

1996 SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR MEDAL OF
HONOR RECIPIENT

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH OF MARIAN WRIGHT
EDELMAN - THE 1995-1996 SANDRA DAY
O'CONNOR MEDAL OF HONOR
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Marian Wright Edelman

Thank you. Hello. I would like to thank all of you for coming out on this afternoon in this very beautiful building. Congratulations to you. I'm so happy to have a chance to visit Seton Hall Law School. It's very hard to think about filling half of the space left in the shoes of others that have been honored, but I am delighted that you have honored children and the children's cause today.

I think we are in an incredible moment in history. Few human beings are blessed to contemplate both the beginning of a new century and a new millennium. How are we going to say thanks for the life, earth, nation, and for the children that God has entrusted to our care? What legacies, principles, values and deeds will we stand for and send to the future through our children, to their children and to a spiritually confused . . . violent world, desperately hungry for spiritual leadership and moral leadership?

How will progress be measured over the next thousand years if we survive them? By the kill power and number of weapons of destruction we can produce, and the traffic at home and abroad in the name of peace and security, or by our willingness to try again to strengthen and, in fact, destroy this prison of violence that hurts so many of us, including our children?

We will be remembered in this last part of the twentieth century by how many material things we can manufacture, advertise, sell and consume, or by our discovery of more lasting nonmaterial measures of success, a new Dow Jones for the purpose and quality of life in our families, neighbors and national community?

Will we be remembered by how rapidly technology and corporate merger-mania can render human beings and human work ob-

solete or by a better balance between corporate profits and corporate caring for children, families and communities?

And will we be remembered by how much a few at the top can get at the expense of the many at the bottom and in the middle or by our struggle for a concept of enough for all Americans?

I believe the answer to these questions lies in values and decisions and actions that you and I stand for today. What an opportunity for good or evil we Americans, personally and collectively, hold in our hands as parents, citizens, community leaders, lawyers and world leaders in the post-industrial and post-cold war error?

I had fun this year because of where we are in time, thinking about the next thousand years and about the last thousand years and putting ourselves in little historic context. A thousand years ago it was nice to think that the United States wasn't even a dream. For instance, Galileo had not told us the earth was round or evolved around the sun. Gutenberg's Bible was not credit why . . . translated it into English, and Martin Luther had not tacked his thesis on the church house door.

Magna Charta didn't exist. To us, Shakespeare's tales had not been spun and Mozart and Bach's miraculous music to heal our souls had not yet been created. European serfs struggled in bondage, while Africa empires flourished in independence. Native Americans peopled our land, free of the blight of slavery. And Hitler's Holocaust had yet to show the depth that human evil can reach when good women and men remain silent or indifferent.

I think we ought to ask ourselves today, as Americans, whether a thousand years from now will civilization remain and human kind survive? Will America's dream be alive, be remembered and be worth remembering? Can our founding principle that all men and women and children are created equal withstand the test of time and the [] of politics and become deed and not just creed for every child? Will we be a blip or a beacon in history?

Is America's dream big enough for every fifth child who is poor, every sixth child who is black, every seventh child who is Latino and every eighth child who is physically or mentally challenged? Can our children, each of whom [] philosopher Dagor (phonetic) says comes with a message that God is not yet discouraged in man, become the healing agents of our national and world transformation. I hope so.

The story is told by the Jewish Midrash about how God bargained with the people of Israel as to whether he would give them His Word. And He asked for adequate guarantors, and they offered God the elders, initially, but God said, "No, that wouldn't do." Then they offered God their prophets. And God didn't hold that sufficient. And it was only when God was offered their children with the promise that His Word would be taught to those young did He agreed to give the people of Israel the Torah.

Jesus Christ welcomed and invited all children to come unto him. He did not invite only rich, middle-class, white male children without disability from two parent families or our own children to come. He invited all children. And so must America. And that is one of the most enormous challenges I think that we face in 1996 and on the cusp of a new millennium.

Very briefly, what does it mean to stand for children? How do we think about this? We are having the most awful threats to children in the name of helping children on both our Cities, State and Federal levels. What does it mean to stand for children? I would like to have you think about that.

I've heard a story recently about a young mother who walked into a WIC office, which is a Women, Infant and Children's nutritional office, seeking help to feed her hungry baby, when a very stressed and overworked WIC worker saw the mother feeding the baby from a bottle with red liquid. She was about to read her the Riot Act — didn't she know that babies needed milk and not Kool-Aid? Just as she was about to scold, the young mother broke into tears. She had run out of money a week ago, knew the baby needed to eat, so spent her last dollars on baby formula, and she, herself, had not eaten for three days. And then the baby formula had run out the day before, and she had gone into MacDonald's and gotten the two free things she could find, which was ketchup and water.

I think we all need to ask ourselves and our political leaders, in light of the debate that was raging in the past year and which is still raging, that we make very fundamental choices about America's commitment to its young, to its disabled, to its weak, to all working Americans. Whether we think of this hungry baby is responsible for America's ills, for budget deficit, crime problem and poor education system, for structural changes and wane stagnation in our

labor market, the deindustrialization of our cities and economic blight of many of our rural areas?

Does this baby and desperate mother have any control of the down-sizing of giant corporations or the replacement of human workers by technology or the exploitation of jobs abroad in our global economy?

Is this baby, who had a one-in-three chance of being born without timely prenatal care, although we lead the world in health technology, and one-in-four chance of being born poor in the richest nation in history? Is she the cause or the victim of a widening income gap between rich and poor, which allow 23,000 poor families with children to live on the same income, on less income, than one entertainment industry executive?

Is this baby responsible for the manufacture and selling of 220-plus million guns circulating in our nation today that kill an American child like her every hour and a half in a classroom full every two days? And did she contribute to the massive breakdown and pervasive breakdown of moral, family and community values in our too-selfish and secular culture?

Contrary to what our political leaders seem to say, this baby, *I* believe, is not responsible for her mother's or father's poverty or behavior or ours. This baby didn't vote for Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Liberals or Conservatives, cannot make campaign contributions, lobby, or hold press conferences to make her needs known.

That's why we have asked parents, grandparents and parents and community leaders and religious leaders to come together on June first at Lincoln Memorial to stand up for this child and the millions of others that are voiceless in our society.

Blaming and punishing this baby for our collective or personal discontent or for short-term economic or political gain, I think contravenes the Old and New Testament and American covenants that we honor very well in our words, but not well enough in our deeds. So I think it is time for America to stand up better for our children now in action and in deed.

So we hope that all of *you* will take off a wonderful day and come down to Washington to stand together with the nearly 2,000 organizations representing tens of billions of Americans from the Girl Scouts to the Easter Seals, to many child [] organizations, to

the entire senior citizen community, to almost the entire child advocacy community to stand for our children.

Because as tough as times are, it is hard that so many families are struggling to raise children on declining wages and despite the external messages that make hard, often through our airways, to do a good job in protecting our children from outside influences. I think we can all do better and all improve the quality of life for our young. It is time for every American to hold ourselves to a higher standard in our homes, communities, private sector and government at all levels. So I hope you will join us.

If you are not yet struggling to raise a child and are planning to try to raise a child, you will find it hard. And you will be worried about childcare and healthcare, and you will be off of your parents' health insurance policy shortly, I hope you will come and stand with us and talk about the needs of healthcare for every child.

As a mother I find it absolutely outrageous that we have many, many millions of parents that are worried whether their children are going to get sick and have to go to the doctor because they don't have health insurance. No other industrialized nation permits this. If you are a young or middle-income family working hard to make ends meet, and all of us are working harder for less wages often, under less security, if you are worried about that, I hope you will come and stand with us, because young families, all races, all types are having a hard time. And a lot of us middle-class parents cried when those of us — we loved our children — who left and went off to college, and we are crying harder because they are moving back home after college.

I think we really need to talk about family formation, none of us is exempt. If you are worried, as you ought to be, about your own children or the children you want to have who are being polluted through the airways, through the air, water and food and the earth and our children's values, I hope you will come and stand with us.

If you are worried about whether your children or the ones you will have are going to be prepared for the twenty-first century in their schools and even if they are, if there is going to be a job out there, I hope you will come and stand with us.

And if you are as anxious, as so many parents of young people are about the random violence from which none of us is exempt,

from all of these guns circulating, we need to educate ourselves about the dangers of guns. And assault weapons don't have anything to do with hunting or anything else. They are just there to kill. We need to really begin to talk about how we can stop the undeclared war against our children. If you are concerned about safety, I hope you will come and stand with us.

And if you are as tired as I am of political leaders of both parties and all levels of government talking about family values and caring about children, how voting and cutting the things that children and families need in order to be healthy and educated and moral and productive Americans, then I hope you will come and stand with us.

This will not be a partisan political day. We will not let one politician speak so that only parents and communities will come together in a massive moral witness for our children. In the same we may not be able to agree about many things as Americans, but across race and income and faith and region and age, and most of the people planning to stand there for children are under twenty-five, that we are going to say no more onto children. And we will go back home and insist the children come first in our families first and communities.

And I hope as you leave this wonderful place or as you think about leaving this wonderful place that you pay as much attention to your family planning and to your parenting roles as men and women, fathers and mothers, as many of you I know are spending on thinking about your careers. Because the quality of life in this country will be shaped far more by the parenting in this country than by the lawyering in this country. So I hope you will get your priorities straight.

Last, I would like to end with a very brief prayer because I think we need to balance and really couch what we do in the context of justice. There is too little a relationship too often between justice and law. So I do hope you will not mix up these distinctions when you go out of here — that you will not only work to be fine lawyers, but you will also work to make sure that justice is done. . . .

So I will end with a prayer, and ask God to forgive our rich nation, where small babies die of colds quite legally. God, please forgive our rich nation where children suffer from hunger quite legally. God, forgive our rich nation where toddlers and school

children die from guns so quite legally. God, forgive our rich nation in which children are the poorest group of citizen quite legally. Forgive our rich nation that lets the rich continue to get more at the expense of the poor quite legally.

God, forgive our rich nation for thinking that security rests in missiles rather than in mothers and in bombs rather than in babies. Forgive our rich nation for not giving You sufficient thanks by giving to others their daily bread. God, help us never to confuse what is quite legal with what is just and right in Your Sight.

Everything that Hitler did in Nazi Germany was quite legal. It was not just, and it was not right. And the suffering of our children in the richest and most powerful nation on earth from guns, from hunger, from poverty, from preventable sicknesses may be legal, but it is not just.

So I hope you will join us on June first and say it's time for America to do what is just and right for our children. But I hope as you go out in the world as lawyers and whatever thing you choose to do, that you will choose to do so in a way that provides the voice of justice and righteousness in America as we face this new millennium.

Thank you for this honor.