

Original Blessings
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“Early in the spring of 1750, in the village of Juffure, four days upriver from the coast of The Gambia, West Africa, a man child was born to Omoro and Binta Kinte.” They were of the Mandinka tribe and the Islamic faith. According to ancient custom, it was the father’s task to name the child. And so on the eighth day, with the village assembled and his wife by his side, Omoro whispered three times softly into the baby’s ear, for it was believed that a child himself should be the first to learn his own identity, and then with the tan-tang drum pounding, the name was shared with the arafang, the holy man, who proclaimed it loudly to all. “The first child of Omoro and Binta Kinte is named Kunta!” he cried. And then in keeping with tradition, that night, his father walked to the edge of the village, beneath the moon and stars, and held his son aloft, looking toward the heavens, and uttered the words, “Behold, the only thing greater than yourself.”

Alex Haley’s saga of his family’s *Roots* is a mix of fact and fable. But it’s true the Mandinka have a rich oral history reaching back generations. It’s true that the child is named on the eighth day of his or her nativity. And it’s true that there is nothing grander, more complex, more alive with possibility than a newborn child.

This is doctrine. This is truth. In these dark days, on this tilted and cockeyed planet where 250 years after Kunte Kinta was kidnapped into slavery slavery still exists, wherever money can be made off the backs of the vulnerable, in this world of greed and indifference and ruthless business-as-usual, how do we maintain our faith in the future? What feeds our spirit? When the nights grow longest, where do we find our own, invincible sunrise?

For me, I find hope in a belief that the kids are okay. This is what makes us Unitarians. Not some centuries old dispute over the godhead or the Trinity, but a fundamental trust in human nature. That we’re born equipped with capacities for kindness, endlessly inquisitive, and able to join in mutuality and love. It’s what distinguished our faith from the very beginning: rejecting the dogma of original sin in favor of original blessing, a

belief that people are born with what William Ellery Channing called a “likeness to God.” And though the biggest, baddest corporations in the world work hard from an early age to turn kids into tiny consumers, and though helicopter parents do their darndest to get youngsters into the premium pre-schools, even hiring professional test-takers to write PSATs (or Pre-School Aptitude Tests), turning education into a career-driven pursuit of high paying jobs that will let us accumulate ever more elaborate lifestyle accessories, children have a way of grounding us with the simplicity of their needs and wants and tenderness and tears.

So much research has shown that, from infancy, human beings are wired to be and want to be moral creatures. Of course, Freud thought babies were little bundles of narcissism, and that’s been psychological convention for years, echoed in a satirical headline from *The Onion*; “New Study Finds Children to be Unrepentant Sociopaths.” But that’s contradicted by the fresh, better documented work of Paul Bloom, Valerie Kuhlmeier, and others at Yale’s Infant Cognition Center who study the moral instincts of very young children.

They suggest we start life rather well, with a built-in sense of altruism and fair play. Of course you can’t ask babies about right and wrong. You have to be inventive. In one of their experiments, for example, the professors decided to use a three-dimensional tableau where geometrical objects, manipulated like puppets, acted out scenarios of good guy versus bad guy: a yellow square would help the green circle up the hill, while a red triangle would push it down. “After showing the babies the scene, the experimenter placed the helper and the hinderer on a tray and brought them to the child. In this instance, researchers recorded ...which character they reached for, on the theory that what a baby reaches for is a reliable indicator of what a baby wants. In the end,” experimenters found, “6- and 10-month-old infants overwhelmingly preferred” the helper to the meanie. “This wasn’t a subtle statistical trend; just about all the babies reached for the good guy.”

Tons of studies confirm that we’re not born bad. People seem to have some innate preferences for cooperative behavior, for niceness. Of course, that doesn’t mean little Adam or baby Eve wouldn’t try a bite of the old apple if given the chance. Tasting,

testing, touching, playing with the world around us seems to be part of primal human nature, leading developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik at Berkeley to suggest that “babies and children are actually more conscious than we are as adults. Adult attention and consciousness look kind of like a spotlight. Our consciousness of that thing that we're attending to becomes extremely bright and vivid, and everything else sort of goes dark. If we look at babies and young children, we see something very different. They seem to have more of a lantern of consciousness than a spotlight of consciousness. So babies and young children are very bad at narrowing down to just one thing, but they're very good at taking in lots of information from lots of different sources at once. And if you actually look in their brains, you see that they're flooded with these neurotransmitters that are really good inducing learning and plasticity. And the inhibitory parts haven't come on yet.”

Maybe that's why Einstein said that part of his genius was that he never really stopped thinking and asking questions like a child. “When I ask myself how it happened that I in particular discovered the relativity theory, it seemed to lie in the following circumstance,” he reflected. “The ordinary adult never bothers his head about the problems of space and time. These are things he has thought of as a child. But I developed so slowly that I began to wonder about space and time only when I was already grown up. Consequently, I probed more deeply into the problem than an ordinary child would have.” He wondered what it would be like to ride a sled at the speed of light, for example, or whether you'd feel any gravity in a free-falling elevator. Fortunately, he didn't try that experiment at home, but he didn't prematurely rule things out, either. So call them little Einsteins or call them little rascals, but youngsters do have a fresh and free way of interacting with the world the self-imposed limitations of adulthood won't allow.

So hope is all around. I see it embodied in young people like sixteen year old Greta Thunberg, addressing the U.N. Assembly and mobilizing millions for climate activism. I see it in inventors like Boyan Slat, still in high school when he invented a giant self-propelled boom for skimming plastic from the oceans. I saw hope in the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school in Parkland, Florida, where seventeen students died in a mass shooting last year, but instead of succumbing to fear or despair, young

people rose up to organize against gun violence. Kids are dumb enough, or naive enough, or smart enough to believe they really can change the world.

Maybe that's why so many world religions picture the divine in childlike form. Christians revere the Christ child in this season. Hindus adore the mischievous baby Krishna. Isaiah proclaims that a little child will lead them. And that's sometimes how I like to think of God, not as all knowing, but as all curious, not pre-determining the course of history and human events with an omnipotent power-over, but rather like a toddler on an adventuresome ramble with no predetermined course in mind, occasionally taking a tumble, tripping over her own shoelaces, but also making discoveries and generating sobs and giggles along the way.

Let me end with a dream, a dream from the mathematical physicist Freeman Dyson, who worked with Robert Oppenheimer and Richard Feynman and that whole generation who were post-Einstein but also met and knew the man. Dyson was a scientist with a spiritual bent, winning both the Max Planck Medal for his theoretical work and a Templeton Prize for what you might call his metaphysics. He declared that we live in the most interesting of all possible universes, and that our fate is to make it more so. And this is the dream he relates at the end of his book, *Disturbing the Universe*.

"I am sitting in the kitchen at home in America, having lunch with my wife and children. I am grumbling as usual about the bureaucracy. For years we have been complaining to lower-level officials and there has never been any response. "Why don't you go straight to the top?" says my wife. "If I were you I would just telephone the head office." I pick up the phone and dial the number. This comes as a big surprise to the children. They know how much I hate telephoning, and they like to tease me about it. Usually I will make all kinds of excuses to avoid making a call, especially when it is to somebody I don't know personally. But this time I take the plunge without hesitation. The children sit silent, robbed of their chance to make fun of my telephone phobia. To my amazement, the secretary answers at once in a friendly voice and asks what I want. I say I would like an appointment. She says, "Good. I have put you down for today at five." I say, " May I bring the children?" She says, "Of course." As I put down the phone I realize with a shock that we have only an hour to get ourselves ready.

I ask the children if they want to come. I tell them we are going to talk to God and they had better behave themselves. Only the two younger girls are interested. I am glad not to have the whole crowd on my hands. So we say goodbye to the others quickly, before they have time to change their minds. It is just the three of us. We slip out of the house quietly and walk into town to the office.

The office is a large building. The inside of it looks like a church, but there is no ceiling. When we look up, we see that the building disappears into the distance like an elevator shaft. We hold hands and jump off the ground and go up the shaft. I look at my watch and see that we have only a few minutes left before five o'clock. Luckily, we are going up fast, and it looks as if we shall be in time for our appointment. Just as the watch says five, we arrive at the top of the shaft and walk out into an enormous throne room. The room has whitewashed walls and heavy black oak beams. Facing us at the end of the room is a flight of steps with the throne at the top. The throne is a huge wooden affair with wicker back and sides. I walk slowly toward it, with the two girls following behind. They are a little nervous, and so am I. It seems there is nobody here. I look at my watch again. Probably God did not expect us to be so punctual. We stand at the foot of the steps, waiting for something to happen.

Nothing happens. After a few minutes I decide to climb the steps and have a closer look at the throne. The girls are shy and stay at the bottom. I walk up until my eyes are level with the seat. I see then that the throne is not empty at all. There is a three-month-old baby lying on the seat and smiling at me. I pick him up and show him to the girls. They run up the steps and take turns carrying him. After they give him back to me, I stay with him for a few minutes longer, gradually become aware that the questions I had intended to raise with him have been answered. I put him gently back on his throne and say goodbye. The girls hold my hands and we walk down the steps together.”