

A Letter from Marian Wright Edelman

Dear Faithful Friend of Children:

Thank you for joining in this 25th annual National Observance of Children's Sabbaths celebration, "**Children of Promise: Closing Opportunity Gaps.**" Whether you have been part of this observance for the past quarter-century or are joining for the first time, we are grateful for your concern for children and your commitment to create more just, significant, and lasting change that improves the lives of children. All across our nation, in places of worship across the religious spectrum, people of faith will be drawing on the texts and teachings of their religious traditions to hear and respond to the holy and eternal call for love and justice that urges special care and protection for children, especially those who are poor. Together we can and must change the odds for America's children with urgency and persistence. Every child should have an equal opportunity to succeed regardless of family income, race, disability, or zip code. To level the playing field we need to close the opportunity gaps by ending child poverty *now* and ensuring every child a strong foundation for success.



"Promise" is a rich word with layers of meaning. **One meaning is the potential for future success and achievement — as in "a promising student."** Truly each and every one of our children is a child of promise, born with the potential to achieve and become all they are meant to be. But that inborn promise cannot be fully realized for millions of our children because of the deprivation, pitfalls, and obstacles put in their way. We are squandering and hindering our children's promise when we allow:

- *more than one in five to live in poverty;*
- *one in seventeen to lack health coverage;*
- *one in nine to be at risk of hunger;*
- *two in five 8th grade public school children to read or compute below grade level; and*
- *nearly one in five children to drop out of high school.*

On this Children's Sabbath weekend, we are dedicated to removing the obstacles and closing the opportunity gaps hindering millions of children in realizing their promise.

Another meaning of promise, of course, is an assurance or a declaration of commitment - what we say we will do. In America, we are good at making promises but far less good at keeping them. We promise all children a free and equal education, but millions of children are consigned to failing schools bereft of adequate resources. We promise families that if they work hard and play by the rules they can get ahead, but millions of hard-working parents find that a minimum wage doesn't lift their family above the poverty line. We promise that all people are created equal with a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but children find that the lottery of birth and geography gives some enormous advantages while others face hindrances, and we allow those gaps to grow wider rather than narrower over time.

On the Children's Sabbath weekend and in the years to come, we promise to work to close the opportunity gaps so that each and every child has a fair chance to succeed.

An election year is especially rife with promises. Candidates assure us of what they will do to improve the lives of children and families as they kiss babies and pause for photo ops with cute children. Will those promises be kept after the ballots are cast? On this Children's Sabbath weekend, we must commit to pay attention to the promises politicians are making to children and families and to hold them accountable — to keep our attention focused on policy decisions long after the election spotlight has switched off.

Dr. Martin Luther King was aware of the huge gulf between what our nation, elected leaders, and citizens' promise and what we do. In his last sermon at Washington National Cathedral, Dr. King announced he would be returning to Washington leading a Poor People's Campaign:

"We are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses . . . We are going to bring children and adults and old people, people who have never seen a doctor or a dentist in their lives . . . We are not coming to engage in any histrionic gesture. We are not coming to tear up Washington. We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. We read one day, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists."

"We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic nonviolent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible. Why do we do it this way? We do it this way because it is our experience that the nation doesn't move around questions of genuine equality for the poor and for black people until it is confronted massively, dramatically in terms of direct action . . . And I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion."

As always Dr. King's voice and vision were prescient and right – and speak to where our nation is today. On the Children's Sabbath weekend and throughout the year and years to come, people of faith and goodwill must put their bodies and souls in motion to curb morally obscene and indefensible child poverty rates; wealth and income inequality; massive miseducation of poor children of color; preventable hunger and homelessness; mass incarceration and unjust criminal justice systems that criminalize the poor; and bullying and demagogic politicians encouraging assault of nonviolent protesters. The time is ripe right now to do what is right and reject the ugliness, violence, demagoguery and greed that have permeated far too much of our political discourse. We must move forward and not backward and teach our children how to disagree strongly without disagreeing wrongly.

The word "promise" has Latin roots that literally mean "to send forth." On this Children's Sabbath weekend, let us send forth the declaration that we will close opportunity gaps. Let us close those opportunity gaps so that all children can reach adulthood with the education, experiences, support, spiritual grounding, and resources to live the lives for which they were created.

Our promise at the Children's Defense Fund is to work tirelessly to Leave No Child Behind® and to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. Our promise is to provide a strong, effective and independent voice for *all* the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves. We promise to pay special attention to the needs of poor children, children of color and those with disabilities, and encourage preventive investments in children before they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble or suffer family breakdown.

Since inception, we have partnered with the religious community to put faith into action with and for children. For the past quarter-century, we have been blessed to join places of worship across our nation in the National Observance of Children's Sabbath. Places of worship have rich understandings of promise — including the promises made to that which is holy, to each other, and to the children with whom we have been blessed.

On this 25th annual Children's Sabbath weekend and in the year and years to come, what will your promise be?

In hope and faith,



Marian Wright Edelman