

“Children of One Family”
Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church
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How are the children?

Our colleague Patrick O’Neill once wrote that an East African exchange student told him of a traditional greeting among the Masai people, the nomadic herders and famous warriors of East Africa. As part of an extended greeting, the speaker asks: “And how are the children?” The traditional response, “All the children are well,” means that all is well with the community: Its priorities are in place, and the daily struggle for existence is not preventing care for the powerless.

So, how are the children?

According to the 2009 California Report Card of Children Now, a nonpartisan research and advocacy organization focused on children’s health and education, one million children in California are expected to be without health insurance this year. Some 16% of California’s adolescents are overweight or obese, at high risk for diabetes, heart disease, and other health issues. Meanwhile, according to the organization First 5 Los Angeles, decisions made in last year’s state budget process mean that as much as \$80 million will be cut from child welfare programs this year; \$50 million from Healthy Families, the health insurance program for poor children, and \$61 million from county funding to administer Medi-Cal, California’s version of Medicaid. It is also likely that this year as many as 230,000 children and their families will lose Cal-Works cash assistance and job-search benefits.

All the children are not well.

Less than half of California’s 3- and 4-year-old children attend preschool; one in five high school students dropped out in 2007. This year state funding for community colleges has been slashed by 16%, and funding for universities by 20%. Education accounts for approximately 40% of California’s state budget, but this year public elementary and secondary schools were targeted for 60% of budget cuts, totaling more than \$17 billion. The results, so far, have been larger class sizes, decreased teaching and support staff, and reduced resources for libraries, breakfast and lunch programs, and instructional materials.

All the children are not well.

Some of them are not safe. The recent terrible events at Richmond High School highlighted the deadly environment too many of our children live in today. A 2008 report from the Children’s Defense Fund’s cited the most recent data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which show that 3,006 children and teens died in 2005 from firearms. California was the leader in this grim race, with 474 gun deaths among our children and teens in 2005. As Marian Wright Edelman wrote in the CDF report: “Imagine a tragedy like the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting occurring every four days. . . . As implausible as it might seem, this is our reality:

guns kill 8 children and teens every day in America. In 2005, guns killed more preschoolers than law enforcement officers in the line of duty.”

As educator and children’s advocate Geoffrey Canada pointed out in his 1995 book *Fist Stick Knife Gun*: “. . .there already is a death penalty on the streets of our cities and towns. . . . Any child living under siege knows that the boy down the block will kill him or her instantly—no trial, no defense attorney, no copping a plea, just one second alive, the next second dead.”

And even this reality pales with the horror that is visited on countless children living in war zones, where the geopolitical conflicts of adults create nightmares from which the children never awaken.

All the children are not well.

How have we let this happen? How is it that as a culture we fail so terribly to give our children the urgent priority they need and deserve?

Our culture’s approach to childrearing has been based on the assumption that children are economically, morally, and physically the responsibility of their parents, their birth or adoptive families. This paradigm treats children as an extension of their parents’ lives. Individual autonomy, and by extension the autonomy of the family unit, is the unspoken assumption underlying our approach to children’s issues and children’s lives.

In the American cultural view, my children are my business; your children are your business. That’s how we convince ourselves that the children in statistics and reports are not our children. It’s not that we don’t have compassion. There are heroic examples of individuals and groups coming together to work for children with whom they have no biological connection. The assumption I’m talking about is a cultural one: As a society, we assume that each family is ultimately responsible only for their own children.

Now you probably knew this already: This is a counter-cultural institution. “Your children are not your children; they are the sons and the daughters of life’s longing for itself.” Khalil Gibran’s words express something that has been central to Unitarian and Universalist faith for generations: We believe that all humankind is related, not divided into separate groups, “ours” and “yours,” “we” and “they.”

The cultural assumption is seductive, because it uses the tender, fierce love we have for our biological and adopted children to mute our compassion for those we think of as “other people’s children.” Perhaps you’ve felt it; I know I have: When I turn on the radio or click into CNN.com or pick up the newspaper and see the latest instance of our society’s neglect, my first thought is for how it will affect Liam or Garner. When my heart aches as I read of another child’s life lost or marred by violence and hatred, I can’t help but think: “I’m so grateful it wasn’t my child.”

But it was. In the first place, it is a comforting fantasy to think that the children who sang for us so beautifully, the children who listened to Cynthia’s story, will not all face the same struggles

and perils that all children face in this world we have made. The youth who are learning about human relationships and sexuality in the Our Whole Lives class right now, and the older youth who will sell you doughnuts in a few minutes, are living with the siren call of substance abuse and irresponsible sexuality, are living with the threat of violence in their schools, are trying to learn how to live a meaningful life in a cultural climate which lies to them that they can fulfill their lives through shopping, partying, and playing with computers.

In the second place, children are not “yours” or “mine,” they are ours. We are all children of a single, undivided, human family. This is a core truth of our faith tradition, and it calls us to confront our culture’s indifference toward its children with the conviction that all of these children are ours. Our faith calls us to step forward, not from outrage, but from compassion to say: we must treat our children better than this.

Advocacy is one thing; learning to live from the values we advocate is something else again. It’s all very well to talk about being children of a single human family, but when you get right into the nitty-gritty of real families and real children, we need more than abstractions and principles. If the church is a counter-cultural institution, then our most radical act may be to learn together how to live a counter-cultural life.

Scholar Cornel West puts it this way: “Prophetic churches, prophetic mosques, prophetic synagogues can all play a fundamental role in nurturing children by transmitting noncommercial values. I’m talking about love, care, service to others, sacrifice, risk, community, struggles for justice, and solidarity.”

This is the church community Marian Wright Edelman describes growing up in, a place where children learn that they are surrounded by caring adults who keep an eye on them and celebrate their achievements and expect the best of them. It is a place where children learn who they are—and whose they are.

That is what our faith calls us to be. On Christmas Eve, we’ll celebrate a Child Dedication in the 4:00 service. Our Child Dedication Ceremony is not a purification of the children from some imagined stain that puts their soul in danger; we don’t think children need any such cleansing. Rather, the ceremony is a declaration of our dedication to being that community of history and memory for our children. It is our promise as a congregation to teach them love, truth, justice, and the need for struggle to bring the world of beloved community into being.

If you’re wondering what that kind of community will look like, you can see signs of it around us. We’ve made some good beginnings. If you come to one of our community dinners, you’ll see children who know many of the adults present, adults who are glad to see them and who will treat them with respect. Our religious education programs are giving our children and youth opportunities to explore and deepen their religious identities. Our multigenerational services are well-attended by adults, and families with younger children are gradually coming to trust that other adults won’t shush the children or ignore them, and that the service leaders will work hard to keep children and adults alike engaged and interested. We’ve had some community social events like the Multi-Cultural Potluck and Game Night that were opportunities for children, youth, and adults to interact outside our immediate families.

What else will it look like, this community where we learn what it means to care for all our children? I think above all it will be a place where adults, youth, and children are genuinely aware of and involved in the realities of each others' lives, beyond the lines of our biological and adoptive families. In one of our Vision In Action conversations this fall, we imagined together some of the ways we could move toward that goal. We imagined that adults, children, and youth would know each other's names. We imagined a religious education program taught mostly by non-parents. We imagined a fellowship hour where the teens and adults don't quickly form separate circles, but flow together in conversation and friendship.

I imagine a community where many adults aren't afraid to use those names we've learned to remind our children and youth that in our church we have high expectations for good people like them. I imagine adult friends who would ask our children to set aside their PSPs, DS's and iPhones and take a hike, or have a conversation, or lend a hand with a social justice effort. I imagine a community where the children know that there are any number of adults who, in Geoffrey Canada's words, "love them enough to embarrass them on the street" with a hug or a joke or a memory of their younger days. What do you imagine?

Cornel West says, "Historically for so many, but especially for black people, the church has been an extended family. The church gave you a sense of history, memory, and the need for struggle. The church at its best was the upholder of truth, love, and justice."

The more we learn together what it means to raise our children in such a community, the more we become part of their real lives, the more we will know how urgently we must gather our courage and turn to the world around us to call for compassion and care for all our children. As we become that community of truth, love, and justice, we will be able to speak not just from conviction, but from knowledge and lived experience as we remind our communities, our state, our nation and our world that we are all children of one family. And one day we will know: All the children are well.