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Lindasusan Ulrich

Other People's Children

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long way from home
A long way from home

This was a song that emerged out of slavery, when children might be sold away from their parents to another plantation far away, often given an entirely different name. Perhaps there were others at the new plantation who would offer the scared and lonely child some comfort and solace. Or perhaps not. Either way, that sense of disconnect and loss likely never went away.

I suspect that in most cases, the slave owners weren't trying to be cruel—they were just…indifferent. It would as soon occur to them to think about how the plough might feel if they sold the shovel. To them, it was one more piece of farm equipment.

Today, racialized mass incarceration is creating a new generation of black and brown bodies being sent far away from their homes, to prisons in rural, predominantly white communities. It's also creating a new generation of children growing up without their parents, sometimes also away from their homes. According to Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow*, "a black child born today is less likely to be raised by both parents than a black child born during slavery."[i]

Nationally, more than 463,000 children under 18 live in foster care.[ii] About 11,500 of those are here in Minnesota.[iii]

In California, where my partner Emily and I adopted our son RJ, there are over 58,000 children in foster care. At one point I realized that that was about the size of the suburban town where I grew up, plus half of the next town over. Ever since, I've been haunted by the image of traversing the streets I knew so well as a kid and picturing *every* person, in *every* house, as a foster child. But for the analogy to be more accurate, this imagined foster child version of my hometown would have to have two and a half times as many African-Americans as the U.S. population overall.

Monica Moss connected the dots between the foster care system and slavery when she wrote:

> Regardless of the circumstances of right and wrong, these systems re-create the slave trauma of child loss when they forcibly remove children from their biological parents as punishment. The children are then given to strangers who are paid to care for them. In all too many incidences the children experience further abuse that is often more severe than the neglect that poverty brings.
>
> Thus the trauma of loss from the era of slavery is perpetuated each day on a new generation of children and parents. Because of the child welfare and foster

> care systems and their practices, we now have three and four generations of children who have few if any family ties or connections. These children grow up without any felt experience of mattering to anyone, often not even to themselves.[iv]

She goes on to highlight the eerie similarity between the language of a social worker trying to place sibling sets together—and the potential necessity of splitting them up if no suitable placement is found—and a slave owner willing to sell some siblings separately "if it best suits the purchaser."

As a foster-adopt parent, I've wrestled with the moral ambiguity that comes with that role. Most prominently, we received financial resources from the county that biological parents don't. Automatic healthcare coverage for our son. A stipend to help with things like clothing and food. Help paying for specialists if he needs them later. These things make a huge difference.

I'm not saying those resources shouldn't be available to foster parents. Because no matter how you slice it, trying to be the person who offers comfort and solace to that scared and lonely child torn from her home is no easy task.

Rather, I want to underline some of the economics that perpetuate and deepen the rifts that began in slavery, continued during Reconstruction, changed form under Jim Crow, and have morphed again with the mass incarceration of people of color.

In the early days of English colonists in North America, the settlers realized they had more land than they had people to work it. (And I'll just bookmark the concept that it was their land to work in the first place, because that deserves its own separate sermon.) Initially, cheap labor came primarily through indentured servitude—an arrangement in which people agreed to work for four to seven years as servants in exchange for passage to the American colonies.[v]

This included blacks as well as whites, who according to Lerone Bennett, Jr., "occupied roughly the same economic category and were treated with equal contempt by the lords of the plantations and legislatures."[vi]

As demand for labor continued to rise, plantation owners turned increasingly to slavery. Michelle Alexander writes that Africans were seen as ideal, because they were relatively powerless and didn't speak English or understand the culture like slaves brought from the West Indies. "The systematic enslavement of Africans, and the rearing of their children under bondage, emerged with all deliberate speed—quickened by events such as Bacon's Rebellion."[vii]

Bacon's Rebellion came about in 1675 when a small landowner brought together "an alliance of white and black bond laborers, as well as slaves, who demanded an end to their servitude." The rebellion ended badly for them, but it did inspire several other uprisings of a similar nature—which must have sent a chill down the collective spine of the elites. They couldn't risk the kinds of alliances that made more of these revolts inevitable.

So the large landholders came up with a strategy: they offered white indentured servants just enough incentives to make it worth their while to support a formal racial caste system. Now, the lot of poor whites didn't improve in any significant way, but they weren't the lowest rung on the ladder any more. Thus the elites managed to

neutralize economic oppression as a common cause between blacks and whites. And we've lived with that manufactured racial divide ever since.

The same slight-of-hand shows up after Reconstruction. With slavery abolished, Southern whites feared black insurrection. They also worried about economic collapse as freed slaves left plantations—often going from place to place searching for spouses and children who had been sold away.

Despite several major pieces of federal civil rights legislation coming into effect in this period, the victories meant little in the face of systemic segregation and anti-black violence throughout the South. Arbitrary arrests of blacks for "mischief" and "vagrancy" led to court costs and fines that could only be worked off through servitude, once again providing a source of cheap labor for economic elites.

And while the Populist Party of the late 19th century held great promise for blacks, the segregation laws that came to be known as Jim Crow once again gave poor whites just enough privilege, embedded in just enough threat, for them to abandon their black allies. A new racial caste system had emerged.

In the 20th century, the Civil Rights Movement defeated Jim Crow, but didn't kill off its roots, buried deep in the American landscape. Martin Luther King, Jr. became most dangerous to the status quo near the end of his life when he began focusing on economics and a multiracial Poor People's Movement. Elites needed a new way to maintain racialized control, this time without using overtly racial language or legislation. They found it in the rhetoric of "law and order," already used during the 1950s to delegitimize protesters engaged in civil disobedience.

The so-called War on Drugs, which came about under Ronald Reagan, became the primary vehicle through which yet another form of the same racial caste system emerged. At every level of government, and across party lines, politicians dreamed up new and ever more punitive ways to prove their toughness. Crime, violence, and welfare became code words for blackness, and economic elites intentionally stoked the fears of poor whites to maintain a racially polarized populace.

It worked. Higher rates of incarceration also meant higher rates of disenfranchisement, as well as "legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service."[viii] What a poll tax or literacy test could no longer accomplish, a felony conviction managed quite effectively.

In an article entitled "Prison, Foster Care, and the Systemic Punishment of Black Mothers," Dorothy Roberts draws attention to the feedback loop formed by the stereotypes of black female criminality and maternal irresponsibility: together, they enforce and reinforce the prison and child welfare systems' disproportionate impact on black mothers.[ix] They are systems more interested in punishing poverty than solving it.[x]

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I've never been naive about the very real limitations of the foster care system—the intersecting oppressions that feed it, the abuses that undermine it, and the lasting impact on even the most well-adjusted children within it. At the same time, I'm challenged to hold the deep love and deep grief I've experienced as a foster-adopt parent next to my role in a system that perpetuates the trauma of slavery. Of course, *not* engaging with the foster care system presents its own moral dilemma.

Back in San Francisco, Emily and I often took RJ to a place called the Tot Space at one of the city's rec centers. It's basically this huge room, maybe about the size of the chancel area up here, where very young children can just play. There are mats, and some bouncy seats, and toys to help them balance while learning to walk, and a little plastic swing set and slide, and best of all, no electrical cords.

At any given time, you might find the space peopled with neighborhood families, nanny meetups, parents with active toddlers and tiny houses, or playmates undeterred by a rainy day.

One afternoon, as I kept an eye on RJ across a particularly busy tableau of babies and toddlers and their caregivers, it struck me that theoretically, any of the children in that room could have been mine. And I do mean literally: because when biological ties aren't involved, and when anyone's bad parenting decision could potentially get Child Services involved, then truly, there's nothing to differentiate them. And in that moment, I felt a broadening of my responsibility as an human adult. In that moment, I felt the reality of Rob Eller-Isaacs' frequent dictum that "there are no *other people's children*."

I don't mean to imply that children are interchangeable, and certainly not children in foster care. We'd cared for a baby girl whom we'd hoped to adopt but who wound up being placed with her grandparents. My grief at that loss didn't magically disappear once another baby came on the scene. Similarly, if you tried to take RJ from me now, I'd fight you like a mama bear. But that visceral sense of the ties that bind us to each other was powerful.

At the same time, however profound my experience was that day, as a foster parent I was always acutely aware of the fact that in crucial ways—including legal ones—yeah, they <u>are</u> other people's children. And appropriately so. The moment you start thinking of yourself as a savior for the child in your care, the relationship starts to warp.

Often, when I mention being a foster parent, people will respond by saying, "Oh, you're such a saint for doing that. Those kids are so lucky to have you." While I appreciate the vote of confidence, much of the time, there's subtext going on. One piece of it is the implication that the child is so broken that all of their value has seeped out. As though I wouldn't also be nourished by the relationship.

Another piece is an unspoken judgment and condemnation of birth families, without knowing anything about the broader context.

Finally, a statement like that also makes me into something more than human, some unattainable paragon of virtue that functions to get the other person, a mere mortal, off the hook. No longer responsible for the most vulnerable beings in our society.

These are kids who, even with the most loving foster or foster-adopt parents, deal with one of the most fundamental losses imaginable for a child: their family of origin. And there's <u>always</u> loss, even when removal is necessary.

For youth in foster care who don't wind up with some kind of permanency, the challenges can be enormous. Imagine if suddenly, at age 18, you were cut off from all forms of support, both financial and emotional, and you had to figure it all out on your own. As you might guess, this can lead to some pretty bleak outcomes.

Most relevant here, though, is that within two years of leaving the foster care system, a quarter of emancipated youth will be involved in the criminal justice system. And with 71% of the young women becoming pregnant by age 21, and facing higher rates of unemployment and criminal convictions, their children might wind up in foster care as well.[xi]

Thus on, and on, and on the cycle flows.

The vast majority of people in this country never give foster kids a second thought, much less put their hearts on the line for them. They can remain personally untouched by the situation, like whites in northern states who didn't speak out against slavery and had no real stake in the outcome of the abolitionist movement. Or like law-abiding citizens today who believe that the people of color funneled into the prison industrial complex should have just made better choices, oblivious to the outside forces that limit economic opportunities, hand out disproportionately harsh prison sentences, and permanently disenfranchise millions of people from participation in mainstream society.

Or like Joseph, when the angel comes to him in a dream and tells him, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Joseph doesn't warn the other parents in Bethlehem to keep an eye out for soldiers. In his haste to protect the infant Jesus, he acts as though other people's children don't matter. And frankly, out of everyone in the Christian scriptures, Joseph should understand this thing about treating someone else's child as your own. Seriously.

Perhaps he and Mary never even knew about the massacre that killed every baby and toddler in Bethlehem. Perhaps they got to be oblivious to the bloodshed, to the wailing and loud lamentation. Perhaps they were never haunted by an image of traversing the village they knew so well and picturing it entirely devoid of children.

Of course, Joseph and Mary would have their share of loss later, when their grown son would be targeted, arrested, and executed by agents of the state at the behest of the elites.

In the reading from Nadia Bolz Weber,[xii] she reminds us that Jesus was indeed born into a world that included both magi with their gifts and Herod with his vicious vindictiveness. We celebrate Bethlehem as the birthplace of a redeemer, but we conveniently forget it as the site of a massacre.

So where does that leave us? Now that we see this tumbling mess of historical patterns and entrenched economic interests and institutional racism and vulnerable children and uncertainty and ambiguity, how do we even wrap our heads around it all? What exactly am I asking of you?

Here's the single most important thing: don't … turn … away. Enjoy the warmth of Christmas, the peace on Earth, goodwill to all, the respite of a silent, holy night … and then don't turn away when we get to the Slaughter of the Innocents. Because you and I also live in a world that includes both wise magi and petty, destructive leaders. Our country has inner-city neighborhoods missing large numbers of children because the state has sent them to live elsewhere.[xiii] Perhaps to land in places where people offer scared and lonely children some comfort and solace. Or perhaps not.

Somehow, we need to find a way for the holy to get back into this American story. We heard it singing through the abolitionist movement and the Civil Rights Movement. Its song is growing louder in the Black Lives Matter movement. We must listen closely for the smallest, most frightened voices in the choir and do what we can to amplify them.

And as we dismantle racial oppression piece by piece, we must **never let anyone near those bricks again**. Our adaptability in the cause of racial healing must be greater than those who'd seek out an even more virulent strain of a manufactured disease. Otherwise, yet another century will dawn with children of color bearing the burden of a system that dehumanizes them.

Future generations are calling us to be the ancestors they need us to be—ancestors who understand that there are no *other people's children* and who are committed to helping everyone find a sense of home.

Ashe, amen, and blessed be.

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[i] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: New Press, 2010), 175.
[ii] http://www.childrenunitingnations.org/who-we-are/foster-care-statistics/
[iii] https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-4926-ENG
[iv] Monica K. Moss, "Meaning Making is the Challenge of Cultural Competency" in *Embracing Cultural Competency: A Roadmap for Nonprofit Capacity Builders* (St. Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance, 2009), 50.
[v] Indentured Servants in the U.S., *History Detectives: Special Investigations*, http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/indentured-servants-in-the-us/ (accessed December 26, 2014).
[vi] As quoted in *The New Jim Crow*, 23.
[vii] Alexander, 23-24.
[viii] Alexander, 2.
[ix] Dorothy E. Roberts, "Prison, Foster Care, and the Systemic Punishment of Black Mothers," *UCLA Law Review* 59, no. 6 (August 2012): 1492. (https://www.law.upenn.edu/cf/faculty/roberts1/workingpapers/59UCLALRev1474(2012).pdf accessed December 27, 2014)
[x] Roberts, 1484.
[xi] http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/about/aging-out (accessed December 26, 2014).
[xii] Nadia Bolz Weber, "The Slaughter of the Innocents of Sandy Hook," *Patheos*, December 12, 2014, accessed December 19, 2014, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/12/the-slaughter-of-the-innocents-of-sandy-hook/.
[xiii] Roberts, 1487.

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