LETTERS FROM A TIGER MOM

A Protective Mother's Reflections
on Parenting Strong-Willed Children

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For Ken, my husband and partner in parenting;
and to my teachers, Sean and Lee,
parents, grandparents, and ancestors.
Okage sama de. ("I am what I am because of you.")

CONTENTS

PREFACE

This book came from fragments of conversations my husband and I had with our adult children. On one occasion, our adult children and teenage grandchildren came to our home for dinner. My husband and I enjoyed and continue to enjoy these evenings, as we inevitably share stories and memories of our family.

What our children said often surprised me and piqued my curiosity, leaving me fascinated by what they remember and how they view their childhoods. This way I learn a lot about what's important to them now.

One evening our son commented, "My friends say they wish they had the kind of relationships we have as a family."

I was shocked and asked, "Huh? Why?"

He shrugged and casually explained, "I think it's because we don't fight and argue. They don't want to visit their parents because they usually end up disagreeing about something, and they end up leaving angry."

At another dinner, our son declared, "I had a great childhood," and when I asked him what he meant, he said, "I felt free and happy! It was great!"

I watched his infectious smile light up his face, and I guessed he was recalling some happy memories. At that moment, I saw him as the child we raised, a child who lived with a wildly expansive heart that refused to be tamed. I could only reflect that this child lived from his soul; I didn't see that when he was younger.

On another occasion, our daughter said, "I don't want my kids doing what I did!" And later, she said, "I'm glad they were not like me when I was their age. I feel so lucky my kids are not on drugs."

The children's memories were so different from mine. Many of mine were of my being a hysterical, out-of-control mom, trying to reason with her children to behave and not make us look like bad parents and not shame the family. My husband and I often remembered the parenting journey as a push and pull—they pushed us, we pulled, and they were always just out of reach. I have wondered whether children grow into themselves from the force of pushing and pulling against their parents.

I wrote this book hoping to make sense of what the parenting experience was about and perhaps pass some wisdom about life on to the children. We seemed to have experienced many events very differently, and now that they are adults and parents themselves, and have worked with children, as our son did at a private high school, I thought our story might help them to understand the role of adults in a child's life. While writing, however, my stories and memories started to take a new perspective. I learned that my parenting experience was about me—not about my children or our family life. The parenting journey was about learning to listen to and hear my children, honoring their souls, and learning about the purpose of parenting.

I never dreamed parenting would be so challenging and rewarding; seeing our children as happy, self-sufficient, kind, and loving people warms my heart. Because of them, I realize that I did not have the answers to make them happy. They had the answers within themselves. I needed to stand by as they tried to find their voices and their way in the world, to catch and pick them up when they fell down, and simply love them.

Now I realize that I wrote this book to thank and remind them how much they taught me and how much they were loved. And when I shared drafts of this book with them, they encouraged me to continue. They loved the memories and enjoyed reliving our journey as a family!

INTRODUCTION

Ma ka hana ka ʻike
"The knowledge is in the doing."

(Hawaiian Olelo No'eau or Proverb)

Unless you "show up," you don't know what can happen.

I am a perfectionist. I love to plan, organize, and prepare for every conceivable wrinkle in the unforeseen future. So, when I got pregnant, I studied about babies, child development, parenting strategies, theories, and what to expect so I wouldn't have any surprises. I was confident my children would automatically be model kids and responsible adults.

What a joke. I was never so humbled.

I never dreamed that becoming a parent would put me through such a washing machine of feelings. I tumbled, spun, respun, reversed the spin cycle, and on many days, I just felt dizzy and completely helpless. And I was never done.

My parenting became a prayer and an act of faith.

Dealing with the bodies of little people with minds of their own who want to experiment and live life their own way and

are willing to expose their parents' inadequacies and embarrass them in surprisingly creative ways is like holding on to water. And yet we love our children no matter how much they fail, yell, and scream, or we ground them. No matter how much I planned, my plans didn't work.

I learned from my children that nothing could prepare me for parenting.

This book is about my personal journey in parenting. As a family therapist and psychologist with over forty years of practicing in the mental health field, with countless hours of meditation, self-improvement workshops, and spiritual journeys to improve my parenting, I finally conceded that the theories of mental health and family therapy do not always translate into solutions.

The ultimate lesson I learned from parenting was to cultivate compassion for myself.

In our family, my husband and I have encountered tremendous challenges but, in retrospect, these challenges were lessons, and these lessons turned out to be miracles … even though I might not have recognized them as precious gifts at the time.

Our son brought us profound awe for life with his conception and birth. Our daughter brought us immense respect for the human spirit when, aged nearly three years old, she stepped off the plane from Korea and moved into our lives.

I felt a deep love immediately for both our children, and I joyfully accepted the responsibility for these gifts of life. As we journeyed together with our new family, my husband and I often discussed how best to handle difficult situations and, after each trying episode, we felt a more profound commitment to our children.

Through my children, I have experienced deep joy, happiness, anger, frustration, love, surprises, disappointment, and moments of awe. I learned to let go of my sometimes perfectionist need for control and instead to trust the universe. As I worried about and tried to foster a sense of self-confidence in the children themselves, I realized I was teaching them, as well, to embrace self-love.

I have also learned that clinging to them resulted in their pushing back and forcing me to see I needed to let them go. I learned to confront my ego, raise myself up to unconditional love, forgive myself for my many mistakes in raising them, and give thanks for a level of patience and love that I would never have known without them.

I invite you to join me on my journey of parenting. The journey forced me out of my comfort zone into being a parent, a better person, a friend, a partner, and a therapist. Our children showed me the meaning of unconditional love.

There are five parts to this book with reflection chapters in each part. After reading each of the chapters, I invite you to reflect on your experiences and how the parenting experience might have influenced or transformed you. I wish you many wonderful stories and profound reflections as you grow with your children.

PART ONE

A LETTER TO MY SON

Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength,
while loving someone gives you courage.

Lao Tzu

My Dearest Sean,

Your birth was a miracle that hit me like a bolt of lightning. When you were born, I felt a surge of love and a purpose for life that I'd never felt before. Your dad and I were so excited about seeing you and holding you, a child we had only known in the womb.

Nothing prepared me for your arrival, despite all my studying about birth and infancy. It was mind-boggling to me when I first saw you, a wrinkled, pink, tiny creature squirming in my arms. Your eyes were tightly closed and you stretched and yawned with tiny clenched fists.

My first thought was, *Oh, my God! What have we done? What is this thing? Who is this person we're supposed to care for?*

As you nestled into my body, I felt an overwhelming sense of Divine Love—love in a way I had never experienced before. All I could say was, "Thank you! Thank you!" My feelings overwhelmed me, and I knew that you were and are a gift from

God. As you suckled at my breast, I felt a connection to all goodness. Words escaped me.

With this Love, your dad and I vowed to be your fiercest guardians and protectors. No one would hurt you, and we promised always to support you.

YOUR TURN TO REFLECT

Recall the first moment you laid eyes on your child. What did you experience?

REFLECTION 1

TRUST THE UNIVERSE

You walked unsteadily at eight months and ran by twelve months. I loved watching you run to your dad with open arms when he arrived home walking his bicycle down the sidewalk toward our apartment. You wore little blue *tabis* (Japanese socks) and a light blue sweater as you ran with your huge, infectious smile, laughing in pure delight with the hugs and kisses from your dad. I saw a boy who loved his father, and your passion for him made me love him even more.

Your love was contagious.

As you grew, you showed no fear—you embraced life. If you had a mantra, it would have been "Trust the Universe."

I learned the courage to love from you.

I would have to revisit this unconditional love often as you and your sister challenged us to let each of you grow in your own ways.

YOUR TURN TO REFLECT

Did your child's love of your partner deepen your love for him or her more? I invite you to revisit that moment often to know the depth of Love.

"*Letters from a Tiger Mom* offers a series of heartwarming letters that speak to the essence of parenting. Ann Yabusaki poses reflection questions that artfully allow you to view your experiences and challenge you in a way that can lead to greater unconditional love and transformation. An insightful book for conscious parents."

—Marci Shimoff,
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author,
Happy for No Reason and *Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul*

"*Letters from a Tiger Mom* is an insightful book for conscientious parents who would heed their call against the backdrop of a deadening culture-specific neurosis of longstanding: Asian American families that raise their offspring in terms of what Karen Horney called 'the tyranny of the should.'"

—Benjamin R. Tong, PhD,
Emeritus Professor of clinical psychology,
California Institute of Integral Studies; founding faculty, Asian American Studies Department, San Francisco State University.

"A candid and easy-to-read book on real parenting with its ups and downs that many of us parents will easily relate to. Take the time to read this if you are a parent or are interested in being one. You'll enjoy the author's personal stories and perspectives on parenting."

—Jackie Hong, parent and retired social worker

"*Letters from a Tiger Mom* gives great interactive question pages, presents genuine honesty in poetic clothing, and is a wonderful opportunity for empathic learning. This book is a gift to every parent who will read it … especially those who were once children themselves."

—Dr. Robert F. Morgan,
author of *Time Statues* and *Time Statues Revisited*

"A deeply insightful and refreshingly honest reflection on parenting. Ann's heartwarming letters to her children are punctuated with laughter, tears, and love. As Ann shares her own parenting journey and her insights along the way, she masterfully leads the reader to reflect on their own parenting."

—Karen Pratten,
CEO Emotional Keys, Happy for No Reason Certified Trainer

"In *Letters from a Tiger Mom,* Ann describes courageously and honestly her journey as a parent of two children, from birth to young adulthood. Some stories she tells would turn any parent's hair white. Ann's love of learning compelled her and her husband to reassess their assumptions, eventually finding a place of harmony with their children. Ann takes a multi-generational approach, discovering how families of origin impacted her family in unique and hidden ways."

—Roberta Stephens, policy analyst

"*Letters from a Tiger Mom* is an invitation to share a mother's unique heart song. Dr. Ann reflects candidly upon her own journey as a parent, from acknowledged angst to unconditional love. Her personal and professional insights offer the reader an invaluable opportunity for self-reflection and conscious growth. *Letters* is a cultural memoir and gift book for Dr. Ann's adult children. It is also a wisdom book for every parent."

—Dianne Poole,
retired RN, Hospice of Martha's Vineyard

"In this well-written and well-organized book, Ann chronicles the joys and challenges of raising a son and daughter, the son the elder, the adopted from Korea daughter the younger. All of this takes place against two Japanese cultural backgrounds, Ann's Okinawan-Japanese-Hawaiian majority and her husband Ken's mainland Japanese

presence that was regarded as hostile in the USA; Ken's people were interred in northern Idaho during the war. Any parent will recognize and profit from the tensions and their resolutions described, best be described by what could be an alternate title of the book, love conquers all."

—Joe K. Fugate, PhD,
Kalamazoo College emeritus

"A courageous trek into the complicated longitudinal journey of parenthood, Yabusaki demonstrates how love and a willingness to learn from our children can be transformative. She reveals the raw turbulent confusion she experienced, which, even as a highly educated family therapist, she was at times unable to connect with her children. She also shows how being a life-long student of human philosophies and cultures led her to be at peace with being a good enough person and mom. Wisdom is within these pages!"

—Susana Ming Lowe, PhD,
psychologist

"In *Letters from a Tiger Mom,* Ann Yabusaki reveals her heartfelt, insightful journey to face in herself the actual impact she had on her children from her beliefs about families and perfection. Her courageous descriptions create an intimate, safe environment for readers to consider the questions she offers, each one from her own transformative path to unconditional love. Help yourself!"

—Miriam Goldberg, PhD

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann S. Yabusaki, **PhD,** is a family therapist and psychologist. She has counseled many individuals and families, letting go of counseling theories and strategies and, instead, aligning with Unconditional Love. She counsels people about Unconditional Love as patience, deep listening, self-compassion, laughter, and letting go.

Dr. Ann welcomes your comments and reflections. Please contact her at Ayabusaki2@gmail.com.