

## SAVE US! SAVE OUR CHILDREN!

Rev. Dr. Dorothy May Emerson

Harvard MA, October 3, 2010

### SERMON

There are some lovely words about childhood in our hymnbook, written by UU minister Sara Moores Campbell:

Give us the spirit of the child  
Give us the child who lives within  
The child who trusts  
The child who imagines  
The child who sings  
The child who receives without reservation  
The child who gives without judgment  
Give us the child's eyes, that we may receive the beauty and freshness of this  
day like a sunrise  
Give us the child's ears, that we may hear the music of mythical times  
Give us the child's heart, that we may be filled with wonder and delight  
Give us the child's faith, that we may be cured of our cynicism  
Give us the spirit of the child, who is not afraid to need, who is not afraid to love.

I just spent a week in Michigan with my five year old grandson. In many ways, he fits the description of this idealized child, and it is one of the great joys of my life to experience his trusting, loving spirit.

The problem is there are far too many children right here in this rich country of ours who do not have the kind of childhood that enables them to be loving and trusting. My grandson lives with caring, attentive parents, in a safe home, in a safe community. Far too many children today are growing up in unsafe homes in dangerous communities with parents who despite their love are unable for a variety of reasons to pay close attention to their children.

A hundred and fifty years ago, Unitarian Eliza Cabot Follen observed a similar contrast between her own children and those living under the system of slavery. She wrote a poem called "The Sadness of Children."

When children play the livelong day,  
Like birds and butterflies;  
As free and gay, sport time away,  
And know not care or sighs  
Then all the air seems fresh and fair  
Around us and above.  
Life's flowers are there; and everywhere  
Is innocence and love.

When children play with fear all day,  
A blight must be at hand.  
Then joys decay, and birds of prey  
Are hovering o'er the land.  
When young hearts weep as they go to sleep,  
Then all the world is sad.  
The flesh must creep, and woes are deep,  
When children are not glad.<sup>1</sup>

It breaks your heart, doesn't it? And we know the current situation isn't much different. If you are like most people, you simply have to put it out of your mind to get on with your day and enjoy whatever time you have to spend with children who are healthy and happy and have a chance to make it in this world.

But today, just for the next few minutes, I would like to ask you to focus on the children who aren't making it in this world. These children are part of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are all a part. Their lives are intertwined with ours in both obvious and subtle ways. Their future is bound up with our future and with the future world our children and grandchildren will inherit.

Several years ago a UU young adult shared this story:

I grew up as a good Unitarian Universalist in South Minneapolis. My mother was an ardent feminist, my school was Montessori and Martin Luther King, Jr., was my hero. I heard stories about the righteous sixties, when my parent's generation marched to make everything equal, and reveled that I had been born in a time when injustice was no longer present. My friends and I were all well-fed, well-housed and happy.

When I was fifteen, I began work in an inner-city community center. I had grown up in community centers, and loved being around them. This center was about two miles away from my house, and within walking distance of my school, both of which were multi-racial neighborhoods. So it surprised me when, on the first morning of work, I discovered that I was the only White person in the entire building! I was totally mystified. How was it possible that only blocks away from my own neighborhood the whole world turned Black? ...

Then I began to listen to the stories of the children around me. They talked about their cousins sharing rooms with them and the rats that lived in their basements. Halfway through the summer, one of our girls' mothers was murdered by a crack dealer she owed. Life on this side of the freeway was obviously different than life in my corner of the world, just two miles away.

I was astounded that these things still existed, and that all the people who seemed to be experiencing them were Black. Hadn't my parents taken care of that? How was it possible that after all the glorious stories of Selma, JFK and the

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<sup>1</sup> In *Standing Before Us*, edited by Dorothy Emerson (Skinner, 2000).

women's movement, some children were still coming to my morning programs hungry? I thought that kind of poverty and segregation was a thing of the past.

I'm not happy to realize that my ideas of perpetual equality were not able to come to fruition for all children when I was a child. I do not want to see another little girl or boy I am working with come to me in anger about being hungry, or not being able to get medicines for their chronic illnesses. Let us work together so that the next generation of Unitarian Universalist children will not have to be taken by surprise over the injustices for children in their country. Let us bring our faith to action.<sup>2</sup>

Although in this situation the author identifies the two worlds she inhabits by race, increasingly in today's world the contrast is between rich and poor regardless of race. According to ABC News online just this past week, this division is growing as a result of the current economic downturn, so that now more than one in seven Americans lives below the poverty line. As the commentator put it: "The number of people living in poverty is larger than the population of Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Michigan, Rhode Island, Mississippi and Wyoming combined."<sup>3</sup> More than half of these people are children.

It's scary to think about what it means to be living in a world, in a country, where so many children are growing up in poverty. And the poverty they live in is dangerous.

Michelle Walsh was the founder of Stand High Stand United, one of the UU Urban Ministry's programs you are sharing your offering with today. In 2002 she sent the following email to those who volunteer and support the program:

As I sit here tonight, a 10 year old girl lies dying at Boston Medical Center, an innocent victim of gang related fire in Roxbury that is reminiscent of the type of violence that created the Stand High/Stand United youth program in 1991 ... Do I count myself lucky that neither I nor the SHSU community know this particular child? Or do I worry with the community that something similar is going to befall one of the children we count as "our own?" (Especially since the shooting occurred very near to where many of "our children" live.) Either way, the emotions are selfishly rooted in personal connections to people, and my imagination of the pain that this child's family is going through is rooted in experience.

The day of this child's shooting, SHSU had been on a highly successful outing to Six Flags New England with 70+ members of the Roxbury/Dorchester communities we serve. I was particularly touched that Chet, the school bus driver from Doherty's Garage, used his own money to win stuffed animals for many of the young children on the trip. I honored that "random act of kindness" in church on Sunday with a candle lighting, and then read in the paper shortly afterwards of

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<sup>2</sup> Christana Wille McKnight, story submitted for Promise the Children newsletter.

<sup>3</sup> Lyneka Little, "Defining America's New Face of Poverty," ABC News online, 9-25-10, <http://abcnews.go.com/m/screen?id=11682134&pid=74>

the ... shooting with very immediate fear that it might be someone I or the community knew. It is a terrible fear to have to live with, and families in Roxbury and Dorchester have to live with this fear on a continuous basis for their children, but still need to operate with hope and the experience of joy in their lives.<sup>4</sup>

That's the challenge: to be fully aware of the danger and the fear and yet to operate with hope and the experience of joy in our lives.

The first step is to become fully aware of the implications of living in a society where so many children are at risk and to seek to understand how their lives interconnect with ours.

In addition to children living in poverty and in low income families and communities with inadequate safety and schools, there are many other risks that all children face. For instance, right now bullying is again in the news, with several recent suicides of teens who had recently come out or were outed as lesbian or gay. There are growing health risks with the increase in asthma and autism among children, perhaps caused by environmental dangers. To say nothing of the economy which puts an increasing number of children at risk, including some whose families used to be solidly middle class.

The danger of falling out of the middle class or never having been there in the first place has a direct effect on a child's future—and on ours. Yesterday at the One Nation rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, Dr. Frederick Hayes from Dallas TX called us all to account: "Shame on our nation when a child's education depends on their zip code!"<sup>5</sup>

According to the Stand for Children Leadership Center, 22% of low-income Massachusetts 8th graders score at or above proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This means that 78% of low-income children in our very own state score below proficient. Many of these children will drop out before finishing high school. And that affects the rest of their lives—and ours. The dropouts from the class of 2008 alone will cost Massachusetts almost \$4.2 billion in lost wages.<sup>6</sup>

This costs our entire society, not just for the prisons some of these children will inhabit and the social services they will require, but more importantly for the destroyed social fabric that so much lost potential creates.

In her presentation at General Assembly in 2008, Michele Walsh noted:

As Unitarian Universalists, we profess a faith that we are dependent on this interdependent web of which we are a part ... but also that the fullness of the

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<sup>4</sup> Email, 7-20-02.

<sup>5</sup> NAACP One Nation rally, 10-2-10.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.stand.org/Page.aspx?pid=1386>

web is beyond us as individuals. ... Intuitively, we understand that children represent the most vulnerable threads of that web, and that they need a broad, sturdy network of threads in mutual support.<sup>7</sup>

We understand intellectually that each child has promise and potential, but how does that understanding become part of our hearts and souls? What might motivate us to connect on a deeper level with children at risk who are part of our interdependent web?

Rev. Walsh suggests that the best way to do this is for us to remember who and what in our lives gives us faith in ourselves to develop our own promise and potential. She goes on:

If we have received deeply from others, *and become conscious* of the sources of these gifts, then our faith and theological understanding are mutually enriching, and mind and body are connected ... Our natural impulse becomes to care deeply and passionately about the welfare of the most vulnerable of society, children, including children who are significantly different from our own ...

[T]his impulse leads us to reach out to others in solidarity and commitment to strengthen and sustain the web that supports and nourishes them. We do this because we see and understand in a more integrated way that the child *is our self* on whom we are dependent.<sup>8</sup>

This is the source of my hope that we as Unitarian Universalists will increasingly take seriously the need to work on behalf of all children. I have faith that the day is not far off when we will, in fact, come to a deeper understanding that every child is our precious child, including those who live in poverty in our own backyards. Understanding this, we will join together in more effective advocacy to change the economic and educational systems that put children at risk, and we will reach out to children nearby and support them in growing into their full potential. Together we can and will create a world where all children can be glad.

Jonathan Kozol, educator and author of award-winning books on race, poverty and education, reminds us to: "Pick battles big enough to matter, small enough to win." One of the ways to do this is to sign up as a volunteer advocate with Promise the Children. Promise is the only UU organization that focuses specifically on advocacy for children and youth, especially those living in low-income families and communities. Right now Promise is engaged in a leadership development process and is considering how we might expand our effectiveness as UUs in support of all children. Please let me know if you would like to join this effort.

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<sup>7</sup> What motivates UU's to support other people's children? Promise the Children panel presentation at General Assembly, June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Whatever you do, I hope you will leave our time together this morning with stronger feeling of connection to those children for whom your support, whatever shape that takes, can make a real difference. When we work together to save all our children, we save ourselves in the process.

One of those children might be Damia Gates, a fourth grade girl in one of the nation's worst schools. Her brief poem seems to me like a prayer:

You may think I am in shadow  
But inside I am a sun.<sup>9</sup>

I pray for the day when her sun shines brightly for all to see and enjoy. May this day, with our help, be soon.

PRAYER/MEDITATION—We Pray for the Children, by Gary Kowalski, Worship Web

We pray for the children,  
For the voiceless, for the innocent, for the vulnerable, for the least powerful among us,  
and those most in need of our protection.

We pray for the children,  
Who depend on adults to make their world safe, to create networks of care and learning,  
and to provide the schools and doctors and counselors and teachers that support them  
in their growth.

We pray for the children,  
Who do not understand partisan politics, who are not registered to vote, who are not  
interested in debating points, but who have a very deep interest in clean air and pure  
water and a world without war.

We pray for the children,  
Who trust their elders to exercise wisdom, to act responsibly, but who are so often  
disappointed and betrayed in that trust.

We pray for the children,  
Who are satisfied with so little—a warm blanket, a roof overhead, a good pair of  
sneakers—but who often lack even the barest of necessities.

We pray for the children,  
For the ones on honor rolls and the ones on drugs, for the well-adjusted and those who  
have been battered and traumatized by life.

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<sup>9</sup> From the files of Promise the Children.

We pray for the children,  
For those tormented by bullies at school and for the bullies themselves, tormented by  
demons we cannot even imagine.

We pray for the children,  
For girls and boys who see far too much sex and violence on TV and are assaulted and  
seduced with unhealthy images of femininity and masculinity.

We pray for the children,  
Who remind us of all that is tender and playful in ourselves, and of our own capacity for  
laughter and for love.

We pray for the children,  
Who contain all the promise of generations to come and all the possibilities of tomorrow.

Help us, we pray, to be the guardians and advocates of all children everywhere, with  
eyes to see that all are children of God.

Amen. Blessed Be. Om Shanti.

#### CLOSING WORDS

You are part of the interdependent web of all existence. You are connected to everyone  
and everything else in the web. Feel that connection now in the hands you touch and the  
common air we breathe.

May you trust that all you will ever say or do belongs in the web of life. What you do  
matters. May your work for healing and justice come back to you as your greatest  
blessing.

Amen. Blessed Be. Om Shanti.