why?
- Why does she suggest that mainstream Jewish law does *not* deploy the blessing in this way? Could this be the only reason why? If not, what are other possible reasons?

#### **Reflective Questions:**

- Does the language of this blessing resonate with you? Why or why not?
- How do you make sense of what's happening when your body or your children's bodies aren't working as they should?
- What aspects of the physical nature of parenting do you find most challenging?
- When are you able to find gratitude in the physical aspects of parenting? When do you find it's hard to do?

## **Chapter Seven**

Please take a moment to think about a recent experience with your kid(s) with regards to play. Did you play with your child(ren)? Did you let your child(ren) play alone? How did you feel in the experience? (Be honest!)

Read "The Turkey Prince," the story by Rabbi Nahman of Breslov in italics on pp. 187-188.

#### **Interpretive Questions:**

- What is the problem of the prince in this story?
- What is the sage's proposed solution?
- Why is the sage's method effective?
- What is the sage's goal, in this story? The prince's? The king's?

#### **Reflective Questions:**

- How might this story be read as a parable about parenting and play?
- When, as a parent, are you the sage in this story?
- When, as a parent, are you the king in this story?
- When, as a parent, are you the prince in this story?
- How do you engage with play with your children?
- What do you teach your children through play?
- What do your children teach you through play?

## **Chapter Eight**

Please share something you've done recently that was an excellent act of self-care.

Read pages 209 through 211 (to the end of the paragraph that ends, "torn into pieces.")

#### **Interpretive Questions:**

- Was Lindbergh's vacation really "radical"? Why or why not?

- What does Lindbergh mean when she says that distractions “run counter to the creative life, or contemplative life, or saintly life?”
- In what ways does Ruttenberg think that Lindbergh’s words are still relevant today?
- What does Ruttenberg mean when she invokes the word, “Zerrissenheit”?

#### **Reflective Questions:**

- Do you agree with Lindbergh that one of the primary challenges as a parent is figuring out “how to remain whole in the midst of distractions”?
- Do you feel “torn into pieces”? Why or why not?
- How has becoming a parent impacted your own spiritual or creative life, or your general sense of being whole?
- What is your personal equivalent of sitting on the beach, watching birds? How often do you do it these days?
- Is nurturing one’s own creative or spiritual self something that must happen away from children? Or can it happen with (and/or through) them? If so, what does that look like?

## **Chapter Nine**

Please share a little bit about a parent (whether you know them personally or not) who has done something that you consider powerful and/or inspiring.

Read pages 238 at the bottom (right after the break) through the end of the first full paragraph on 240 (that ends, “something that matters.”)

#### **Interpretive Questions:**

- What changed for the doctor when she became a parent?
- What changed for Makeda Thomas when she became a parent?
- Is the change for the doctor and Thomas the same, or different?
- What are the practical implications for each of their shifts in attitude?

#### **Reflective Questions:**

- Was your experience of becoming a parent similar to that of the doctor’s, and/or of Thomas’?
- Has becoming a parent changed the way you think about, or interact with, other people?
- Has becoming a parent changed how you read the news? If so, how? Has it changed what decisions you do or don’t make in your engagement with the wider world?
- Have you or other parents you know experienced a shift in perspective since having kids? If so, in what ways is it positive? In what ways does it feel less so, or more challenging?
- Has becoming a parent changed how you want to be in the world? If so, have you made concrete changes in your behavior to reflect that?

## **Chapter Ten**

Please share a time when you experienced something that you would describe as sacred, or holy, or mystical, or transcendent. If you’ve never had an experience that you would characterize with that kind of language, please share that.

Read from the beginning of the last paragraph on 263 (that begins, "My mom...") to the end of the first paragraph on 265 (that ends, "interfacing with reality in a new way.")

### **Interpretive Questions:**

- What seems to have changed for Ruttenberg's mother when she had children?
- What changed for Dorothy Day?
- What does Ruttenberg mean when she says, "Birth, and its twin, death, are, for so many people, two of the greatest keys into this room...."?
- To what degree are the examples given here about ways of thinking? About feelings? About concrete experiences?

### **Reflective Questions:**

- Why would having kids impact some people's spiritual lives?
- What does the word "God" mean to you (whether or not you consider yourself someone who "believes in God")?
- Has becoming a parent changed how you think about God, spirituality, and/or the holy? Has it changed what kinds of questions you have about these things?
- What kind of language do you give to the profound, powerful experiences you have with and through your children?

The poet Yehuda Amichai once wrote, "A child is something else again:/on a rainy spring day/Glimpsing the Garden of Eden through the latticework/Kissing her in her sleep/Hearing footsteps in the wet pine needles." Whatever language we give to our experience of love for our children, they can, perhaps, offer us a glimpse of Eden, of some kind of sweet paradise, a world we hadn't known until their arrival.

## **Concluding Questions**

Here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from these conversations?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life as a parent, based on these conversations?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?

## **Enhance Your Discussion**

- Listen to "Nurture the WOWcast": short (5 mins) podcast nuggets of wisdom with Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, in partnership with Kveller.com.
- Watch to Rabbi Ruttenberg's 12-min ELI Talk on parenting as a spiritual practice.
- Read other writings by Rabbi Ruttenberg on parenting and spirituality.

All of these can be found at <http://danyaruttenberg.net> and <http://danyaruttenberg.net/media>.