



Video Story Transcript

Who Knows What Children Make of These Things?

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZyaOsWdM98>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My name is Milbre Burch. These stories are from, In the Family Way and Making the Heart Whole Again: Stories For A Wounded World.

I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, born in 1953, but I left home and I married another southern expatriate in Providence, Rhode Island. Our children were born in California, in the 90s. And since then, we've lived in the southeast and the Midwest. Though we all grew up in America, my children and I were born into different worlds. In the 60s, the light brown woman who cleaned our house had a dark brown daughter about my age. And in the summer of 1963, I played with Debbie when she came to work with her mother. I was 10 and that meant that we could walk around the neighborhood on our own. And so, I suggested we walk up to the drugstore, lured by the soda fountain, and there I ordered two limeades. The counterman served us, as we stood and slurped down our drinks, put them on my family's tab, and headed home. When I got there and my mother realized what I'd done, she scolded me, telling me that the counterman could have refused to serve Debbie because of the color of her skin. She said nothing more than that. Just that I had put Debbie and our friendship in a perilous position. Now, my mother had immigrated from Canada and grown up in southern California. And she remembered that the woman who lived across the street would let her play in the yard with her children. But wouldn't let her in the house because she was from a foreign country. I didn't hear that story until my mother was in her 90s. But even if you don't talk about your past, still it shapes your life. And perhaps that's why she never spoke to me of people as *others*. So, it was not until that day in 1963, because of white privilege, that I even heard of the Jim Crow laws. But Debbie and her family had to live with them every

day. What did her mother tell her about how to navigate hostile world? And what children make of these things?

In 2002, my husband and I and our family lived in Chapel Hill. And I set out one Thanksgiving holiday, to take our girls by car to the hills of north Georgia for a Thanksgiving celebration with my brother. My husband, Berkeley, stayed behind, he was working on his dissertation and would join us in a few days. Now, whenever we went on a road trip we would always play songs and stories on tape in the car. And this day we were listening to, "I'm to let it shine," a collection of songs from the freedom struggles and during the civil rights movement. It's an acapella album and I defy you not to burst into song if you're listening to it. So, we drove down the road, singing at the top of our lungs. And then we'd come to a line like, "If you miss me at the back of the bus, you can't find me nowhere, come on up to the front of the bus, I'll be sitting right there," and my children said, "Mom, what's that mean?"

Now my kids had friends of many colors and they were too young to have studied the civil rights movement in America yet. So, I told them for the first time what it was like growing up in the segregated South and they said, "Oh." We played some more music and came to a line like, "You're gonna go my bail."

And they said, "Mom what's that mean?" And I told them for the first time about how if you believe all laws unjust you might participate in a civil disobedience and you might get arrested. And your friends would collect money to bail you out so you could go back to your demonstration.

And they said, "Oh." And we start singing again. Who knows what children make of these things?

A week later, we were back home at our own supper table. It was early December and now the sun set at 4:30 or 5. We were having dinner and I realized that Elizabeth, age 6, was going to a birthday party right after school the next day and we hadn't gotten a present. So, I said, "Honey, let's run over to the bookstore at the mall and pick up a gift card." Because books are our favorite gift to give or to get.

She said, "OK, Mom." And we did just that. Drove over to the mall, went to the bookstore, came out with our card. We're headed back, in the parking lot, in the night sky, and I was aware of a stranger coming toward me. And I turned and I saw it was a woman and she was carrying a big, stuffed bear. So, I wasn't afraid. It was another mom getting a gift for another child. And she asked me if I might take her to the bus stop by the university because she just missed her bus there at the mall.

When she spoke, it was clear that English was not her first language. She had a very heavy accent. Now, I'd never picked up a stranger with my child in tow. And Elizabeth doesn't like surprises. So, I said, "Honey, we're going to help this gal get to the bus by the university."

She said, "OK, Mom," and climbed in the backseat. And woman and the bear got in the front. And we drove up to Franklin Street and dropped her off. But I thought I should put this unusual happenstance into a context for my little girl and so I said, "Well, Honey, I just did my good deed for the day."

And in the backseat Elizabeth thought for a minute said, "Why do you have to do a good deed for the day, Mom?"

Well, I said, "I guess I think it's what makes the world go 'round."

She thought for a minute and then she said, "Some people wouldn't help another person with a different accent or a different skin color."

And I said, "That's right, Honey."

And she said, “And that makes the world stop.”

I said, “I think you must be right.”

She thought for another minute. She said, “And then when the world starts again you have to keep jumping over that person every time you get to him.”

I said, “Yeah.”

And then she said, “And after a while it gets to be a great big pile because it's all of us.”

I said, “Elizabeth you're a philosopher.”

And she said, “What's that, Mom?” And we drove up the driveway and we're home.

Now, Elizabeth had started sharing her big ideas the year before when she was five. September 11th, 2001, my girls were both at the Montessori community school when my husband came in to tell me that a plane had just run into the World Trade Center. A few minutes later, he came back to tell me that a second plane had flown into the second tower. We were stunned by news of this attack. And we stayed close by each other all day long. We got an e-mail from the school saying that no one would talk about the incident until the parents had had a chance to speak to their children that night. But that the next day, the teachers would be prepared to answer any questions that children might have. Now, when my girls were young, I had Mommy Day with each one of them, one day a week. And that meant, when I went to school I'd only pick up, the one girl, leave the other at the child care center a little while longer, and go have a small adventure with one of my daughters. And that Tuesday, it was Elizabeth's turn for a Mommy Day. But Berkeley and I didn't want to leave each other's sides, so I took him with me. And we went to the mall with Elizabeth to get some ice cream.

Now, Elizabeth doesn't like surprises. She stood there for a moment and then she said, “I don't know what Daddy's doing here. What's a Daddy doing on a Mommy Day?”

And I said, “Honey, something really bad and sad happened today. Some bad guys, some bullies, they hurt a lot of people. Daddy and I just wanted to stay close by each other.”

And she accepted that. When our ice cream was done, we went back to the school to pick up her sister. And Elizabeth ran into the child care center and said, “Katie, some bad guys and bullies, they really hurt a lot of people.” And I grabbed her hand and I pulled her out of the childcare center before the other children could hear any more. And on the way home we talked a little more specifically about what had happened that day. But who knows what children make of these things?

Fast forward to New Year's Day, 2002. We had been invited by our friend, Louise Amotel-Kecil to her house for an open house. Now Louise was Japanese-Jewish so she was a multicultural experience all to herself. And she and her husband, Holmes, adopted a baby boy whose skin color was different from theirs. And this open house was a chance to introduce him to his community, over latkes and sushi. So, my family went and celebrated the new family. When it was time to go home, we got back in the car and we drove down the long driveway at their farm and before we turned onto the highway, we saw their mailbox. Now, their farm is called “Clapping Hands Farm” and the whole mailbox is covered with bright, colored imprints of hands, all different colors. Elizabeth saw it. And in the backseat, as we turned on the road, she said, “Idea, idea, idea!”

I said, “What's your idea, Elizabeth?”

She said, “We could get a mailbox and paint it like all the peoples of the world. And then, we could paint our house like all the peoples of the world. And then, we could get clothes like all the peoples of the world. And

that way, no harm will ever come to us.” And she thought for a minute and she said, “Even the bad guys and bullies can be on the mailboxes.”

“May it be so, Elizabeth. May it be so.”