

## Children

In nineteenth-century Norway a well-to-do governess fell in love with a poor farmer. Such a marriage was frowned on, but the governess was determined. In a burst of rebellious exuberance and a blue wedding dress, she married the farmer and sailed for America the same day, May 17, 1843. Their ship, the Tricolors, arrived in New York harbor on July 4, America's Independence Day. They looked forward to building a life together in this free land. They moved from New York to Wisconsin where they built a log cabin. When the Civil War broke out, the farmer went to fight for the Union. His wife and young son longed for a flag to fly above their home, but American flags were scarce and there was little cloth to be had. So the mother and son took unbleached muslin flour sacks and made the white portions of the flag. Others were dyed red with Indian berries. But blue cloth was almost impossible to acquire. When there seemed no alternative, the mother took her blue wedding dress out of the large wooden trunk she had brought from Norway. And with tears in her eyes, she cut out the blue background for the white stars. Her son cut down a sapling tree, and the Norwegian immigrant family had an American flag to fly above their home.\*

I tell you this story and I have this flag with me this morning, boys and girls, to help us remember how much this flag means to many people. It represents one of the most precious gifts on earth--freedom. We believe that God wants all His children to be free--everywhere on earth. And we give Him thanks today that we can live in this free land.

Back in the days of the Soviet Union when they conquered a country. They went into the schools and held up the country's flag and asked the students did they love the flag and they said yes. So they would cut up the flag and give each student a piece to take home. As children do, they brought it home and either lost it or forgot what the little piece of cloth was about. They forgot what the flag stood for may we never forget what our flag stands for. That is we are the land of the free and because of many of. Your family members we have freedom so we can say the land of the free because of the brave.

## I Based on King Duncan

A few days ago we celebrated Independence Day. I thought you might enjoy these thoughts from an unknown author:

Only in America . . . can a pizza get to your house faster than an ambulance.

Only in America . . . do people order double cheeseburgers, a large fry, and a DIET coke.

Only in America . . . do banks leave both doors open and then chain the pens to the counters.

Only in America . . . do we use answering machines to screen calls and then have call waiting so we won't miss a call from someone we didn't want to talk to in the first place.

Only in America . . . do we buy hot dogs in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight.

Only in America . . . do we use the word "politics" to describe the process so well: "Poli" in Latin meaning "many" and "tics" meaning "blood-sucking creatures."

Well, maybe we're being a little harsh on politicians . . . Naaw!

A group of people were struggling over the words found in "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." They weren't struggling over The Battle Hymn's gender exclusive language, as you might think. They weren't struggling over its militaristic imagery. They weren't even struggling over its Civil War origin. They were struggling over the phrase, "As He died to make men holy, let us DIE to make men free."

They questioned, "Is freedom for others worth dying for?" An alternative phrase had come from Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians. They had recorded a popular version of the Battle Hymn with the "softer" lyrics of, "As He died to make men holy, let us LIVE to make men free."

Perhaps that is for the best. I say that, even though living for a good cause is often more difficult than dying for it. But the original words cause us to ask, **Is There Anything in My Life Which I Value So Much That I Would Die For It?"**

As we reflect on our life as a people, we see the parallel between first century Palestine and our time. The Hebrews could look back to years of slavery when Moses went to Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go!" In reply Pharaoh did not say, "Sure, y'all go free; send me a post card from the Holy Land!" No, Pharaoh's troops went after the Hebrews. Even after they crossed the Red Sea, the children of Israel spent a generation and a half wandering in the wilderness. Even after they entered the Promised Land they struggled to possess it.

Americans celebrate July 4, 1776 as Independence Day. We shouldn't. We should call it our DECLARATION of Independence Day, for merely signing, quite literally, our John Hancocks on the declaration did not establish our independence. King George did not read the Declaration and then say to Thomas Jefferson, "Nice piece of writing Tom, y'all enjoy your USA, send me a postcard from Colonial Williamsburg." No, it took seven years of struggle before the Constitution could be written. (2)

Have we forgotten the struggle involved in this noble experiment of democracy? Do we cherish this land or do we shy from a word like "patriotism" because it's been co-opted by the fanatic fringe? To be "patriotic" is not to be blind to our nation's sins. Like every nation, we have our weak points. This week on the feast of Junipero Serro, I reminded the listeners that you don't have to be perfect to be saints, you just have to be holy. Serra founded missions in California. In these missions he gathered in the native population, fed them, clothed them, educated them and kept them safe. They want to tear down his statutes because he kept them in the missions. No one seems to ask why. He did it to keep them safe from people who wanted to kill them for becoming Catholic. He wanted to keep them away from the polygamous relations of the population. He also created the Regulation which prevented Spanish soldiers from killing and torturing the indigenous population. If he could look back now, he might have done it differently. He tried. He wasn't perfect but he became a saint.

A family of refugees was very favorably impressed with America--especially the six-year-old daughter who rapidly adopted the view that everything American was not only the best, but also perfect. One day a neighbor told her she was going to have a baby, so little Mary marched home and demanded to know why she couldn't have a little baby too. Her mother decided to introduce her to the facts of life right then and, among other things, explained that it took about

nine months for a baby to arrive. "Nine months!" exclaimed Mary indignantly. "But Mother, aren't you forgetting that this is America?" (3)

Well, even in America some things take time. We love our country, but none of us believes it is perfect. And when America is in the wrong we need to speak up. Indeed, in a principled democracy, not to speak out against wrong would be a lack of patriotism. To be patriotic (from the Greek PATRIS which means fatherland) is to appreciate the sacrifice of our forefathers and foremothers who wanted this nation to be extraordinary. Many of them gave their lives that we might be free as a people, just as many people gave their lives that we might have our Christian faith. Now it is our turn to maintain and to improve what they have passed on to us.

How shall we do that? How shall we maintain and improve that which we have been given?

### **First of All, We Need To Remember Where We Came From.**

We like to think we came from the aristocracy of Europe. Well, a few Americans may have, but most Americans are descendants of slaves, indentured servants, of the emptying out of Europe's poor houses and those who were escaping poverty and persecution making up those "huddled masses yearning to be free" that Emma Lazarus wrote about several generations ago. Her words are inscribed on our Statue of Liberty that stands proudly in the harbor of New York City to welcome millions of immigrants to America. In our lesson from the Gospel, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Who can read those words without being reminded of the words that grace our Statue of Liberty? "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

These words grew out of the history and heritage of a Jewish woman named Emma Lazarus. When France was about to present America with a statue called "Liberty Enlightening the World," and America was to provide the pedestal, Emma Lazarus was approached to contribute a poem. Emma Lazarus wrote the poem, but in October 1886, when the Statue of Liberty was dedicated, she was gravely ill with cancer and did not attend. She died a year later at the age of 38. Her life was short, but her words live on, engraved in the concrete of a statue of acceptance. (4)

Except for our Native American friends, we are a nation of immigrants. We trace our ancestry back to many kinds of people in many different lands. Maybe that is why it is our tradition as a nation to welcome the stranger with kindness and compassion. There are some in our land who would change all that. They would turn us into a fortress. That's understandable in light of the events of September 11th. Still, we need to be mindful of our history. We will maintain and improve that which has been handed to us, first of all, when we remember where we came from.

### **Second, We Need to Remember What We Stand For.**

Growing up in the black ghetto of Baltimore, young Thurgood Marshall was an early, though unwilling, student of the U.S. Constitution. Often in mischief, he was required to stay after school as punishment for his classroom antics. For each infraction of a rule, Marshall was required to memorize a portion of the Constitution. As a result, Marshall reported, he soon knew

the whole thing by heart. Marshall's primary school teachers would have been astonished if they could have foreseen that their unruly pupil would one day put that knowledge into practice as a distinguished attorney, and then as this nation's first African-American United States Supreme Court Justice. (5)

Wouldn't it be great if every American child could know our Constitution by heart? We are a people whose existence depends upon our sacred documents. The Declaration, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights. As Christians we would add another sacred document--the Bible--for every principle we hold dear as Americans was first established in God's Word. The words on the Statue of Liberty remind us where we came from. The words in our sacred documents tell us what we stand for.

### **The Third Thing of Which We Need to Be Reminded Is the Sacrificed that Have Been Made on Our Behalf.**

This land is ours today because men and women have given their life's blood in our behalf. Nearly 20 years ago Dick Abel came face-to-face with several prisoners of war in Vietnam. Abel was the first American these prisoners had seen after being held captive more than eight years. Some of the men Abel met had been in solitary confinement for four years! Later, Abel stood in awe as he heard the leader of these POWs speak for the group in a message to the free world: "Thank you," said the leader on the group's behalf, "for the privilege of serving: God bless America!" This, from a group of men who were captives expressing their conviction that they were privileged to serve.

Don't think that there are no heroes left in this world. There are many men and women in this generation and in each generation over the past 200 plus years who have literally been willing to lay down their lives for this country. And we owe them a great debt. Part of what kept these men who were captives in Vietnam going was their faith in God. Abel tells about one of the captives, Robbie Risner, using a wood dowel to painstakingly wear a hole through an 8-inch concrete wall. He accomplished this excruciating task so that he could share his faith in Jesus Christ with the man in the next cell, a man who later died. Abel tells of the group singing, "Amazing Grace" even under the most horrid of conditions. (6)

This is the stuff of which our commitment as Americans to freedom, justice, equality is made. Our faith helps us live out our commitment to freedom. Why? Because we understand that only in giving up some of our autonomy as individual citizens do we truly become free.

In Jesus' time, oxen were linked together by means of a wooden yoke across their necks that helped to evenly distribute the weight of a load so that both oxen carried it. Together, they were able to pull far greater a load than either one could pull by itself.

When we are yoked to Christ we are better able to stand up for the things we believe. When we are yoked to Christ, we are better able to repay the sacrifices made in our behalf. So, as we reflect on the meaning of Independence Day, we thank God and we thank those dedicated persons who made it possible for us to worship in freedom this day. And we are thankful that on our Statue of Liberty still read those words that remind us of the words of Jesus: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. . . ." God bless America.

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3. Anthony de Mello, *TAKING FLIGHT* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1990), p. 102.
  4. *LECTIONAID*, July, August, September 1994 (Kamuela, HI: LektionAid, 1994), p. 10.
  5. Greg Anderson, *LIVING LIFE ON PURPOSE: A GUIDE TO CREATING A LIFE OF SUCCESS AND SIGNIFICANCE* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.
  6. Bob Budler, *YOU CAN DO IT!* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), p. 19.

## Il Fr Desiano

**It's a laid-back Fourth of July. Even now we're not sure who gathers, how they gather, what the displays will be like, how various celebrities will be present. We gather without the swagger that usually accompanies our national celebrations, chastened by a disease that has crippled us, and demonstrations that point out embarrassing flaws in how we live out our American philosophy.**

**So maybe we are in a better position to hear the message of Jesus in the Gospel. "Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart." Humble of heart is not the way we think of ourselves as citizens. Not only are we all equal, or at least supposed to be equal, but we define ourselves by our proud achievements—defeating the British twice, conquering the Confederacy, humiliating the Spanish, winning the "war to end all wars," until we had to win another one twenty years later. About recent wars, where it's hard to swagger, we kind of obscure in our discourse. We still think of ourselves as the richest, most powerful country—in all of human history.**

**But what does Jesus mean by being "meek and humble of heart"? We can understand this by looking at the phrase "take my yoke upon you." To be yoked to someone is to work alongside, to be part of their work and efforts, to share their vision. In order to understand how Jesus is meek and humble, we have to see what his vision was and how we are joined to it.**

**In this passage, Jesus is receiving his disciples whom he sent out earlier to proclaim his Kingdom and to heal the pains and burdens of the people. Just as Jesus came as a servant, so he sends his disciples to be servants too. Jesus shows his disciples that there's a power in humble service; the same power is available for us as well. In the first reading, from one of the last prophets in Israel, when the Jewish people had not seen kings for hundreds of years, Zechariah envisions a king who comes to rule without any of the displays of power—horses, swords, chariots—but only with the promise of peace.**

**You and I know the power of humble service, for nothing brings parents closer to their children than the opportunity to care for them, even in the most menial ways. Nothing motivates public servants more than just be of help to others; we see what happens when public servants don't act that way. People go to poor countries to serve the population; they come back transformed. A prophet like Martin Luther King Jr. stands before us—and we all know the power of his words more than 50 years after his death.**

Paul contrasts those who live by the Spirit and those who do not. To live by the Spirit is to live totally focused on God and the power that comes into our lives because of that. To live by the flesh is to rely on the arrogant illusion that "I can fix this by myself. I am strong and resourceful." Many things we can fix, but the deepest problems need the resolution that can only come from God.

Like the disciples, we are all sent out. Every week Jesus sends us forth, strengthened by his Word and nourished by his Flesh. We have yoked ourselves to Christ. He sends us forth to walk in that deepest assurance that comes not from arrogance but from an attitude of humble service. We learn to say, "I am not here to look good, but only to serve you."

When we take on this attitude, indeed we find deep peace and profound rest. The arrogant are yoked to their own illusions. Jesus' disciples find true freedom in humbly being yoked to him and his vision for humankind.

### III

The plot of a recent Tom Hanks' movie, *The Terminal*, sounds so outrageous that it is hard to believe that it is based on a true story. In 1986, an Iranian man named Merhan Karimi Nasseri flew to Paris, France, without his immigration card or other proper paperwork. He never should have been allowed to board the plane without the paperwork, but somehow it was overlooked. Without his papers, the French authorities could not let him into the country, but they could not deport him either. So they forced him to live in the airport until they figured out his situation. Nasseri seems to like living in the airport. For more than fifteen years, he has been allowed to remain there. He eats at the food court, reads the newspaper, speaks to the airport employees. Even when offered the chance to leave and start life over in a new country, Nasseri chooses to stay. The airport's doctor believes that Nasseri has become paranoid and confused by his loss of contact with the outside world. Nasseri says, "This is my dream world. I don't have any worries." (1) Most of us would not like to be confined to an airport, or anyplace else. But, for Nasseri, it has become his home. Let's talk about freedom today. That makes sense on this Independence Day weekend when we celebrate our freedom as a people. It is said that King George wrote in his diary, July 4, 1776, "Nothing of importance happened today." Well, we think something of importance happened, and we are grateful that it did. Freedom. What a beautiful word. It's what our text is about. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (NIV) What a great thought to begin our day. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Is there anyone here who is weary? Weary, say, from work? Michael Boyer wrote an article for the *National Geographic* titled, "A Work-Weary World?" that may give us a little comfort. He notes that Americans are famous for their work ethic. However, according to a study by the International Labor Organization we are no longer the world leaders in hours worked per year. South Korea's booming economy necessitates a six-day work week. In the past few years, South Koreans have

averaged 2,390 hours of work per year, as compared to the 1,792 hours of work per year in the U.S. Workers in Japan, Poland, Australia, and New Zealand also worked more hours than U.S. workers. Swedish workers clocked the fewest work hours in an average year, only about 1,337. (2) Now before you pack your bags for Sweden, remember those cold, dark winters. Also, you don't speak the language. Some of you, I know, are weary from work. The stress on modern people has been well documented--particularly those with families. There are many people today working full-time on the job and then working just as hard off the clock meeting their responsibilities at home. Of course, you don't have to work outside the home to have more than enough to do. Kim Bolton tells of a workday that many moms can relate to. She looked around at mounds of unwashed laundry and un-mopped floors, and she silently dedicated herself to a day full of cleaning. And just as she was getting into a cleaning rhythm, her two-year-old son called to her, "Hey, Mom, why dontcha come and sit wif me in da big chair. " Kim protested. She tried to explain how busy she was. She promised to sit with him later. But he continued to smile that charming smile and pat the chair next to him. Finally, Kim put down her laundry and settled into the chair with her son. The two of them snuggled for a minute or so, then her son patted her on the leg and said, "You can go now." In a hectic day, he had insisted that she take just a moment to rest with him. He understood her busyness, but he also understood that their time together was more important to both of them. Here's what's interesting. For just a moment, Kim Bolton said her two-year-old boy was an example of Jesus to her. (3) "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," says Jesus, "and I will give you rest." Some of us are weary from work. Others of us are weary from worry. Much of our fatigue is mental and emotional. I am always amazed at the number of things some people find to worry about. An elderly woman at the nursing home received a visit from one of her fellow church members. "How are you feeling?" the visitor asked. "Oh," said the lady, "I'm just worried sick!" "What are you worried about, dear?" her friend asked. "You look like you're in good health. They are taking care of you, aren't they?" "Yes, they are taking very good care of me." "Are you in any pain?" she asked. "No, I have never had a pain in my life." "Well, what are you worried about?" her friend asked again. The lady leaned back in her rocking chair and slowly explained her major worry. "Every close friend I ever had has already died and gone on to heaven," she said. "I'm afraid they're all wondering where I went." (4) Few emotions take a toll on us like worry does. Author Stephanie Stokes Oliver in her book, *Daily Cornbread*, asks whether we are worriers or warriors? Chronic worriers let their anxiety and fear interfere with living their life to the fullest. They manifest their worry in physical symptoms like headaches and knotted muscles. Worriers seem unable to take control of their situation and make a positive change for themselves. Warriors, on the other hand, find healthy ways to deal with their fears. They don't automatically shut down and go into crisis mode. They trust that God will sustain them. Warriors take positive action to change a negative situation. (5) Astronaut Jim Lovell is a warrior. In a news conference he was asked about Apollo 13. He was in command of that spacecraft when it experienced an explosion on its way to the moon. With their oxygen almost gone, their electrical system out, their spaceship plunging

toward lunar orbit, it appeared Lovell and his crew would be marooned hundreds of thousands of miles from Earth. Lovell was asked, "Were you worried?" Such an obvious question drew snickers. But then Lovell gave a surprising answer. "No, not really," he said. "You see, worry is a useless emotion. I was too busy fixing the problem to worry about it. As long as I had one card left to play, I played it." (6) Jim Lovell is a warrior. People who allow worry to overwhelm them will often complain of fatigue. Fatigue, they'll tell you, is why they do not do anything about their situation. Friends, you may be tired because of your work. But more of us are tired because of what is happening in our brains than what is happening in the workplace. Negative thoughts will drain the life right out of you. It's true. We've talked about this before. You come in from work barely dragging one foot in front of the other. Someone calls inviting you to do something you really want to do. Suddenly you have more energy than you've had for a long time. It's not the work, it's the worry. How we look at our lives makes an enormous difference in how we handle our lives. Are you weary from work? Are you weary from worry? Some of the worry we experience may come to us from a breakdown in integrity. Nothing will drain us like the fear of discovery. Always looking over our shoulder will not allow us to make much progress in the world. In his book *Uncle Tungsten*, Dr. Oliver Sacks recalls some of his most vivid boyhood memories of growing up among an extended family of scientists and doctors. One of his more colorful relatives was Aunt Lina. Aunt Lina was a tiny woman with, as Sacks recalls, an "iron will." She was a sociable woman with a great ability to listen to people and extract from them their deepest thoughts and secrets. Her great listening skills led her to collect gossip on all the most prominent citizens in her town. Aunt Lina used this sensitive knowledge to raise funds for her pet cause, Hebrew University. Each year, she would call up a variety of people and promise them secrecy in exchange for a donation to the University. University officials never guessed that one of their most effective fund raisers was blackmailing their donors. (7) I wonder if there are any of us who carry around secrets that we would pay good money to keep hidden. (Hmmm. That's something to think about when we have our next finance campaign. Just kidding, of course.) Nevertheless, anything that robs us of our peace, our joy, will drain our bodies as well as our souls. Are you weary this morning? Weary from work? Weary from worry? Weary from guilt or fear? Hear again the words of Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Dr. Neil T. Anderson puts it like this: "Jesus invites you to a restful walk in tandem with Him, just as two oxen walk together under the same yoke. 'How can a yoke be restful?' you ask. Because Jesus' yoke is an easy yoke. As the lead ox, Jesus walks at a steady pace. If you pace yourself with Him, your burden will be easy. But if you take a passive approach to the relationship, you'll be painfully dragged along in the yoke because Jesus keeps walking. Or if you try to race ahead or turn off in another direction, the yoke will chafe your neck and your life will be uncomfortable. The key to a restful yoke-relationship with Jesus is to learn from Him and open yourself to His gentleness and humility." (8) You need to understand that this is more than a pious platitude. The



reason modern life is so draining on us has nothing to do with our work. People have always had to work. The reason we are weary is that we do not have the spiritual, mental and emotional resources to deal with this brave new world. We need to ask Christ to share our yoke. We need to ask Christ to set us free from our negativity and to help us learn to trust him. When we are able to do that then we will be free at last. Even if we were imprisoned in an airport or a prisoner-of-war camp or in a dead-end job or whatever our outer prison might be, inside we would be tasting the sweet taste of freedom, because if Christ makes us free, we are free indeed! -----

----- 1. From Uncle John's Slightly Irregular Bathroom Reader by the Bathroom Readers' Institute (Ashland, OR: Bathroom Readers' Press, 2004), pp. 99-101. 2. December 2004. 3. Kim Bolton with Chris Wave, Finding God Between a Rock and a Hard Place, compiled by Lil Copan and Elisa Fryling (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1999), pp. 134-135. 4. bounce-jokeseveryday-1807004@ripple.dundee.net 5. Stephanie Stokes Oliver. (New York: Doubleday, 1999). 6. Second Thoughts--One Hundred Upbeat Messages for Beat-up Americans by Mort Crim, Health Communication, Inc., Deerfield Beach, Florida, 1997, p. 154. 7. Oliver Sacks, Uncle Tungsten (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), pp. 97-98. 8. Victory over the Darkness (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), p. 102.