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Matters of Consequence

The June 1st Stand For Children event in Washington, DC, was my five-year-old granddaughter Christina's introduction to political activism.

When I first got word of plans for the event, I called my son and asked if Christi could participate with me and invited him and Christi's mom. Work-related complications prevented Christi's mom from joining us so it was just us three: my son Chris, my granddaughter Christi, and me (Mea Mau).

We arrived in DC the afternoon of May 31st and headed for the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History where Christi met her first prehistoric creatures. I haven't heard "Look! Look!" so continuously since my Dick and Jane basal reader days. Keeping up with Christi as she ran awestruck from one exhibit to the next was no mean feat, and insisting that she remain attached to us at the hand was impossible.

On our exhausted trek back to our hotel we halted at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Chris was the one to say "Look!" but it was Christi who announced, "Mea Mau, it's the White House; my favorite president lives there!" (That turned out to be George Washington, not Bill Clinton, and a brief history lesson ensued. Christi's cheerful response was, "Oh yeah, Bill Clinton is my favorite president." She isn't hard to please.)

The morning of June 1st we headed back down 16th Street and onto the mall. As we approached the reflecting pool and looked towards the Lincoln Memorial we were gratified to realize that we were in the first wave of participants. We wove our way through the denser crowd listening to America Sings in front of the Memorial and made our way up the steps and into Mr. Lincoln's presence. Christi halted in silence looking up at the massive figure and thoughtful countenance of the 16th president. My son broke the silence by reminding her of a Ren and Stimpy show in which the statue played a prominent part, but his attempt at light-heartedness did not break Christi's moment of connection with a history she cannot yet comprehend.

Since it appeared that the Event would not be in full swing for some time, we decided to pay our respects at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Wall. Christi had scant interest in this structure but was fascinated by the flowers, notes, pictures, and a military medal and ribbon left by the living as a tribute to the honored dead. She reminded me, as she often does, that she will love me even when I'm dead like the people who are named on the surface of the wall.

By this time the hundreds of thousands of children and their families were arriving by bus and streaming into the area around the reflecting pool where they would listen as Marian Wright Edelman and dozens of prominent and ordinary citizens would address the issues of the Stand.

On the chance that you were out of the country or off the planet on June 1st, I'll list a few of our concerns.

We owe our children this day of support and a lifetime of commitment because:

Every day in America

- 15 children are killed by gunfire
- 2,660 babies are born into poverty
- 2,833 students drop out of school
- 8,493 children are reported abused or neglected

Among Industrialized Countries, America Ranks:

- 12th among 15 nations in mathematics achievement of 13-year-olds
- 16th in the living standards of our poorest children
- 18th in the gap between rich and poor children
- 18th in infant mortality

After eating lunch and briefly touring the Air and Space Museum we turned back toward the Washington Monument. When we mounted the rise and looked off toward the Lincoln Memorial we were reassured that children, families, and their advocates had come to make history as the area from 17th Street to the Lincoln Memorial was now packed with people. The overflow spilled onto the mall around the Washington Monument where a gospel music festival was in full swing.

We three stood holding hands silently surveying the spectacle spread out before us proud to take our place as advocates of children's right to a safe present and secure future.

Later, Christi and I lay on my bed in our hotel room and I told her I wanted to write something about our participation in Stand for Children. Since she often sits and writes with me (we maintain a joint journal of our visits), she thought that was a good idea. We were resting before dinner and so we just talked about what I might write. I asked if I could interview her and she said, "Sure!"

- Mea Mau: What do you think people should know about Stand for Children?
Christi: There were lots of people and we walked a lot. My legs hurt.
Mea Mau: What do you think grown ups need to know about kids that they maybe don't understand ... something that might help them take better care of children.
Christi: Well, children have lots and lots and lots of love and joy in their hearts to give away. I'm full of love and joy for my family and everyone. (Christi named a list of relatives and friends, then her dog and cat.)
Mea Mau: Do you think grown ups have less love and joy? Is that the problem?
Christi: Yes! They (grown ups) would have more love and joy if they were like me.
Mea Mau: I'm not sure I understand what you mean. How can we be more like you?
Christi: You have to give away your love and joy and then you get more. Then you will be happy like me.
Mea Mau: Sounds pretty simple. I'm going to write that down. Okay?
Christi: Yeah.

It has taken time and reflection to realize that Christi's responses to my probes were not simply the full-of-herself glib murmurings of a much-loved first child. My interpretation based on Christi's context of living is that she was describing and defining her version of unconditional acceptance and positive regard.

At age five Christi is discovering limitations and expectations placed in her path by adults. Her responses may have their origins in the good days when her very move was met with applause. Our attempts to socialize and civilize her are sometimes met with protest. She must be wondering what happened to us adults, why have we become so mean-spirited and joyless in our responses to her ways of exploring the world and locating her niche. Have we traded our spontaneity and ready applause for a joyless conditional policy of caring for her.

Maybe Christina has named the problem. Perhaps if she and thousands of her preschool peers could appear before Congress and explain the need to drop the conditions currently placed on our willingness to care for the nation's children there would be love and joy in our hearts and peace on the planet. If Christi's love and joy theory works we might even export our excess love and joy.

I think the next step in advocacy for children is to send busloads of Christi and other five-year-olds to Capitol Hill to enumerate the Love and Joy policy before the House and Senate. Maybe they could address Christi's favorite president and the press as well.