

Holding



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The following poem was written and delivered by Carolyn Joy Dayton upon receipt of the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health 2015 Hiram Fitzgerald Award for new research scientists. It appears here with permission from the author and the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health where it was originally published.

The Infant Mental Health Specialist who does not like Babies

Act I: Learning to hold. On.

To hold a baby.

To hold a mother.

To fall apart under the weight of the holding;

Knowing that you will come together again

in the arms of your family, your friends, your colleagues, your supervisor.

Knowing that you can withstand.

Knowing that staying connected sometimes means falling apart.

Because the weight...

it is. . very, very heavy.

Tell me about the baby! Said my supervisor.

Actually, I don't really like babies, I thought, but did not yet have the courage to say.

How can you not want to visit that young, vulnerable mother! she said.

Because I am tired, I thought, but did not say.

Because I'm not sure it will help.

Because she does not listen to me.

Because it is really, really hard for me to listen to her.

But, that mother...

It's not fair, I thought, feeling angry, but did not say, and did not let on.

That she cannot hold her baby.

Her mother did not hold her. Her father did not hold her.

There were no aunts or grandmothers or uncles or grandfathers.

How can we ask her to hold her baby? It's not fair. I thought and began to think maybe I would say.

That's it! I thought, but did not say.

I still did not like babies.

But, I thought, I do care about their mothers.

They are heavy though, those mothers.

And tricky, too.

They hide beneath their shame and their suffering.

They sometimes don't come out for a long, long time.

They sometimes make me feel like I don't matter, and they are very, very certain that they. don't. matter.

And, why, after all, would you hold your baby, if you don't matter.

So, I have to matter, I thought, and almost said.

Do I matter?

How do I know?

What if I'm wrong?

What if I don't matter enough?

What if I

can't.

hold.

on.

Act II: Holding on

I was held.
I don't remember it.
I know it felt good though.
Safe. Warm. Contained.
Understood.

I was held.
I can remember.
When things went wrong.
When I skinned my legs in the summer riding bikes.
When I lost important things like my Mickey Mouse wristwatch.
When I felt scared of things – real or imagined.
I was held.

It felt good.
I am held.
When I'm scared and tired and I start thinking that maybe I don't matter.
"I don't think I'm doing this right," I say, out loud.
What?, she says. What aren't you doing right?
You know, life, I say.
And, she holds me.

So, I hold on.
To myself. To my others. To the young mother. To her baby.
It's sometimes scary. I sometimes fall apart.
I always come back together.
Because I was held and I am held and I can hold on.

Act III: Reaching Up, or Out. Sometimes Sideways. Mostly just reaching.

So, what's it gonna be, Dayton, I thought, but did not say.
I was looking out at a sea of IMH folks – many of the folks who are still here tonight – because we all continue to hold on to each other.
Some of you are interventionists, some researchers, some policy makers.
So many people who matter.
So many people making a difference in the lives of families.
But, how can I matter? How will I matter? How will I make a difference?
I wondered. For a while. And I talked, and talked, and wondered.

I think maybe research. . . . with a clinical focus. . . . that has policy implications, I said, to one of my others.
She shook her head.
What? I said.
Nothing, she said. You'll figure it out.
I'm pretty sure a hamburger and a glass of wine will help you figure it out.
Right, I said.
I was being held.

Act IV – Figuring it out, kinda sorta

Fathers, I said.
Why? He asked.
Because they matter, I said, and nobody seems to know.
Not nearly as much as mothers, he said.
But, you're a father, I thought but did not say.
They do matter, I said, to one of my others. They do. And she nodded.
I will try to understand fathers. I say. Today. To all of you.
Because they matter.
Because I have a father.
Because my son has a father.
Because my son will someday be a father.
And all of that matters. To me.