

# The Meaning of the Presence of Children

by Gilbert Meilaender

from: *Things That Count*

Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Inc.  
3901 Centerville Road  
PO Box 4431  
Wilmington DE 19807-0431

Reprinted with permission

Why have children? The question carries its own pathos, and we might be tempted to reply that those for whom the question is a live one probably should not. But our society is greatly confused about this question. On the one hand, married couples—and sometimes unmarried individuals—go to great lengths to have “a child of their own.” On the other hand, many couples have difficulty summoning the courage to proceed. They doubt their readiness—and that not only for economic reasons. Ellen Goodman wrote a column, a few years back, reflecting on a survey that had been taken to determine whether people felt “ready” to have children. She doubted the wisdom of such an undertaking.

I know a dozen couples who can't decide to have children. They can't even decide how to decide. They want a rational actuarial kind of life-plan, and this test feeds right into their anxiety. The search is on to unearth the “right reason” to have children and to find out who are the “right people” to have them. . . . Parenting demands a risk and not a scoreboard.

It is my aim here to explore the venture of parenthood, the inner meaning of the family bond. And because such an exploration must always have a location, I will examine the meaning of fecundity from within the perspective of Christian faith—which has, after all, been one of the principal sources of our culture's formation on this question, but which, on these questions may help to point us in the direction of a true humanism.

Such a humanistic perspective, and something of the meaning of the presence of children, has been provocatively exemplified in P. D. James recent novel *The Children of Men*.<sup>1</sup> The story is set in Great Britain in the year 2021. No children have been born anywhere in the world since 1995, a year in which all males—for reasons unknown—became infertile. We see what such a world means through the eyes of Theodore (Theo) Faron, an Oxford historian.

Because of his fascination with a woman named Julian, Theo makes contact with a revolutionary group to which she belongs. But their plans for revolution against the dictatorship ruling Britain suddenly take a back seat to an unexpected turn in the plot: Julian discovers that she is pregnant (by Luke, a priest, who is also a member of the small band of rebels). Needing help to escape detection until Julian gives birth, the group turns to Theo. He comes by night to their hiding place, unable to believe that Julian could truly be carrying a child. She places his hand on her abdomen, and he feels the child kick. Then she tells him to listen to its heartbeat. In order to do so, he kneels beside her.

It was easier for him to kneel, so he knelt, unselfconsciously, not thinking of it as a gesture of homage but knowing that it was right that he should be on his knees. He placed his right arm around her waist and pressed his ear against her stomach. He couldn't hear the beating heart, but he could hear and feel the movements of the child; feel its life. He was swept by a tide of emotion which rose, buffeted and engulfed him in a turbulent surge of awe, excitement and terror, then receded, leaving him spent and weak.<sup>2</sup>

There is mystery in the presence of the newly created child—and Theo rightly kneels. But we can and should also explore a little the human meaning of this mystery.

### **The Venture of Parenthood**

There is, I claimed at the outset, a certain pathos in the question, Why have children? It suggests a loss of spontaneous confidence in life and an impoverishment of spirit. This does not mean that such a question is unreasonable, particularly for those whose circumstances make hope difficult, though we may doubt whether they are the ones always most likely to raise the question. In any case, I do not seek to judge the difficulties facing any particular married couple or their special circumstances; rather, I seek to reflect upon the social significance of our attitude toward the presence of children.

The formation of a family is most truly human, a sign of health, when it springs from what Gabriel Marcel called “an experience of plenitude.”<sup>3</sup> To conceive, bear, and rear a child ought to be an affirmation and a recognition: affirmation of the good of life that we ourselves were given; recognition that this life bears its own creative power to which we should be faithful. In this sense Marcel could claim that “the truest fidelity is creative.”<sup>4</sup> The desire to have children is an expression of a deeply humanistic impulse to be faithful to the creative power of the life that is mysteriously ours. This impulse “is not essentially different from that of the artist who is the bearer of some message which he must communicate, of some flame which he must kindle and pass on...”<sup>5</sup> The power of her art will have dried up in an artist who no longer feels impelled to create and who must ask, Why write? or, Why sing? or, Why paint? She will no longer be in touch with the powerfully creative Muses that were hers—and yet, of course, not simply hers; they were forces beyond her control in which she was a confident and hopeful participant.

This does not mean that we are most truly human when we simply reproduce often and almost by chance. We can distinguish, Marcel notes, between forming a family and producing a brood.<sup>6</sup> Nor does it mean that the marriage bond should be thought of simply as a means to the end of production of offspring, as if the relation of husband and wife were not itself centrally related to the meaning of our humanity. Nor yet does it mean that “planning” is inappropriate in the formation of a family, as if to be human were only to be subject to a life-force and not to exercise our freedom and reason. But granting all such provisos, there is still a sense in which planning alone cannot capture the “experience of plenitude” from which procreation, as its best, springs. There is, after all, no necessity that human beings exist—or that we ourselves *be*. That something rather than nothing exists is a mystery that lies buried in the heart of God, whose creative power and plenitude of being are the ground of our life. That life should have come into

existence is in no way our doing. Within this life we can exercise a modest degree of control, but we deceive ourselves if we forget the mystery of creation that grounds our being.

To form a family cannot, therefore, be only an act of planning and control—unless we are metaphysically deceived. It must also be an act of faith and hope, what Marcel termed “the exercise of a fundamental generosity.”<sup>7</sup> There is, as he quite rightly noted, a fundamental difference between deciding to produce an heir, or deciding to reproduce ourselves (by having a son and a daughter)—between such attitudes and a fidelity to life that is creative because a man and woman “in a sort of prodigality of their whole being, sow the seed of life without ulterior motive by radiating the life flame which has permeated them and set them aglow.”<sup>8</sup> Years ago I read a set of newspaper articles comparing the attitude toward children of two married couples.<sup>9</sup> One couple had decided to have no children; the other had, at least by our contemporary standards, a large family. Certainly there was nothing illogical in the first couple’s decision.

They are distrustful as well of what children can do to a marriage. “When you have children,” says Michael, “the focus changes from the couple to the kids. Suddenly everything is done for them. Well, I’m 27, I’ve used up a good portion of my life already. Why should I want to sacrifice for someone who’s still got his whole life ahead of him?”

How instructive is the image this man uses. Life is held in a container. We must hold on to as much of it as we can, be careful not to give too much of it away, avoid pouring out the container’s contents precipitously. One could not ask for a better contrast with Marcel’s claim that the creation and sustaining of a family is an act of self-spending. And if there is nothing illogical about this man’s attitude, there is, nonetheless, a failure to probe deeply the mystery of human life. As if our very existence were not itself an act of entirely gratuitous self-giving on the part of the Creator—an act for which no logical ground or explanation can be given! And in response to that primal act of self-giving we can respond with that fidelity to life which is itself creative—or we can turn the mystery of life into simply a problem to be controlled by our own attempts at planning and mastery.

To the extent that we moderns have understood the family as a problem to be mastered, and not a mystery to be explored faithfully, we have quite naturally come to adopt a certain attitude toward our children. They have been produced, not out of any spontaneous confidence in life, but as the result of our own planning. We are, therefore, tempted to suppose that we must—and can—become their protectors, the guarantors of their future. Paradoxically, having lost the metaphysical underpinnings of procreation as a participation in the Creator’s own gracious self-spending, having lost much of the real significance of the family, we make of it more than it is. We invest it with more emotional freight than it can bear, as we cling ever more tightly to the children we have. The paradox is, in fact, understandable: to ask of an earthly good more than it can offer is an inescapable result of idolatry. In order to make of the family neither more nor less than it ought to be, we may be helped if we think of its inner meaning in two ways—as a biological community and a historical community.

## **The Family as Biological Community**

Lines of kinship and descent embed us in the world of nature so that from birth we are individuals within a community. Like the other animals, human beings “bring forth...according to their kinds” and, in more peculiarly human fashion, pass on to their children their image and likeness.<sup>10</sup> Our personhood is marked by that inheritance, for we incarnate the union of the man and the woman who are our parents. They are not simply reproducing themselves, nor are they simply a cause of which we are the effect. In reaching out to each other, they forge a community between two beings who are different and separate. When from their oneness they create a new human being, that act testifies to the truth that love for someone other than the self is a love that does not seek simply to see its own face in the loved one. This love creates community.

And the bond between parents and children does in fact bind; with it come obligations. Parents have, whether they want it or not, the honor and responsibility to stand before their children as God’s representatives, for it is his creative power in which they are sharers. Children have that most puzzling of duties: to show gratitude for a bond in which they find themselves without in any way having chosen it. For the “problem” of their existence is simply, in miniature, the “problem” of all existence—the mystery that anything should exist at all. Hence, in what seems to be a biological fact, moral significance is embedded. The psalmist writes that children are “a heritage-from the LORD.”<sup>11</sup> The child, therefore, as a gift of God and the fruit of our fidelity to and participation in God’s continuing creative work, is a sign of hope and of God’s continued affirmation of the creation. Still more, the presence of the child indicates that the parents, as co-creators with God, have shared something of the mystery of divine love: their love-giving has proved to be life-giving. That such gratuitous self-spending should, in fact, give new life is the deepest mystery of God’s being and is imaged faintly in the birth of a child.

We are, of course, free in many ways to transcend our embeddedness in nature, but we ought also to respect the embodied character of human life. As parents of children and children of parents, we are marked by the biological communities in which we find ourselves. We are not just free spirits, free to make of ourselves what we will. There is, in part at least, a “givenness” to our existence that limits us. Part of the task of a faithful life is to learn to receive that givenness with thanksgiving and to be trustworthy in the duties it lays upon us.

If this is in part the inner meaning of the bond of parents and children, we should be clear about one important truth. This bond may very often make us deeply happy; indeed, it may have the capacity to bring some of the greatest joys into human life. But we ought not have children chiefly for that reason. Though the bond often fulfills us, it does not exist for the sake of our fulfillment. Parents are not reproducing themselves; they are giving birth to another human being, equal to them in dignity and bound to them in ties of kinship, but not created for their satisfaction. To desire a child of “one’s own” is understandable, but such language should be used only with great caution. Biological parenthood does not confer possession of children. Rather, it calls us to the historical tasks of rearing, nurturing, and civilizing our children so that the next generation may achieve its relative independence. And it calls us to seek to impart that spontaneous confidence in life which is the fundamental ground of the family.

Self-giving, therefore, not self-fulfillment, lies at the heart of the parents' vocation. If such self-giving should prove to be deeply satisfying, we have reason to be thankful. But such a symmetrically satisfying result is not guaranteed, and seeking it is not the best way to prepare for the vicissitudes of parenthood. To give birth is a venture that must be carried out in hope and in faith that the Creator will continue to speak his "yes" upon the creation.

### **The Family as Historical Community**

In love a man and a woman turn from themselves toward each other. They might, however, miss the call of creative fidelity to life and be forever content to turn toward each other alone, to turn out from themselves no more than that. But in the child, their union, as a union, quite naturally turns outward. They are not permitted to think of themselves as individuals who come together only for their own fulfillment. In the child they are given a task. Their union plays its role in a larger history, and it becomes part of their vocation to contribute to the ongoing life of a people. Certainly both Jews and Christians have commonly understood the bond of parents and children in this way:

I will utter dark sayings from of old,  
things that we have heard and known,  
that our fathers have told us.  
We will not hide them from their children,  
but tell to the coming generation  
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,  
and the wonders which he has wrought.  
He established a testimony in Jacob,  
and appointed a law in Israel,  
which he commanded our fathers  
to teach to their children;  
that the next generation might know them,  
the children yet unborn,  
and arise to tell them to their children,  
so that they should set their hope in God.<sup>12</sup>

In many respects this is the most fundamental task of parents: transmission of a way of life. When the son of the ancient Israelite asked, "What does this mean?," his father told again the story of the mighty acts of God, the story of their common life as a people. When a woman of Israel appeals to the biological bond and cries out to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked," he responds: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it."<sup>13</sup> He points, that is, to a further bond that must be built upon the basis of biological community and is finally more crucial: initiation into a way of life. The apostle writes that fathers should not provoke their children to anger, but should "bring them up in the *paideia* and instruction of the Lord."<sup>14</sup> That task of *paideia*, of nurture and inculcation of a way of life, is the calling of parents.

Of course, these biblical passages refer to the transmission of a religious tradition: the story of God's care for his people. But they also point more generally to something fundamental.

Parenthood is not just biological begetting. It is also history—a vocation to nurture the next generation, to initiate it into the human inheritance of knowledge and obligation. If today many feel that the family is “in crisis,” or wonder why they should have children, that may be in large part because parents have little commitment to or sense of a story to pass on.

To think of the family as a biological community points us, we noted earlier, toward the importance of self-giving love. The same is true when we envision the family as a historical community. Here, even more clearly and starkly, the risk and venture of parenthood come into view. Parents commit themselves to initiating their children into the human inheritance and, more particularly, into the stories that depict their way of life. In so doing they shape, mold, and civilize their children.

But there are no guarantees that the final “product” of this process will be what the parents anticipated. Parents know this, of course, and are therefore understandably anxious about their children’s future. However understandable such anxiety may be, it also constitutes a great temptation—the temptation to try to be the guarantor of our children’s future, to protect them from all disappointment and suffering. To give in to such temptation would be, in effect, to deny their freedom to be another like us, equal to us in dignity. This means that parents must seek more than their own satisfaction in rearing their children. They must give themselves in faith and hope, recognizing that they are not more than co-creators and that they cannot shape the future.

### **Why Children?**

Viewing the family from these two perspectives, we can understand why Marcel would suggest that parenthood, at its best, implies a certain fundamental generosity. And if this is true, if the family is a community that demands a great deal of us, we may often wonder why we should undertake the effort it involves. The ultimate answer, I think, is the one with which I began—that there is no answer if we lack all spontaneous confidence in life. But perhaps we can now press a little further and find a purpose or *telos* in the family bond. Both a social and a theological case can be made for commitment to the family, and we can begin with the lesser and move toward the greater.

Renewal of the species and rearing of the next generation might, of course, take place apart from anything remotely resembling the family. That is a very old idea. Plato had Socrates propose it when constructing the ideal city in *The Republic*. He suggests that by making kinship universal we could eliminate the divisive passions that ordinary family preference involves. In today’s setting, we could establish a universal system of day-care centers to which children were given at birth and in which everyone had a hand in the care of all children—and in this way begin to approximate Socrates’ proposal. If, however, the family is the sort of community I have described, doing this would make war on elements written very deeply into our nature. And no doubt Aristotle had something like that in mind when he suggested that Socrates’ proposal would do more than combat divisive passion: it might also dilute a sense of concern and responsibility for those who come after us.<sup>15</sup>

We can expand a little upon his claim. A parent, after all, is not simply a public functionary charged with looking after a certain number of children. The special attachment that

characterizes the parent-child bond serves, at its best, as a kind of guarantee of love—almost an analogue to divine grace. (That it does not always work this way indicates only that it is no more than an analogue and that quite often we are not at our best.) The child is loved unconditionally, for no particular reason. I love my children not because they are especially talented or qualified in one way or another, but simply because they have been given to me and placed in my care. And only such love, founded on no particular quality or attribute, can offer something approaching unconditional acceptance.

If I love my daughter because she plays the piano well, or my son because he executes the pick-and-roll with precision, if that is the ground of my special attachment, then it is subject to change. There can be little certainty that my commitment will endure, for it is likely that others will play both piano and basketball better. But when, by contrast, parental love is grounded in the facts of biological and historical bonding, the child lives in a setting that offers the kind of acceptance human beings need to become capable of adult commitment—a setting in which individuals who are separate but connected can grow and flourish. Thus, Michael Waizer perceptively commented that

[o]ne might...liberate women from childbirth as well as parents from child care, by cloning the next generation...or by purchasing babies from underdeveloped countries. This is not the redistribution but the abolition of parental love, and I suspect that it would quickly produce a race of men and women incapable even of the commitment required for an affair.<sup>16</sup>

At least this much can be said about the social purpose of the family.

But from a Christian perspective our commitment to the family cannot and ought not to be grounded simply in its importance for our common life, for training the generation that will succeed us. However important, this remains only penultimate. The family is also something more than a basic social unit, and this something-more limits it, helping us to make of it neither more nor less than it should be. It is a sphere in which God is at work on us, shaping and molding us, that we may become people who genuinely wish to share his life of love. The overarching interpretive rubric within which to understand the spheres of life—here, in particular, the family—is Augustine’s statement that the servants of God “have no reason to regret even this life of time, for in it they are schooled for eternity.”<sup>17</sup> The family is a school of virtue in which God sets before us, day after day, a few people whom we are to learn to love. This is the *paideia* of the heavenly Father at work upon both children and parents, building upon the love that comes naturally to us in our families, but transforming it also into the image of divine love.

Such straightforward religious talk may, of course, seem alien to the common life of our society, and no doubt it is, to some degree. Yet it may be precisely the language for which we are searching, language that points the way toward a true humanism. We tend to make of the family both too much and too little. Too much is made of it, as parents seek to reproduce themselves in their children, feverishly seek children “of their own,” and try as much as possible to protect those children from all experience of suffering and sacrifice. In doing this we ask of the family more than it can give, and we place upon it expectations that must inevitably be disappointed. At

the same time we make too little of the family—seldom seeing in it anything more than an arena for personal fulfillment, and failing to see it as a community that ought to transmit a way of life.

What we really need is language that can take seriously the venture of parenthood without depriving the family bond of a still greater *telos*, a larger aim and meaning. The family understood as a school of virtue—the place where citizens capable of adult commitment are formed, the place where we begin to learn the meaning of love—can provide that larger context.

### **The Importance of an Ideal**

One might argue, of course, that the vision sketched above—whether true or false—is largely irrelevant to our circumstances. The creative fidelity to which the venture of parenthood calls us rests upon the virtue of hope—and, perhaps, many in our world have little reason to hope. Until we change the conditions and circumstances of their lives, this vision of the family is worthless. We might well be tempted to think in that way, but we would then fail to appreciate the importance of an ideal.

In his engagingly titled book *What's Wrong with the World*, G.K. Chesterton argued that his fellow citizens could not repair the defects of the family because they had no ideal at which to aim. Neither the Tory (Gudge) nor the Socialist (Nudge) viewed the family as sacred or had an image of what the family at its best might be:

The Tory says he wants to preserve family life in Cindertown; the Socialist very reasonably points out to him that in Cindertown at present there isn't any family life to preserve. But Nudge, the Socialist, in his turn, is highly vague and mysterious about whether he will try to restore it where it has disappeared...The Tory sometimes talks as if he wanted to tighten the domestic bonds that do not exist; the Socialist as if he wanted to loosen the bonds that do not bind anybody. The question we all want to ask of both of them is the original ideal question, "Do you want to keep the family at all?"<sup>18</sup>

The result of such confusion, Chesterton thought, was that in his own day "the cultured class is shrieking to be let out of the decent home, just as the working class is shouting to be let into it."<sup>19</sup>

In such circumstances one needs an ideal—a point from which to begin and on the basis of which to think about the world. Chesterton began "with a little girl's hair":

That I know is a good thing at any rate. Whatever else is evil, the pride of a good mother in the beauty of her daughter is good. It is one of those adamant tendernesses which are the touchstones of every age and race. If other things are against it, other things must go down...With the red hair of one she-urchin in the gutter I will set fire to all modern civilization. Because a girl should have long hair, she should have clean hair; because she should have clean hair, she should not have an unclean home; because she should not have an unclean home, she should have a free and leisured mother; because she should have a free mother,

she should not have an usurious landlord; because there should not be an usurious landlord, there should be a redistribution of property; because there should be a redistribution of property, there shall be a revolution. That little urchin with the gold-red hair, whom I have just watched toddling past my house, she shall not be lopped and lamed and altered; her hair shall not be cut short like a convict's; no, all the kingdoms of the earth shall be hacked about and mutilated to suit her. She is the human and sacred image; all around her the social fabric shall sway and split and fall; the pillars of society shall be shaken, and the roofs of ages come rushing down; and not one hair of her head shall be harmed.<sup>20</sup>

That captures vividly the importance—and the power—of an ideal. And until we rediscover the inner meaning of the venture of parenthood as a mystery to be lived rather than a problem to be controlled, we will be ill equipped to deal with the ills we confront.

### NOTES

1. P.D. James, *The Children of Men* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 153f.
3. Gabriel Marcel, "The Mystery of the Family," in *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p. 88.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 87. There is, of course, also a difference between a *brood* and a *large family*. And for those who take seriously the idea that the truest fidelity is to be creative—the idea that our own creativity participates in and mirrors the divine creative power—there is something to be said, at least in principle, for the large family. Marcel himself makes the point nicely in another essay, "The Creative Vow as the Essence of Fatherhood," also collected in *Homo Viator*: [I]t would be impossible to exaggerate the extent of the difference which separates a large family from a family of one or two children: a difference comparable to that which in the philosophy of Bergson separates the Enclosed from the Open. It is a difference of atmosphere in the first place: that which exists between fresh air and the air in a confined space. We must, however, go much further. By the multiplicity, the unpredictable variety of the relationships which it embraces, the large family really presents the character of a creation..." [p. 113].
7. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
9. *Washington Post*, August 7, 1975.
10. Genesis 1:24; 5:3.
11. Psalm 127:3.
12. Psalm 78:2-7.
13. Luke 11:27-28.

14. Ephesians 6:4.
15. Aristotle, *Politics*, II:iii, 1261 *b*. Cf. A.W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 188.
16. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 238f.
17. Augustine, *City of God*, I, 29.
18. G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, vol. 4 of *Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 212.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 217f.