

Breakfast at McDonalds

Reflections on Voices and Values

By Bette Moore
June, 1999

Today I fell victim to the "Beanie Baby" craze!

Last weekend my lifelong friend, the mother of an adorable 8-year-old named Molly, visited me in the cute little town on the Oregon coast that my husband and I feel was our escape from urban life.

Molly is collecting the set of "International Bears" that is currently available with any regularly priced item on the McDonalds menu. In particular, now she *really* needs "Teenie Beanie Glory Bear." This is the baby bear that her full-sized "Glory Bear" has been "expecting." The problem, my friend explained, is that children like Molly can't get the toys to play with because adults have made them into Collectors' Items. She reasoned that since I have moved to a small town, and she still lives in a metropolitan area, maybe it would be easier for me to get "Teenie Beanie Glory Bear." Today is her "due date" so all week I have been planning to have breakfast with Ronald and pick up a bear for Molly.

Well! The good news is that I enjoyed a leisurely Egg McMuffin breakfast at about 9:15 A.M. The bad news is that the 1500 toys had sold out to adults buying ten at a time by 6:30 A.M! After buying ten, they would stand in line again, buy another cup of coffee, so they could get ten more. This went on until the toys were gone.

As I lingered over my coffee, I realized that my thoughts were triggering voices from a faraway past. One was my own "child voice" dutifully memorizing scripture to earn the coveted prize of a leather-bound Bible. Others included my father, and a host of teachers, ministers, and preachers I had thought were long forgotten:

"For the love of money is the root of all evil"

"They that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, shall reap the same."

"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he shall not depart from it."

As my thoughts continued to drift, I realized that I was beginning to see a relationship between a child being disappointed because McDonald's sold out of "Teenie Beanie Glory Bears" and another, seemingly unrelated, news item. I remembered hearing that President Clinton is beginning to address the issue of marketing violence to children. As one reporter put it, he is going to do a "Joe Camel" on the entertainment and video game industry.¹ While they may be at opposite ends of a continuum, I think both examples should make us stop and think about the models we are providing our young.

As I watched another disappointed child leave with her mother after driving 25 miles from a neighboring town to buy a toy, the voices continued. This time it was Crosby, Stills and Nash telling us to "Teach Your Children Well" and Whitney Houston reminding us that ". . . children are our future. . ." and ". . . they shall lead the way. . ." The Biblical texts seemed to agree. "Train up a child in the way he should go. . ." But most terrifying of all was the verse we usually paraphrase: "As ye sow, so shall you reap."¹

¹ Biblical references: Job 4:8, 1 Tim. 6:10, Proverbs 22:6

As I listened to the voices, other more recent phrases joined them: "Family Values." "Character Education." "Youth Violence." And, of course, the song from *Bye Bye Birdie*, "Kids! What's the matter with kids today?" Our society seems to be crying out against spiraling youth violence, but at the same time, we seem blind to our own competitive greed. *Do we forget that out-of-control greed usually ends in violence?* Since we are unable, or unwilling, to look inward, we focus our attention on the symptoms and *blame our youth*: Drug testing. Tougher standards. School uniforms. Closed campuses. Place enough restrictions on them, we believe, and they will stop acting out.

In the midst of all this insanity, we overlook the children. Children are amazing little learning machines. What most of us forget is that children are learning all the time . . . not just when they are in school. They learn how to be human from the humans around them. They learn their values as they imitate the adults they see. They reflect our values, and they do it very well! Our problem now is that we don't like the reflection we see.

On a daily basis we are hearing about children and young people acting out in unthinkable ways. As a society we ask: "Why?" and "Why now?"

I would submit that one reason is because our children are finally getting old enough to make their voices heard. Their frustration at not being heard, and their confusion about the conflicting messages we have sent them has turned to anger. Now they are telling us they *will* be heard. Mary Foulke and Lorna Miller of *Pasadena Young and Healthy* put it this way: "Part of what is so outrageous about children in our society is that they articulate their needs, expecting them to be met. It is so *impolite*. It makes us *so* uncomfortable. Why can't they sit still, let their stomachs growl, and allow a silent grief to fill them up as we have?" ²

When they are very little we think we are teaching them by telling them what to do, how to think, what to say. More often than not this "teaching" takes the form of telling them what NOT to do, what NOT to think, what NOT to say – and how NOT to be. Some of that is appropriate if our intent is to ensure their safety or to socialize them. However, if we try to convince them we are *educating* them, they won't believe us. Our children are smarter than that. They don't remember our words; they remember their *perception* of our words.

- Mommy tells them to be generous, not greedy. Then they are disappointed when senior citizens buy all the Beanies because they can sell them at "Beanie Exchanges" to collectors for up to \$300.00 each.
- They are told not to call each other names . . . then they see adults slandering each other in public forums.
- They are told that fighting isn't the way to solve problems with their siblings . . . then they are taken to movies where the body count is inconsequential as long as the "good guy" wins.
- They are told to be kind to animals . . . then are sold video games advertised as "more fun than shooting your neighbor's cat." ³

² Mary Folkes, Lorna Miller. "Saints Alive" *The Newsletter of All Saint's Episcopal Church*, Pasadena, Calif. June 6, 1999.

³ Sandra Sobieraj, Associated Press, Tuesday June 1, 1999, "Clinton Wants Violence, Kids Study

Yes, our children have learned our values. They have learned them well. But the other thing they know is that, to quote a young friend of mine, our "values suck!" We point our finger at loving gays and lesbians so we won't have to confront the hatred in our own homes. We withhold abortions from confused, even abused, young girls without dealing with the dreadful consequences of unwanted children in our midst. Our media chronicles youth violence every day and largely overlooks the 130% rise in violent, property, drug, and other crimes committed by white males over the age of 30 during the last 10 to 20 years.⁴ We know that if we can't find someone to blame, we may have to look inside and confront our own demons. So we blame the young. We adopt programs to change them. We enact laws and write rules to keep them in line. **We argue about the best ways to make them turn out just like us!**

One difference between children and adults is that we adults know "when to keep quiet." We "know our place." We know how to be "polite." Children have more trouble with this . . . and many adolescents simply refuse to accept it. When they see absurdity in a system, they tend to react. It is very sad that we as a society have waited so long to begin looking at ourselves. Perhaps our children are beginning to provide us with the mirrors we need. When will we be ready to see what they are trying to show us?

Bette Moore
June 4, 1999

⁴ Mike Males. *Framing Youth: Ten Myths About the Next Generation*. (Common Courage Press, 1996) UC Irvine (mmales@soceco.uci.edu)