

A child without dreams

Written by

Wednesday, 15 May 2013 11:59



Every day four children in America are killed by abuse or neglect. More than 750,000 children are abused or neglected each year. Even when children survive or after physical scars heal, the emotional damage left by child abuse and neglect can last a lifetime just as the post traumatic stress left by gun violence leaves deep scars in countless children.

Joseph Miles has essentially been on his own since he was 13 years old—the year his mother tried to kill him. Until then, he would say, he cried for love. After that he gave up on hoping ever to find it. Today Joseph is in his forties and has been incarcerated since he was 28. When he came to prison he couldn't read or write. It was only recently that Joseph realized he missed out on something crucial besides love in early childhood: he didn't even know he should have had dreams until it was much too late. Listen to Joseph's words:

"I never had dreams as a child, a teenager, or as a young adult. Until 2010, I had never sat in a room and heard people talk about their dreams for the future.

I did not come from a loving, nurturing family. 'Motherf***er, you little ugly mother***er.' I could go on telling you how I was spoken to as a child but the words will remain the same.

There was no one in my life who could have talked to me about dreaming about my future. As I

A child without dreams

Written by
Wednesday, 15 May 2013 11:59

got older, my inner pains turned to anger and that anger turned to rage.

In 2006, I got serious about education and just before I got my GED in 2008, I started dreaming about my future—at the age of 41. That was the first time I had ever had a dream about my future.

In 2010, I was part of an undergraduate Inside Out college class . . . This class had seven young students from Vanderbilt University, two from American Baptist College (an African American college), and ten inmates. We referred to ourselves as insiders and outsiders.

This day our opening circle was to tell the class what you dreamed of being when you grew up. The first person spoke and, always going to the left, the next person spoke, and so on. It got to me and I had to tell the class that I never had a dream of becoming anything in my life. My childhood was spent wanting my parents to love me, crying because I was hungry, or crying because one of them had hurt me and my feelings. At the age of 13 my mother tried to beat me to death.

Those years were spent learning how to fight so I would never have to endure another beating like that by anyone.

Dream? I could not dream; my pain had turned to anger, and in my twenties that anger turned to rage. I could not dream because I chased death. Knowing what I know today, the only reason I did not die is because God would not let death take me.

That class was the first time in my life I had ever been around people talking about what they dreamed would happen for them in life. What they wanted to do when they were done with school. I lived each day of life surviving. Dream? How could a human being like me dream when no one ever trained me how to use my mind to think? I was so impressed with these young people from the outside and the dreams they had for their future.

Even though I had that first dream in 2008, I like to think these young people gave me permission to dream. After our class was over that night and the outsiders were gone, I lay in that cell and went to that place I always tried to stay away from since being introduced to education: the place of what if. What if someone would have helped me with education when I was young? What if I would have known how to think and dream? What if I could have experienced the love that was so obvious in those young people's conversation? The love from family and friends that allowed them to dream. What if I had a dream? 'What if' is a painful place to be!

Today, in 2013, at the age of 45, I dream. I dream of telling young people about the dreams I never had and why it's important for them to dream. And hopefully I can keep them away from that place called 'what if.'

Today I do wish someone would have taught that child, that teenager, that young man in his twenties to dream. Who knows? Maybe my life would have been different.

A child without dreams

Written by

Wednesday, 15 May 2013 11:59

Dreams! So important for the future of our children. I know this from experience. Now I dream."

How many millions of children who were hurt or neglected themselves grow up hopeless, hate-filled, and continue the cycle of hurting others? No child deserves to grow up feeling hated and abandoned instead of safe, cared for, and loved.

And all children deserve to be allowed and encouraged to dream by the adults around them in their homes, schools, and communities. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, the great president of Morehouse College and mentor to me and thousands of Black college students, told us: "It must be borne in mind that the tragedy of life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disaster to be unable to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim is sin."

Every child needs a dream. Dr. King had a dream and our nation has a dream we must continue to struggle to honor for every child and adult in America during this month dedicated to preventing child abuse and every month going forth.

Click here to share your comments and find out what others are saying.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose *Leave No Child Behind* mission is

to ensure every child a

Healthy Start

, a

Head Start

, a

Fair Start

, a

Safe Start

and a

Moral Start

in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

For more information go to

www.childrensdefense.org

Mrs. Edelman's Child Watch Column also appears each week on The Huffington Post.