Let the Children Come

dedicated to children in church

It was late spring in a sleepy New Hampshire mill town. The sun's last rays were presuming through the stained glass windows of the Baptist church on the hill, just off Main Street.

Night came on, and the lights in the church radiated their golden warmth into the darkness. Inside the church, the minister was coming to the conclusion of his always-just-twenty-minutes-long sermon, speaking quietly, with authority, with occasional punctuations by a wrinkle of humor, or a deep sigh.

Seen rows back, on the far left, I say, my four-year-old legs dangling above the floor. Slowly my head dropped against my mother's shoulder. She lifted her arm mechanically in a motherly gesture, let my head fall onto her lap. As I lay there, drifting off to sleep, my father's voice from the pulpit faded. I could feel the comforting stroke of my mother's hand absent-mindedly running her fingers through my hair.

And so I slumbered, deep and dreamless. . .only awakened by the sound of the organ signaling the closing hymn, a hymn for which Mother did not stand, encumbered a she was with this sleeping child.

Slowly, I awoke, opening my eyes to the unaccustomed light of the sanctuary and hearing the sound of the organ. Inexplicably, I wept.

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We moved to Kansas City when I was eight, a short stay fraught with intense memories. We had gone to care for my grandparents who died within five months of each other.

To a country New Englander, the streetcars, boulevards, and fire sirens of a major midwestern city were as alien as outer space. The church where we worshipped was Southern Baptist, a massive structure of limestone. I was placed in a Sunday school class that met in the furnace room. The minister called my father "Brother Russell" and during the week, clerks in the dime store addressed me as "Honey," to my outrage—they didn't even know me!

How could I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

By the time I was a teenager, I was considered capable of *teaching* children in church. For the most part, this went well—I was a dramatic storyteller—but when Johnny Hackman entered my class, I was apprehensive. He was a known terror.

On one particular Sunday in March—I remember the date well, as it was my mother's birthday—Johnny was especially obstreperous. even the other eight-year-olds were trying to calm him down.

Halfway through the lesson, I asked a somewhat rhetorical question: "You know why Jesus died, don't you?" Suddenly John sat bolt upright, fixed his eyes intently on me and yelled, "No!" It was a declaration that demanded a response. And so I began to talk—a little flustered, but gaining courage as I continued—telling the story of the gospel to this child, who had already been through several years of teaching.

The room grew strangely quiet. At the end of our class hour, we prayed together—prayer that marked the beginning of faith for Johnny, as it turned out, for he was never quite the same again. A kind of holy taming took place which neither he nor I understood—a quiet miracle to tuck into the recesses of memory.

In the late 1960s, I belatedly discovered the secular world. I was studying for an advanced degree at the University of Chicago. Several months of therapy had changed me inside, "given me back myself," I used to say: the world of turmoil—war in the cities and in the Far East—was changing me from the outside as well.

I decided to cross the "Maginot Line" of the Midway Plaisance—a medial strip effectively separating the Gothic gray structures of the university and Rockefeller Chapel from the blackening slums of Woodlawn—and attend the First Presbyterian Church. Woodlawn was a tangle of vacant lots, burned-out buildings, neglected tenement structures, elevated tracks, struggling "soul" enterprises, bars, and neighborhood help organizations.

I was recruited to teach a wide age-range Sunday school class composed of a handful of black children from the surrounding area, and a few white children whose parents crossed the Midway to express solidarity with the community of Woodlawn in the intense struggles of those years, to hear the eloquent preaching of the self-confessed radical John Fry who was stirring up national controversy by his actions on behalf of black youths in the famed warring gangs of Disciples and Blackstone Rangers.

The time was close to Easter in 1968. I remember looking out the second story window of the church building at the bleak empty lot below, littered with shards of glass and beer bottle caps. How could I teach the Easter story to this motley assortment of restless pre-teens?

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We decided to "live the story out." We traipsed downstairs and out into the alleys near the church to collect the most vicious and ominous items we could find. Back upstairs, we fashioned a crude cross from two weather-beaten nail-ridden 2 by 4's, and proceeded to attach crushed beer cans, jagged strips of metal, bits of nondescript litter—whatever we had found. We wielded hammers with a vengeance, hoarsely shouting "Crucify!" as we nailed each item to the crosspiece.

Five days later, Martin Luther King was killed. On Sunday, National Guardsmen barred my entry into the ghetto. "It isn't safe." As I drove slowly up Michigan Avenue along the lake to attend church downtown, I was horror-struck to find the boulevard lined with *tanks.* It was the beginning of change for Chicago—for Woodlawn—and for children growing up there.

The dimly lit sanctuary in the church on Bowdoin Street was the picture of peace. An almost-all-adult congregation bowed, stood, sat, chanted, prayed, listened—only occasionally distracted by the piping voice of a small child.

Then suddenly, like so many birthday balloons, the bellies of many women around me began to swell. Soon each balloon was birthed. . .and today the music in the liturgy includes a new occasionally cacophonic note.

As I sit here in the pew, alternately absorbed and woolgathering, the child in me responds to these new liturgical elements. I have learned to hear the sudden shrill remark of a toddler, or gurgling laugh, or the sharp clatter of a dropped rattle, as counterpoint within the anthem of prayers. . a *joyful noise* to the Lord.