

Most Precious Resource
Steven Epperson, Parish Minister
November 19, 2006
UCV

For most of my adult life, I have been intimately and daily involved with an intentional practice; with a way of looking at and experiencing the world that has-- cumulatively, day-by-day--contributed hugely, irrevocably to the formation of the person I have become. To know me: who I am, what I value, and fear and hope and live for would mean that you know that once upon a time I decided that I wanted to be a parent; that I wanted to raise, teach, work and play with children in the setting of a family. I wanted to be a father. I had no idea what I was in for; but then, what parent does? And I was fortunate that there was someone who wanted to take on this kind of life and living with me; that we had children; and that together, both of us have remained devoted to the work, to the practice of parenting; to its joys and tedium, its sorrows, anxieties, and its moments of exceeding beauty.

No this isn't Fathers' or Mothers' Day, it's not Canadian Family week; and I am not up here to guilt trip us about whether we've had children or not, or how many, or how they are turning out. It's none of my business anyway, and I am hardly in the position to pontificate about it. But I am going to be talking about children and youth; which inevitably means I will also be talking about us and our relationship to them; talking about this whether we are parents or not, because, not only were we all children once ourselves (do we remember those distant day?); as well, I am going to talk about it because *believe me* who we are, and what we say and do as adults effects children and youth; and *I really mean effects them* and whether they will wither or flourish in this world.

1/3 of human beings on this planet are under 18 years of age. This century inevitably belong to them and to their children. But living in what kind of world? Will they bless or curse us? Will they flourish in the decades to come; or despair because of us? What have we taught them by word or deed? What skills of hand, mind, and heart have they learned from us? What kind of landscape, what environment human and natural have we handed to them? Two thousand years ago, a Jewish sage told his disciples: even those who are evil know how to give good gifts to their children. For what kind of adult would give a stone to a child when he asks for bread, or a serpent when she asks for fish?

And that cliché: "children are our future"? I'll try not to say it too much, though truth frequently stands behind a cliché. No not our future; children are both citizens of today possessing the full rights of persons and they live toward their own destiny. Still, one day, to be sure, we will find ourselves dependent on the tender mercies, resources and skill of a generation-come-of age. When that day arrives, and believe me inevitably it does, will we be surrounded and supported by children grown to adulthood who will attend to us with patience, skill, forbearance and compassion? And how, pray tell, did they acquire these virtues, resources; these qualities of heart and hand? Where and how were they encouraged to school and express them? And why would they want to share them with us? What have we adults done to earn it?

Tomorrow, November 20 th, is Universal Children's Day. In the year of my birth, the United Nations General Assembly decreed that this day should be devoted to worldwide fraternity and understanding between children; a day that would promote the ideals of the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the welfare of children everywhere. I have learned that more the 120 nations observe this day in one form or another. And recently, Universal Children's Day has taken on increased importance due to the ratification of one of the most important human rights documents ever written. It's called "The Convention on the Rights of the Child," and Canada and its representatives played an instrumental role in drafting it and promoting its ratification in 1989. This nation, along with 191 other member states of the

United Nations have ratified this human rights convention, making it the most universally acknowledged human rights document in the world. It seems that only Somalia and the United States have not signed it.

In a 2005 report to the Canadian Senate's Standing Committee on Human Rights, the Convention is described as unique in the breadth of its enumerated rights and protections. Children are clearly identified as individual persons possessing full human rights and citizenship; they are neither chattel, nor mere passive objects of adult charity. While parents are clearly identified as the primary actors responsible for the provision, protection, and education of children, where they are not willing or able to care and provide for the well-being of their children, states are obliged, by virtue of having signed this document, to step in to promote and serve the best interests of the child. (see "Who's In Charge?: Implementation of Canada's Obligations with respect to the Rights of the Child," Interim Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, November 2005.)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child contains 54 articles, covering the breadth of rights possessed by children and the protocols for their implementation. I want to mention a number of them, and then take a look at how we're doing as a nation to respect them. Rights include some of the following: "every child has the right to life, and the state has an obligation to ensure the child's survival and development" (6). Children have the right to an identity, nationality and family ties; the right to leave any country or enter their own to be reunited, and maintain the parent-child relationship (8-10). They have rights to express their opinions freely, obtain information, and make ideas or information known, regardless of frontiers (12, 13). They have rights to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and association; rights of privacy and access to appropriate information, and here especially, media shall encourage materials that are beneficial, not harmful to children (14-17). Children shall be protected from abuse and neglect; refugee children, those caught in the theatres of conflict, and children with disabilities are entitled to special protection; and the right to enjoy a full and decent life (19, 22, 23). They have the right to be protected from economic and sexual exploitation, sale, trafficking, abduction, drug abuse, torture, and armed conflict (32-38). Not a pretty picture these: for identifying and insisting upon respect for human rights arises from gross and systemic violation. The human tragedy behind this document is immense.

But to finish: the Convention states that children have the right to the highest possible standard of health and access to services; they have the right to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, and moral development; the right to education, to enjoy his or her own culture, religion and language. Indeed, the stated aim of education should be to develop the child's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities so that she and he will be prepared for active participation in a free society, and learn to respect their own culture and that of others. And finally, though I've not exhausted the list, children have the right to rest, leisure, play and participation in cultural and artistic activities (24-31).

We should be proud of the fact that Canadians were instrumental in writing and promoting ratification of this document and its significant enumerated rights and protections. For what stands behind its 54 articles, hammered out over a nearly ten year period of drafting, negotiation, compromise and breakthrough, is the palpable hope, expressed by Kathy Vandergrift of World Vision Canada, that by treating children as persons, as active, rights possessing actors, we create a nurturing environment that will lead to the formation of a generation of responsible adults. (see "Who's in Charge?")

Ah, but here, the problems emerge. Max Yaldin, a Canadian member of the UN Human Rights Committee, stated in testimony before the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights that "I am of the opinion that [while] Canada has always played an important role in the international community as regards human rights...I have to admit that I am becoming more and more impatient with this very rich community of ours [and its] tendency to teach lessons to others without looking at its own performance." (Who's in Charge?)

Indeed, while commending the good that this nation and its provinces have achieved in significant areas of health and education, the Report of the United Nations' Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2003, makes for very sobering reading. It cites the fact that in both theory and practice, children's rights in this country are not understood, and are only haphazardly provided. We lack consistent implementation, coordination and monitoring. The Report notes, with grave concern persistent patterns and expressions of prejudice in the media about children belonging to visible minorities, and about teenage youth; the exclusion from the school system of children of migrants with no status; that our relatively high health standards are far from equally shared by all Canadians; that there is a near apocalyptic rate of suicide and substance abuse among Aboriginal youth; that child care is scarce unregulated and expensive; it notes the reduction in education spending; the expanded use of adult sentencing for children as young as 14 years old; our high rate of children living in poverty; and it observes that the mayors of Canada's 10 largest cities have declared homelessness to be a national disaster. (see Appendix E, "Who's in Charge?")

Had enough? Sorry, I am going to lay out a little more gloomy news. Last February, the BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition issued findings about child poverty in this province that we should know. First, of 23 industrialised nations, Canada ranks 17 th in child poverty rates; 15.5% of children, nationally, live in poverty. In this province, the rate is 21%, that is, 156, 775 kids are living poor; and they are poor because their parents are poor; and how many of us are struggling just to keep afloat? (see "Child Poverty and Income Inequality in British Columbia: A Status Report, February 2006. " published by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition)

Children, according to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, have the right to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development, and yet, to this day we refuse to require that our paid labour force receives a living wage. We shy away from public investment in accessible and affordable child care and housing. We have been unable as a society to break the bond of poverty and deprivation for a significant number of children and their parents. People, we talk a good talk about rights, and still we fall so short from realizing them. And why? Is it because, relatively speaking, we have it so good? Is it due to the fact, in the words of Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, that rights is a "dangerous word?" Rights talk, she claims, "is resisted by the powerful precisely because it threatens (or promises) to rectify distribution of political, economic, and social power that, under internationally agreed standards and values, are unjust."

We are living in anxious times and have become an anxious people. And is it any wonder? According to yesterday's *Vancouver Sun* three quarters of us in this Province believe that the world faces a global catastrophe in the next generation or two due to global warming. Median family income in Vancouver has dropped 4% in the past fifteen years, and this city has the highest poverty rate for couples with children. (see "Child Poverty...") We drive our children from pillar to post hoping that they will acquire the skills to compete, survive, and succeed in school and the market. And then we are demonized and ridiculed for being pushy and insecure. Our provincial government battles with teachers incessantly over wages, crams our children into overcrowded classrooms, and then demands high performance in quantitative test scores. The long, ubiquitous arm of media extends intrusively into our homes with the message that the value of a young human being is their ability to consume, and that the measure of an adult is that person's capacity to provide an endless stream of brand name artifacts for conspicuous consumption.

Is it any wonder then, that there is a pernicious, growing bias against having and raising children in our culture? They remind us that we fall short of truly securing human rights in this nation. They remind us of just how far we have acquiesced in being name branded ourselves and how we judge others by their capacity to buy and consume. They remind us that we are failing to provision for a flourishing, healthy environment in the near and distant future. We note the unholy rise in the incidence of anxiety, depression and suicide among them, and see our own harried, uncertain lives. They remind us that we have so far

failed to become a truly just and equitable society. We look into their expectant faces, and see ourselves....

... *and despite everything we see* our innocence, our capacity for wonder, our hope, and our determination to secure a better today and tomorrow for ourselves and others; whether we are parents or not. For if there is such a thing as a calling, I believe it is this: we are called, each of us, to be adults, mentors, teachers in the work of sharing hope, not hell. Looking back in our own lives, isn't that exactly what someone older than we were: a parent, a teacher, a more experienced colleague gave us at least once as a gift: the gift of sharing and securing for us some realistic measure of hope, and not hell? Can we not do the same by teaching a children's RE class, turning off the television, reading, speaking and listening to a child, and demanding that our government live up to the human rights document that it signed?

Children are our most precious resource. They give us a reason to be adults with a meaningful calling in life; inestimably precious, as well, because a child, if you will listen, just might save your life. Twelve years ago, there was a family that once united around a deeply held religious faith and practice, had started to disunite precisely because that religion. So much seemed perilous: the threat of division, the loss of community, the prospect of salvation itself. They gathered in a family council to decide what to do. It was a seven year old girl who proposed that they feed the city's homeless. And so, for the next several years, parents and four children walked through the streets of Salt Lake City, down to a freeway viaduct, under which the homeless gathered for a free Sunday morning breakfast. That family joined with others to prepare, serve and clean up in that good work. As a result, that family, that marriage, stayed intact. I lost my work teaching at a church owned university because, in part, my family and I were no longer attending church services. But the loss became a gift. Because I listened to and valued the wisdom of my then-seven-year-old daughter, what seemed an iron clad, grim fate became, instead, a new lease on a better life. That child liberated her father from prison and saved his life.

If we haven't done it already, may we place ourselves in the path of liberation, discover that children can be our most precious resource, and stride with them into a future of hope, not hell, because we have determined to be worthy of them, and to work with them, adults, children and youth, to make it so.