

**Labor of Love**  
A Sermon for Labor Day  
Rev. Jennifer Brooks  
September 2, 2007

The Masai People of Africa greet the birth of a child with the words:

Hail the day on which this child was born. Rejoice! Let us all sing and praise her that gave birth to a child for whom she longed. Greet this day with joy. Our hearts are glad.

I am grateful for the opportunities I've had to visit other countries with cultures very different from my own. And I've been able to take my children along on some of these journeys; they, too, have had the chance to see what other cultures are like.

One memorable occasion was the time I took my son Kevin, then only seven years old, to Ethiopia. Both my children are adopted, and Kevin is African-American. His physical resemblance to one of the Ethiopian tribes is astonishing, and his presence became an opening for cross-cultural conversation at every stage.

One of my Ethiopian colleagues, inspired by my son's presence, invited me to his home so that I could meet his family. Fantahun's son was a year older than Kevin, and his daughter a year younger. The two Ethiopian children didn't speak much English, and Kevin spoke absolutely no Amharic. Yet they were able to play happily together, bonding instantly in the way children sometimes do, despite the vast differences in culture, experience, and language.

As we watched them play, we spoke quietly of our hopes for our children and for all children in the world.

It was clear that in becoming parents we had accepted the responsibility to do the very best we could for our children. We recognized the extent of their need for our help.

In the Masai naming ceremony, which takes place when a child is 12 or 13, the child recites these words:

I have ridden the shoulders of my mother and my father  
to arrive at my today.  
I hold their hands as I test the strength of my legs  
to climb into my tomorrow.

That the ceremony includes these words acknowledging that the support of parents enables children to become themselves—to “climb into tomorrow”—is only one reflection of the universal understanding of the need children have for adult help. Parents are “the bows from which [their] children as arrows are sent forth.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kalil Gibran, “Your Children.”

Yet in many places in the world today, parents are unable to give their children the care they need. No matter how conscientiously they try, sometimes the conditions of life in this world deprive children of what they need, through no fault of their parents.

The obvious situations are storms and earthquakes—natural disasters that bear no relationship to the diligence and care and hard work of parents. More subtle are the loss and grief caused by the death of a parent, and the heart-wrenching consequences to the child. And then there is war, which in the words of a Liberian father, “is not good for anyone.”

When we think about the places in the world where parents struggle against impossible odds to help their children grow successfully into adulthood, we think of Africa, where there is so much poverty, and Iraq, where there is war, and Southeast Asia or South America, where hurricanes and mudslides bury entire villages. There are serious needs in these places. As Unitarian Universalists, we share values that acknowledge our connection to all people and our responsibility to work for a better world. As individuals we respond as best we can, and often generously, to the needs of far-away lands.

But America’s Labor Day is tomorrow, the day our country sets aside to celebrate the working people of this land, and I want to say something about the hopes and fears of working parents *here*; about the dreams and needs of children *here*.

48 million people in this country lack health insurance. Nearly nine million of them are children: 12% of the children in this country have no health insurance coverage. In America, nearly 65% of children below the poverty threshold have health insurance through Medicaid, yet 20% in this group still have no health care coverage, often because the state-administered programs have reached their maximums and families are put on a waiting list. 48 million people, in the richest country in the world, have no health insurance.<sup>2</sup>

Why does this matter?

It matters because we live in a nation where access to health care *depends* on having health insurance. This is not the case in most of the developed world. Canada, England, Germany, France all regard basic health care as a fundamental human right, and it is provided through a “single payer” program much like Medicare, but expanded to everyone.

I was on the phone the other day with a technical support representative. In the course of the conversation, she mentioned that she was from Canada. “Canada,” I said. “You have free health care there.”

We talked a little bit about health care, and she said, “I can’t imagine being sick or injured and having to worry about what I’d have to pay to see a doctor or go to the hospital.” She told me that she paid a small amount for insurance that made her prescriptions cost only \$5 each and that guaranteed her a private room if she were admitted to the hospital.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: US Census Bureau report issued August 2007.

In the United States, the annual cost for health insurance for a family of four can easily top \$12,000 per year. As people struggle to afford housing and child care, and as more and more employers give up offering health insurance as a fringe benefit, many families with two working parents may find it impossible to pay for health insurance, or to cover the out-of-pocket costs for deductibles and co-pays.

The result is that more than 25% of households with income below \$50,000 lack health insurance.<sup>3</sup> That's more than one-quarter of the families in this country. That number includes not only the households officially living in poverty, but also the families who have income up to this country's "median" household income—"middle-income" families.

The poverty line by federal law is a little over \$20,000 a year for a household of four. Most states, recognizing the reality of the cost of living, have made the Children's Health Insurance Program ("CHIP") available for children in families that are living in households with 2.5 times the poverty-level income. Essentially this means that in those states (not all), children are eligible for "CHIP" in families at the median household income and below. The program provides health insurance for children at a reasonable cost, with modest co-pays and deductibles.

Many of you may be aware that the House and Senate have each re-authorized funding for CHIP. The House version addresses the realities of health care in this country and attempts to double the number of children with health insurance.

There is vocal opposition to this proposal. The President has threatened to veto it. Why? Much of the televised opposition decries attempts to provide "health care to middle-income families." And, let there be no dispute, it is the "middle-income" families that now lack health insurance to the same degree that families below the official poverty threshold still lack health insurance about 20%.

When William Ellery Channing, the founder of American Unitarianism, talked about "the free mind," he said that the free mind does not content itself with a "passive or hereditary faith"; that the free mind resists the "bondage of habit."

We Americans are accustomed to thinking about "self-reliance" as a fundamental American virtue, and it seems to me that this is the point of view that galvanizes opposition to the expansion of the children's health insurance program. But it is important for us, who embrace shared values that include the dignity and worth of each person, to evaluate the need for subsidized health insurance in light of the realities of American life. One of those realities is that, for families at the country's median household income, the cost of health insurance is one-third of their income after taxes. Their housing, if they are lucky, is no more than one-third of their gross income. What's left over is about \$600/month to cover all their other expenses.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: US Census Bureau report issued August 2007.

Households by Income: (51.3% of households are below \$50,000)  
Under \$25,000: one-quarter lack health insurance (25.2% of households)  
\$25,000 to under \$50,000: 21% lack health insurance (26.1% of households)  
\$50,000 to under \$75,000: 14% lack health insurance  
\$75,000 and above: 8% lack health insurance

Food. Clothing. Utilities. Car and gasoline (at \$3 a gallon). Visits to the dentist. School supplies. Child care. Everything it takes to keep a family healthy and secure: \$600 per month. Child care alone typically costs more than \$600 per month.

Just as individuals don't control nature, with its hurricanes and floods and earthquakes, individuals don't control the costs of health insurance, with its many for-profit companies and its costs of administration. Individuals can't control health-care costs. And families in this country, working hard for a decent life, also don't control the skyrocketing costs of housing and automobiles and gasoline. The average worker cannot somehow negotiate with an employers for pay above the employer's pay scale.

These working families are, more or less, *stuck* with the familiar costs of living that each passing year seem to increase beyond what they can pay. It used to be that working people could put food on the table, buy a home, call the doctor when they needed to, and send there kids to college. The American dream.

Those who abhor government help for these middle-income families that want health care for their children at a reasonable cost may also be *stuck*— in what Channing called “the bondage of habit.”

As people of a free faith, with free minds, it behooves us to see American life as it really is, and to have compassion for those who are ensnared in working poverty by the systems and structures that are so very difficult to change.

As people of a free faith, with free minds, we are called by our idea of the holy, by our sense of decency, by our commitment to justice, to make the welfare of children a pre-eminent concern.

As people of a free faith, with free minds, let us free ourselves from old ideas and all preconceptions to make life safer and better for the children who dwell in our nation, in our community, and in our fellowship here.

May our free faith and free minds light the way to a better life for all the children in our nation.

It's a labor of love.