Parenting on a planet in pain

How do I teach my children to care for an ailing world?

by Melissa Kuipers in the January 26, 2022 issue

(Left: Photo by Jacques Le Henaff on Unsplash; right: photo © ikinikon / iStock / Getty)

As I pull the car out of the driveway, I notice something dark flutter out of the corner of my eye. It's the wings of a sparrow on the edge of the windshield, perched on the wiper, trying to keep its balance as the car lurches onto the road. I pull over in front of the neighbors' house just as their seven-year-old pulls up on her scooter.

"It's a bird! It's a bird!" she's shouting at me as I scramble out of the car.

"I know!" I call back. "It must be hurt."

I gently prod the sparrow from the windshield onto my mittened hand. It doesn't chirp or flinch.

“Let me see it!” she cries. I hold it down to her face and she puts her nose close to its beak to peer into its eyes. “Ah!” she shouts, and pulls back. “I’m afraid of birds. I’m afraid they’ll peck my eyes out.”

“I don’t know what to do with it,” I say. I’m confiding in a seven-year-old about my complete inability to care for nature. “Maybe it’s old and dying.”

“It’s just a baby,” she says, though I know it is not. “Bring it to my mom. She knows a lot about birds.”

I look at its soft little face, stroke its back. It remains serene—in shock? In pain? Ready to die? Comfortable? It can’t be very calm with us screaming in its face. How do you read the expression of a bird?

I wish that my children were here to see the sparrow up close. My three-year-old loves animals, as most do. At least, he loves learning about them. His favorite show is a children’s nature program, which he pauses while I’m chopping onions for supper to call facts out to me: “Do you know that baby swans climb on their mother’s backs?” “Did you know that warthogs are herbivores?” “Emperor penguins can dive almost a mile!” He seems to relish the power of information, even if he does not know the meaning of the words he speaks. “Is it endangered?” he asks about each new animal he learns, a concept he can’t understand but knows is an important way to categorize living things.

“Is it endangered?” my son asks about each new animal he learns.

If he were here, he would speak tenderly to this bird, say something comforting and untrue like “It’s okay, little bird. You’re safe now. Everything will be alright.”

But of course everything will not be alright for a bird that can’t fly.

Now I face a conundrum I have faced before: Can I kill an animal, even if it’s the kind thing to do? Would I rather shuffle it onto the ground and let the creature starve to death instead of dying quickly, before it even knows what is happening? How can I kill it swiftly enough that it won’t suffer?

Now the girl’s little brother runs up to join us. “Give it to me! Give it to me!” he says.

“We’ll take it to our mom!” the girl says.

“Be very careful with him,” I say as I gently pass the bird to the boy. “If she doesn’t want it in the house, put it under that tree over there.”

When I return home from picking my kids up and pull them out of their car seats, the neighbor kids are nowhere to be seen. I look under the tree for the bird and don’t see it. I am hopeful that perhaps their mother is some kind of bird whisperer. Perhaps she has taken it inside and fed it seeds, and perhaps it will know a death of dignity and comfort in the warmth of their home. But then I spot its still body sprawled under a branch, its tiny feathers quivering in the breeze. With the baby on my hip, I usher my preschooler up the steps, hoping he won’t notice.

“But hyenas are bad, right?” my son asks me after a conversation about scavengers. Is it the influence of Disney movies? Is it the way society characterizes some animals as more relatable than others? Is it the scavenger’s proximity to death, or is it simply the sharpness of the species’s features— its cackle, its arched back and snarling muzzle—that makes my son want to characterize the hyena as “bad”?

I wonder where this need comes from, but I notice that even babies pampered in healthy homes seem to know early that something is amiss in the world. My colicky baby cried and fussed, and I could not figure out why. He was well-fed, warm, surrounded by love. Tummy trouble seemed the most likely, but when I watched his face break into a wail, I could not help but feel he was overcome with this world not being what it should be, that he knew already in his tiny frame that this world would bring unpredictable pain. I felt he was grieving for the brokenness of the world. And then I felt I wanted to cry in the same unreserved way with him.

I’ve learned that the gift my children are is worth their experience in a broken world.

After the birth of each of my children, I found myself experiencing an overwhelming combination of guilt and despair that our culture calls postpartum depression. I would look into the tiny faces of my children and ask, “How do I share with you the brokenness of this world? How do I bring you into its deep cruelty without dampening your joy?” I couldn’t bear the grief at the incongruity between their sweetness and the world in which that sweetness had to walk. Over time the depression lessened, but I still, even today, find myself hovering between trying to shield my children from this world’s pain and sharing with them the reality of the world.

The day after we found the bird I sit down on my almost four-year-old's bed as the afternoon sun seeps through the window. He has picked a book off the shelf about elephants, and as I absentmindedly read words like "endangered," "poachers," and "kill them for their tusks," my child suddenly begins to cry. "Why are they killing the elephants? We need to go and bring them back to life and then there can be millions again," and then he throws himself on his pillow in tears.

My throat tenses as the rims of my eyes grow wet. Already in his less than four years he has many times heard the words *endangered* and *pollution*. Already he knows that many of the animals he learns about are at risk. Does he know that the world he is growing up in is hotter than the one I grew up in, that I cannot guarantee that this will be a safe place for him and his children to live in?

"It's really sad," I say to him. I make some pat statement about how it's important to care for the world God gave us. I edit the rest of the book as I read.

Who wrote this book for kids anyway? Why are we putting the responsibility of this knowledge on them? Because we hope they'll educate their parents and pressure them toward change? Or because we know most adults are too far gone and the only hope we have is teaching the next generation while they are young?

But the truth is that this was *my* childhood book, one given away at gas stations in an attempt to mass-educate the public about the need to protect endangered species. Clearly the tactic did not work. The information did not change my generation enough to make a difference. Now we have more pressing issues than combating the ivory industry.

Later, the neighbor girl sees us leaving for the park and yells from her porch, "The bird flew away while we were having supper." It sounds like her mother had the strength to do what I did not but still protected her children from what really happened.

Our children's Bible is big and heavy, but our toddler has not yet figured out that it is a long book of many books, and so he always wants to start at the beginning. I don't mind. "God said, 'Let there be fish in the sea and flying things in the air!'" the big book says. "And then there they were! God said, 'Hi fish! Hi birds!'"

At the end of the first story, before the next one when it all goes wrong, "God said to the people, 'Look after all these animals I've made, and care for this wonderful world

I love.’”

Sometimes when our toddler sees litter at the park, he says, “We should take all the people who throw garbage on the ground and throw them in jail!” Confinement seems the most logical solution to him, but I’ve also learned that the threat of jail means anger. Already he gets angry about the world not being what it should be.

That next story in the Bible is tantalizing. Who isn’t intrigued by a talking snake? In some illustrated versions the serpent has legs before Adam and Eve take the fruit, and then God amputates them during the curse. The sudden appearance of thorns and storm clouds come along with awkwardly placed leaves that mean that cartoon Adam and Eve can no longer cuddle with lions and rhinoceroses. I don’t love to read this story to my son. I don’t believe it was originally written for children. Adults rigorously debate what the “tree of good and evil” was, and I don’t know where to begin with a three-year-old. And he still has no shame in his nakedness, thank God.

What he does understand is that he skins his knee on the pavement, that sometimes kids at the park don’t want to play with him, that some people are not treated well, that his loving daycare provider has cancer and is no longer able to take care of him, that Grandma is dead and he can’t meet her, that he fights sometimes with his parents, that this world is both good and bad at the same time in so many ways. We are privileged, and so he understands fallenness in tiny increasing increments.

It took a year, maybe more, for the postpartum depression to fade away. As time went on and as my children grew, I slowly learned that the gift they were was worth their existence and their experience in this broken world. I learned to trust God and God’s image in them, that, despite my feeling weighed down with the wretchedness of all things here, there is still so much goodness resisting the pervasive fallenness of our world. I knew that they could not fix this place, and I certainly could not fix it for them, but I began to hope that we could take small steps together toward healing.

On Earth Day, the preschool teachers make a collage of the children’s answers to the question, “How can we care for the world?” “Don’t hurt the sun,” one says. “Be nice to animals.” “Throw garbage away.” They look around at the world they know and make their best estimates, or they repeat what they’ve heard from us.

We buy a rain barrel, plant some veggies. We bicycle more. We try to buy less. We vote for political leaders who want to improve our public transit and provide more

affordable housing. We pray for justice. We eat less meat. We do these tiny things that make us feel a little better, and all the while I ask, Is it anything? Does it mean change? Will they ask me one day why we didn’t do more?

We walk down to the waterfront trail by the bay. Near the pavilion that meets the edge of the water, my toddler plays in the dead rushes, still standing seven feet tall after a long winter.

“Can you break this one for me?” he asks, and I snap its fragile stalk so he can run around with it, a weapon or a wand. We spot a swan’s nest near the dock, so close to us that we can make out the dirt along her neck as she sleeps above her eggs. Around her nest are littered coffee cups, and yet she still trusts the human voyeurs enough to raise her young here. She wakes up and looks at us, stands up and gently rolls her green eggs with her black foot.

“She’s turning her eggs to keep them warm,” my toddler teaches me. “She better not break them.”

I assure him, “She won’t.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The sparrow and the swan.”