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# The Sanctuary of the Streets

## Raising Kids in Protest and Faith

Lydia Wylie-Kellermann

I've watched my dad get arrested dozens of times. I've held my children up to the police car window to wave goodbye to him. I've bailed him out. I've sat in courtrooms. I've vigiled outside jail cells, first as a child and now as an adult.

My dad is always just one of a communal ragtag team of organizers, storytellers, musicians, artists, legal observers, marchers, dancers, medics, drummers, and deep listeners—a chorus of voices coming together to create poetry, to create protest in an even larger movement for justice.

Inevitably, the moment arrives. Time stops and breath slows.

Handcuffs emerge following police warnings, and the chained protestor is ushered to the police car. No matter the person, tears well up within me. Spirit seems to run through my whole body. Others begin to applaud, and I cannot join for fear I will collapse weeping. Not with grief but with joy. Joy that comes only when we have courage to expose the pain and the truth. It is powerful to see bodies given in struggle, to see freedom claimed as an act of freedom, and to see ancestors and generations present in those chains.

It is holy and sacred. One of those rare moments where spirit is undeniably present in the working of our lives.

It is church.

In 2018, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival organized six weeks of protests that included civil disobedience at state capitols around the country. I spent those weeks protesting at the capitol in Lansing, Michigan. My two-year-old companioned me. He passed around the mic at the morning nonviolence trainings. He expertly drew over the carefully plotted maps that contained direct action plans (covering up any trace or possibility of conspiracy charges). He distributed water under the beating sun to folks blocking doors. And when things got tense and I needed to be ready to move at a moment's notice, I strapped him to my back. Often he would fall asleep ushered

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into dreams by the sung strands of “Somebody’s hurting my people, and we won’t be silent anymore.”

## Learning by Walking

I too had been lulled to sleep by lullabies on the streets. I was first carried in utero, then in a stroller, then by my own feet or sometimes bike or roller blades. As a child, I had learned the geographical and political landscape of this same place by walking the trodden streets with signs or songs or snacks. And one day, I carried my own boys in utero, then pushed their strollers. Now I pack helmets and bicycles.

For me, this place is Waawiyatanong (where the waters go round)—named and continually loved by the Anishinaabe peoples—now known as Detroit, Michigan. My waters broke only miles from where my mother’s water broke. The waters of home returned to the earth. These are the lands that have nourished our bodies and the lands I hope to nourish with my life.

It is always the same streets, the same buildings, and—while the struggles or chants may shift with time—ultimately it is the same struggle. The weight of my feet upon this pavement has educated me, formed me spiritually, and deepened my commitment to this community and place that I love.

## Parenting on the Picket Line

These patterns of justice and protest stem back to my parents and the ways they intentionally chose to raise my sister and me. For them, having kids was not a reason to flee from the risks of resistance but an opportunity to welcome us deeply and lovingly into that struggle.

I grew up participating in Christian traditions that followed the liturgical year. I learned the rhythms of those seasons through where we put our bodies. Each Monday of Advent, as we waited in darkness for the birth of Jesus, we made the long drive to Williams International, where we would stand—clad in snow pants and mittens—on the side of the road. Inside, people were building cruise missile engines. Outside, we were holding candles and hungering for a world without war-making. We would spend Good Friday walking the streets of Detroit asking, Where is injustice and crucifixion happening in our moment and place? I learned that our sacred stories were inseparable from the seasons of the earth and the church. I learned to embody those stories with my own body by placing it in the street. Because of that, my faith could never be separated from justice.

When I was in third grade, a newspaper strike took place in Detroit. Every Thursday morning during the strike my parents pulled us out of school to join the protests. My sister and I would make up chants and draw protest signs. As we played hooky from school, we learned that showing up for our community

and understanding local struggles was just as much a part of our education as sitting at a desk. And we learned that our beings, voices, and presence as children mattered.

When I was four, my parents went to Palestine with an interfaith human rights delegation. I stayed behind with my grandma. Before they left, my dad pulled out a cassette player and recorded a love letter to me. In the language a four-year-old could understand, he spelled out his love, their reasons for going, and why it mattered. He also explained that their travels through the West Bank into Gaza could be dangerous. Throughout my childhood, my parents told us the hard truth of injustice. They found words we could understand and trusted our hearts to hear them.

It was not always easy for my parents; they ached with questions, wondering if they were laying too much upon their children. I hold my own fears with my kids. Sometimes the world feels so bleak and the truth too painful. Sometimes the risks seem too large or too scary. Yet I try to hold onto the fact that when I look back at my own parents, I hold nothing but deep gratitude for the unconventional parenting decisions they made in speaking truth to their children. I want to keep listening to them as teachers inspiring me toward truth, risk, and courageous action.

## Listening to the Lingering Questions

The work of protest is never done without discernment, scrutiny, critical analysis, and lingering questions. Resistance in the street is not the whole of the work. Justice must be demanded, built, and created from every angle, drawing on the skills of many—from the streets to the neighborhood community centers, the courtroom to the sanctuary, the classroom to the front porch, the halls of power to the encampment beside the freeway. The work is long and wide, but when thousands (or even just a few) begin to sing in the street, the sound reverberates through our very core. The power of community is palpable. Those moments give us courage and strength for the coming days, when righteous rage pours out through bodies into the loving arms of community. When Earth holds that rage, without murmurings of domination or dehumanization. This is medicine.

To honor those who risk arrest, we must also acknowledge the blatant racial disparities in our criminal justice system. Not all bodies are treated the same in handcuffs. Not all people can risk a misdemeanor. Not all folks can afford to be away from their families for even a short time. Questions must be asked. Tensions must be held. And movement must be built with a place and honor for every person. For each of us holds a piece of the work that it takes to bring down systems of domination and create something beautiful to rise up from the ashes—something rooted in imagination, justice, and community.

## Honoring Their Voices

I love that so much of my work as a parent of two beautiful children is to nurture their consciences and beings as they navigate their place in the ecosystem of what it means to be human. Their protest signs, held in place by masking tape, cover the wall along our stairway entrance. Through crayon and marker, I am already seeing their voices grow and shift. I still delight in a sign my now five-year-old drew with abundant color a few years ago. It simply says, “I Love Eggs.” My work is to honor their voices, trust what they have to say, and welcome them into the great and ancient community of prophetic protest.

It’s not always easy. It requires work and energy and imagination that are often hard to come by in the early years of raising kids. Sometimes the best work I can do is pack snacks and mittens and diapers, only to arrive thirty minutes late to a forty-five-minute vigil. Yet, we keep showing up. We bring our bodies and our hearts. We stand as witness. We stand as a reminder that we are not alone.

I want my kids to know struggle, to feel the power of voice and community, to be white bodies fighting for racial justice, to join deep roots and wide rivers of nonviolence, to be washed over by one another’s courage and imagination, to be nourished by the joy alive when the masses cry out for liberation. So that when they go home, justice flows into the rest of the day and the rest of the work now and always.