

When Children Smile

“Go ahead, smile!”
my mother would whisper to me,
whenever she was anxious herself,
having to face intimidating or worrisome people.
In moments of humiliation,
my smile shielded and strengthened her.
“Go ahead, smile!”
Because a child’s smile hides
all the suffering and uncertainty in the world.

In India, they say,
“Children are the world’s smiles,” and it’s true.
Aren’t children the ones who bring us all together,
when their parents are fed up with begging and pleading?
Their smiles stop the questions and the criticisms.
It’s their strength, their strength as children,
that finds friends for their families.
They play, they run, they grow up
in rundown neighborhoods,
in slums squeezed between highways and factories.
They shout too loudly.
They disturb their whole class.
In church they can’t keep quiet or stop fidgeting.
But when they feel touched by your love,
they beam the most irresistible smiles at you.

Sometimes I start thinking--
if the world keeps going like this,
children will no longer have the strength to smile.

Then who will be left
to hide a father’s shame when he is out of work?
Who will make a mother forget the drudgery of everyday life?
Who will remind our world
that tenderness is worth more than efficiency and profit?

I think of the many solidarity organizations,
increasingly hard hit by the economic crisis.
I think of all those who, too caught up in these difficult times,
uneasily edge away from the worst off.
If we can’t keep children smiling,
if we let grinding poverty, which is already so painful,
become absolutely hopeless,
what kind of a world will we be living in?

So tomorrow, how do we plan to recapture
the hope that lies behind children’s smiles?
How will we understand what they are trying to tell us?

Tomorrow, how will we find the strength to laugh?
How will they plant joy in our hearts,
and remind us of the meaning of justice?
How will they urge us to stand up against poverty?
How, tomorrow, will they assure us that love is our future?

A little boy told me,
“If people hear what we put up with,
they will say to themselves, ‘Things can’t go on like this!’ ”