

World Congress of Families IX

The banquet hall was filled to overflowing. Men and women from all walks of life were waiting with excitement for the arrival of their honored guests. Enthusiastic cheers were heard when the tall, fine-looking young man took his seat near the center of the guest's table. He was their newly-elected mayor—the youngest mayor they had ever had. The townsfolk had watched him grow up and they were so proud of him!

Minutes later, an old white-haired lady entered to more applause and was seated to the left of the mayor. She had been away for many years, but she was the one who had given them their college, their library and their playground.

Dinner was served, the tables cleared and then the mayor rose to speak. After reflecting a bit on growing up and the recent election, he said, "I believe that every man is master of his own fate. I believe in being a self-made man and while I am serving as your mayor, I will do all in my power to ensure every young person in this town is given every opportunity for a good education and a fine career. One can make of himself what he will if he has enough determination and courage. I am here to serve you all." And he returned to his seat amidst thunderous applause.

Not once during the address had the eyes of the little, white-haired lady been taken from the speaker. She seemed to be studying him rather than his address. She was so deep in thought, she almost missed her introduction as the next speaker.

She made her way to the podium and began, "Years ago, in this very town, there lived a teacher of ten bright, happy girls. They played and worked together and loved each other dearly. Sadly, the teacher's husband became very ill and she had to move far away.

"It was hard for the teacher to leave. She had tried to help the girls the best she could, but she wasn't sure if she had done enough. The day came for her to leave and she invited the girls to spend one last evening with her in her home. She asked each girl to write a letter to her and share their dreams of what they hoped to be when they grew up. One by one, ten little heart-to-heart letters were laid on the table.

"Five days later as she was traveling, the teacher opened the letters and read them over and over to herself.

"Jennie wanted to be a great singer; she wanted to go to New York and study opera.

"Katherine wanted to be a kindergarten teacher.

"Mary wanted to be a lawyer—a criminal lawyer.

"Louise wanted to be a nurse.

As she read, the teacher felt reassured and smiled at the thought of the influences for good these girls would be. Then, turning to the mayor of the city, the little white-haired lady said, “Sir, I believe the contents of one of those letters will be of interest to you more than the rest. I was the teacher of those girls, so I can give you the exact wording of the last letter I read:

“Dear friend,

You have asked us to give you our dearest wish. I have many wishes for the future but the wish I want most of all is to be a fine and noble woman and some day to be the kind of mother you have told us so much about.’

“The girl who wrote that letter, sir, became your mother. Fourteen years before you were born, your character was being formed, your ideals were being molded, your future was being safeguarded. I congratulate you, sir, on being elected to the office of mayor; but I congratulate you more for being the child of my little girl of the long ago who at sixteen could write, ‘I want most of all to be a fine woman and some day to be a noble mother.’ To her you owe much. Inspire the girls of the town if you plan for great men. A self-made man needs a noble mother to build the foundation of his character. There is no better way.”

Then the speaker sat down and there was silence in the banquet hall.

Over a hundred years ago, Helen Hunt Jackson exclaimed: “Oh! If the world could only stop long enough for one generation of mothers to be alright, what a Millennium could be begun in thirty years!”

It is my dearest hope that we will see that generation of mothers, and so I would like to address my remarks to mothers of young children.

Everything man creates in this world is but an outward expression of what is treasured in his heart. As Luke, the physician, wrote, “A good man out of the good treasures of his heart bringeth forth that which is good.”

You mothers are the guardians of the world’s most important natural resource: the hearts of children. For far too long, you’ve been made to feel that the work done in your home is beneath you; that there are more productive ways to spend your time. That is a lie.

When a child’s heart is the most open and impressionable, you are there. As you hold your newborn baby close to your heart, your skin is soft and warm. Your voice is sweet and melodic. The lullabies you quietly hum bring a sense of calm and order to the chaotic world your baby has suddenly entered. You provide the nourishment that satisfies the gnawing hunger in his belly. Cradled in your arms, your baby feels safe. Long before he understands words, long lasting impressions are being made deep in his heart that reassure him, “I matter. I belong. I am loved.” The bond between a mother and a child is strong and powerful.

It is because of your closeness to your child's heart that your influence and impact is so great. Your direct link to his heart is the reason why the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the nations. If you don't like what you see going on in the world, the truth is, you are the one who can change it for all true change must take place in individual hearts and as Frederick Douglass wisely observed, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." Your heart-work is vital to society and we need to rally around, protect, encourage and support you.

Your baby's heart develops before his brain within the womb, and his emotions develop before his intellect outside the womb. While minds are fed with facts, information and words, hearts are fed with impressions, feelings and images. Nature has reserved the first years of your child's life-particularly the first eight years—for making impressions on the heart. The wise mother will use those years to fill her child's heart with the good, the beautiful and the true.

There has been a shift from heart to mind in childhood education over the last hundred years. This shift from heart to mind has not happened by accident or overnight. It has been by design and with steady effort. Some of the most influential men and women of the last century, especially those who influence education, have dreamed of a world governed by reason. Reason, they say, will give us solutions to all our problems. Reason, they think, can give us a new moral code that's more realistic and practical. And what reasonable person would ever think war is reasonable?

And so we see academics and skills to train minds introduced to our children at younger and younger ages while their hearts are being neglected. The experiment has gone on long enough to see results and the result is, our world has turned upside down. That which used to be good is now viewed as bad, and that which was bad is now held up as good and desirable. It is a grave mistake to train the intellect of a child before we have tended to his heart.

Our world will only be brought back into balance when we place heart and mind in their proper order. This course correction won't require any governor's signature or committee to debate its merits. It will require no government funding. In fact, it doesn't require any funding at all. It's free to implement. And it can be implemented today.

More than 200 years ago, Swiss-educator, Pestalozzi wrote, "It is for a long time the business of the heart, before it is the business of reason. . . The eternal laws of nature lead me back to your hand, mother! Mother! I can keep my innocence, my love, my obedience, the excellences of my nobler nature with the new impressions of the world, all, all at your side only."

The shift from mind back to heart will be found in the music you play in your home, the art you hang on your walls, the poetry you recite by heart because you love it, and above all, the stories you tell. Music, pictures, poetry and story are the languages of the heart. The more you use these languages with your young children, the more they will comprehend.

The story is one of your most useful tools. Telling a story is how you can convert words into moving images that your child's heart will understand and to which it will attach feelings. Storytelling is an ageless and beautiful art that has been used for hundreds and thousands of years

to convey values and traditions from generation to generation and from heart to heart. In those quiet hours when the lights are low and your children are in a calm, reflective mood, the stories you tell them will never be forgotten and they will influence them for the rest of their lives. And in the process, your hearts will be knit together in love.

And now, mothers, I will tell you why I think you are going to be able to do what no generation of mothers has been able to do before you. You live in the season of the harvest and what a bounteous harvest it is! For 6000 years, mankind has been preserving its finest ideas and ideals in art, music and literature. And now, modern technology has delivered the ripened fruit right to your home where it will do the most good. The eyes of all those who sweat and suffered, sacrificed and labored are upon you. They have gifted you with all you need to raise the noblest, most refined, and wisest generation that has yet walked this earth.

Where much is given, much is required and what is required of you is to first, fill your own heart with good treasure from the harvest because what is in your heart will naturally flow into your child's heart. It is your love of all that is good and beautiful combined with your love for your child that will enable you to do what no one else can.

Then, you will need to re-learn the lost arts of heart education that have been brushed aside in our age of Reason. But there is good news. Just over a hundred years ago, there was a revival in the art of storytelling among mothers and teachers of young children. As part of that revival, warm-hearted educators—heart specialists—wrote careful instructions on how to educate children's hearts and then left us a treasure trove of stories to tell; stories that inspire the heart with possibilities and goodness; stories from nature, from history, from great lives, from fine art and music; fairy tales and tales of epic and legendary heroes; and stories of faith. Many of these writings have been buried in dusty corners of university libraries during this reign of the mind. But they've been brought back into the light for all of us to read and study, thanks to the digitizing efforts of such organizations as Internet Archives, Gutenberg and Google.

I have spent the last several years immersed in these writings and they have filled my life with joy and hope. I am excited to share them with you and I will tell you where you can find them tomorrow afternoon in Forum #3 at 3:00. It's listed wrong in the program, so just remember Forum 3 at 3. Reminder cards have also been placed on the chairs around you.

But more importantly, I will be joining a team of wonderful men and women and tomorrow we intend to begin a new revival in storytelling in the home and you are invited to help us launch this new project. This revival is meant to span the globe, family to family and heart to heart. We hope you'll come—it's for everyone.

Vincent Van Gogh said, "It is good to love many things, for therein lies the true strength, and whosoever loves much performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done in love is done well."

To help a child love much is the divine charge given to mothers and divine gifts are given her to accomplish the task.

This is the day of the harvest. It is a day to thrust in your sickle and reap with diligence because you know what follows Fall's harvest. Already you may be seeing signs of approaching winter. The leaves are changing color and starting to drop off the trees. There's a bit of a chill in the air. But you don't have to be afraid. Within the harvest are lessons on how to survive harsh winters. And if you've been wise, you will have stored enough to sustain yourself through cold winter months when nothing grows. Winter can be a time to rest from heavy labors, to wrap up in a warm blanket, sit in front of a fire and reflect on things that really matter. Even on the coldest day of winter is found great beauty. Some of the greatest masterpieces of literature, art and music have come from history's winters. And if the winter's day seems especially long and dark and dreary, you can hold on to the hope and promise of spring, because spring always follows winter. Always. It will be a time of new beginnings; of clearing away rotting leaves and digging new furrows in the earth to plant the seeds saved from the fruits of fall's harvest. And there will be fresh scented breezes.

I realize the number of harvesters may be small, but I've baked enough bread to know a little bit of leaven raises the whole loaf. Mothers, will you be that leaven?

By small and simple means, you can bring great things to pass. Remember this story with which I will close:

A certain man had a friend who was a beekeeper. Upon visiting him one day, he found his friend in great despair. "I'm ruined," he cried. "All my honey is bitter." The man carefully and thoughtfully considered the situation and then suggested they rise early in the morning and try to follow the swarm of bees to see what they were feeding on, which they did. They found them at an old abandoned bottling factory where, out back, there were barrels of rotting, gooey, icky syrups from which the bees were filling their little pollen sacs and flying back to the hives. The man offered, "Change what your bees are feeding on, and you'll change the quality of your honey."

Mothers, as you pay attention to the quality of stories your children are feeding on, you will not only improve the quality of their lives, you will improve the quality of the world. Stories can heal our hearts. Stories can heal our homes. Don't underestimate the power of a story.