

A Full-Sized Soul

by Donne Hayden

Those of you who know me know that I usually speak on Sunday morning on about something that has come up several times during the week and so a theme develops. I'll bet most of you know what I'm going to talk about today. Babies have been uppermost in my thoughts and experience this week, of course, because my daughter had a baby who is now one week old—a fine lad with thick black hair who, on arrival, was 20 inches long and weighed 7 pounds, 11 ½ ounces. His name is Silas and he's about the size of a loaf of bread.

I anticipated the arrival of this child with a mixture of joy and fear, sentiments shared by many of us at the birth of a child. Joy, of course, because a new little soul has joined us on earth. Fear because we are so aware of all that can happen to a child.

I want to talk about fear by making reference to one place in the New Testament where I am willing to take the scriptures literally: it occurs in Mark 9: 42-48, Matthew 18:1-11, and Luke 17:1-2.¹ Here it is in Mark, the earliest gospel as Jesus speaks to his followers:

¹ **Luke 17:1-2:** ¹⁷Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ²It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.

Matthew 18, Verses 1-11: ¹⁸At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' ²He called a child, whom he put among them, ³and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

⁶If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷Woe to the world because of stumbling-blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes!

⁸If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹And if your eye

'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

This is harsh. So why am I inclined to take it literally? Because, while these verses have been interpreted so that “these little ones” refers to all of us, I suggest that Jesus was speaking specifically about sexual abuse of children. For one thing, the word translated as “put a stumbling block before” is the Greek word *skandalizō*, which is related to our word “scandalous,” whose meanings include “to interfere with, to entice to sin.” Do any of you remember when people used the phrase “interfere with” as a euphemism for sexual abuse? I remember my great-grandmother using the phrase that way—as in, “Had she been interfered with?” meaning had she been sexually violated.

I suggest that these teachings attributed to Jesus are very direct and specific: If you are attracted to children, if your hand can't help touching a child inappropriately, cut your hand off; it would be better for you. If your feet take you to places where a child is vulnerable,

causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

¹⁰ 'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.

cut your feet off; it's better for you. If your eye is enticed by a child in an inappropriate way, poke your eye out. That would be better for you, as well as the child. To me it makes sense that Jesus would say such things; we know, for instance, from historical documents of the time that children were frequently exploited in sexual and inappropriate ways. We also know that such cycles of abuse have continued through the centuries into the present. So one of the fears associated with having a new baby around is the awareness of how many predators are out there.

One of the most frightening things to do when one has a new baby in the house is to read the newspaper or watch the news. In addition to stories of child abuse, the world itself is frightening: war in Iraq & Afghanistan, a horrifying oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico, madmen killing children in China. How does one deal with bringing a child into this world?

Over thirty years ago, I first struggled with the decision of whether or not to bring a child into the world. What right, I wondered, had I to bring another being into a world where the Viet Nam war still raged; where riots and assassinations were all too common in my own country; where overpopulation was already a concern?

When I was working through this material for today, I found a couple of poems that speak to my condition, first as a mother in the 1970s and now as a grandmother in 2010. The following poem expresses some of what I felt as I considered having my own child:

*I listen to the women of Rio
when they try to speak
of street children murdered,
and my heart is breaking.*

I listen to the women of Chernobyl

*tell of childish blank faces
grown old and lifeless
and my heart is breaking.*

*I listen to the women of Bhopal
whisper the grotesqueness
of deformity and disease,
and my heart is breaking . . .*

*I listen to the women of Addis Ababa
describing empty stomachs
and drought,*

*and my heart is breaking.
I listen to the women of Cyprus
and Ireland and Sri Lanka
South Africa.
I hear conflict's pain,
and my heart is breaking.*

*But also,
I listen to the Madres, and the Women in Black,
and the African mamas. I listen to
the young women of Asia and the Pacific Rim.
I listen to the female voices of North Africa,
and the Middle East and Eastern Europe.
And I hear
the Power of Everywoman,
Everywhere.
Then, I rejoice,
I hope,
I take heart*

—Elayne Clift, "I listen to the women"

I didn't actually find that much comfort in the power of "everywoman," but finally I rationalized it this way: however bad things might be in the world in the 1970s, humanity had also made great advances; things weren't as bad as they had been. Generally speaking, my

child had a better chance to survive and be happy than any child born in previous centuries or in other countries.

Last November, when my daughter told me she was going to have a baby, the same sort of scenario played out in my mind—the war in Iraq and Afghanistan continuing unabated after 9 years; terrorist plots and acts of random violence characterizing the world-at-large; the impending doom of global warming, exacerbated by overpopulation. If anything, the world seems a more frightening place than it was in the seventies. Again, though, the odds favor survival for the child born to my daughter a week ago in Cincinnati, Ohio, with good chances of his having a healthy and perhaps happy life. I have gained perspective as a grandmother that I did not have when I was in my 20s, and so another poem speaks to me in 2010.

This may be one of my all-time favorite poems. It was written by the Nobel-Prize-winning poet from Poland, *Wisława Szymborska*, who was born in 1923 and lived through the Great Depression and Nazi occupation of her country, and the years afterward through the Cold War. In spite of all the horrors she witnessed, she has a wonderful sense of perspective and playful humor. (Just in case you don't get it, none of the people or places in this poem are real people or places.) Here is her poem, "A Tale Begun":

*The world is never ready
for the birth of a child.*

*Our ships are not yet back from Winnland.
We still have to get over the S. Gothard pass.
We've got to outwit the watchmen on the desert of Thor,
fight our way through the sewers to Warsaw's center,
gain access to King Harold the Butterpat,
and wait until the downfall of Minister Fouché.
Only in Acapulco
can we begin anew.*

*We've run out of bandages,
 matches, hydraulic presses, arguments, and water.
 We haven't got the trucks, we haven't got the Mings' support.
 This skinny horse won't be enough to bribe the sheriff.
 No news so far about the Tartars' captives.
 We'll need a warmer cave for winter
 and someone who can speak Harari.*

*We don't know whom to trust in Nineveh,
 what conditions the Prince-Cardinal will decree,
 which names Beria has still got inside his files.
 They say Karol the Hammer strikes tomorrow at dawn.*

*In this situation, let's appease Cheops,
 report ourselves of our own free will,
 change faiths,
 pretend to be friends with the Doge,
 and say that we've got nothing to do with the Kwabe tribe.*

*Time to light the fires.
 Let's send a cable to grandma in Zabierzów.
 Let's untie the knots in the yurt's leather straps.*

*May delivery be easy,
 may our child grow and be well.
 Let him be happy from time to time
 and leap over abysses.
 Let his heart have strength to endure
 and his mind be awake and reach far.*

*But not so far
 that it sees into the future.
 Spare him
 that one gift,
 O heavenly powers.*

—*Wisława Szymborska*

This last week, holding my little grandson, I marveled that in that tiny package is all that is required for my grandson to be a unique being—it's all there. Though he can't yet express it

yet, within his 7-pound-body, Silas has multiple personality traits, who-know-what-talents and gifts, and potential character traits that will bloom or die as his life unfolds. Perhaps most marvelous to me is that Silas contains *right now* “that of God”; he has the Light Within, the Seed of Light and Life; he has a soul. And you know what? I think it’s full-fledged.

I’ve come to the conclusion that while we may arrive on the planet with a soul in search of further growth experiences, we arrive with a whole soul, and that children understand at a soul-level from the beginning much more than we give them credit for. I suspect that little Silas is already conscious at the soul-level of much that goes on around him. I base this on one of my own memories of a time before I could speak.

Here is what led me to think of that memory. Yesterday at the conflict resolution workshop, the “fight or flight” impulse came up, an impulse apparently triggered by the *amygdala*, which is an “almond-shaped sub-cortical structure in the temporal lobe” of our brain. Sharon Kowatch pointed out recent research indicates that our earliest memories are in images rather than words. This rings true with me because I have a vivid memory of my first Christmas when I was eleven months old. I know when it happened because of who is in the memory. It was the first time I met the man who would become my stepfather.² A little background. My mother had married my father when both of them were eighteen; he was in the Navy and stationed in San Diego. When she became pregnant with me, she returned to her grandparents’ home in New Mexico. (Papa and Grandma, her grandparents/my great-grandparents raised her and my aunt, so home was always where Papa and Grandma were.)

² “The amygdala appears to decide which experiences are important enough to store, a decision based on the emotional significance of the events in a decoding process that affects both learning and memory.” “Special Report: Area of Brain Found to Play Key Role in Initiating Memory Storage,” Center for NeuroSkills website, accessed May 23, 2010, <http://www.neuroskills.com/tbi/pr-amygdala.shtml>

After I was born, my father came home on leave, but then he returned to California, and my mother and I lived with Papa and Grandma in a small house in Portales, New Mexico. One night a dark strange man came to visit the house; he came with my mother. He and Papa put me in the back seat a car—I think this was the first time I had ever been in an automobile. Papa and the stranger talked to me about going downtown to see the Christmas lights—I know I could not have been talking yet, but I understood what they were saying. (If you have ever studied a language, you know there is a point at which you understand almost everything anyone says, you just can't formulate a response.) I have vivid images of the darkness (it may have been the first time I was ever outside at night, too) and the colored lights strung around the square and courthouse. When we got back to the house, my mother and Grandma met us, exclaiming that we had “just missed Santa Claus,” who had been there and brought me presents. I remember most clearly *knowing* that this was a lie. I had no sense of judgment about it—I just knew what they were telling me was not true.

Having such pre-speech memories has made me aware that those who cannot read or talk still have intelligence. Memories stored visually and experientially are perhaps stronger than those we have after language and thus after analysis and interpretation get involved. So I am very conscious of what images my newest grandchild might be storing up in his memory.

This week, I've encountered several things related to the child's inner life and the notion that at some level, children are not as much of a blank slate as we might like to think. For example, I picked up and began reading a book Jim Kimmel loaned me, *Ender's Game*, by one of Jim's favorite authors, Orson Scott Card. In the Introduction, Card describes the response to *Ender's Game* from a guidance counselor who worked with gifted kids; she “loathed the book,”

Card writes. She complained that his “depiction of gifted children was hopelessly unrealistic. They just don’t talk like that, she said. They don’t think like that.”³ Card says that “It was important to her and to others, to believe that children don’t actually think or speak the way the children in *Ender’s Game* think and speak. . . . Yet I knew—I *knew*—that this was one of the truest things about *Ender’s Game*.” When Card continues his reaction to the guidance counselor’s objection, he writes: “*never in my entire childhood did I feel like a child. I felt like a person all along—the same person that I am today. I never felt I spoke childishly. I never felt that my emotions and desires were somehow less real than adult emotions and desires.*”⁴

More than my experience as a mother or grandmother, or teacher, my experience as a *child* leads me to agree with Card. Did you ever, *ever* feel like a child inside? Didn’t you always feel whole and complete? That your thoughts and emotions were less real than those of the adults around you? Among the adults in my family, my feelings certainly carried less weight—but they never *felt* trivial. I also feel that *at some level* I always knew right from wrong.

So another article that caught my eye this week was titled “The Moral Life of Babies”⁵ by Paul Bloom, a psychology professor involved in studies at the Infant Cognition Center at Yale University in collaboration with his wife, Karen Wynn, “who runs the lab.” In experiments with toddlers, researchers discovered that children under a year old demonstrate an awareness of justice, “the capacity and willingness to judge the actions of others,” and an ability to

³ Orson Scott Card, *Ender’s Game*, p. xix.

⁴ Card, p. xx.

⁵ Paul Bloom “The Moral Life of Babies,” *The New York Times Magazine* online, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/magazine/09babies-t.html?ref=magazine&pagewanted=all>

distinguish between “altruism and nastiness.”⁶ Here is Bloom’s first paragraph in which he describes the kind of experiment researchers used:

Not long ago, a team of researchers watched a 1-year-old boy take justice into his own hands. The boy had just seen a puppet show in which one puppet played with a ball while interacting with two other puppets. The center puppet would slide the ball to the puppet on the right, who would pass it back. And the center puppet would slide the ball to the puppet on the left . . . who would run away with it. Then the two puppets on the ends were brought down from the stage and set before the toddler. Each was placed next to a pile of treats. At this point, the toddler was asked to take a treat away from one puppet. Like most children in this situation, the boy took it from the pile of the “naughty” one. But this punishment wasn’t enough — he then leaned over and smacked the puppet in the head.

“A growing body of evidence,” writes Paul Bloom in an article titled “The Moral Life of Babies,” “suggests that humans do have a rudimentary moral sense from the very start of life. With the help of well-designed experiments, you can see glimmers of moral thought, moral judgment and moral feeling even in the first year of life. Some sense of good and evil seems to be bred in the bone.” I would say the *soul* rather than the bone, as I believe we are born with a full-fledged soul, and that within that soul is a Seed of Light planted within us and fully there from birth. George Fox and early Friends referred often to the Seed as the teaching of Christ, the influence of Christ, the inner Christ. Today being Pentecost, the day recognized in the Christian tradition as when the Holy Spirit made itself known, when the Seed was recognized

⁶ Bloom.

for what it was among the early Followers of the Way, so it seems appropriate to speak about the Seed of Light, which is present and full-sized, even in a tiny, newborn human.