ANGELS (AND NEIGHBORS) WATCHING OVER US
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This document is an adapted and abridged version of a sermon given by the author at Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Simpsonville, South Carolina, on May 14 ([U.S.] Mother’s Day), 2006.

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My wife Robin, my mother Marion, and my older daughter Jennifer joined me for the celebration of Mother’s Day. At the time, Jennifer and her husband Tom were less than a week away from celebrating their fifth anniversary. They were married in the small-town Methodist church that had been the focal point of much of my childhood in Granite Quarry, North Carolina, and that had been served by Jennifer’s great-great-grandfather as minister about 75 years earlier. By coincidence, Jennifer’s wedding occurred on the same day as the observance of the town’s centennial. One of Jennifer’s uncles (my brother David), who is a United Methodist minister, officiated, and the vocalist was another uncle (my brother Scott), who is an accountant by day but a classically trained singer and actor by night. Reflecting Jennifer’s affinity for Norway, the site and focus for much of her college education, the wedding also had a Scandinavian touch in music, costumes, and participants — fortunately not, however, in food. (Codfish marinated for months in lye has yet to appear on Martha Stewart’s list of approved wedding fare!) In short, Jennifer’s and Tom’s wedding was a highly personalized celebration that I remember fondly.

Nonetheless, the most moving and indeed the most educative aspect of the wedding for me was not a particular part of the ritual or the social events that celebrated it. Instead, the really powerful element was the context in which the wedding occurred — the tightly woven network of relationships that we hoped would provide security for Jennifer and Tom as they had for four generations before them.

Those relationships sustained each generation when, as the vows go, they were richer or poorer, in sickness or in health. The connections among them rested not just in the church but also in and among the bridge group, the civic club, the Little League team, the Scout troop, the street dance, the town council, and the school classroom.
The day following the wedding, Robin and I joined my siblings in attending the Sunday service at the little church for the first time (at least in my case) in many years. Then and in some subsequent visits, I was awestruck by the number and specificity of parishioners' memories of my family's involvement in the everyday life of the community — notably including mundane but nonetheless personally important illustrations of our participation in the community as children (for example, my brother David's attention to a Little League teammate who lost first a leg and then his life to bone cancer). Although I am not sure that I fully appreciated the fact as I was growing up, there were many good neighbors watching over us — and the reciprocal was also true.

Such remembrances have been vivid and powerful for me because they contrast so dramatically with the experience that my own research and now that of many others show is common among young families today. In research that I conducted in Greenville County, South Carolina, in the early 1990s, I was stunned by what was then a novel finding: social poverty — social isolation and a lack of easy access to help — had become rampant, regardless of families' socioeconomic status. To a large extent, help had become a commodity that people buy, not what they do.

These results presaged voluminous research about a decade later that showed a dramatic societal trend since the 1970s toward greater isolation, alienation, boredom, and distrust, and diminished involvement in civic, political, and religious life, especially among young people. Our own post-2000 survey data show that roughly one-fifth of all parents of young children in southern Greenville County are truly isolated. By their own admission, they do not know from whom they could obtain emergency child care, they do not know the names of any children in the neighborhood other than those of their own children, they do not belong to any community organizations (except perhaps a church), and so forth. At the same time, the median real income of young adults keeps declining, and job security — a "career" in traditional terms — is becoming a phenomenon of the past, even for many 20- and 30-somethings who are highly educated.

As young parents face the challenges of achieving and maintaining independence and of providing for their children's basic needs, they often feel — and are — alone. Tragically, this widespread long-term decline in the
strength of personal relationships has resulted in striking generational increases in children's anxiety and depression.

These findings have reverberated as our society has become ever less supportive of family life and (notwithstanding the observance of Mother's Day) ever less respectful of parents. Opinion polls tell us that American adults today, unlike those in earlier generations, commonly believe that children are thoughtless and wild and that the reason for such lack of civility is the ineptitude and negligence of their parents. (Such perceptions typically do not extend, by the way, to one's own family.) Such put-downs are not only wrongheaded but dangerous. Parents' perception that they can make no real difference in their community on behalf of their family has been consistently shown to be related to rates of child maltreatment and community violence, independent of social class.

Perhaps now more than ever, for the sake of our own and our neighbors' families, we need a rebirth of community. It's all about relationships! When human beings share an experience of personal significance, something mystical occurs — a reflection of the divine. The depth of caring and sharing that occurs in the family (perhaps most of all, between parent and child) is at the foundation of our spirituality.

The Welsh lullaby "Sleep, My Child" vividly captures this depth of feeling. In the first verse, a parent wishing peace for her child assures the child that she will keep a protective vigil: "I who love you shall be near you, all through the night."

In the second verse, the child responds with an almost psychic expression of trust:

Mother, I can feel you near me, all through the night.
Father, I know you can hear me, all through the night.
And when I am your age nearly, still I will remember clearly, how you sang and held me dearly, all through the night.

The last two lines of the third and final verse poetically capture the essence of the spiritual connection that I suspect that each of us experiences as child and as parent:

Even while the sun comes stealing, visions of the day revealing, breathes a pure and holy feeling, all through the night.
This "pure and holy feeling" — this fundamentally spiritual experience of the relationship between a protective parent and a trusting child — is multiplied in the context of the relationships that crisscross a caring community, just as I saw anew in the weekend of Jennifer’s wedding in the small town where I grew up. Desmond Tutu calls such a community “a delicate network of interdependence.” Providing a cultural interpretation of the Christian Gospel in the light of African experience, Bishop Tutu brings to our attention the African saying, "A person is a person through other persons.” It is through children’s — and adults’ — relationships that their personalities unfold.

Bishop Tutu frequently writes about ubuntu, a word found in one form or another in numerous African languages but absent in Western tongues. *Ubuntu* seems to capture the “deep and holy feeling” of which the balladeer sang — a feeling that “breathes,” that gives us life. *Ubuntu*, Bishop Tutu elaborates, “is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is...inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion.... [People with ubuntu] have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong to a greater whole and [that they] are diminished when others are...treated as if they [are] less than who they are.”

People with ubuntu know, I would add, that children may be small in stature but that they are fully people in the kingdom of God. In treating children like people, each of us opens the door to the oneness that is at the heart of transcendent human experience. Loving care for, and respect of, children both leads to and prospers in a community in which, following the prophecy of Jeremiah, there is a norm of care for one another, whether inside or outside one’s own family — in which, in short, there is a shalom community.

To conclude, allow me to recount another experience in our family — an event that had occurred just a month and a half prior to the Sunday when this sermon was delivered. The story began when I received a tearful call from our then-23-year-old younger daughter Stephany, who lives in Boston and who at that moment was in the emergency room of a hospital near her home. She had just been diagnosed with pulmonary embolisms and was on her way to intensive care. Fortunately, after some scary weeks, Stephany nearly fully recovered.
Our family's experience during that time, however, provided two vivid lessons in relation to the work that my colleagues and I had been doing in STRONG COMMUNITIES for Children. STRONG COMMUNITIES was a community-wide initiative for primary prevention of child abuse and neglect in parts of two counties in northwestern South Carolina. Grounded in the recommendations of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect in its 1993 report (Neighbors Helping Neighbors: A New National Strategy for the Protection of Children), STRONG COMMUNITIES used outreach workers to build or strengthen norms of neighborly assistance for families with children.

The first lesson was a painful truism on which STRONG COMMUNITIES is based — namely that loneliness and isolation are horrific experiences when a family is in crisis. Fortunately, we were able with almost no effort to mobilize a network of friends in the Boston area, so that Stephany was alone for "only" a few harrowing hours as she faced a life-threatening situation. In those instances, obtaining expert medical care was, of course, a priority, but how Stephany coped with the situation — and how anxious Robin and I were some 1,000 miles away — related more directly to the availability of friends and relatives.

Moreover, that nearly immediately friends of the family seemingly just appeared at the hospital in Boston without Stephany herself having to take action made the help all the more powerful. The spontaneous expressions of concern and our friends' related advocacy for Stephany in the hospital directly alleviated her anxiety without her having to use her scarce remaining psychological resources to solve the problems on her own. Apart from their instrumental value, the repeated acts of direct help also made Stephany feel important even at an almost unimaginably frightening time. Such neighborly acts showed that friends cared, and indeed, as we used to say in STRONG COMMUNITIES, that they noticed and cared1 — in effect, that they took Stephany's feelings seriously.

In the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life at Clemson, we have long stated our overarching vision in terms of the following wordy but

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1In STRONG COMMUNITIES, the penultimate goal (corollary to the primary goal of prevention of harm to children [stated positively, assurance of their safety]) was to create the conditions necessary for every child and every parent to know that, if they had reason to worry, celebrate, or grieve, someone would notice, and someone would care.
commonsense proposition: families should be able to get help where they are, when they need it, in a form that they can use it, with ease and without stigma. This set of phrases can be reduced in its essence to five words: people shouldn’t have to ask.

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Epilogue: What Does This Have to Do with Children’s Rights?

I began this chapter by promising readers that this would not be a typical academic treatise. Instead, this chapter has had a personal slant, consistent with both the overall tone of this Festschrift and the nature of human rights.

In the end, however, let me make some general points that are expressed or implied in the sermon from which this chapter was derived. First, there is plain error in the argument that human rights generally and children’s rights specifically are concepts applicable largely to societies in which autonomy — individualism — is valued. It is noteworthy — and, in the light of the enormous atrocities that occurred at times in the 20th century, simply remarkable — that every government in the world accepts (in word, if not always in action) the proposition that there are domains of human concern that are so basic that their protection is a matter for all of humankind.

Rights are derived from the moral status of human beings as persons; lacking universality of application, rights have no meaning. Moreover, the meaning that rights do have is grounded in an understanding of the requisites for personality. It is those interests that are most important to the definition of personality — an inquiry
that has particular significance for children and adolescents — that
the global community is obligated to protect.

Beyond the most basic elements of personal security (e.g., the
right to survival), the interests that are most critical to protect are
those embedded in the relationships (especially but not exclusively
relationships in the family) that are important to personal and
cultural identity — even to one’s name — and that thereby are most
closely related to the range of emotion and experience that is at the
heart of human existence. In short, in the end, rights protect the
interests of individuals in being part of a family and a community.

As an empirical matter, strong communities enable the
development of strong families, and vice versa. (I am reminded of the
slogan of the International Year of the Family [1994] extolling “the
smallest democracy at the heart of society.”) Moreover, both kinds of
institutions are critical to children’s survival and development and
their quality of life.

Second, communities of faith are potentially important allies in
the protection of children’s rights. This statement is based in theology
even more than practical political considerations related, for example,
to the level of fervor often attached to religious motivation or simply
to the ubiquity in most societies of institutions of faith.\(^2\) Although the

\(^2\)Even in highly secular societies, places of worship are typically widely available, and
there may even be an official religion with nearly universal education in its tenets.
Moreover, in such societies, religious institutions may still bear the tasks of moral education
(prophetic justice) and service to those who are vulnerable or outcast. The role of
religious institutions, even in many secular European countries, in the protection of refugees
is illustrative.
rationale for human rights can be based in secular moral philosophy. I concur with James Garbarino in his argument elsewhere in this volume that respect for children’s rights is a necessary corollary of belief in their creation in the image of God.

Third, religious culture is important in another way in relation to discourse about human rights. Ultimately, rights rest on communal obligations to show respect for other people and to do whatever is necessary to enable others to be (or to become) full participants in the community— in effect, to enable the exercise of MUTUAL respect.3 This re-statement of the Golden Rule is a principle that has particular significance for young people and their families.

Taken together, these three points imply that, especially in a time of ever growing loneliness (especially among young people), the creation and growth of COMMUNITY are requisites for a culture that supports and protects human rights generally and children’s rights specifically. Moreover, achievement of this sense of common concern, including an ethic of respect for the Golden Rule, is so basic that it calls in effect for unity of spirit. However one understands the nature of the Force that binds us all within the human community— however one conceives of the Source for our existence and meaning— it is fundamentally a spiritual matter.

3A statement of the Golden Rule may be present in every society in some form. The Christian form of the rule may have greater power if it is re-phrased as a duty to do unto others as THEY would have you do unto them. Our exhortation that every child and every parent should know that whenever they reason to celebrate, worry, or grieve, someone will notice and someone will care is in the same spirit.
The motivation of human beings to connect with one another — to form relationships — and in so doing to achieve both personal meaning and communal oneness of spirit is the energy that ultimately enables a commitment to children’s rights. To reiterate Bishop Tutu’s lesson to us all, “a person is a person through other persons”; “we are human because we belong.” The quest for children’s rights is grounded in the recognition the personality of a child depends on a collective conviction that children themselves belong and that we should welcome their growth in a sense of humanity — oneness with all humankind.