

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

I'm not sure I recognize who you have all been talking about tonight.

I feel like the luckiest person in the world, having been born at the intersection of great events, and great people, and great role models. And everything I do today comes out of my childhood. I had great parents, and community co-parents. And I always have something to fight about, and to be against, and to be for. And my daddy and momma said that God runs a full employment economy. And that if you just follow the need, you'll never lack for a cause worth living and dying for. And so, I did exactly what my parents, and my community co-parents, and all the great role models of the time did. They drug me out everywhere to listen to the Howard Thurmans, the Mordecai Johnsons, to the Mary McCleod-Bethunes, to all these.

It was always clear that God did not make two classes of children. And I was a rebel from the time I was four or five. When I went out to Bell's Department Store with my Sunday school teacher and I didn't know the difference between white and black water. And I went to it and drank out of the white water fountain. And she jerked me away in terror, and I said, what's the matter? And I took great pleasure in going to switch the signs wherever I saw them, all over, and got great satisfaction from that.

Every issue that the Children's Defense Fund works on came out of my childhood. And I don't want to see that continue in this nation, but nobody builds an institution alone, nobody builds a movement alone, and one of my prayers from the beginning has been: *send me who you want, God, to do what you need to have done*. And boy did he send me some gifted friends and gifted people. And I have always felt very blessed to have been at the intersection of great events and great role models. And it's miraculous. I mean, I heard Mrs. Bethune, when I was seven, say, "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice." I'd never heard a woman command men that way. I used to have to go every year to the Columbia, South Carolina, auditorium and sit on hard folding seats for four and a half hours when Mordecai Johnson, the President of Howard, would speak with an intermission. And we would groan. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays had to come and stay with us, because there were no public accommodations for the people who traveled. But I was always exposed to great role models. But the model was: you don't like the way the world is, you change it. And



they were evicted from their houses, and shot at. But they want their children to have a better life and be able to go to school. I've never seen such courage. And I tell you, every time I thought I was scared, or couldn't do this, Miss Hamenols would get me up at three in the morning, and Mrs. Maybrother-Carter would get me up.

I've never seen such courage, and I've always wanted to be half as good as those people, the grit. Everything my mother and father started, with the home for the aged, or my twelve foster sisters and brothers. I would wake up and I would have another child in my bedroom. So, I just did what my parents did, it never occurred to me not to.

So, I feel so lucky to have been born who I was, where I was, with the parents and community co-parents who built a cocoon around us, who taught us history. We had oratorical contests, and we were gonna put oratorical contests in our Freedom Schools. I can repeat Ralph Bunche's 1946 speech at Fisk University about how the barriers of race can be surmounted.

But we need to create the world we want, and I had empowering parents around, and great faith. And I went for years and years in our church vestibule with my daddy, and he always had books. We always had books in our house. We didn't have a second pair of shoes, but we always had books. And I'm gonna put it in this year's report, that we're gonna put out in the next month. But in Herb Block, we did a cartoon that was very close to that. But every day in my formative years, until I was fourteen or fifteen, I would walk into the church vestibule, and there was this picture, a newspaper editorial cartoon. Or not a cartoon, whatever you call it. Whatever Herb Block does, and people like that. But there was this picture of a Thanksgiving occasion, and hordes of brown, sunken-jawed people, hungry, starving, and a table laden with an unbelievable amount of food. And turkeys, and hams. And a white family sitting there, and the caption was, "Shall we say grace?" And those kinds of things sear in a child's mind, but the message, again, is when you see something needs to be done, don't ask why somebody doesn't do something, you ask why you don't do something. And God runs a full employment economy.

I do today what my parents and community co-parents did. What those incredibly courageous people in Mississippi did, because they wanted their children to have a better life. I had the best education in the world at the Legal Defense Fund, which is the spawn and inspiration for the Children's Defense Fund. And I wouldn't do anything else. And I always try to make sure that the baby sits in the middle of the table when policy discussions are being had. And if the policy is going to hurt that child, or not help that child, or not be just for that child, then you fight it.

So, God does run a full employment economy. And if you just stick with it, you can just make things happen.

And we've got a long way to go. We're going to end child poverty in this country. It's obscene. We're going to break up that cradle to prison pipeline. And we're going to either do it or we're going to continue to slide backwards, but I think it's the Achilles Heel of this nation, and I think it's the most important work.

But I just feel so blessed to have had the chance to make a difference with such extraordinary talent. One of my prayers has been: *Lord, send me who we need to do what you want.* And he has sent me this bountiful, gifted group of folk. And one I just want to single out tonight again, Paul Smith, who was our genius research director. Who never gave me a bad fact. Never gave me a wrong fact. And who could just make the most complicated thing so simple. And he looked like Einstein. His budget never increased one penny in the thirty years he worked with us. But he was indispensable. Important, and who's not sitting here is Mary Lee Ellen, because she's taking care of business with our policy director now. These great, gifted people whom you have heard. Nobody builds an institution by themselves. And Elaine, thank you. So, I just have felt so blessed.

And I just wanted to end with a prayer, because I'm a praying lady. And it's by a white journalist out in Tennessee, named Ina Hughes,<sup>1</sup> but I think it captures what we need to be doing in this country, because it's our Achilles Heel. We're never going to be a great nation, we're never going to be a moral nation, unless we create a decent chance to succeed and a level, fair, just playing field for every child. And she says we pray for, and I say we will fight for, and advocate for those who sneak popsicles before supper, who erase holes in math workbooks, who can never find their shoes. But we've got to pray and stand up and fight for children who stare at photographers behind barbed wire. And it's unbelievable what is going on in this country now with this wall. It's just Biblical evil. And we're just simply going to have to decide we are not going backwards. We are not, we're just not. Who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers, who never "counted potatoes," who are born in places where we wouldn't be caught dead, who'd never go to the circus, and who live in an X-rated world.

Let's commit to praying, and standing, and fighting, and voting for children who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions. Who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money. And let's pray, and stand, and

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1. Ina Hughes, A PRAYER FOR CHILDREN XII-XV (1997).

fight, and advocate for children who never get dessert, who never have a safe blanket to drag behind them, who watch their die, who can't find any bread to steal, who don't have any rooms to clean up, whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser, and whose monsters are real.

Let's pray and advocate for children who spend all their allowance before Tuesday, throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food, who like ghost stories, who shove dirty clothes under the bed, and never rinse out the tub. But let's also stand up and fight for children who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool, children who never get a visit from the tooth fairy, who squirm in church or temple and scream in the phone.

But we also must make sure that we stand up, and pray, and laugh with children, and make them smile. Those children have things that only make them cry. Let's pray and accept responsibility for children whose nightmares come in the daytime, who will eat anything, who have never seen a dentist, who aren't spoiled by anybody, who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep, who live and move, and have no being.

We pray for children who want to be carried and for children who must be carried, for children we never give up on, who are our own, and for children who never get a second chance. Let's pray for those children we smother, but also those who will grab the hand of anyone kind enough to offer it.

This is the Achilles Heel, both morally and economically. Who lets preschool children be killed by guns more frequently than law enforcement officers in the line of business? What kind of nation does this? And so I think that there's never been something that is not worth living and dying for in the cause for children, and the cause for racial justice, and the cause for economic justice. And I just, it's been a privilege to carry on the tradition of the people who taught me that your faith is something you live, and God does not make two distinctions between children.

And so, thank you for this honor. Thank you, young people.