

Standing for Children

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is a graduate of Spelman College and Yale Law School. She was the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar, and directed the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund office in Jackson, Mississippi. In 1968 she moved to Washington, D.C., to serve as counsel for the Poor People's March that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had begun organizing prior to his death. She founded the Washington Research Project, a public interest law firm and the parent body of the Children's Defense Fund. She also served as the director of the Center for Law and Education at Harvard. Founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), she works to educate the nation about the needs of children and to encourage preventive investment in children. Her publications include *Families in Peril: An Agenda for Social Change* (1989), *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours* (1993), and *Guide My Feet: Meditations and Prayers on Loving and Working for Children* (1995). She is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship.

I am honored to share this day of celebration and accomplishment with your trustees, administration, faculty, and families, and with the best graduating class in the history of this great university.

You are graduating and we are living at an incredible moral moment in history. Few human beings are blessed to anticipate or experience the beginning of a new century *and* millennium. How will we say thanks for the life, for the earth, for the nation, and for the children God has entrusted to our care? What legacies, principles, values, and deeds will we stand for and send to the future through our children, to their children, and to a spiritually confused, balkanized, and violent world desperately hungering for moral leadership?

How will progress be measured over the next thousand years if we survive them? By the kill power and number of weapons of destruction we can produce and traffic in at home and abroad, or by our willingness to shrink, indeed destroy, the prison of violence constructed in the name of peace and security? By how many material things we can manufacture, advertise, sell, and consume, or by our rediscovery of more lasting, nonmaterial measures of success, a new Dow Jones for the purpose and quality of life in our families, neighborhoods, and national community? By how rapidly technology and corporate mergermania can render human beings and human work obsolete, or by a better balance between corporate profits and corporate caring for children, families, and communities? By how much a few at the top can get at the expense of the many at the bottom and in the middle, or by our struggle for a concept of enough for all Americans? By the glitz, style, and banality of too much of our culture, or by the substance of our struggle to rekindle an ethic of caring, community, and justice in a world driven by money, technology, and weaponry?

The answers lie in the values we stand for and decisions and actions we take *today*. What an opportunity for good or evil we Americans personally and collectively hold in our hands as parents, citizens, community leaders, and titular world leader in the post-Cold War and postindustrial era on the cusp of the third millennium. Czech Republic President Václav Havel said recently that “there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended. Many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying, and exhausting itself while something else still indistinct were arising from the rubble.”

A thousand years ago the United States was not even a dream. Copernicus and Galileo had not told us the earth was round or revolved around the sun. Gutenberg’s Bible had not been printed, Wycliffe had not translated it into English, and Martin Luther had not tacked his theses on the church door. The Magna Carta did not exist, Chaucer’s and Shakespeare’s tales had not been spun, and Bach’s, Beethoven’s, and Mozart’s miraculous music had not been created to inspire, soothe, and heal our spirits. European serfs struggled in bondage while African empires flourished in independence. Native Americans peopled our land free of slavery’s blight, and Hitler’s holocaust had yet to show the depths human evil can reach when good women and men remain silent or indifferent.

A thousand years from now will civilization remain and humankind survive? Will America’s dream be alive, be remembered, and be *worth* remembering? Will the United States be a blip or a beacon in history? Can our founding principle that “all men are created equal” and “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” withstand the test of time, the tempests of politics, and become deed and not just creed for *every* child? Is America’s dream big enough for every fifth child who is poor, every sixth child who is Black, every seventh child who is Latino, and every eighth child who is mentally or physically challenged?

Can our children, each of whom “comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man,” says Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, become the healing agents of our national and world transformation and future spiritual and economic salvation?

I believe protecting children is the moral litmus test of our humanity and an overarching moral challenge in our world and nation, where millions of child lives are ravaged by the wars, neglect, abuse, and racial, ethnic, religious, and class divisions of adults. In the last decade, UNICEF reports, 2 million children have been killed, 4.5 million left disabled, 12 million left homeless, more than 1 million orphaned or sundered from parents, and some 10 million traumatized by armed conflicts throughout the world.

How much child suffering, death, and neglect will it take for you, me, religious, civic, community, and political leaders to stand up and cry out “Enough” with our hearts and voices and votes to protect our young, who are our sacred trust and collective American future?

WHAT DOES AMERICA BELIEVE IN?

A colleague pulled from his wallet a frayed *New York Times* clip he has kept since 1968 to remind him why he does what he does. The clip showed a cute, round-faced nine-year-old girl from Concord, New Hampshire, named Holly Harrell, whose faith in the future had been shattered by the deaths of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. When interviewed about her outlook at Christmastime in 1968, she responded, “I don't believe what I used to believe, but I wish I could.”

I do too. Don't you wish every one of our children could believe in their parents, teachers, preachers, neighborhoods, and leaders to protect and provide them a Healthy, Fair, and Moral Start in life and safe passage to adulthood? Don't you wish they believed in themselves, in us, and in our founding creed that “all

men [and women and children] are created equal” and “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” because they saw it practiced in their daily lives? Don't you wish they and we could believe our political leaders in both parties when they say they will not hurt children and are acting to protect our children's futures rather than their own when they make crucial budget and policy decisions?

Wouldn't many children feel more worthwhile and valuable and less alienated if more adults cared enough about them to protect them, from birth to adulthood, from health defects and diseases we could prevent and treat; from neglect and abuse we could alleviate; from poverty we could eliminate; from ignorance and poor skills good schools could eradicate; from death by guns we could control; from air, water, noise, and cultural pollution we could stop; from moral confusion and spiritual hollowness that drugs and drink and sex and possessions cannot fix but that more love and better adult moral example, attention, and service can?

Wouldn't you like to believe that we and our leaders would make sure that our personal and collective actions and decisions made it easier rather than harder for children to grow up healthy, safe, and educated and that our personal, social, business, and public policies and practices made it easier rather than harder for parents to support their families and meet their children's needs? Wouldn't you like to believe that a people who committed to and succeeded in sending the first human to the moon, created an atomic bomb in forty-one months during World War II, and led the world in health and information technology could and would tackle and solve their children's problems with the same *can-do* verve and will?

THE STATE OF AMERICA'S UNION

In his 1997 State of the Union address, nearly upstaged by the media's and America's obsession with O. J. Simpson, President Clinton announced, “The state of our Union is strong.”

But is it? By what measures? Aren't the fissures from deep racial, economic, family, and spiritual fault lines everywhere threatening to crumble America's house?

How strong is our union when U.S. children under fifteen are suffering from a firearm death rate twelve times higher than the *combined* rates of twenty-five other industrialized countries, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention? How strong is the union between parents and children when 3.1 million children are reported neglected and abused every year? How strong is the union between mothers and fathers when one in three children is born out of wedlock, divorce disrupts the families of almost a million children every year, child support payments by fathers are sixteen times more likely to lag behind than are car payments, and domestic violence stalks spouses in every race and income group, as the Simpson case shows?

How strong is the union between Blacks and Whites and men and women when affirmative action backlash stalls the slow progress of the last thirty years in breaking the centuries-old affirmative action for White men? Blacks and women make up a small minority in corporate and legal corridors of power. Women make up only 11 percent of congressional power and Blacks only 7 percent, although they make up 51 and 13 percent of the population respectively.

How strong is our economic union when the gap in income between the rich and the middle class and poor is at its widest level in decades? The top 5 percent of families got a 46 percent increase in real inflation-adjusted income since 1979 while the poorest fifth of families lost 9 percent. The 1995 salary increases received by 35 CEOs of large companies could have lifted 17,000 children out of poverty.

How strong is our civic union when only 49 percent of registered voters go to the polls, the lowest proportion since before the Great Depression?

How strong is our political union when campaign finance practices enable the rich to gain access to political decision makers that

children, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, and hard-working families often lack?

How strong is the sense of fairness in our union when in the 1996 election year our leaders voted to “end welfare as we know it” by dismantling the sixty-year-old safety net and cutting \$54 billion over six years in federal assistance to children, low-income families, and legal immigrants without asking a dime of sacrifice from the Pentagon, corporate welfare recipients, or other well-to-do Americans? In fact, Congress gave the Pentagon \$11.5 billion it did not need or ask for. Their actions threaten to push another million children into poverty and millions more already-poor children deeper into poverty.

If the measure of our success is love of God and neighbor, spiritual rather than economic growth, truth-telling rather than truth-shaving, service to others over greed and materialism, non-violence over violence, and family and community bonds over political bonds, then the state of our union is at risk and needs healing. Let us begin the healing process right now with our children. Edmond MacDonald wrote in *Presbyterian Outlook*:

When God wants an important thing done in this world or a wrong righted [God] goes about it in a very singular way. [God] doesn't release thunderbolts or stir up earthquakes. God simply has a tiny baby born, perhaps of a very humble home, perhaps of a very humble mother. And God puts the idea or purpose into the mother's heart. And she puts it in the baby's mind and then God waits. The great events of the world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity, but is still expecting goodwill to become incarnate in each human life.

STANDING TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN WE CAN
MAKE A DIFFERENCE

On January 20, 1997, an extraordinarily important symbolic convergence occurred as we celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King,

Jr.'s birthday and inaugurated the last president of the twentieth century. The key question is whether we are just going to celebrate or truly follow Dr. King.

Many citizens say, "I am not Dr. King and can do nothing to stop child neglect and ill health." But we all have some of Dr. King inside of us, just as we are God's hands and heart and feet and voice in the world. "When evil men plot, good men must plan. When evil men burn and bomb, good men must build and bind. When evil men shout ugly words of hatred, good men must commit themselves to the glories of love. Where evil men would seek to perpetuate an unjust status quo, good men must seek to bring into being a real order of justice," Dr. King counseled.

Some stand mute when children and the poor are treated unjustly because they are afraid of controversy or failure. Dr. King too was often afraid of police dogs, of violence among his followers and foes alike, of disunity in the movement, and of failure in the face of seemingly intractable obstacles. But as a college student I heard him say to take the first step in faith even when the whole stairway is not revealed and to leave the results to God. He also said, "If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl, but keep moving." The important thing is to *keep moving!*

Some people stand on the sidelines saying, "I am not a leader." Dr. King was not America's image of a leader — he was a Black man in a nation that legalized White supremacy; a preacher and doer of the gospel of service and love in a culture that idolizes material things and power; and a man of nonviolence in a nation that glorifies military might. Great moral movements and leaders are built one committed citizen at a time, like Mrs. Rosa Parks, who said:

I did not get on the bus to get arrested; I got on the bus to go home. Getting arrested was one of the worst days in my life. It was not a happy experience. Since I have always been a strong believer in God I knew that He was with me and only He could get me through the next step. I had no idea that his-

tory was being made. I was just tired of giving in. Somehow I felt that what I did was right by standing up to that bus driver.

“I can’t make a difference,” countless people say. Oh, yes, you can. Parents, communities, youth-serving groups, youths, health professionals, religious congregations, and businesses are making a real difference, often with the help of private foundations, much-maligned but imaginative and dedicated public officials, and well-targeted federal, state, and local initiatives. Child advocates made a difference in 1995 and 1996 in helping to save Medicaid and school lunches and protections for disabled, neglected, and abused children. We made a difference in helping to get billions of dollars more (rather than cuts) in child care and hundreds of millions more dollars in Head Start. And we made a difference on June 1, 1996, when over 250,000 people of every race, income, faith, age, and state gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to Stand for Children in the largest and most uplifting demonstration of commitment to children in American history. Thousands more stood in 133 local rallies across America. Since June 1, 1996, over 170 Children’s Action Teams (CATs) in 38 states have continued to Stand for Children in their communities in a variety of ways.

STANDING STRONG FOR HEALTHY CHILDREN IN LOCAL
COMMUNITIES AND ON THE INTERNET IN 1997

I invite you to join Mrs. Rosa Parks, Rosie O’Donnell, me, and many, many thousands of others to Stand for Children on June 1, 1997, in local communities in every state across America and in a Virtual Stand for Children on the Internet. This year we will focus on *healthy children* —ensuring every child a Healthy Start, the health coverage they need to grow and thrive and reach productive adulthood, and healthy communities that allow them to breathe and walk safely to and learn in school, unimpaired by fear of violence or by untreated health problems.

We are Standing for Healthy Children in 1997 because

⌘ It is unconscionable that *every day* in America children are dying from diseases we could prevent; are being born too small to live and thrive because their mothers lacked prenatal care; are failing in school because of untreated vision and hearing and learning problems; are being hospitalized with life-threatening asthma and other illnesses that could have been alleviated if their parents could afford needed medication and doctor visits; and are losing private health coverage at a rate of 3,300 a day.

⌘ Each child is growing up *right now* and needs health protection *right now*, regardless of the state or the parents they chanced to draw. Why should a child's life chances depend on geography? Why should a Massachusetts child have health care that is denied a Mississippi child whose state chooses not to provide it? Why is a 66-year-old guaranteed health care but a 6- or 16-year-old is not? What makes one child's life more valuable than another's ?

⌘ Healthy children learn better. Imagine sitting all day or week in school with a toothache because your parents can't afford to take you to a dentist. Imagine spending days in a hospital recovering from measles when a cost-effective immunization could have prevented it. Imagine never being able to run and play and dance and romp because your untreated strep throat led to rheumatic fever that damaged your heart. Imagine not being able to listen to music or your family's conversation or the whispered jokes of playmates because your parents couldn't afford medical care and you lost your hearing when your ear infection didn't get treated. Imagine your frustration at being unable to see the blackboard because you don't have glasses.

⌘ We are standing for healthy children in 1997 because nearly 10 million children are uninsured in America and the num-

ber is growing every day. Nine out of ten uninsured children live in families that work; seven out of ten are White; and six out of ten live in two-parent families. If your family is very poor, or on welfare, you can get Medicaid. If you are well-to-do and don't have to work, you can afford to buy health insurance for your children. If you are a parent in the middle —earning somewhere between \$15,000 and \$50,000 a year —and your employer does not provide health coverage for your family, you often cannot protect your children's health. This could happen to your child or grandchild or mine in this economic climate. If our leaders take only small and piecemeal steps and cover only half of uninsured children and private coverage continues to erode, by the year 2000 there still will be 7.6 million uninsured children. Which of them or us would want our children uninsured? Surely we can do better than this.

¥ It is disgraceful that the world's leader in health technology ranks eighteenth in the industrialized world in infant mortality rates and highest in low birthweight rates. If America's children faced the same infant mortality rate as Japanese children, over 15,000 more U.S. babies would have survived in 1994.

¥ Taxpayers benefit when children are healthy. Minnesota care is saving taxpayers \$2.1 million a month in welfare costs by providing health coverage to its citizens, including over 50,000 children. Every dollar we invest in vaccinating our preschool children saves \$3.40 to \$16.34 in direct medical costs. Yet one in four preschool children still is not vaccinated, although much progress has been made in the past several years. Nine months of prenatal care cost \$1,100; one *day* of neonatal intensive care for a low-birthweight baby costs \$1,000.

- ¥ Lack of health insurance for children is a problem we can solve right now and make a huge difference in many child lives. The issue is whether we care enough to build the political will to do it. As one mother, I think it is time for all of us, but especially women, to stand up to the men in power and say, “Do it right and do it right now!” Put children’s lives and health before capital gains and estate tax cuts and more unnecessary weapons systems. Healthy, educated children are the most powerful economic growth stimulus and the best defense America can have.
- ¥ Each and every one of us can contribute. Pregnant women can make sure they get prenatal care and do not smoke or drink too much alcohol. All parents can make sure they do not take drugs or engage in any action that places their children’s health at risk. Parents and community outreach campaigns can make sure children are immunized on time. Corporate leaders can stop cutting health care benefits and shifting the burden of health coverage to their employees who cannot afford it or onto taxpayers. Communities can conduct immunization campaigns and make sure clinics are open after 5 P.M. and on Saturdays so working families can get their children vaccinations and checkups without losing a day of work. All states can follow the lead of Minnesota and Massachusetts and dramatically expand state programs to cover uninsured children. All citizens can call and write their representatives and sign and circulate petitions in their congregations, clubs, or places of work during lunch urging state and federal officials to vote for sound health coverage for all children now.
- ¥ It is likely that the 105th Congress will pass some kind of child health bill. It might be a piecemeal bill that leaves millions of children behind; a harmful bill that cuts Medicaid benefits and takes from one group of poor children who

need health care to help another group of children who are ineligible for Medicaid; or it could be a sound child health bill that covers all 10 million uninsured children and pregnant women and that enables parents to afford and contribute according to their means to timely coverage and the comprehensive services their children need. We must stand up and make sure the latter occurs. Otherwise our leaders may declare that they have taken care of child health while leaving millions of families and children out in the cold.

¥ It is the right and just thing to do! Our Judeo-Christian tradition requires it. “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why has the health of my poor people not been restored?” Jeremiah asked. How do we answer him?

HATCH-KENNEDY: A BIPARTISAN SOLUTION TO CHILD HEALTH COVERAGE

We have an unprecedented opportunity to make significant progress on child health coverage this year through the bipartisan CHILD bill cosponsored by conservative Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah and liberal Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy from Massachusetts. They recognize that three-year-olds struggling for breath from asthma don't know a Republican from a Democrat or liberal from conservative. They just need medical help.

Building on and protecting the Medicaid coverage and benefit package, the CHILD bill (Child Health Insurance and Lower Deficit Act) will raise \$30 billion from a 43¢ tobacco tax—\$20 billion will go toward child health coverage. Ten billion will go toward deficit reduction. The CHILD bill will have a triply positive health effect: it will cover far more children than any other pending measure; will deter many children from smoking and its related ills; and will prevent more youths from tobacco's gateway addiction to other drugs. It can pass if we mobilize and focus.

TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR STANDING EFFECTIVELY
FOR CHILDREN

1. Don't be blinded or bamboozled by political, media, and cultural chaff. Keep planting your seeds of hope and honesty and hard work and service and leave the harvesting to God. Ignore labels and just do what you've got to do. It doesn't matter whether someone calls you liberal, conservative, radical, extreme, or center. Labels don't matter when two-year-olds are being killed by guns and are dying from lack of health care we could provide.
2. Talk less and act more. Peter Marshall, the distinguished preacher, said, "Small deeds done are better than great deeds planned."
3. Don't worry about credit, turf, or critics. Keep doing your work. Indira Gandhi said her grandfather told her that there are "two kinds of people: those who do the work and those who take the credit. He told me to try to be in the first group; there was less competition there." It doesn't matter who gets the credit, as long as our children get the health care and child care and family supports they need.
4. Have holding power. Hang in and hang on to your values and faith in every kind of political weather. Millions of children will continue to perish rather than flourish if sunshine advocates give up when inevitable stormy political weather and low tides come. Persist and insist that children's needs be met.
5. Stand together. Watch out for political divide-and-conquer games. At the wonderful Monterey, California, aquarium, I watched little sardines swim together in unified formation. This protects tiny fish from sharks and other predator fish who gulp them up one by one when they stray off alone. If child advocates don't swim together and focus

on a few achievable objectives for our children each year, crucial individual child investments will be eaten up one by one. Don't let our leaders pit hungry children against homeless children, children with disabilities against abused children, and mothers who need child care to get off welfare against those already working who need child care to stay off welfare. And don't allow political leaders to squeeze children, the poor, the disabled, working Americans, and immigrants into a tiny, segregated budget-cutting box while powerful special interests are exempt.

6. Learn how to communicate simply. A Chinese proverb reminds, "Tell me, I'll forget. Show me, I may remember. But involve me, and I'll understand." That's why the Children's Defense Fund's Child Watch Visitation program takes community, media, and political leaders out to see and experience firsthand the needs of children, the solutions to those needs, and how everyone can help. As welfare repeal unfolds, bringing in its wake hunger, neglect, and more poverty, put a child, family, and program behind the statistics. When your members of Congress are home, take every single one of them on a Child Watch visit to talk to parents, children, and providers and see the human faces behind the statistics. Take them to a neonatal intensive care unit and let them see the child, parent, and taxpayer costs of low birthweight. I hope Child Watches on child health needs and solution will go on all over America until our corporate, state, local and federal leaders feel compelled to act. Ask them what they plan to do to assure jobs, child care, and health care for families.
7. Don't take *but* for an answer. How many times have you heard, "I am for (indeed, who can possibly be against) children —*but* this is unrealistic in light of budget constraints; *but* it will take a lot more time to get done; *but*

I don't like this particular proposal or strategy; *but* this is not the right time; *but* you need to build the political support for it and come back; *but* the other party will block it. *But, But!* I have been particularly struck with the child health coverage *buts* I've heard: I'm for all children getting health coverage, *but* we ought to cover their parents too (I agree); *but* we need to balance the budget and there is no money to cover parents or all children; *but* I'm against a new government program; *but* we need to lower our goal or we won't get bipartisan support; *but* you outside groups ought to get your act together; *but* we must figure out whether to do it through Medicaid or health tax credits or vouchers, or at the state level, or through employers.

8. Answer their *buts* with our *buts*. *But* just do it because children are dying every day and that's morally wrong and unnecessary. *But* there are many ways to provide health coverage for children, building on many successful private, state, and federal efforts. *But* we will pay for it in the same way Congress would pay for capital gains tax cuts and corporate welfare. Ensuring healthy children is not a money issue; it is a moral imperative.
9. Don't give up when you fail the first, second, fifth, or tenth time. Saving children is a mission, not a job. Transforming movements take decades to build and big wars have many battles—some of which you win, some of which you lose, and some of whose outcomes are undetermined for a long time. In 1996 we lost the income safety net but helped beat back seven other unjust block-grant proposals that would have repealed child and family nutrition, child protection, and Medicaid. So don't be discouraged and *don't quit*. You *can* make a difference. My role model, Sojourner Truth, was an illiterate slave woman. In harder times than these, she never stopped speaking out

against slavery or second-class treatment of women. My favorite Sojourner story occurred one day when she was heckled by a White man in the audience while speaking against slavery, who said: “Old slave woman, I don’t care any more about your anti-slavery talk than for a flea bite.” Sojourner snapped back, “That’s all right. The Lord willing, I’m gonna keep you scratching.” So often we want to be a big dog. Try being a persistent flea. Enough fleas biting strategically can make very big dogs uncomfortable. I’m optimistic about our movement for children, because I’ve seen the flea corps for children grow and grow across America. And it’s going to continue to grow as we stand together and strong for our children.

10. Pray for children, ourselves, and our nation, that we will do what is right by our children. “Prayer,” Gandhi reminded, “is the key of the morning and the bolt of the evening.” With prayer we will continue and succeed in building our movement until no child is left behind.

Let me end with a prayer as I always do to the God of all children:

O God of the children of Somalia, Sarajevo, South Africa, and South Carolina,

Of Albania, Alabama, Bosnia, and Boston,

Of Cracow and Cairo, Chicago and Croatia,

Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of black and brown and white and Albino children and those all mixed together,

Of rich and poor children and those in between,

Of children who speak English, Russian, Spanish, and Hmong, and languages our ears cannot discern,

Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of the child prodigy and child prostitute,
Of the child of rapture and the child of rape,
Of run- or thrown-away children who struggle every day without
parent or place or friend or future,
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

Oh God of the children who can walk and talk and hear and see
and sing and dance and jump and play and of children who
wish they could but can't,
Of children who are loved and unloved, wanted and unwanted;
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of beggar, beaten, abused, neglected, AIDS-, drug-, and
hunger-ravaged children,
Of children who are emotionally and physically and mentally
fragile and of those who rebel and ridicule, torment, and taunt,
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of children of destiny and of despair, of war and of peace,
Of disfigured, diseased, and dying children,
Of children without hope and of children with hope to spare and
to share,
Help us to love and respect and protect them all.