

Introduction: A Journey to Share

We're Maria and Thomas Jonsson, a couple who've lived a life full of love, chaos, and lessons learned across continents, blending two vibrant worlds—my fiery Spanish heart and Thomas's steady Swedish soul—into one family forged in faith and love.

Maria here—*¡ay, qué aventura!* I love adventure and I'm Spanish to my core, raised in the loud, warm embrace of a Madrid family where every meal was a fiesta, every challenge a story to tell, and every moment a chance to love fiercely. My heart thrives in the mess—the spilled juice on the table, the late-night talks that stretch until dawn, the laughter that bursts from nowhere like a summer storm.

Thomas, my Swedish engineer husband, brings a different flavor. He's the calm to my storm, the man who sees a problem and builds a solution, as if it's a bridge or a circuit, his quiet strength grounding our wild dance. Together, we've raised our seven children through moves from Spain to Sweden, the USA, and beyond, learning how to build a family that's strong, flexible, and radiant with hope, rooted in our Catholic faith that, like Psalm 133:1, reminds us, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"

This book isn't about perfect parenting—*¡por favor, we're far from perfect!* It's about the real stuff: the doubts that creep in like shadows, the triumphs that shine like sunlight through the clouds, the moments you realize you're doing better than you thought. We wrote this for you, younger parents, who might be feeling overwhelmed, caught in the whirlwind of busyness, or wondering if you're enough in a world that tempts you to compare and despair.

So much has changed in our world over the last decade, and we meet more and more young people who are either struggling under the weight of parenting without a solid support system OR they are afraid to even *start* raising children. So tragic! It doesn't have to be this way!

Spoiler: You are enough, and God's grace, as 2 Corinthians 12:9 declares, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," is with you always. We want to share our story—not to show off, but to show you what's possible when you build a family organically, learning from mistakes and happy accidents, just as we did.

This is why we've written this little book. You can do this! You are enough and, even if you don't have reliable family nearby, you can build the extended family support that you need. Intentionally, boldly, joyfully.

You don't need to cross continents to create a thriving family culture; whether you're blending two worlds from opposite sides of town or different corners of your heritage, you can forge a home that resonates with your unique story. We've seen our children start raising their own families, and we know this generation desperately needs the simple, timeless virtues of our heritage, like peace, joy, and love, to counter the chaos and comparison that the enemy sows, as

Ephesians 6:11 urges, “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.”

Think of us as friends who’ve been there, sharing a coffee—or a *café con leche*—and some hard-earned wisdom to help you craft a life your children will cherish.

I’ll bring the passion, the stories that make you laugh until your sides ache or tear up with the tenderness of God’s love. And my Thomas will bring the clarity, the practical steps to make sense of the chaos, like a lighthouse guiding you through a stormy sea. Together, we’ll show you how to build a family that’s not just surviving but thriving, with a community to lift you up, rooted in faith that sows peace and joy.

So, grab a seat, take a deep breath, and let’s start this journey together, trusting in Proverbs 22:6, “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.”

What You’ll Learn

This book is your guide to building a family that feels like home, no matter where life takes you—whether across the globe, across town, or simply from one family background to another. Through our story and lessons, you’ll discover how to:

- *Embrace the chaos* of parenting with joy, turning mishaps into memories that strengthen your family’s bond, like spilled juice becoming a story of laughter.
- *Create a community* anywhere, from hosting simple gatherings to building lasting support networks, weaving a village as strong as our Madrid and Portland tables.
- *Balance structure and freedom*, giving your kids roots to grow and wings to soar, blending Maria’s nurturing heart with Thomas’s practical systems.
- *Communicate with love and clarity*, fostering open family conversations that resolve conflicts and build trust, grounded in faith.
- *Navigate change* with resilience, whether it’s a new city, a new school, or a new phase of parenting, trusting God’s plan.
- *Make every moment count* by creating intentional traditions—meals, prayers, stories—that become your family’s heartbeat, echoing the love of Christ.
- *Hold onto hope*, even in the toughest moments, knowing that your love and effort, guided by faith, are shaping a legacy of peace and joy for your kids, as Romans 15:13 prays, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him.”

Each chapter offers stories from our global journey—mistakes, laughter, and all—paired with practical steps to craft a family life that’s uniquely yours, full of connection, virtues, and the joy of a home rooted in God’s love. We built our family culture organically, appreciating the traditions of our Spanish and Swedish childhoods, like enjoying *sobremesa*, which means “lingering at the table”, eating some Swedish fika while focusing on deepening connection with friends and family alike. Or forging new traditions, like pancake nights and rosary drives, that blended our two heritages into a vibrant whole.

You can do this, too, avoiding the chaos and stress that pull families apart, building a life your children will love, rich with the intangibles of faith, hope, and love.

How to Read This Book

Think of this book as a conversation with friends who’ve walked the parenting path before you, stumbling and soaring by God’s grace. You don’t need to read it cover to cover in one go—parenting life is too busy for that, and the enemy’s schemes of busyness and comparison, as Ephesians 6:11 warns, can steal your peace.

Here’s how to make it work for you:

- *Our Story*: In Part I, Chapters 1-3, we tell you a good bit of our story, so you get to know us and see where, and how, we learned what we will teach you in Part II, Chapters 4-12.
- *Dip in where you need*: If you’re feeling overwhelmed by the chaos, start with Chapter 4 on breaking bread together. Struggling with family communication? Jump to Chapter 8. Each chapter stands alone, so you can focus on what speaks to your heart right now.
- *Savor the stories*: Maria’s tales will pull you in with their warmth and humor—read them when you need a reminder that parenting is a shared adventure, blessed by God’s joy. Thomas’s insights offer clear, actionable steps—turn to them when you’re ready to try something new to anchor your family.
- *Take it slow*: Try one tip or tradition at a time, like a family dinner inspired by Maria’s Spanish *sobremesa* or a structured family meeting from Thomas’s Swedish playbook. Small steps, rooted in faith, build big change, as Matthew 17:20 says, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed... nothing will be impossible for you.”
- *Talk it over*: This is the most important part! Share a chapter with your partner, friends, or a church group. Discuss what resonates, what traditions you want to forge, or how our stories echo your own. Parenting is a team effort, and this book is here to spark conversations that build your village. So let’s intentionally build your village! Invite other couples over to read and work through the discussion questions in each chapter. You’ll find a wealth of knowledge hiding in unexpected places.
- *Keep a notebook*: Jot down ideas, reflections, or moments when you see your family growing stronger in virtues like patience or kindness. It’s a way to track your journey and

celebrate progress, trusting God's guidance.

This book is meant to feel like a warm hug and a gentle nudge forward, a reminder that you can create peace and joy in your home. Read it in stolen moments between diaper changes or at night when the house is quiet. Wherever you are in your parenting journey, we're here to cheer you on, praying you find the strength to build a family that shines with God's love.

Our Roots, Your Journey

We're a mix of two worlds—Maria's fiery Spanish heritage and Thomas's steady Swedish roots—but you don't need to cross continents to build a thriving family culture. Whether you're blending traditions from opposite sides of town, different states, or unique family histories, your story is just as powerful.

We cherished the traditions of our childhoods—Maria's raucous Madrid dinners, Thomas's orderly Stockholm hikes—and wove them into new ones, like long chats after supper, with full bellies and quick laughter, and “soup and pancake” nights, that became our family's heartbeat.

Some we carried forward, like prayers before meals; others we built from scratch, like piano lessons that filled our home with music. Our mistakes, like burnt muffins or forgotten diapers, and happy surprises, like a free piano at just the right time, taught us to grow organically, trusting God's grace.

Now, watching our children raise their own families, we see how desperately this generation needs these simple, timeless virtues like peace, joy, and love, to counter the enemy's whispers of comparison and envy.

You *can* do this, building a family culture rich with faith and connection, as Psalm 127:3 reminds us, “Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him.”

Let our story inspire you to forge your own: one joyful, messy moment at a time.

With Love, Your Guides

We're excited to share this journey with you, not as experts, but as parents who've stumbled, learned, and found joy in the chaos, guided by our Catholic faith and God's endless love. Here's to building your family's story—one messy, beautiful moment at a time, creating a legacy of peace and joy that your children will carry forward.

With all our heart,
Thomas and Maria Jonsson

Chapter 5: Evolving Traditions – Letting Go and Making Room

Maria's Perspective: The Heart of Change

Family traditions are the heartbeat of our home, pulsing with memories that grow and shift as our loved ones do, reminding us that love isn't rigid but alive, adapting with grace and joy. Our journey with traditions taught me this in the most tender ways—starting with my mother's defiant embrace after fleeing Cuba's shadows to Chicago's chill, where Thanksgiving became our anchor of gratitude, a ritual she cherished so deeply it became the soul of our new life.

Fresh from Havana's loss, with the ache of loss still raw, she poured her resilient spirit into that first turkey, basting it with love and Cuban spices, declaring it a feast of thanks for the freedom we'd found. It wasn't just a meal; it was her way of reclaiming joy, weaving gratitude into the fabric of our days, her eyes lighting up as she set the table with mismatched plates from our South Side kitchen, insisting we invite everyone—neighbors, the milkman, even the stray cat if it wandered in.

A young Jewish neighbor, who became one of my mother's dearest friends, set a huge pot of bubbling *matzah ball* soup on the cheap Formica table, which groaned under the weight of my mother's *frijoles negros* and roasted plantains. That first Thanksgiving in America turned our table into a tapestry of unexpected kinship. Strangers becoming family under one roof, laughter echoing as we passed the cranberry sauce and shared stories of harvests both literal and metaphorical.

My mother loved these American holidays with a fierce, unyielding passion, seeing in them not foreign customs but universal bridges of hope, rituals that whispered, "We are here, we are whole, we are blessed."

She carried that fire across oceans, refusing to let exile dim the light. Even in Lebanon's relentless heat, where the air shimmered like a mirage and the call to prayer wove through our days, she insisted on carving pumpkins for Halloween, her hands steady as she sketched jack-o'-lantern grins on the orange rinds we sourced from the souk, turning our Beirut apartment into a glowing haven of costumes and candy.

"*¡Mira, mis amores!* Look, my beloveds!" she'd exclaim, her voice thick with emotion, as Joey and I donned her handmade outfits—a gypsy for me, a pirate for him—parading through the courtyard with neighborhood children, the scent of spiced tea mingling with trick-or-treat sweets. And All Saints' Day? Oh, it was her sacred crescendo, a joyful march of paper saints she crafted with us, crowns of foil and halos of yarn, her trembling voice recounting their stories under the olive trees, the weight of what we'd lost in Cuba transformed into gained resilience, each tale a prayer for the saints to intercede for our wandering family.

These weren't mere holidays to her; they were lifelines, bold acts of love that bridged our fractured world, teaching me early that traditions aren't frozen in time but carried in our heart, adapting yet enduring, a mother's gift to her children amidst life's storms.

With our seven children, culture became our compass, but time cannot stand still. As they married, their spouses brought along traditions of their own. For example, our eldest daughter's in-laws celebrated their Christmas traditions on December 24th, which clashed with our family's traditional Epiphany wait for the arrival of the Three Wise Men. But rather than clinging to *our* way, we joined their early gathering, then slipped away to attend midnight Mass. Before we left, I squeezed her hand as we whispered prayers for her marriage and all the exciting things that her future held. It stung a bit, that letting go of our own exclusive family traditions, but it bloomed into deeper bonds with each of our now-adult children, and their extended families.

Thomas's Perspective: The Framework for Flow

Traditions provide the steady rhythm that grounds a family, but as life expands—through marriages, moves, or simply time—they must flow with intention, not rigidity, allowing us to prioritize what endures while releasing what no longer serves our family. My engineering mind sees it as a system: assess the core purpose (*does this build connection or merely habit?*), evaluate its fit (*will it unite or divide amidst these new voices?*), and adapt with grace (*what can we keep, what to let evolve?*). We faced this when our children's spouses entered the fold, their cultures adding new layers, a beautiful tension that forced us to reassess.

When the kids were little, our living room was often piled high with over-the-top gifts, but the real joy came later, as our children matured and found partners of their own. We began shifting toward more practical gifts, like the toolkit we bought for our son-in-law's projects, echoing my father's lessons in building with hands and heart. As we shifted from excess to essence, we discovered that traditions are strengthened when they foster generosity, not obligation.

Reflecting on our path, I see how our early choices, like questioning a tradition's roots (*"Why this? What purpose will it serve?"*), built resilience. Young families often neglect these old ways for convenience, or because they don't understand the significance, or simply for the sake of fitting in, corrupted by marketing's flash over meaning. But we chose depth instead, like ensuring we were at church every week, despite the Sunday scramble of kids and clothes and breakfast and busyness, because the value of church to our family outweighed the effort. Much like a home-cooked meal is always superior over a quick run through the drive-through, even though takeout is often faster and more convenient, it cannot compare to the many benefits of creating a nutritious meal together.

Wherever we lived, our neighborhood dinners became simple, intentional gatherings that drew fractured lives together, countering isolation with shared stories. The framework is clear: hold

onto what encourages roots of faith and family connection; release what will only fade away, and welcome change, awakening a legacy of peace amid life's shifts.

Our Takeaways: Steps to Keep Your Traditions Flexible

Traditions are living bridges, evolving as families mature and expand, from blended holidays with dating teens to new nests, complete with in-laws. Love thrives in flexibility, not perfection. Maria's open heart embraced the mess of shifting feasts, turning storms into stories, while Thomas's steady framework assessed purpose, prioritizing what unites. Together, we learned traditions make us stronger, individuals discerning truth, families bonded unconditionally, countering a world's pull toward fleeting fits and victim whispers. \

As Pope Benedict XVI reflects in *Spe Salvi*, "hope anchors us in God's eternal promise, awakening hearts to persevere with joy."

You can nurture this too, building a legacy where traditions serve love's higher call.

Here's how to grow your traditions with intention:

Assess with Purpose: Gather your family for a "tradition talk". Ask yourselves, "Why this event or activity? What joy does it bring? Is there a better way?" Journal responses to discern what to keep and what to release.

Make Room for Growth: As spouses or grandkids join, blend boldly. Consider hosting a "culture share" night where each person adds a dish or a story, fostering deeper connections and unconditional welcome.

Embrace Imperfect Shifts: When plans falter, pivot with laughter. Mishaps can become favorite memories as well as teaching resilience and hope.

Counter the Rush with Ritual: Prioritize effortful joys like home-cooked meals or church Sundays; their nourishment outweighs convenience, awakening gratitude and unity amid busyness.

Discussion Questions/Journal Prompts

1. Reflect on a tradition that evolved in your family (e.g., blended holidays). What purpose did it serve, and how did it strengthen bonds?
2. What "over-the-top" element in your celebrations could shift to something practical and heartfelt? How might that make room for new family voices?

3. Share a time a tradition felt rigid—how could flexibility, rooted in faith, awaken joy instead?
4. Journal a “tradition talk” plan: What roots to keep, what to let go, to foster unconditional love?
5. Discuss with your group: How can evolving traditions counter isolation, building a village of hope?