

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

B Y L E D A Y N E M C L E E S E P O L A S K I

Children harbor God-given gifts waiting to be discovered. How can we nurture the unfolding of what God wove into the children in our families, churches, schools, and neighborhoods, as well as the children whom we will never know?

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

Psalm 139:13-15

She has my nose, her Daddy's unbelievably long eyelashes, along with vivid blue eyes that come from who knows where. She has my thick hair, Daddy's sweet face, and it seems so far (please let it be so!) his usually sweet and easy-going disposition as well. When we were expecting her, like all parents-to-be, we speculated what she would be like. We were both excited and afraid. After all, a child with the best of the both of us could be astoundingly wonderful while a child with the worst of both of us...well, that just didn't bear thinking about.

When she arrived, a friend and fellow mother of young children sent a card of congratulations with a thought that has stuck with me: parenting, it said, is not so much a matter of implanting things in our children as it is a

continual process of finding ways to allow what is already within them to unfold. Even as she approaches her second birthday, it is more and more clear that as much as we have learned of her in these wonderful months, she remains a mystery. Who knows what has been knit together within her, what remains to unfold, what she will yet become? She may yet fulfill her latest stated professional ambition to drive a big truck or a school bus!

This much is certain: having her has made me much more attuned to the emotional landscape of my own childhood. I find myself far more aware, and far more grateful, for the love that surrounded me from my birth. On the dresser in my bedroom there is a collage of photographs that my mother put together for my grandfather for his 90th birthday. I inherited it when he passed away several years later. In the lower left corner there is a picture of my grandmother and grandfather with me as a newborn. My grandmother is holding me so that I am between the two of them; they are both peering down at me. Looking at this picture, looking at my grandparents' faces, one thing is perfectly clear: I am the center of the universe! As the only child of an only child, I was their only grandchild, and nothing ever happened to alter their view that I was the center of the created order. To them, I was indeed "wonderfully made."

On the other hand, most people do not regard me with the same biased and unreasoning satisfaction. Several years ago my pastor invited me to be one of several members of the congregation to offer a meditation in worship on Psalm 139:14. My husband Tom, the person who knows me best, immediately volunteered to let me speak about my being "wonderfully made" while he took up the topic of my being "fearfully made." I shared this with the congregation as part of my meditation, telling them, "Time constraints prevent us from honoring his request."

I am neither so falsely humble nor so unaware of my own faults and frailties that I do not see the truth in both views of me. So, is that what these verses are all about—the fact that we are all both wonderful to behold and fear-inspiring all at the same time? Though that concept is both interesting and true, it is not the meaning this passage holds for me. It leads me to think instead of the awesome nature of being human, of being created by the same hands that created the universe and all that is within it. I hear these words and think that there is more within each of us—more within you, more within me, and more within each person we know and each person we encounter—than we can guess or dream. More than Tom and I can imagine about our daughter. More than my grandparents imagined about me.

The psalmist's claim that there is within us so much to unfold reminds me of my own story. Though reluctant to make myself an example, I also believe that the best thing we can ask of a biblical claim or story is, "How do we know this to be true in our own lives?" So here goes:

I decided as a sophomore in college that God was calling me to go to seminary. I had little idea of what might lie beyond that, little idea of what sort of career I might pursue afterwards, but I felt a strong pull to go. And so I did. Amid my vocational questioning and confusion, there was one thing I was very sure of: I did not, under any circumstances, *ever* want to preach. I spent years dreading and avoiding the preaching class I would have to take in order to get my degree. Finally, when I could wait no longer, I took the course. An amazing, astounding thing happened. As I did this thing that I dreaded and feared, my classmates and my professor began to use this completely unexpected word in reference to my preaching: “gift.” They said that I had a *gift* for preaching. I was shocked. And here is where the “fearfully” part comes in: I was scared. As scared as I had ever been. What on earth could this mean? You see, I had learned my Sunday School and Training Union lessons well. I knew what it meant to have a gift: if God gives you a gift, God means for you to use it. I did not want this gift. I did not want to do this thing. I did not want to change the way I thought about my self, my call, and my future. It was indeed a fearful time. And yet, it was also a wonderful time. For I learned that, despite all my fears, this was something that I loved to do, a secret woven into my being even while I was being formed. And so I began to do this thing. And I can say now that there is no aspect of my work and of my call that brings me more pure joy. Locked within me, there was something beyond my imagining, a wonderful and fearful gift. Perhaps (and here is grace indeed), it is not the only one. Perhaps more wait to be discovered. The psalmist says it is the same for us all, and for all our children.

Who are the children we’re thus called to nurture and unfold? Several years ago, an older colleague of mine attended a workshop led by a leading thinker on generational patterns and differences. My colleague came back and told me that, according to the speaker, the difference between his

generation and mine was this: his generation set out to save the world, and, if their families went to hell in a handbasket while they were at it, that was just a cost of having a mission of such great importance. By contrast, members of my generation, not coincidentally the children of the world-savers, are out to save our families, and, if the world goes to hell while we’re at it, that’s just the price of having a mission of such great im-

The psalmist reminds me of the awesome nature of being human, of being created by the same hands that created the universe and all that is within it. There is more within each of us than we can guess or dream.

portance. Like all sweeping generalizations, this one is oversimplified and limited, but it is nevertheless instructive. Our calling is somewhere in between. We are called to nurture all children, the ones closest to us and the ones at such distance that we will never see their faces.

Soon after my daughter was born, we held a Family Dedication service at our church. Our pastor asked us to choose a gift that the church could present to us as part of the service. We chose a small clay figurine in which three children of different colors and races hug a globe and hold it up in their small hands. I keep it on a central shelf in our living room along with photographs of our daughter to remind me to keep striving to live in the tension between world-saving and family-preserving, to look always for the balance of serving this one amazing, mysterious child who has been gifted to us and all the amazing, mysterious children gifted to the world.

We must always be asking ourselves these questions: How do we order our personal and collective lives so that we allow for the unfolding of what God knitted together within our children, and the children of our churches, schools, and neighborhoods? How do we order our lives to encourage the unfolding of what God wove into children whom we will never know? What a tragic waste when we fail. What a great gift when we succeed. Fearful and wonderful indeed. Amen.



LEDAYNE McLEESE POLASKI

is Managing Director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, and lives in Charlotte, North Carolina.