

A Manner of Speaking

The World Summit for Children, an international gathering of Heads of State and Government to discuss the plight of the world's children, took place on September 29 and 30, 1990 at the United Nations in New York City—we decided that I would attend as a member of the media, covering the event for Exchange. I approached this assignment with excitement and an array of insecurities, having last called myself a reporter for the world premiere of "Cat Ballou" during my high school days. I stayed near the United Nations where the Summit took place so I had a ringside seat for watching limousines and security personnel jam the streets. It was fascinating to watch the proceedings on closed circuit television in the media center and then to witness the opening and closing ceremonies in person from the balcony in the Assembly Hall. All those Heads of State and Government (a Guinness Book of World Records event—the most world leaders [71] ever gathered to discuss one topic) and me. I felt so privileged, awed, excited. All that power in one place.

But a lot of what they did was just ceremony. Each president/premier seemed compelled to deliver pretty much the same speech—to go on record for the world as a nation committed to the cause of children. They had to stand on little pieces of tape for the historic photograph. They had to attend your worst nightmare of a cocktail party. Where was the power in all of this?

There was great theatre as each diplomat was escorted to the opening by a child representing his/her country. Later, stepping on all sorts of media toes and breaking all protocol, I watched as these children were interviewed/interrogated about their countries. It turned out that it really was mostly for show; as children of diplomats living in the United States, they had little firsthand knowledge about the needs of children in their own countries.

And then there was the awkwardness when other media discovered I was from the U.S. and wanted to know why President Bush was not signing the Covenant (the official document from the Summit) or even the Declaration. (This was signed for the United States just as the Summit ended by Louis Sullivan, Secretary of Health.)

During the Summit, I attended a group interview with Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund. With typical eloquence and expertise, Marian discussed the plight of children in our own country and deftly put responsibility for making changes for children on the shoulders of those of us in that room. It was an uncomfortable moment when I had to face my own responsibilities for advocating for children.

How can I comment on this whole experience? Truth has so many faces! There is the story of history in the making when 71 world leaders gather to discuss the needs of children. There is the story of the children themselves and the life-threatening, easy to remedy perils that befall them. There is the story of pomp and theatre. There is the story of our country's reluctance to join with other nations in committing to the Covenant for Children. There is the story of my personal thoughts and feelings.

Much to think about, but one theme is clear. Power does not rest with those leaders who meet and eat in the spotlight unless we delegate all power to them. Each of us has responsibilities to change society's wrongdoing. And it is wrongdoing—for the remedies for children dying of starvation, dehydration, and disease are not recent discoveries and they are not expensive to administer. So why did we let all these children die before the Summit took place? And why are we letting them die now? Each of us has to decide what should be done, and then take steps to put our own power to work in the world for the good of our children. Without us, so many babies will never grow up.

*Bonnie Neugebauer
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