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The State of America's Children

Marian Wright Edelman
Children's Defense Fund

It is a great honor to receive the 2017 Inamori Ethics Prize from the Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence at Case Western Reserve University enabled by the Inamori Foundation. Your mission of fostering ethical leadership locally, nationally and globally is crucial in these turbulent times.

We are living at an incredible magical moment in history—blessed to experience the beginning of both a new century and millennium. How will we say thanks for the life, earth, nation, and children God has entrusted to our care? What legacies and values 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, peace, justice and community?

How will progress be measured over the next ten, hundred, and thousand years if we survive them? By the kill power and number of weapons of destruction we can produce, or by our willingness to shrink, indeed destroy, the global prison of violence constructed in the name of peace and security? Will our era be remembered 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 quality of life and justice in our families, national, and world communities? Will our legacy be how rapidly technology and corporate mergermania and greed can render human beings obsolete or by our efforts to reach a better balance between corporate profits, and corporate caring for families, children, communities, and the environment? Will we be remembered by how much a very few at the top can get at the expense of the many at the bottom and in the middle or by our determination to close the huge gap between the haves and have-nots in a world where the world's eight wealthiest people (all billionaires) own the same combined wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the world's population.

Something is awry in our own great nation when the richest one percent of Americans own about as much wealth as the bottom ninety percent of America combined; when the 400 highest-income taxpayers earned as

much as the combined tax revenue of twenty-two states and the District of Columbia in 2014; when the highest-paid American CEO took home over \$94 million in 2016, more than the combined average annual salaries of 4,240 child care workers; and when the gap between rich and poor has reached historic heights not seen since the 1920s.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Protestant theologian who died opposing Hitler's holocaust, said the test of the morality of a society is how it treats its children. The United States is failing Bonhoeffer's test daily by permitting a child to be abused or neglected every forty-seven seconds; (to be) born into poverty every forty-eight seconds; (to be) born without health insurance every sixty seconds; and (to be) killed by guns every three hours and eight minutes. We have lost nearly 180,000 children to gunfire in America since 1963. A child is killed or injured by a gun every thirty-two minutes and we are standing for it. Between 1963 and 2015, nearly 65,000 Black children and teens have been killed by guns—more than fifteen times the recorded lynchings of Black people of all ages in the seventy-four years from 1877 to 1950.

These facts are not acts of God. They are our choices as human beings. We can and must change them.

Albert Camus, speaking at a Dominican Monastery in 1948 said: "Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children." He described our responsibility as human beings "if not to reduce evil, at least not to add to it" and "to refuse to consent to conditions which torture innocents." "I continue," he said "to struggle against this universe in which children suffer and die." And so must every one of us. Only then will the cries of the prophets for justice and peace become a lasting reality.

The day Dr. King was assassinated, he called his mother to give her his next Sunday's sermon title: "Why America May Go to Hell." He warned that "America is going to hell if we don't use her vast resources to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life." It is a national moral disgrace that there are more than 13.2 million poor children in the United States—one of the world's richest nations. It is also unnecessary, costly and the greatest threat I believe to our future national, economic and military security and national soul.

The younger children are, the poorer they are during their years of greatest brain development. Every other American baby is nonwhite and nearly one in two Black babies is poor, 150 years after slavery was legally abolished.

The Children's Defense Fund commissioned the Urban Institute to analyze nine policies for their poverty alleviation impact. We released a 2015 report, which we are updating now, calling for an end to child poverty right now in the richest nation on earth. Our report showed that solutions to ending child poverty in our nation already exist and for the first time showed how, by expanding investments in nine existing programs that work, we could shrink overall child poverty sixty percent, Black child poverty seventy-two percent, and improve economic circumstances for ninety-seven percent of poor children at a cost of \$77.2 billion a year. These policies could be implemented immediately, improving the lives and futures of millions of children and eventually saving taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars annually.

America's poor children did not ask to be born; did not choose their parents, country, state, neighborhood, race, color, or faith. In fact, at the time of the report if they had been born in thirty-four other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries they would be less likely to be poor. Among these thirty-five countries, America ranked thirty-fourth in relative child poverty—ahead only of Romania whose economy is ninety-nine percent smaller than ours.

The United Kingdom committed to and succeeded in cutting its child poverty rate by half in ten years. It is about values and political will. Sadly, politics too often trumps good policy, moral decency, and responsibility to the next generation and the nation's future. It is way past time for a critical mass of Americans to confront the hypocrisy of America's pretension to be a fair playing field while more than 13.2 million children languish in poverty we have the capacity—but not the will—to prevent and alleviate.

Child poverty is too expensive to continue. Every year we keep these millions of children in poverty costs our nation about \$500 billion—six times more than the \$77 billion investment we proposed to reduce child poverty by sixty percent. MIT Nobel Laureate economist and 2014 Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Dr. Robert Solow in his foreword to a 1994 CDF report *Wasting America's Future* presciently wrote:

“For many years Americans have allowed child poverty levels to remain astonishingly high...far higher than one would think a rich and ethical society would tolerate. The justification, when one is offered at all, has often been that action is expensive: ‘We have more will than wallet.’ I suspect that in fact our wallets exceed our will, but in any event this concern for the drain on

our resources completely misses the other side of the equation: Inaction has its costs too....As an economist I believe that good things are worth paying for; and that even if curing children's poverty were expensive, it would be hard to think of a better use in the world for money. If society cares about children, it should be willing to spend money on them."

Not only does child poverty cost far more than eliminating it would, we have so many better choices that reflect more just values as well as economic savings. I believe that food, shelter, quality early childhood investments to get every child ready for school and an equitable education for all children should take precedence over massive welfare for the rich and blatantly excessive spending for military weapons that often do not work.

We can afford to act now to establish a floor of economic decency for all our children if our leaders think that we can afford more tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires. In our 2015 report we identified a few ways to fund the \$77 billion—two percent of our national budget—that at the time was necessary to make a huge down payment on ending preventable, costly and immoral child poverty in our wealthy nation.

- Closing tax loopholes that let U.S. corporations avoid \$90 billion in federal income taxes each year by shifting profits to subsidiaries in tax havens.

or

- Eliminating tax breaks for the wealthy by taxing capital gains and dividends at the same rates as wages, saving more than \$84 billion a year.

or

- Closing twenty-three tax loopholes that at the time were in House Ways and Means Chairman Dave Camp's Tax Reform Act of 2014 which would have freed up an average of \$79.3 billion a year.

or

- Decreasing fourteen percent of the nation's FY2015 \$578 billion military budget. The U.S. has less than five percent of the world's population but thirty-seven percent of the world's military expenditures.

or

- Scrapping the F-35 fighter jet program which was several years behind schedule and sixty-eight percent over budget and still not producing fully functional planes. For the nearly \$400 billion projected costs of this program, the nation could reduce child poverty by sixty percent for five years.

If we love America and love our children we must all stand against the excessive greed that tramples millions of our children entrusted to our care. America's Declaration of Independence says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." After more than two centuries, it is time to make those truths evident in the lives of all poor children and to close our intolerable national hypocrisy gap and show the world whether democratic capitalism is an oxymoron or can work. A nation that does not stand for children does not stand for anything and will not stand tall in the twenty-first century world or before God.

Let me end with a few lessons from Noah's Ark according to an anonymous sage in an old clipping that appeared in my home mail some years ago and a few examples of how one determined person can make a difference:

Lesson One: Don't miss the boat. The United States is going to miss the boat to lead and compete in our globalizing world because we are not preparing millions of our children for the future—especially nonwhite children who soon will be a majority of our child population. More than sixty percent of all public school fourth and eighth graders and almost seventy-five percent of Latino and Black students in these grades cannot read or compute at grade level and dropout rates are rampant; about seventy-one percent of seventeen to twenty-four-year olds would fail to qualify if they applied for military service because of reasons related to health, criminal records and drug abuse, literacy, and other education problems.

Lesson Two: We are all in the same boat. Many Americans may not like or think they have any self interest in assuring a fair playing field for other people's children—especially poor and nonwhite children who by 2020 will constitute a majority of our child population and future workers. But isn't it better to prepare them to be a productive workforce than for us to support them in costly prisons where they increase neither our safety nor our productivity? Yet the U.S. spends more than twice as much per prisoner than per public school pupil. [Note: 2011–2012 data shows Ohio was second-best, at 1.8 only behind Vermont]. I can't think of a dumber investment policy.

Lesson Three: Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark. Tomorrow is today and children have only one childhood. Providing *all* children a healthy start, quality early childhood experiences, first rate schools with first rate caring teachers who have high expectations for every child, and stimulating high quality out of school time programs must be the first order of national, state and community business in our quick fix, quarterly profit driven culture. And we must build a strong nonwhite teacher pipeline to better reflect the demographics of our child and public school population. Black, Brown and other nonwhite children since the 2014–2015 school year have been the majority of our public school population. They should be able to see themselves and their cultures reflected in the leadership, books and pedagogy of their schools.

Lesson Four: Don't listen to critics and naysayers. If you don't want to be criticized, don't say anything, do anything, or be anything.

Lesson Five: For safety's sake, travel in pairs and—better still—in community groups and coalitions. Lone ranger and top down leadership will not work. We must together reweave the fabric of family and community and utilize the power of our individual and collective voices and votes with urgency and persistence for children and the poor. Sprinters, dabblers and press hogs are not welcome. We need marathon runners and servant leaders—not self-serving leaders.

Lesson Six—my favorite: Remember that the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by experts. Too many of us are waiting for Dr. King to come back. He's gone. Use your citizen power and vote to wrest our ship of state from experts and powerful special interests who too often recklessly jeopardize all of our lives and our children's futures for personal gain and take more than their fair share of our nation's wealth and income.

Let's build our nation's future on higher ground and leave it better than we found it—more just, more hopeful, more peaceful, more productive, inclusive and unified. This may be the first time in our history when our children and grandchildren will be worse off than their parents and grandparents unless we correct course and do whatever is necessary to get them to safe harbor. God did not make two classes of children and we continue to do so at our soul and nation and world's peril.

What can each of us do to honor the spirit of this Inamori Ethics prize?

1. Avoid convenient ignorance—refusing to see the obvious suffering and unjust governmental and private sector policies in plain sight if our eyes were not deliberately closed or diverted.

2. If you do see, don't ask why doesn't somebody do something about child hunger, gun deaths, homelessness, unjust treatment and unequal school funding in schools and other institutions for poor and nonwhite or disabled children. [Public education in America and Ohio is still separate and unequal if you are a child of color or poor.] And we must all see and break up the Cradle to Prison Pipeline™ which continues to trap thousands upon thousands of Black, Latino and Native American boys. Incarceration for profit is a huge industry in America which must be stopped now.
3. Persist—democracy is not a spectator sport and one-day advocates or once in a while citizen participants let's our country and world down. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote: "There are those who struggle for a day and they are good. There are those who struggle for a year and they are better. There are those who struggle all their lives. These are the indispensable ones." Be an indispensable one.
4. Let's accept our responsibility to pass onto our children and grandchildren a safer and better world than we inherited.
5. Struggle to be an ethical human being who simply refuses to stop demanding justice for all children. God did not make two classes of children.

Two of my lifelong role models are Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman—both slave women who were determined to free themselves and others from slavery. One day Sojourner Truth was heckled by a White man in the audience who asserted he didn't care any more about her antislavery talk than a flea bite. She replied "[That's alright] but, the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching." We don't have to be big dogs trying to make big differences or big headlines. Working together with others strategically biting and voting as fleas, we can make the biggest dogs uncomfortable.

Harriet Tubman escaped slavery and created an underground railroad to the North and freedom and returned again and again to free slaves left behind. She boasted that she never lost a passenger. I can't think of any airline, train or bus company that can match her record.

As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. King's call for a campaign to end poverty in wealthy America, I hope we will make a down payment in 2018 by committing to ending child poverty now for which we will be issuing a call soon—working in coalition with others—and issuing a new

report and outlined goals. I hope you will join us in moving Dr. King's dream forward and stop the attempts of many of our political leaders to destroy the laboriously woven safety net over the past fifty years that has helped millions of children avoid hunger; enabled ninety percent of children to get health coverage with the help of thanks to Medicaid and CHIP and the Affordable Care Act; millions of children to get a Head Start and lay the foundation for a long overdue and not yet completed high quality early childhood system to prepare every child for school and success in life. We must go forward as Dr. King told me and other Spelman College students in chapel in 1960—never backwards. “If you can't fly,” he said, “drive. If you can't drive, run. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl. But always go forward.” Let us honor and heed his call and build a fairer and safer America in a world hungry for moral leadership, justice and peace.