



# Notes to a Daughter on Living in This World

by Marsha McGregor

Remember that each of us is afraid of something and if you approach the naked places of those around you with anything resembling a pointed object—your words, your glance, your blackened thoughts—their fear will strike back at you in self defense.



### On Employment

In the workaday world of giants and gnomes, you may feel embattled at every turn. The giants tower over you in bluster; the gnomes hide in shadow, sticking out a foot to watch you fall. If you come to believe this is how the world works, that everyone you meet might be a foe, all the armor in the world will not protect you. If your fear flames into anger and hardens into hate, you will blind yourself and make yourself weak at a time you must be clear-eyed and strong.

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I am not endorsing naïve platitudes nor tactics involving doe eyes or too-big smiles. I am saying that when you enter a room, gather up all the dignity and grace you can muster and picture yourself lined with gold, radiating warmth and strength that is sensed more than seen. Straighten your spine and breathe from the belly. Be neither abject nor proud. Watch closely and learn how to be and not to be. You have much to learn from everyone. Let nothing be lost on you.

Remember that each of us is afraid of something and if you approach the naked places of those around you with anything resembling a pointed object—your words, your glance, your blackened thoughts—their fear will strike back at you in self-defense.

Do not be lulled into thinking a de-throned ruler is powerless; the sharp-

ened arrow of their shame holds poison.

If you find yourself ambushed—and this may happen, sometimes inexplicably so—do not be moved. Be like a mountain: grounded, quiet, willing to withstand the passing weather, fierce as it may be. Do not quake with fear or rumble with imagined revenge. You might trigger an avalanche you can't control, bringing parts of yourself down in the process.

Know that you are not a prisoner despite what you have been told. You can leave the kingdom of your own accord in search of other lands, peopled with natives who welcome you as if you've arrived home.

Someday you may find yourself in a place of assigned power. Drop the shimmery cape of entitlement and accept a heavier mantle, one with compassion and humility sewn into its sleeves. Claim your authority and then be accountable for it. Intimidation and blame are the cloaks of cowards.

Know also that you will occasionally fall. Try not to waste your precious energy bracing for it. In the event you lose your footing, do the last thing one thinks of doing in the clutches of descent: unclench yourself. In this way upon landing you might only break the delicate bones, preserving your spine.

### On Homekeeping

You may fail to muster an enmity with dust, even when it gains sufficient momentum to mutate into tumbleweeds that skate around the furniture and hide under beds. The virtues of a tidy closet might remain out of reach. Things you discover living under couch cushions, on the rare occasions you are foolish enough to go investigating there, will frankly appall you. With luck you will live with housemates who share a similar tolerance for things not completely under control.

Yet the pull of household order might still be real for you, something closer to godliness than cleanliness can touch. There is a difference between a spotless

house and a serene one. Give yourself a few flat surfaces, bare and smooth—a made bed, a cleared countertop, a table holding nothing but tulips—and you can overlook the paw prints by the door, the sticky smear of jelly underfoot, the gadgets and books sprawled this way and that on the floor. The point is not to remove all evidence of life as it is happening around you, but to maintain small planets of calm within your spinning universe. You may, for example, develop a fondness for a sparkling sink, its gleaming emptiness offering you unexpected pleasure. Have you heard of those people who alphabetize their spices? Do it once and you will always be able to find your rosemary.

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**Out there with no walls between you, a raised voice will lose its hard edge. Words will dissipate in steam, be cooled by the streaming rain.**

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Take notice of the neighbor who tidies her stoop with a stiff-bristled broom. Witness her satisfaction with each efficient whisk across that three-foot square of real estate. She brushes off the litter and grit that crept in overnight against her doorstep. She sweeps them away from her threshold.

### On Living with Love

When the air is thick and the horizon boils, when summer's green necklace chokes round your neck—too close, too close for comfort—go directly to the porch, that middle ground suspended above the steamy lawn.

Out there with no walls between you,



a raised voice will lose its hard edge. Words will dissipate in steam, be cooled by the streaming rain.

Rock back and forth in the comfortable old chairs you have put there for these moments. Or stretch out flat on the slatted wood floor where one or both of you may decide to take this lying down.

It's not exactly cool out there but at least the air moves. It's a fine place to ride out the thunder.

Remember that you never thought the morning glory would make it. You planted the diamond-hard seeds so late, taken in by the name—Heavenly Blue—and the picture—all that wide-eyed beauty, those golden throats. You didn't believe the small print that claimed it needed—no, preferred—mere ordinary soil to thrive. That, and a few stakes strong enough to withstand the weight of its twining toward the sun.

Now look at it, flush with color and heart-shaped leaves, its insistent optimism sprawled across the railing with blooms the size of a toddler's hand.

Stare up at the ceiling then and distract yourself for one moment with the brilliant green grasshoppers that like to congregate there. Think of them as small children who are listening to every word you say.

Just stay there.

Be willing to steady your breath even as the barometer rises and falls.

Eventually, you'll notice the wind's wailing has stopped. You will look at each other, sheepish, survey the small fury of debris strewn across the yard, say thank goodness nothing serious came of it.

### On Losing Yourself

One day in a rush you will cut yourself shaving. Blow-dry your hair into ridiculous angles that mainly say lost and confused, the machine moving your hand in awkward jerks against your will. You will spill your coffee in a caramel splash small enough to con-

vince you that the spot on your shirt doesn't show and big enough to make you obsess about it all day long, hiding it self-consciously with your arm.

Your body feels like an assemblage of robotic parts, its dry joints and hinges moaning and threatening to come undone, but at a pitch and frequency only you can hear. You walk around doing your smiling best. People smile back.

On one of my own robotic days (or weeks or months, who's counting) it occurred to me that all that clumsy banging around is the body telegraphing SOS on the soul's behalf. The body has become an aggressive front for its wealthy silent partner sitting behind the scenes on hidden bags of gold. The soul sees its investment going shaky, heading towards shady deals and suspect accounting practices. It sighs and wags its wise head, calls a meeting, makes a few calls. Inexplicably, you begin tripping all over yourself, obsessing, hiding, inaudibly threatening to come undone.

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Believe for a moment that you can make rain enough to move again. I do not mean be a rainmaker, someone who drums up profits with a silver tongue. What I am saying is to search and recover what remains from all the clouds that broke over your head when you couldn't find cover, the rivulets that leaked into your unprotected, open

seams when storms moved through, that hid in the bends of your knees, the creases of your belly, the nautical whorl of your ear, the corners of your eyes squeezed shut against the wind. This is rain that entered you. It is your rain now, and you must make use of it.

Siphon it into one big barrel and pour it over yourself, a drenching libation of rain. Collect all the buckets you so carefully placed under leaking roofs and cracked ceilings, watchful for a collapse that would bury you forever. Let yourself rain down in sheets. Rain down your stored sorrow until the rusted hinges of your pain loosen and sing.

Tomorrow you will not feel so lost. Tomorrow you will not accidentally make yourself bleed. ■

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**Author's Note:** As we prepared for our 18-year-old daughter to leave home for college, I wondered (worried?) about all the things I hadn't taught her. I knew from my own life that we learn best by experience. Still, I wanted to bundle up a writer's version of provisions in a knapsack, sustenance for her journey toward independence. "Notes to a Daughter on Living in This World" is an excerpt from a book-length collection that grows and evolves as my daughter continues to grow and evolve.

*Marsha McGregor is the mother of two children and lives with her husband in Hudson, Ohio. Her first contribution to Brain, Child (special issue 2014), "Catcher," was written about her son.*