



## Young at Heart.

Some years ago I was given a tiny little gift at Christmas. We all know that “big things come in small packages,” don’t we?—or so we are told—and this, for its size this gift was, indeed, “bigger on the inside than the outside,” as C. S. Lewis would say, by several orders of magnitude. Was it a ring? No. Was it a billfold? No. Was it the key to a new car? No. It was a book—of all things—a tiny book no more than four inches square, and scarcely a quarter-inch thick. It’s title? *Children’s Letters to God*, edited by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall. Believe it or not, this slender little 1975 book has made publishing history, to this day, selling an unprecedented 1.2 million copies. A 1991 sequel, also entitled *Children’s Letters to God*, has also done well.

“Whether posing a question, begging a favor, or expressing doubt or joy, these letters are notable for their refreshing directness, unexpected humor, and startling clarity of thought,” writes a reviewer, “it’s like seeing the world through a child’s bright eyes—eyes untouched by cynicism, eyes brimming with innocence, wonder, and curiosity.”

Here are some of the letters:

Dear God, in school they told us what You do.  
But who looks after the world when You are on vacation? - Debbie

Dear God, I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole world.  
There are only 4 people in our family and I can never quite do it. - Caitlin

Dear God, if You watch me in church Sunday, I’ll show You my new shoes. Love,  
Emily

Dear God, instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don’t You just keep the ones You have? - Amy

Dear God, did You really mean “*do unto others as they do unto you*”? Because if You did, then I’m going to fix my brother.  
- Darla

Dear God, is it true my father won’t get into Heaven, if he uses his bowling words in the house? - Anita

Dear God, did You mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident? - Norma

Dear God, I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church.  
Is that okay? - Neil

Dear God, thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. - Joyce

Dear God, why is Sunday school on Sunday?  
I thought it was supposed to be a day of rest. -Tom

Here is a letter to God not found in either anthology.  
It is, nevertheless, the work of a child. It reads, "Dear God, I am bringing in my world to you for repairs. We've played with it hard, worn it out, and pretty much used it up. On September 11, 2001, it fell down, broke. It is hurt really bad, and I know you are the only one who can fix it. You always say that if we seek, we will find you; if we knock at your door, you will open it to us; and if we ask for something, you will grant an answer. Well, I am seeking, knocking, and asking, and I know you always keep your promises. So THANKS! in advance for whatever you can do to help us! P.S.: And please tell the Baby Jesus I said "Happy Birthday!"

"Even as young children," writes Jean G. Fitzpatrick, "most of us believe in something. We have all felt some sense of the divine presence, although we might not have called it God. It may have felt more like spontaneous joy or a sense of being loved and protected. But it is within us, in our very being, closer than any creed." And then what happens, pray tell? Well, we grow up . . . .And it would seem for as much as we gain in knowledge, in confidence, in strength, in power, in reason, we lose—or are stripped—of even more . . .

"One winter's day," a mother observes, "I sat at the kitchen table with my daughter, who was then 3 years old. Outside, big, round snowflakes were falling thickly. "Look, Mommy," she said, "The angels are shaking their pillows and the feathers are falling! "And look! God sent down a letter! It's on the windowsill. What do you think it says?" "I'm not sure," I stammered.

"Why don't you open the envelope and read it?"

She opened the imaginary envelope and "read" aloud.

"Dear People, I hope you are having a nice time down there. I love you. Love, God." In the creative way preschoolers have, she was expressing her basic trust and her sense of being cradled in the universe. She shared it with me when I managed to set aside my own concerns about what to say and instead joined her in play. The rest was between her and God."

In 1961, Jenny Joseph, an English poet, wrote a now-famous poem, which has been turned into posters, emblazoned on t-shirts, and sold a hundred thousand greeting cards. Ironically it's not about growing old; rather, it's about growing young. One seldom sees the original, but this is how it reads. It's called "Warning."

## WARNING

*When I am an old woman I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.  
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves—  
And satin sandals, and say "we've no money for butter."  
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired  
And gobble up samples in shops—and press alarm bells,  
And run my stick along the public railings.  
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.  
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain  
And pick the flowers in other people's gardens . . .  
But maybe I ought to practice a little now . . .  
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised  
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.*

Growing young. A rather odd turn of phrase, if you think of it. But it's something Jesus would have liked, I believe. In Matthew 18 he makes what was then a rather shocking statement. "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Moreover, this statement was very important to Jesus. Jesus prefaces this saying with a word we use all the time. It's the Hebrew affirmation "Amen." The word 'amen' can be translated "verily," "truly," "so be it," even, "let this be." We use it to close our prayers, of course, as Jesus did, but *amen* can also be used at the beginning of a statement, to introduce an affirmation of unusual importance. Here Jesus uses it twice. "Amen. Amen." "Truly truly I say to you, in other words, listen up, this is really important: Unless you change and become like children, you **will never enter** the Kingdom of Heaven."

In fact if you make a careful study of the life and ministry of Jesus, children are everywhere. In Mark 9, the disciples argue about who would be greatest among them, a typically adult preoccupation. How does Jesus respond? He takes a child in his arms and says: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very least, and servant of all. Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes one of these little children welcomes not me, but the one who sent me." In Mark 10, the disciples actually try to forbid people from bringing children to Jesus. Jesus is positively indignant!!! "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." One of Jesus' greatest miracles is the raising Jairus' twelve year old daughter in Mark 5—not to mention the healing of a little boy with an epileptic disorder in Mark 9. "I praise you Father," says Jesus says in Matthew 11, "that you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."

To be sure, children were viewed as God's greatest gift, even the guarantee of the covenant. Every birth was regarded as a divine miracle. And it was children, and no others, who carried the very names of their parents. But no one ever thought to emulate them!

Children were powerless, absolutely powerless, and occupied the bottom rung of ancient society—Hebrew or otherwise. Parents had absolute authority over children, Who were educated strictly and punished severely. Their humility was both institutional—and inescapable.

But to Jesus, becoming like a child, as lowly as that was in worldly terms, “Growing young,” as it were, is actually **the very prerequisite for knowing God**, and entering his kingdom. But growing young requires things we are not accustomed to providing each other, let alone God. **Humility. Openness. Trust.** To some people they are very scary words. If you were to rate yourself from 1 to 10 vis-à-vis each of those qualities, how would you rate??

**“Humility?”** “The quality or state of being humble, which is to say, of lowly rank or condition, of modest pretension,” from the Latin, *humus*, meaning “ground.” ?????  
“You’re joking, right, God? Come on. If you don’t stick up for yourself—if you don’t have overwhelming pride in who are what you are—no one else will. You’re asking me to humble myself, to be willing to admit that I need you, to admit that yes—dare I say it—I’m actually wrong once in a while?? Hmmmm....I don’t know about this, God.”

**“Openness??** From “open,” “not closed or blocked up, allowing entrance or passage or access, having gate or door or lid or part of boundary withdrawn, unenclosed, with ends not joined, unconfined, unobstructed, uncovered, bare, exposed, undisguised, public, manifest, not exclusive or limited, eagerly attentive, admitting all persons, not only to ‘members,’ accessible....” ???????????

“I’m sorry, God. But are you out of your mind??? You ask for the impossible. Why should I be open to you, much less other people?!”

**“Trust????”** I.e. “firm belief in the reliability, honesty, justice, or strength of a person or thing; confident expectation.....” ????

“God. Don’t get me started. This is the living end.”

Here is another poem. It is the work of a new grandmother, Angelina Fast-Vlaar. It’s entitled “A little child.”

*She snuggles into my arms  
finding the perfect fit.  
Her small hand reaches to touch my face;  
contented crooning escapes her lips.  
Her big brown eyes slowly close  
and her tiny body relaxes  
totally trusting its weight to my care.  
She sleeps.  
I stand in the soft glow  
of one Christmas candle  
and contemplate the depth of my love*

*for this beautiful granddaughter of mine.  
If I, in my finite, sinful humanness  
can love this little child,  
can I not believe how much  
my heavenly Father loves me,  
His child,  
and can I not completely relax  
in His loving everlasting arms,  
entrusting my total being to Him  
and become as a little child?*

Let me tell you about another three-year-old. Sophia Cavalletti writes about a three-year old who grew up without religious influence and **had never heard the name of God spoken**. The little one asked her father, “Where does the world come from?” He responded with a typically-secularized theory of the origins of the world but added, rather openly, “However, there are those who say that all this comes from a very powerful being and they call that being, God.” On the instant his daughter joyously exclaimed, “I knew what you told me wasn’t true; it is God, it is God!”

It is God. He’s calling to you this morning. He’s saying, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for **I** am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Will you hear his voice? Will you become like a child? Will you live like a child before him? Will snowflakes make you dance? Will you see roses growing out of the cracks in the sidewalk? Will the sunshine make you smile, perhaps for the first time in years? *Amen. Amen.* Let it so be.

Colin Cross