

“The Children Are Well!”

Children widen the circle of our being in ways that are limitless.

Every baby that's born connects us to our history, our own mothers and fathers, grandparents and unknown forbears who brought new life to the world in each successive generation.

Every baby that's born links us to the future, to a world yet to come that belongs to our descendants and that we hold in trust for our posterity whom we will never know.

Each child connects us to nature, to the innocence and exuberance of a world always hatching newborns: kittens and pups and lambs and babes.

Each child reminds us of the kinship we share with people of other lands and races who love their young as purely and tenderly as we do.

Each child connects us to the universe, to the holy mysteries of birth and death and becoming from which we all emerge.

Every culture celebrates the arrival of a newborn in its own way. Among the Mandinka people of West Africa, for example ...

By ancient custom, the first week after the baby was born was a time of thoughtful searching for the family, but especially for the father. It was his task to find a suitable name for the child, a name that might for better or worse reflect the baby's future destiny. A good name meant a good life in store, while a poorly chosen name meant trouble. So choosing rightly was important.

All that week, the father visited the homes of each family in the village, inviting them to the naming ceremony, which would take place on the eighth day, the day when the child would be welcomed into the tribe.

When the day finally came, the women would gather with their calabash containers, some filled with sour milk and others with sweet cakes of rice and honey. The tan-tang drums would play, alerting kinfolk from many miles distant who would make the journey as soon as they heard the drum talk tell the news.

Then when all were present, the father would stride before the assembled people of the village, beside his wife, and as the others watched, he would lift the child for everyone to see, then whisper the name he had chosen three times into the baby's ear, quietly, inaudible except to the little one hearing it for the very first time. Only then would the name be shared with the rest of the community, for the Mandinka felt the child should be the very first to hear the name by which he or she would be called in this world.

Later that night, when the festivities were over, the father would finish the ritual by taking his child with him, just the two of them, under the twinkling stars of the Milky Way. Holding the baby high aloft, facing heaven, he would softly speak the words, "*Fend killing dorong leh warrata ka iteh tee,*" which means, "Behold, the only thing greater than yourself."

It's an enormously vast and old and beautiful universe we're a part of, the words seem to say, a cosmos that, in the words of physicist Freeman Dyson, appears infinite in all directions. And yet each of us is at home here, each of us belongs on this Earth as much as a tree, a river, a mountain and even more so, each of us a point of light as bright and shining as the stars that gave us birth.

"Behold the only thing greater than yourself." It's a blessing to be here, an act of unearned grace to be born into this world with hearts to love and minds to explore, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be a part of the human family, and though we forget it daily, lose sight of the wonder of existence almost hourly, it's always possible to be awakened.

Often it's a child who restores us to consciousness. One mother in our congregation, for instance, said that she was more of a mystic because of her children. When I asked her to elaborate, she recalled moments from her daughters' early childhood when the girls said things that showed insight beyond their years. In first grade, for example, one of the girls arrived home from school one day in the mood to talk. "You know, mother," she confided, "Kids at school say nobody's perfect. But I don't think that's right." What do you mean," the mother asked, seeking more information. "I mean all of us are perfect, aren't we?" the girl continued. "We may make mistakes; the things we do aren't perfect; but who we *are* is perfect."

There is reason to believe that children are naturally at home with spiritual things. One father in our congregation recalls that for years, their family observed a weekly ritual called "Candle Time," in which the whole household gathered in a darkened room, illuminated only by the soft flickering of the flames, to share their thoughts. One evening, one of the boys began to speak quite spontaneously about God. "This candle is God," the boy began with emotion. "The light is God; the darkness is God." One by one, he named each of the objects and the people in the room. Then he began to enumerate the trees and grasses, the streams and mountains and living creatures who roamed the wider world, and the moon and planets beyond it. This universe and every entity within it, the boy proclaimed, is divine. I asked the father if anyone had taught the boy these things; he was not aware of it. It appeared to be a realization the child had achieved on his own—an immediate insight into the sacred quality of all that is.

In their honesty and simplicity, their lack of prejudice and pretense, children can be our teachers and guides. But let me ask: How many of the names of the children who are here with us this morning do you know? Do you know Henry and Maddie? Have you met Augusta or Lucy or Geoffrey or Emma? I confess, I'm always trying to learn and remember the names of our youngest members, but I know it's worth the effort. For as

the Mandinka people understand, a name is a very precious and personal possession. A name is a portent and promise of what lies in store, and each child's real name is hope, surprise, the unexpected and unforeseeable waiting to emerge in a tired and weary world. For as my own faith tells me, each of these children is unique and without parallel, each one an individual but each also the offspring of those same wild and energetic forces that have shaped the cosmos, the repository of an inherent worth and dignity that dwells in all people but that, to me, is especially evident in youth.

Maybe like another African people, the Masai, we should learn to greet each other on Sunday morning and the rest of the week, not with a casual "hello, how are you?" but with a more earnest salutation, "How are the children?" What kind of world are building for them? And what legacy do we want to leave when our lives are through? Are we modeling the behavior we want them to follow? And will they recall our names among the ancestors worthy of remembrance? Questions for each of us to ponder as we strive to create the kind of community that can answer with a collective affirmation: all the children are well.