

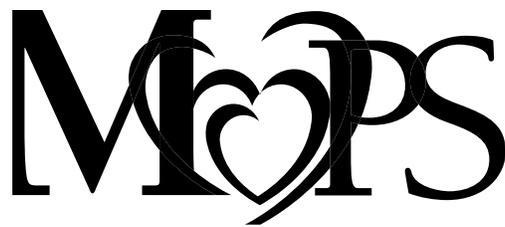
SEARCHING
FOR
STARS

WONDER & HOPE FOR
MILITARY MOPS MOMS

WE
ARE
THE

*Starry
Eyed*





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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Welcome mom!

MOPS started over 40 years ago as a community of moms with infants and toddlers in tow who needed a break and a chance to connect. Moms holding down the fort, with the added pressure of a military spouse, have found the support and encouragement of a Military MOPS group on or near bases across the United States and around the world.

The devotions in this book were written by women like you – moms who love their children to the moon and back and want to be the very best moms they can be. Moms who sometimes go at it alone for long stretches, making do and making the best of things as they support their husbands from the home front. Women who bravely uproot themselves and strive to bloom where they are planted in new places.

*"Thus says the Lord who made the earth, the Lord who formed it to establish it ... Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."
– Jeremiah 33:2-3*

In the midst of the busyness of motherhood and military life, we invite you to join us in choosing wonder, hope and kindness. This year, we proclaim that we are Starry Eyed.

Blessings on the journey.

Sincerely,
Liz Sagaser, Editor

P.S. We've included a bonus just for you: the introduction and first chapter of *Starry-Eyed* by Mandy Arioto, the 2016-17 MOPS theme book! We hope you are as excited about this wonder-filled book as we are.

HELLO, MOM FRIEND

Around the world at base chapels, churches, parks and playgrounds, moms like you are gathering to make new friends and navigate motherhood together. We're so glad you are a part of Military MOPS.

MOPS is for every mom! Even on days you don't feel like a perfect mom, you are the perfect mother for your children - the mother God intended them to have. Breathe this in: You. Are. Enough.

Becoming a mother can make even the most put together woman feel lost at times. Who you are to everyone changes, along with expectations from family and society. Military moms have extra layers that can muddy the already murky water: frequent moves, distance from family and deployment are just a few examples of challenging circumstances.

This devotion was put together with you in mind. We want you to know you are not alone. God's got your back - and if you let them in, so will your sisters in MOPS. Your MOPS group is a place to just be YOU! No clean up of your life is necessary to be part of this community - we're saving you a seat at the table, just exactly as you are.

Thank you for all you do to make faraway places home for your family and those around you. It is not the illusion of perfection that draws others to you, but your ability to live in truth and grace. May you find rest in that knowledge.

In the trenches with you,
Carlynn Welch
Area Coach // Military MOPS

YOU ARE CALLED TO BE A WARRIOR'S WIFE

BY STACEY MORGAN
MOPS AREA COACH
MOM OF 4

You married a warrior. A man who is trained to fight and win our nation's wars. This is no small burden, and not every man is up to the task. Those who choose to bravely stand up and put themselves between us and our enemies are a rare breed. So rare in fact, that less than 1% of American men are currently serving in the United States military. They serve not because it's easy, for the money or the prestige, but because it is a calling. This calling is defined by words casually spoken by those who have never served, but they are full of meaning to the warrior: duty, honor, loyalty and sacrifice.

Standing beside that warrior is someone equally called: YOU. The life of a military spouse is loaded with excitement and adventure. This role also carries more than its share of hardship, loneliness and sacrifice, which makes many wonder why we stick it out. We endure because we are also called to a life of service – whether we do it by wearing the uniform or by supporting those who do.

Do not minimize this higher calling for your life, or fear you do not have what it takes to shoulder such a heavy burden. God does not call the equipped, he equips the called. This is the mission field God has prepared for you in this season of your life. The courageous military spouse knows the dangers and the risk involved, but nonetheless emboldens her husband as he steps forward into the fray. Rather than allowing our fears to dictate our lives, we surround ourselves with women who share in the understanding of the power and pride in our defining words: duty, honor, loyalty and sacrifice.

Together, we share the joy and the grief of this warrior life. We can encourage each other to give our anxieties to God, who promises to trade them for a peace and a hope that is so unusual, our human minds cannot fully comprehend it. God called YOU to this role and will give you the courage and strength needed to confidently answer his call every day. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here I am. Send me.'" Isaiah 6:8.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 Have you ever thought about your life as a military spouse as a calling from God?
- 2 How has God uniquely equipped you for your calling as a military wife?
- 3 How does the idea that you are called by God change your perspective on challenges of military life?

THERE IS FREEDOM IN CHANGE

BY STACEY MORGAN
MOPS AREA COACH
MOM OF 4

The first time I went to the commissary as a newly minted military wife, I was completely confused. How are they getting the price per pound for chicken breasts so low? Why is there such a huge selection of Asian and German foods? Why are there traffic arrows painted on the floor in each aisle? Why is this adorable old man, the same age as my grandfather, bagging my groceries instead of the considerably younger cashier? And wait, he's loading them into my car and then expects a tip? It was like I stepped through the looking glass into a world, that at first glance looked the same, but upon closer inspection, operated under a completely different set of rules. Even if my new hubby had clued me in, I still wouldn't have understood until I saw it for myself.

The military life is a string of unfamiliar experiences. It's a journey of constant change and adjustment. Sometimes it feels like you just unpacked your household goods and already the packers are here to start wrapping everything up again. With each new duty assignment, life shifts to something close, but not quite what you were used to. The plans you made, the schedule you had, even the furniture placement that worked before, just doesn't fit into your new way of life. So, as the heart of your family, you reevaluate, adapt and evolve, and your family follows your lead. There is power in the ability to periodically alter the way your family operates. Knowing that Uncle Sam will move you again in a few years gives you the freedom and ability to say: "This is the best option for this time and place. It's not a forever decision."

What a gift God gives us in the military to recognize that life is not one straight road, but rather a chain of seasons, each unique in its challenges and blessings.

God tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

*For everything there is a season,
a time for every activity under heaven.
A time to be born and a time to die.
A time to plant and a time to harvest.
A time to kill and a time to heal.
A time to tear down and a time to build up.
A time to cry and a time to laugh.
A time to grieve and a time to dance.
A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones.
A time to embrace and a time to turn away.
A time to search and a time to quit searching.
A time to keep and a time to throw away.
A time to tear and a time to mend.
A time to be quiet and a time to speak.
A time to love and a time to hate.
A time for war and a time for peace.*

Don't waste time wishing for a life without change. Embrace the freedom God gives us in this dynamic military life and thank him everyday for the season you are in today.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 Look at the passage from Ecclesiastes. What "times" resonate with you most in the season you are in right now?
- 2 Each season has its challenges and its blessings. What blessings are you most thankful for in your current season?
- 3 What can you do today to embrace the freedom God gives us with a new start every few years?

KOREAN BABY- SITTERS

BY AMY PONCE
MOM OF 2

My husband and I were on a plane headed to Seoul for his 2 year billet. Our baby was just 6-months old, and the prospect of our thirteen hour flight with her was daunting. We spent our last few days stateside visiting with family and friends before our big goodbye, but the whole time, there was a part of my mind stuck on the preparations I would need to make for this long flight.

The first few hours slipped right by as she slept. When she awoke, I felt my blood pressure rise. Would she start to fuss and annoy all the other passengers? Would she wiggle and squirm? And with no room to crawl, what would we do?

It was then that two older Korean ladies across the aisle from us held up their hands and smiled brightly. I asked my husband, "Do you think they're asking for our baby?"

He looked over. This is what it seemed like. But...who asks for someone else's baby?

It couldn't be.

I smiled back and waved. They cradled their arms in the universal gesture for "baby" and again held out their hands. Huh. Well, the situation seemed safe enough, so I passed our daughter to them.

They were thrilled. They played with her toes, they did a version of "pat-a-cake," they even pulled rubber bands from their purses and styled our daughter's hair, which was peculiarly thick and long for a baby her age.

And my husband and I settled in to watch the in-flight movie. Every now and then we looked over and saw our little girl laughing and delighting in the marvelous attention of these women.

I began to think, "See, Amy? If you were a good Mom, you would have looked forward to a long flight as a wonderful opportunity to lavish attention on your child."

Have you ever questioned your mothering that way?

I found myself playing this lie on repeat in my head, and many forms of this lie have come to me since. Maybe you've told yourself the same untruth. Something like, "See how this other woman is interacting with your child? She's more patient. She's more fun. She's more engaged. She's better at loving your child than you are."

Thoughts like this, and the guilt they produce, can be so harmful, and they are simply not true. You are the mother God chose for your children. You are the mother your children love and long to be loved by. And your motherhood is not set in comparison to anyone else. Not in God's eyes. Not in your children's eyes.

What do we make of wonderful people who come along our children's paths and show them love, interest, and affection? I've learned to say, "Thank You, God, for this awesome person who adds a little more love to the fabric of my child's heart."

I thanked those Korean ladies at the time for their 6 hours of babysitting time on the plane, and I gladly thank them again these many years later. Not because I was inadequate to the task of caring for my daughter on the lengthy flight to Seoul, but because God sent me a blessing in the form of two women who were overjoyed at the opportunity to help.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 What mothering situation(s) do you find most challenging?
- 2 Do you ever catch yourself comparing your mothering skills to a friend's, or wondering how a stranger is able to interact so easily/joyfully with your children? Does this comparison make you a better mother? Why or Why not?
- 3 Do you believe you are the mother God chose for your children? Why or Why not?
- 4 Name 3-5 personal qualities that make you a great mom for your unique kids.

IF YOU WOULD COME HOME ON TIME...

BY CARLYNN WELCH
AREA COACH
MILITARY MOPS

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. – 1 Peter 3:8

Although dinner time was not always a grand event at our house, having dinner every night as a family was a priority for me. It was my moment to shine at the end of the day, no matter how bumpy it had been. I liked to tie up my day with a bow that said, “Well done! You are great! Wow!” However, most nights were met with frustration and discouragement.

Being military, my family lived by the rule “If you are five minutes early you are ten minutes late!” This seemed to apply to everything, except coming home. This particular duty station was called a hardship duty for good reason; many times I thought of a prior deployment as a fond memory!

Here is a timeline of a typical night where I almost crashed and burned every time:

1500 // Play outside and hope my sweet neighbor and friend comes out with her kids. This is a time to let off steam and regain balance. The understanding of another mom can sooth a frazzled mom’s heart in ten seconds flat, and sometimes just with a look.

1700 // Sounds of PBS and my girls playing! Complete a ten second tidy, then on to dinner prep.

1730 // Courtesy call! Tell him I can't wait to see him. (This is true, but I'm mainly checking to see if he'll be late.) If I know now, I won't blow up later!

1800 // Set table. Hold girls off from snacking the night away. The "witching hour" is on its way.

1830 // Call again, praying he doesn't answer. He answers. I'm mad. He states he is "walking out the door."

1840 // Feed kids. Act happy. Start baths. Want to eat, but hope we can redeem the night and eat together.

1930 // Eat overdone food. Clean up. Feel sad.

The good news is we are still married. The sad news is, we never learned to navigate our way out of that disappointing timeline at this particular duty station. Our youth and responsibilities were colliding with unrealistic expectations.

Today we are raising six healthy, happy, resilient children. Our lifestyle isn't any less crazy, but our ability to be compassionate and humble is far greater than in our beginning years. Our mutual understanding and respect for one another's jobs has allowed us to be more sympathetic to the short comings that accompany life. I'm not mean anymore when my husband comes home late, and I hope he feels welcome and loved.

Even more important than perfect timelines, I want to model what grace is to my children. My hope is for their memories to be a grace-filled mix of family bonds, reality and, most of all, God's redeeming love.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 Are you living in harmony? Why or why not?
- 2 What keeps you from resolving repetitive frustrations in your relationships?
- 3 What are some “out-of-the-box” ways to address difficult conversations or situations that allow compassion, humility and sympathy in the process?

IT'S THE PEOPLE, NOT THE PLACE

BY STACEY MORGAN
MOPS AREA COACH
MOM OF 4

Every military spouse has that one “Please NO!” duty station. A tiny airfield or sprawling mega-base, sweltering humidity or numbing fridity, an urban city or the middle of an endless desert, in a foreign land or on domestic soil: the nightmare assignment is different for everyone. Every once and awhile, you meet another family who was actually stationed in “that place” and survived. Not only that, they tell you they liked living there and if they could, they would go back again in a heartbeat! As you attempt to wrap your mind around how anyone could want to return to the single place you are actively avoiding, you can’t help but ask them, “Why?”

The answer is always the same: *community*.

Across the board, these content families will tell you it didn’t really matter where the base was located, what the weather was like, what language the locals spoke or what amenities were available. What mattered was the friendships they made with those living around them, and how they prioritized “doing life” together. They made an active resolution to look past all the physical distractions and purposely invested in friends equally committed to supporting each other in an authentic way. In the end, it was about the people, not the place.

In 2 Corinthians 13:11, Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to: “Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you.” Paul wanted the early church to be a community made up of joyful, encouraging and peaceful people, even though they were living in a city full of distraction and materialism. Paul understood that to build a faithful, world-changing community, you have to focus on the people, not the place.

No matter where you are currently stationed or where Uncle Sam moves you next, you can build a supportive and loving community like the one Paul describes. Invest your most valuable resource, your time, in one of the few things that can last a lifetime: relationships. Actively moving toward deeper, more Christ-like friendships also draws you into a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God. Like Paul instructs: Let's be joyful. Let's find friends who will challenge us to grow in our faith and maturity and encourage us when we stumble. Let's be peacemakers. If we follow his lead, God joins us in building the authentic community we all long for, no matter where in the world the military sends you.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 What made your best duty assignment so great? Was it the place or the people?
- 2 Have you ever asked God to help you build the kind of community Paul described?
- 3 What one thing can you do today to invest in relationships with the people who live around you?

THE BEAUTY OF STAINED GLASS

BY TARA SCOTT
MOM OF 2

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, not only so but we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that sufferings produce perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.
– Romans 5:3-4.

January 2014, I received a voicemail from my mom asking me to call her that evening when my husband returned home from work. My heart sank. I knew what her request meant - nothing good. After I got off the phone that evening, with tears in my eyes I explained to my husband that my mom's breast cancer had returned, and the doctors did not have a realistic hope for a cure due to the extensive nature of the metastasis. In September of that year, as I sat by her hospice bed, she entered the gates of heaven. A month and a half later, my dad was admitted to the hospital for unresolved blood clots. After further testing, it was determined that he had stage four pancreatic cancer. I spent the better part of a year caring for him as he battled, until he was called to his heavenly home in November of 2016. In a little over the course of a year, everything I knew changed. I was grieving, hurt. I felt like a piece of glass shattered into a million pieces that could never be put back together whole again.

So many times in life, and along this military journey, we experience brokenness. Life gets turned upside down and our fragile hearts fall to the ground and shatter. Deployments, loss of a loved one, change of duty station, miscarriage, the health of our children, injury and severed friendships... the list goes on. Life has its fair share of disappointments and brokenness. The beautiful thing is, God never intended us to live a life of continued brokenness. He sent his son to redeem us, to wash us clean, to make us whole again. He has promised us he will restore our hearts and piece back together every sliver and shard of that broken, shattered glass.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. – 1 Peter 5:10-11

What's even more beautiful is he doesn't just put us back together how we were. For he uses a holy glue that binds those shards of broken glass together with the true beauty of stained glass, woven with colors that represent character, perseverance and hope. We are made whole again: bolder, stronger and more stunning than ever before.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 Where have you felt brokenness in your life?
- 2 How have you seen God refine your faith and produce character and hope through suffering?
- 3 How can we use this knowledge and hope to guide our children as they face trials and suffering?

FINDING PEACE IN A DANGEROUS WORLD

BY STACEY MORGAN
MOPS AREA COACH
MOM OF 2

When she tearfully opened her front door, I was standing there holding a casserole. Earlier that day, the vehicle her husband was riding in hit a roadside bomb while on patrol in Afghanistan. Her husband had received a hard blow to his head and needed further evaluation for his serious concussion. Two other squad mates were killed in the attack. She was understandably distraught, and as a fellow unit spouse, I was asked to go over to her house and be her first contact after the incident. Even though our husbands worked together and we lived on the same street, I had only spoken to this woman once or twice in passing. She had chosen not to participate in any unit activities, even the essential pre-deployment briefings. As we sat at her kitchen table, she told me how her coping mechanism to deal with the dangerous nature of her husband's job was to convince herself he was a "traveling vacuum salesman." She achieved this by telling her husband she didn't want to know anything about his military unit, where he was going or what he might be doing, and he complied with her wishes.

As we sat and cried together, the consequences of her short sighted plan were painfully obvious. Faced with the possibility of a monumental life change for her family, she now wanted and needed to know all the information the rest of us had processed over months and years. Her strategy had shielded her from the fear and anxiety of the deployment until suddenly, life intervened and she was forced to confront her new reality.

Our military husbands do dangerous business in dangerous places. How does one face this fact day after day without being overcome by fear of what may happen? Philippians 4:6-7 tells us:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with

thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

God promises, if we ask him to help us with our fears, he will give us peace. And not just peace of mind, but a peace within our soul that cannot be explained in any human terms. God may not remove the inherent danger our husbands may face, but God will give us a depth of comfort and peace only he can provide, even on the darkest of days.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 How do I cope with the inherent fear and anxiety that comes with being married to a military member? Would my plan stand up under the pressure of a crisis?
- 2 Instead of asking God to change a difficult situation, have I ever simply asked God for peace as I move through it?
- 3 How does presenting my fears and anxieties before God change my outlook when facing a dangerous world?

THE GOODBYE

BY REBECCA GRADY
MOM OF 3

We know it's coming - either a hard and firm reality set in stone by the arrival of an official notification, or just a certainty floating about in the ether. And once the stroke of the bureaucratic pen has been placed upon the official Department of Defense annotated form, the clock begins to tick down. Perhaps you have a long lead time, months to plan and prepare. Perhaps you have only a few days' notice. Both situations bring their own burdens. Whether you are watching the months peel off the calendar or the hours count their way down on the clock, the time will eventually come. The day of deployment will arrive. The goodbyes will be waved. The challenge will begin. How very bleak it all sounds ...

My first experience with the goodbye was in 2006. My husband, Tim, and I were only dating at the time. We were both on active duty, stationed at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls, Montana. We were in that fairy tale stage of tremendous mutual infatuation and facing the first of what would turn into many deployments as a couple. As each day leading up to his departure fell away, my emotions became more intense. When the time came to finally say goodbye, I was in pieces. I had flown to Baltimore, Maryland, where he was departing on a rotator that would take him to his overseas sandbox destination. Standing in the airport just outside the USO, I cried inconsolably.

Tim was deploying with his entire unit, so all around us, others were also saying their goodbyes. Most of the unit members were in good spirits. There was playful ribbing and crude jokes flying about. You could almost say they were excited. I was one of many "significant others" that had made the trip to Baltimore for the sendoff. Many knew one another and were happily chatting as their husbands went on their way. There were some tears, but there was just as much, if not more, rowdy chatter and laughter. As I stood there watching him head through the gate to security, I felt like my heart would burst, like the weight of the entire world was crushing down upon me, like I would never be happy again. I was confused by what was going on around me. The WORLD WAS ENDING right before our eyes and I was the only one who noticed! Didn't these women love their husbands? Weren't they going to miss them? Obviously not as much as I was.

We married 10 months after Tim returned from that deployment and two weeks later, he deployed again. We have since said the big goodbye for 5 deployments and one year-long short tour. Looking back on that first deployment, with vision adjusted by maturity and experience, I can see things much differently now. Hindsight is twenty-twenty of course. In retrospect, I see the spouses in a much different light. Where I once saw wives callously underestimating the gravity of the separation being thrust upon them, I now see a brave tribe, looking ahead at a challenge. I see them propping each other up with humor and positivity. I see courageous women who, with hearts aching and worry churning in their guts, put on a brave face to let their husbands know things are going to be just fine here while they are away. From where I am now, I see the jokes and excitement of the men no longer as nonchalance, but as dedication to a job ahead and a need for camaraderie in the face of danger, discomfort and loneliness.

The feelings I had during that first goodbye were not by any means wrong. They were very real, and completely valid. My mistake was in how I evaluated those around me through the lens of those feelings. What I assessed as a deficiency in them, was, in fact, a deficiency in myself. Over the years, my love for my husband has only grown stronger. He is my partner in all things, my best friend and my true love. Based on the standards I held for others at that first goodbye, I should crumble to dust every time we part ways. But I don't. Today, I look much more like those other women. Why you ask? Two main reasons:

First, my faith in the Lord has become the bedrock of my deployment survival plan. He gives me courage, shores up my strength when problems present themselves in my path, and brings me comfort when loneliness and worry overtake me.

This is my command – be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. – Joshua 1:9

Second, I have found my tribe. I had no understanding of how important the concept of a tribe would be to my life as a military spouse. As an active duty member, the people I worked with provided me a social outlet, but they were not the people I needed or would need, facing this type of challenge. What I found in MOPS was a group of women who shared my station and season in life, my role as a mother and wife, and my faith in Jesus Christ. My tribe lifts my spirits, wraps me in prayer and helps me carry burdens that are too heavy to carry on my own.

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." – Ruth 1:16-17

So, if you see me at a sendoff, drinking coffee, smiling and engaging in lively banter, I want you to know a few things: First, I love my husband and I will miss him every minute of every day until he is beside me again. Second, I might still cry a little (or a lot) later on; maybe when my 2-year-old colors on the walls while my 6-year-old screams at my 4-year-old for some minor infraction as my biscuits are burning in the oven and we are late for soccer practice. Third, I am going to pray like crazy. And I am going to have every person I know, every member of my tribe, praying with me, for me, for my husband and for my children. And finally, I want you to be in my tribe. If you are that mascara war paint wearing mama, I WANT YOU IN MY TRIBE. Wipe those streaks off, grab your Starbucks, tighten up that ponytail, pull on those big girl panties and let me induct you. You are going to be okay.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 Many people find journaling to be cathartic, and even a learning experience. Consider journaling the story of one (or more) deployment goodbyes you've shared with your spouse.
- 2 How many deployments has your spouse gone on? How have your goodbyes changed over time?
- 3 Who is in your tribe? Make a list of mom friends, mentors, neighbors and family you consider "inner circle" to keep handy for tough days. If you have a difficult time asking for what you need (help, encouragement, etc.), consider asking one or more members of your tribe to check in with you from time to time; let them know you may need help, but may not be able to ask for it directly. Empower your tribe to support you well.
- 4 Do you invite God to your deployment send offs (and the waiting game during deployment) through prayer? Why or why not? What might that look and feel like?

ON SEX AND SUPERPOWERS

BY REBECCA GRADY
MOM OF 3

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. —1 Corinthians 7: 3-5

Sex is a huge part of marital intimacy. It's the great unifier: complete surrender of oneself to another. At our most vulnerable and exposed, it is an act of trust and the embodiment of oneness. It is exclusivity at its utmost, and that makes it powerful. That is why Paul makes a point of addressing it with the Corinthians – because it is a marriage superpower. Of course, every superpower has its foil. If sex is a superpower, long separations are the kryptonite. If you aren't together, you can't have it, and you just can't mail that stuff. It would never make it through customs, anyway.

Obviously, there is much more to intimacy than sex. But when it comes to marital intimacy, it is a large and important part. Intimacy can thrive in the absence of sex, but in order to do so, extra effort is required from both partners. Love making ebbs and flows in various seasons of our married lives. Every couple experiences dry spells from time to time, that's normal. But for the military couple, the dry spells are a bit more arid. Where strategies and solutions abound for working through the standard wane of sexual activity, the deployment driven dry-up is a horse of a different color. We cannot just "schedule it" or "be intentional about making sex a priority." The old go-tos don't work when the dry spell is brought on not by a lack of libido, but by a lack of proximity. It is not a dysfunction to be overcome or a problem to be fixed - it is a thing to be conquered through ingenuity and endurance! And conquer we will - because we are superheroes!

Intimacy, at its very heart, is exclusivity. When we married our spouses, two became one, creating a tiny little club with only two members. If your club had a headquarters, the sign on the door would read “NO OTHERS ALLOWED – Supervillains Beware (and if the HQ is rocking, don’t come a-knocking).” The power of sex comes from the fact that it deepens and strengthens our unity exclusively between two married people. Taking sex out of the equation does not take away the exclusivity, so make exclusivity your new superpower.

A great place to nurture exclusivity is in your communication with your spouse. While we may hesitate to burden our spouse with the day to day trials and annoyances of life at home, we need to make sure that we are not shutting him out. Men need to feel needed, so let him know while you are holding down the fort, you still need him – as your sounding board, your battle buddy, your other half. Keep that space for him. Don’t fill it with someone else – your spouse is your primary confidant. When we make love to our spouse we are giving ourselves over physically. When we communicate at a deeply personal level with our spouse, we are giving ourselves over to them emotionally. Whether it is by phone, by video call or by letter, make certain it is your spouse with whom you share the intimate details of your life.

Communication intimacy isn’t always about delving deep into the depths of our souls either! Victor Borge once said, “The shortest distance between two hearts is laughter,” and in this case, short of a teleporter, what could be better? Humor is a fabulous lens through which to view the mishaps that inevitably arise during a deployment. Handling them and recounting them with a sense of humor will help your spouse feel at ease as well as give you something to share a laugh over. Make sure to relish in your joys and triumphs. Delight with him in his achievements, and when something amazing happens in your day, save that news for him – share it with him first. Knowing you were most excited for him to know about your good news demonstrates your exclusive desire for him.

Making your husband a priority is important under any circumstance, but even more so when time together is such a rare commodity. Guard the time you get to talk with him fiercely. Whenever you are able, give your communication with him your full attention and avoid allowing distractions to overtake your time together. Sometimes you will have to share him with the children, but when you do have the opportunity, make that time about the two of you. Never feel bad for making your conversation the top priority. Don’t allow trivialities to eat up all your time – save a healthy portion to get emotionally intimate together. Remember that

the kids, the dishes, the homework, the television will all still be there when the phone call or video conference is over.

While the physical aspects of sex have become a temporary impossibility, that does not mean it's not still on our minds! Remember the part of Paul's letter where he warned about temptation? How do we work around that as a couple? What do we do with our superhero size sexual appetite? Well, for one, we cultivate it. Savor your longing for your spouse. Continue to think of him sexually and let him know it! He wants to be wanted; knowing you are also looking forward to the days (and nights) when you can be together again will help to sustain him! Another part of cultivating that healthy sexual appetite is staying away from the "junk food" that tempts our intimate appetites. As a couple, avoid the things that might spoil the main course such as pornography or erotica. Make sure your relationships with others, especially those of the opposite sex, remain in appropriate bounds.

Finally, there is a tool in our toolbox we often overlook when we talk about intimacy and sex. As Christians we make the Lord central to our entire lives, but in the context of intimacy, we become skittish about bringing him into the discussion. There is no act more intimate than a husband and wife praying together. When joined in the act of prayer, the two truly are one: joined inextricably in a battle against an enemy who wages a war on our marriage using weapons like loneliness, temptation, fatigue and frustration. Joined in prayer, despite thousands of miles of distance between you, together you raise the shield of your faith against the enemy. You guard him with the power of your prayer, and he guards you with his. You create a force field of prayer over your family. The Lord strengthens you, gives you courage and brings you closer together. There really is no greater superpower than a strong faith, and nothing can defeat it.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 In what ways are you and your husband intimate outside of the bedroom?
- 2 How have you encouraged long distance intimacy between you and your spouse on past deployments? Has this been effective? Why or why not?
- 3 Who could help you maintain intimacy long-distance by wrangling the kids for an hour, or helping with housework from time to time so you can relax before an online meeting with your husband? Talk to friends, neighbors and family to set up a support network for this purpose before he deploys, if you are able.
- 4 Have you ever prayed together as a couple, just the two of you? If not, consider taking the first step by inviting your husband to join you in prayer - in person if he is home, or over the phone or video chat if he is deployed.
- 5 Have you shared your concerns about deployment separation, including intimate concerns, with God? What is stopping you?

FALLING FROM HIGH EXPECTATIONS

BY REBECCA GRADY
MOM OF 3

I have a child who can absolutely sabotage any big event. I don't mean that in a mean spirited way. It's just the truth of the matter. If there is something coming up that is big, exciting and fun, I bet you dollars to doughnuts when the day arrives, my child will bring the house down. I'm not talking about "bring the noise, bring the funk" kind of bringing the house down. What I mean is more of the wrecking ball variety.

What I've learned, through many unfortunate years of trial and error, is that the build-up is dangerous, and expectations are deadly. This child is high spirited and highly emotional. A canary in the coal mine who can sense even the slightest presence of anxiety or intensity. We know we must temper our desire to make big days special with awareness and flexibility. We try to accept that expectations must be kept small, plans remain changeable and patience in plentiful supply. We try to embrace rest. A well-rested child can self-regulate better than a tired one and a well-rested parent is less likely to devolve into a very tall toddler when going nose-to-nose with the all-in-one rock and hard place. We also learned to recognize when we just need to say "no" to something or someone. Sometimes discretion is the better part of valor. (Okay, I admit we are still working on that one.)

When it comes to the deployment homecoming, we all stand to become that child who sabotages big events. Homecomings are overloaded with expectations, anxieties and huge emotions. While they are long awaited and filled with joy, they are also often complicated, messy and awkward. People on the outside looking in often do not realize just how mixed up our emotions can be on this occasion. In fact, even those of us in the thick of it often do not realize it. When we feel these mixed up, messy feelings, we sometimes worry something is wrong with us. It's something we so rarely talk about, because feeling anything other than joy and excitement makes us feel a little ashamed. If we put all the truth out on the table, we would see that the joy, happiness and excitement are more often than not accompanied by

nervousness, anxiety, frustration and exhaustion. Our kids feel it too. Even after being over the moon with excitement for days leading up to the homecoming, they might pull away or be hesitant when the moment actually arrives. They might have tremendous mood swings between joy and anger. They may feel anxious or fearful. If we could climb into their heads and see what was going on, we would recognize currents of the same emotional storm that rages in our own minds.

It's complicated for our husbands, too. No doubt he is glad to be home, returning to the loving arms of his family and the comforts of home. He is relieved to arrive safely and to be far away from dangers he may have faced. But the lifestyle and pace of his days are changing drastically. He may still be concerned for people and projects he left behind. He may have experienced things that burden him emotionally. He is jet-lagged and strung out on excitement. He may be nervous about reconnecting with you or worried about what effect his absence has had on his relationship with the kids - they change so much in a short time. He might worry he is not needed, that his role no longer needs to be filled; there are so many places for anxiety to grow into.

Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. – 1 Peter 5:7

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. – 2 Corinthians 12:9

So what do we do? Take a lesson from life with my big-event sabotaging force of nature:

1. Keep your PRIORITIES straight. The man you love, and who loves you, is coming home. That is what is important. This moment is about bringing your family – you, your husband and your children, back into the unit God intended. It is not about anyone or anything else.

2. Prepare to have PATIENCE. Pray! Pray for God to give you patience with your children, who will be amped up with excitement and on emotional tenterhooks. Pray for patience with your husband, who may frustrate you a bit as he tries to find his fit in your altered routine. Pray for patience for yourself as it may take some time for you to readjust to the changes in responsibilities and expectations. Pray for patience with your extended family and friends who might not understand why you close ranks for a time while your family gets readjusted.

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. – Ephesians 4:2

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. – 1 Corinthians 13:4-5

3. Keep your EXPECTATIONS small and plans simple. Sometimes we are tempted to make a big day bigger with grand gestures. Some people can pull these off, but when expectations are high, the fall can be disastrous. By keeping things simple and flexible, it will allow you to be responsive to the needs of your children and husband as they arise.

4. Make room for REST. We often become driven creatures in the days leading up to a homecoming. And sometimes the momentum of the big day pushes us forward in the days that follow – visits with friends and relatives, parties and trips. Take your rest. Find time to be still. Rest allows us to better see through the clutter and chaos, to think more clearly and to have better self-control. So instead of going like gangbusters, just rest. Take extra time with the Lord. Really listen for his words in your heart. Take walks outdoors, swing in the park, or cuddle with your children and spend time talking with them about how they are feeling as the big day approaches. And when the big day does arrive, don't let the momentum take you. Give yourself permission to put the brakes on. Embrace the word NO when it comes to invitations and requests.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. – Matthew 11: 28-30

5. ACKNOWLEDGE and ACCEPT your mixed up feelings. Bringing a family back together after a long separation is messy business. However you are feeling, it's okay. However your kids are feeling, and however your husband is feeling, it's okay. Be open and honest about those feelings and help your children to do the same. Pray with them, for the Lord to help you walk through these difficult feelings. And if the separation has been especially long, or its effect on your family has been especially significant, (or perhaps just as a proactive step,) arrange for

some family counseling. This can be incredibly helpful for both parents and children during the reintegration process. Counseling can come from many different sources including pastors, the military health system, or free of charge through Military One Source. Seeking counseling isn't a sign of weakness – it's a sign of strength.

*When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles.
– Psalm 34:17*

Homecomings are wonderful. They are the answer to a million prayers uttered over the chaos of day to day family life while functioning one parental unit short. They represent the completion of an incredible challenge. They are a victory in endurance and recognition of incredible sacrifice. So, basically, try not to make too big a deal of it (uttered with a wink and a knowing smile)!

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 Consider writing a Homecoming Mission Statement. Keep it simple - a short paragraph about what matters most on this day. When invitations arise or you are tempted to rent a pony to celebrate grandly - refer to your mission statement for clarity.
- 2 What circumstance (or family members) try your patience the most? What can you do before homecoming day to prepare yourself and your children to deal with this particular frustration if it comes up?
- 3 What can you do in the week or two beforehand to ensure you and your children are well rested upon your husband's return? Who can help with the kids or join you for a housecleaning session?
- 4 So many of us have mixed emotions as we prepare for our husband's return from deployment. Talk to God about your feelings, journal or meet with a trusted mentor to discuss. What are your biggest feelings about his return? Which feelings do you wish you could sweep under the rug? How can you deal with them in a healthy way?
- 5 Ask your children open ended questions about their feelings. Such as, "Daddy is coming home in __ days. How are you feeling about that?" Consider creating a feelings book of pictures and words that describe all of their feelings about your husband's return, and remind them that every single feeling is okay to feel. Talk to them on their level about your own emotions, and pray as a family for a positive rejoining upon your husband's return.

THE HOME- COMING HOKEY POKEY

BY REBECCA GRADY
MOM OF 3

In our culture, when it comes to sex, we have a serious problem with our expectations. I blame Hollywood. I am going to go ahead and assume that at some point you have seen a sex scene in a movie. A man and woman make love in a ballet of graceful synchrony - no doubt the envy of any dance choreographer – in a room full of well-distributed candles, to the dulcet tones of the sexiest music ever composed. Her hair is not mussed and her makeup stays perfect. They don't sweat, they glisten. They change positions without her awkwardly kneeling him in the groin. The covers remain perfectly positioned as to avoid any unflattering exposures. Heck, their sheets don't even wrinkle. I don't know about you, but I have never, ever had sex that looked anything like that. I would like to... Like I said, we have an expectation problem. Thanks, Hollywood.

If regular day to day sex has unreasonable expectations attached to it, that's nothing in comparison to the mountain of expectations heaped upon the hotly anticipated act of post-deployment coitus. Never has any occasion of love-making been more overburdened by unnecessary pressure than this. And how unfair is that? After months of being separated by thousands of miles, stressed by new and over expanded responsibilities, and challenged in their ability to remain united in holy matrimony, two utterly exhausted people return to one another only to be faced with the daunting possibility of incredibly awkward sex with their now somewhat unfamiliar better half. Woohoo, welcome home!

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.
– Ecclesiastes 9:9

Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth.
– Proverbs 5: 15-18

No matter how hard you worked at maintaining intimacy during the deployment, something is lost without the physical affection. It's not a permanent loss, but it's just not fair to expect it to come bounding back the moment your eyes meet his across a crowded airport baggage claim. Like most things in a military marriage, rekindling intimacy is going to take a little effort. It's an effort worth making though, because it's incredibly important. Intimacy, in its generic sense, is an element of many different relationships. We share intimacy with our children and with our closest friends. But sexual intimacy is unique to marriage. It is the great unifier – where we come together as one and give ourselves completely to the other. This is a level of intimacy unobtainable in any other relationship. It is truly exclusive and valuable beyond measure. So, you know – no pressure.

The starting point for getting back that level of intimacy is different for every couple. Some people will find they easily fall back into the groove. Many couples will find it more difficult. The time they spend apart opened the way for things like self-consciousness, inhibitions and anxiety to slip in. For these couples, the starting point may be having time alone to reconnect emotionally; building up to flirtation and playfulness before starting down the road to physical intimacy. Others may need to put their toes in the water first, simply reintroducing physical closeness by holding hands or cuddling together. Whatever your starting point is, make sure it is a place you are comfortable, and know that whatever you choose is right for you. Both of you should be careful not to pressure the other. You are both adjusting and will need to be given the time and space to do so.

The expectation that you will jump right back into physical intimacy is only one of many unreasonable expectations we encounter. The idea that the first sexual encounter will be mind blowing is another. While the mechanics of sex are likely well-remembered, the intricacies of making it pleasurable for your spouse and for yourself might take some time to re-master. Expect to spend time relearning each other's bodies and re-familiarizing yourselves with the things you enjoy most. It's a marathon, not a sprint; pace yourselves. Keep in mind also that outside factors can have a big effect on sexual performance. Stress and fatigue are two of

many common factors that can be a detriment to our sex lives and go hand in hand with return from a deployment. Be patient and understanding with one another.

However you go about it, and at whatever pace you choose, regaining sexual intimacy with your spouse should be a high priority. God gave us sex as a means to glorify him, in the fulfillment of the order and unity he created in marriage. God designed sex for procreation, intimacy, comfort and physical pleasure. The unity it creates in your marriage benefits not only the two of you, but your entire family. That unity creates a sense of security and stability for your children. As the bond between you grows ever stronger, it strengthens the very foundation upon which your lives are built. Just know that recapturing physical intimacy is a process that deserves to be a priority and given your time and attention. Once you let go of unreasonable expectations and remove the pressure we needlessly place upon ourselves, the familiarity will come. And, while the sex we have will probably never resemble the synchrony and grace of ballet, remaining more akin to the hokey pokey, the awkwardness will dissipate. (And hey - you might still be awkward, but you will be intimate enough to laugh about it!)

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1 Have you ever found yourself wishing for Hollywood-style romantic moments? Does this vision of intimacy feel genuine or achievable to you? Why or why not?
- 2 What extra pressures do you put on yourself for an intimate reunion with your husband after deployment? What expectations do you have for him?
- 3 What factors affect your desire or ability to engage intimately with your husband? Are there ways to mitigate these challenges so they are less of a stumbling block?

RESOURCES

THE OFFICIAL BLOG OF MOPS INTERNATIONAL:

Hello, Dearest

CONNECT WITH MOPS ON:

Facebook

Pinterest

Instagram

Twitter

A FEW OTHER BLOGS WE THINK YOU'LL ENJOY:

While You Were Away

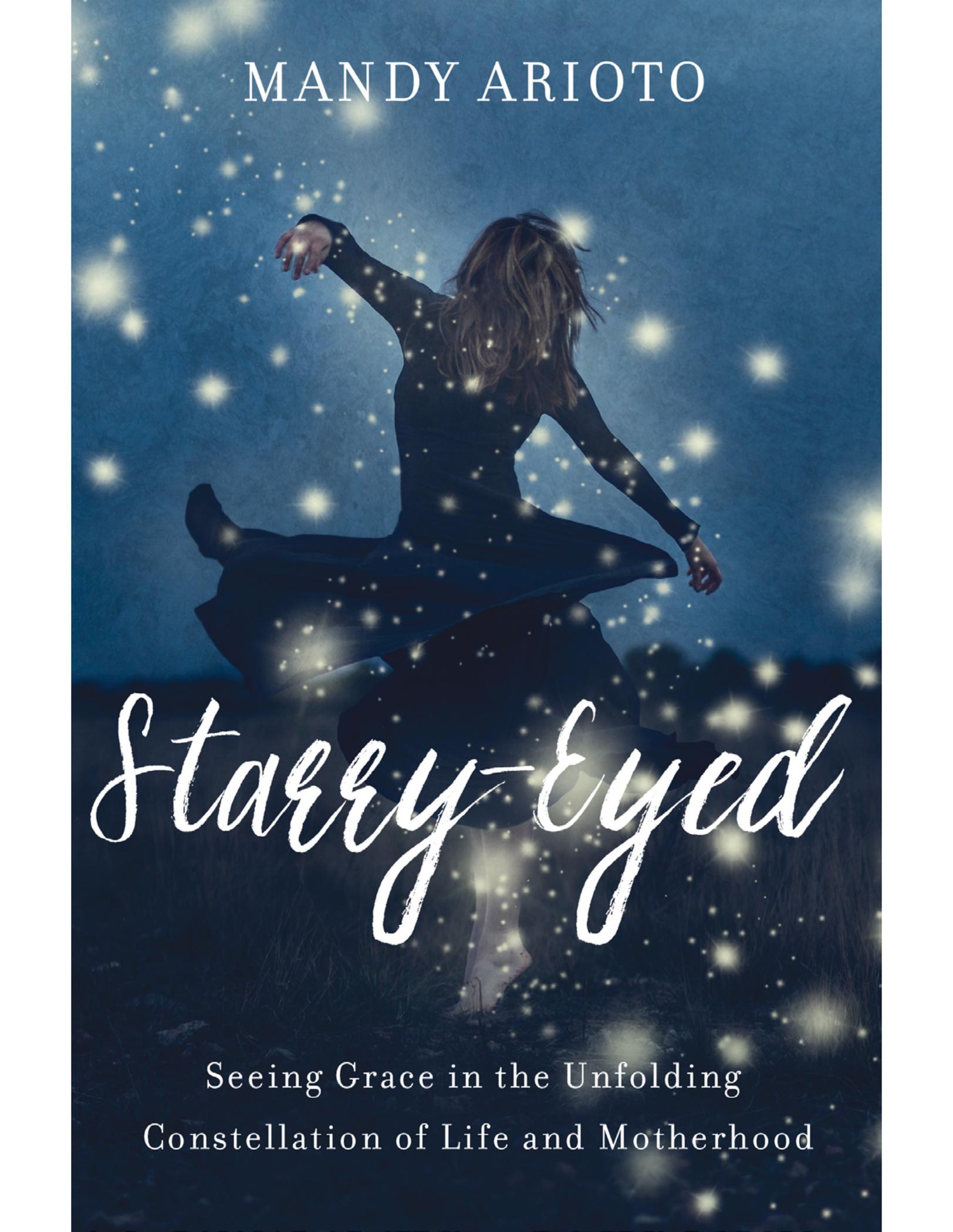
The Navy Mom

Sarah Damaska

Hope N Griffin

Find The Lovely

Embrace Life Coach

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black long-sleeved dress, is captured in a graceful dance pose, seen from behind. She is in a dark field at night, surrounded by numerous glowing fireflies that create a magical atmosphere. The background is a deep blue night sky.

MANDY ARIOTO

Starry-eyed

Seeing Grace in the Unfolding
Constellation of Life and Motherhood

Introduction:

With Stars in Our Eyes

Have you ever had a time in your life when things felt off? Like the sun has become eclipsed by the moon and everything that at one point made sense in the bright light of day now feels uncertain in its darkness?

There are three distinct seasons in my life when I forgot what the warmth of light felt like; three seasons when uncertainty consumed and I had to learn how to make peace with the dark. The first was when I was twenty and was confronted with a loss that took the breath out of my lungs, the second was a season when I was searching for what I was supposed to do in the world, and the last one happened on a warm night one May.

The night was unusually humid for spring in Northern California. The evening breeze that blew through my hair and over my bare shoulders was just enough to make being outside bearable. My three-year-old son and I were standing in our driveway just like we did every night that spring, under a dark sky filled with stars. Each night we followed the same routine. Just before bed, Joseph and I would grab hands and walk outside to stand in our driveway. He would find the moon, and then we would both point out the stars and constellations whose lights were beginning to emerge as the darkness deepened. Holding his hand, I could feel the beat of his heart straight through our meshed fingers. We were connected not only by blood

but also because we had once shared the most intimate space for nine months. Our hearts were synced to one another's.

On this particular night I was heartbroken. Joe and I had been trying for seven months to get pregnant with a second child, but once again my body bled, and disappointment plunged me into a desolation that was becoming all too familiar. Sensing my despair, my husband Joe joined us in the driveway. He wrapped his arm around my waist and whispered that everything would be okay, and that a family of three can be just as awesome as a family of four. Then, in a gesture to brighten the mood, he pulled out some matches along with a long, thin box of sparklers I had been storing away for the Fourth of July.

He handed our three-year-old a sparkler, struck a match against the sidewalk, and lit the silver stick in Joseph's tiny, anxious hand. The sparkler began flickering and hissing. Sparks flew, illuminating the darkness right around us. As I kneeled down next to my son in order to take it all in, I noticed that instead of watching the light in his hands, he was looking straight into my eyes. He waved the sparkler from side to side but kept his gaze focused on me. I watched him for a few minutes, curious as to why the sparklers weren't holding his attention. Then he said it.

"Momma, I see stars in your eyes."

Glittering sparks, just like the flickering stars we gazed at every night, were reflected in my eyes. That moment was the start of my awakening to the fact that glimmers of light were shining in my darkness if only I trained my eyes to see them.

It was the beginning of a journey toward becoming starry-eyed.

This book is a collection of essays about light and darkness, hope and heartache, brokenness and wholeness, and what to do when you don't know what to do. It is meant to be a north star for all of us travelers, reminding us that Someone has gone ahead of us and left glimmering lights to help guide us home.

One of my favorite constellations is the Pleiades, also called the Seven Sisters. It is one of the nearest star clusters to Earth and the most visible to the naked eye. Legend says that the Pleiades were the seven daughters of Atlas, the giant who bears the world upon his shoulders. These seven maidens were transformed into stars because of their “amiable virtues and mutual affection” and because Orion was constantly wooing them, which caused them great discomfort.¹ They appealed for help to Zeus, the overseer of all the gods, and out of pity for them he changed them into doves. As doves they then flew up into the sky and found a hiding place among the stars.

I like the idea of finding a hiding place among the stars, of finding home amongst the brilliant light and darkest night. As we look at the night sky of our own lives, patterns begin to emerge. We start to notice swirling constellations making beautiful configurations that we can see clearly only in the dark.

Carl Jung suggests that becoming whole means bringing together that which has been torn apart.² Whether that is light and darkness, feminine and masculine, conscious and unconscious, we are whole when we embrace both. In fact, the whole universe unfolds through paired opposites—sun and moon, hot and cold, black and white. I love women who have chosen to bring together the light and dark in their lives and make peace with all of it. Not only are they more compassionate but they are also the ones who change the world. They are the ones who aren’t afraid of being honest about their flaws and fears and who are eager to reflect sparks of hope and love to the people around them.

1 “Miscellaneous Notes and Queries, with Answers,” *Notes and Queries and Historic Magazine: A Monthly of History, Folk-lore, Mathematics, Literature, Science, Art, Arcane Societies, Etc.* 3–4 (1886–87): 401.

2 As discussed in R. Frager and J. Fadiman, *Personality and Personal Growth*, 6th ed. (New York: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 56.

As you read the pages ahead, think of each essay as a star in the sky, each contributing to a beautiful constellation that makes up your life in all its darkness and light. Bring these words along with you to the park and on the subway and even into the bathroom as you steal away for a few minutes to yourself. It may take a little time to adjust your eyes and soul to see the goodness in both the light and darkness of life and motherhood, but as you do, you may find yourself transformed into a dove, hidden safely in the Creator's night sky.

I think it is seriously cool that we all get to do life together, sharing the pretty and painful all mingled together in a way that creates something whole and beautiful. Thank you for holding my messes and triumphs gently and with palms wide open to whatever it is a few words in a little book can offer.

With hearts on sleeves and sparklers in hand, may we all see glittering lights in the darkness. May we become starry-eyed. Together.

P.S. A wise friend once told me that they refused to participate in Q & As, also known as question-and-answer sessions. Instead they preferred Q & Rs, question and responses. This idea stuck with me, because as far as I can tell, we are all questioning and responding most of our lives. And the idea that there is one right answer leaves me uncomfortable and with a little bit of performance anxiety. So at the end of each chapter you will find a section for Q & R. There are no right or wrong answers, only what is the most true for you at this very moment in life. Grab some friends and spill your guts, or work through them in a journal by yourself. However you choose to engage these questions, be open to how your eyes may be adjusting to a new form of illumination that is both holy and unexpected.

Q & R

1. Look back over your life and reflect on the experiences that seemed dark, painful, or uncertain. Try to draw your personal “constellation” of major positive and negative experiences in your journal.
2. As you reflect on your life, what patterns and seasons of light and dark do you see?
3. Where are you longing for some illumination today—right at this moment?

* * *

CHAPTER 1

Swell Seasons: When Motherhood Is Like the Ocean

As moms, we all know that we would do anything for our kids. But today I truly took one for my team. I crawled under the door of a public restroom stall because my youngest daughter had insisted on going in by herself, which of course meant locking the door. She then yelled to me that she needed help, which is not easily accomplished when Mom is on the other side of the door, and said child will not hop off the potty to unlock the door. After what seemed like hours of negotiations, the only option was to crawl under the stall door. That's right—hands and knees on the floor, followed by soldier crawl on my tummy, to find my little one smiling at me from her perch on the potty. Hours later, I contemplated another option I didn't think of at the time: I could have crawled over the stall. A bit precarious, but certainly more sanitary than the floor crawl I hastily chose as my only option.

I share this story to document, for my kids, the depth of my love for them. Soldier-crawl-on-public-bathroom-floor = laying your life down for your child.

This motherhood deal is a pretty classy gig.

There are so many things that have surprised me about being a mom. Like how crawling on the floor of a public restroom would

ever be a consideration. Or how decentering having a baby can be, yet how wholly I would want to give myself to another. Another thing that surprised me is the saturation of feeling that would flood me at unexpected times.

Motherhood reminds me of playing in the ocean. Like when I was in high school and we spent most of our summer days at the beach. We would wake up late, and if we had spent the night at Michelle's we would eat peanut butter swirl ice cream for brunch. Then we'd pile too many people into someone's mom's minivan and head to Oceanside for an afternoon in the sand. We would oil our skin, bronze until we blistered (I know, I know), and then run to the water to cool off. The waves made for a great diversion from all the boy watching and red-vine licorice eating.

In order to really experience the waves, we would swim out as far as possible while still touching the bottom; then we'd wait for the biggest ones to roll in. The game was to try to jump over the waves without getting knocked back to shore. If a wave was powerful enough, and you chose to jump, the swell would sweep your feet out from under you. You would get tossed around a bit and inhale some water up your nose until you regained your footing, just in time for the next wave. The goals were to keep your balance, to laugh like crazy when you lost it, and to avoid exposing your booty to the entire shoreline when your swimsuit bottom got rearranged in the surf.

Being a mom is like high school at the beach; I am constantly being moved by swells that threaten my footing.

Some of us are initiated into motherhood with an inner knowing. We are the ones who notice the first flutter of life inside us. We carry our children for months and know them before anyone else does. Others of us come to motherhood with an inner knowing that our child is to be welcomed from an external place, where we labor for years with hope and paperwork to welcome them into our

family. How we arrive at motherhood has no bearing on the fact that it is filled with seasons made up of the brightest and also the darkest of days.

Darkness is immediate. Our bellies swell, or our hearts are knit together in the dark of another's womb. We rock and feed babies in the dark. For some of us postpartum depression is the pitchest black we have ever known. From the dark womb we welcome new life, and our own new life, a life we haven't known, unfolds before us as well. The unknown can feel uncertain with its shadows.

Daylight comes, as it always does, and we feel a little more equipped to face the new swells. Time goes by and we realize we are enjoying ourselves. We laugh at what once overwhelmed us, and we welcome firsts without so much fear.

First tooth, first step, first word. First day of preschool.

We laugh with our friends about how growing a baby took nine months, but bedtime takes for-freaking-ever.

Motherhood is full of joy, full of moments that make you relish who you are becoming. You give and give, and it's okay because there is no shortage of love in your starry depths. Until it is infuriating as all get-out because you can't reason with a four-year-old crazy person who, once all sweetness, is now screaming at you because she wanted the cherry sucker, not the stupid grape one. Bless her heart.

Your nighttime watch comes round again. You sit with a child whose fever is raging like fire, his hot breath on your neck. Your arms are tired, not from the holding but from the weariness that threatens to pin you to the floor. Tears swell. Worry and exhaustion make the night feel long and lonely.

The fever breaks, and relief washes over you. The light returns. Bedtime still takes for-freaking-ever, but that is okay because motherhood is made up of hard and beautiful moments that come together to create some pretty swell seasons.

Sun and inky blue water. Light and darkness at the same time.

I remember one time when my mom told me she dreamed my brother and I were little again, and we were all under her roof. She said she cried when she woke up and realized it was only a dream.

When we are in the midst of mothering our children, believing that it is all good is difficult. And it is difficult, but also thrilling.

One thing I have learned in my thirteen years of being a mom (I know what you are thinking, I couldn't possibly be old enough to have a thirteen-year-old; you're right, and I love you) is that we miss out on the fun because of our expectations. Thoughts that sweep our feet out from under us are, "I thought I would be a better mom; I thought my birth story would be different; I don't feel as happy as I thought I would; I can't do it all."

Not being able to do it all is my shame trigger. And I am one of those really bad jugglers. I disappoint people and I forget my nephew's birthday and I miss deadlines. It is in my bad juggling moments, when I can't attain my self-imposed standard of perfection, that I feel like a complete failure—even though my nephew eventually gets a present, and the assignment gets turned in a few days late. It has taken a lot of years and some therapy to realize that my idea of perfection is a myth. It is completely unattainable. And trying to live at an unattainable pace has sucked all the fun right out of my soul more often than I care to admit.

For me, the trick of regaining my perspective and joy in mothering is permission to live freer. Free from clenched hands. Free not to always need to be in control. Free to do life my own way, not how everyone else is doing it. And free from being held hostage by the myth of perfection. Have you ever noticed how perfection looks good with her shiny manicure and homemade kombucha, but really she is the snob that no one wants to invite to their BBQ? The reason is perfection is annoying and frankly no fun. I find perfection is at best an illusion and at worst a lie. And this whole

concept of defining success as the ability to balance everything only makes sense if you are a juggler in the circus.

Being a mom is all of it. Light and dark, joy, frustration, and consuming love. I think Debra Ginsberg had it right when she said, “Through the blur, I wondered if I was alone or if other parents felt the same way I did—that everything involving our children was painful in some way. The emotions, whether they were joy, sorrow, love or pride, were so deep and sharp that in the end they left you raw, exposed and yes, in pain.”¹

For the rest of my life, I will be wading in the swells. I will feel it all deeply—the moments of darkness and the blindingly beautiful light. I will mess up and succeed—both many times over. Through all the swells there will be something holy, like a mother, putting breath back into lungs and holding close so there is no doubt about the depth of love surrounding it all: this fierce, fragile, thrilling, midnight motherhood.

Whatever season you are in—waiting for a baby, hoping for a mate, sending kids to college, or beginning a new adventure—may part of your story be about trusting that the swells are part of the game. And that jumping in is always worth it.

Q & R

1. Which of these shame triggers around mothering resonate with you? “I thought I’d be better at mothering.” “I wanted a different birth story.” “I don’t feel as happy as I thought I would.” “I thought I’d be able to do it all.”

¹ Debra Ginsberg, *Raising Blaze: A Mother and Son’s Long, Strange Journey into Autism* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 188.

* STARRY-EYED *

2. Write your own personal definition of "successful mothering."
3. How does perfectionism show up in your life? What does that look like and what are the effects?
4. What might you let go of that would leave you feeling freer as a mom?

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