

Move Forward
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Among the many tribes of Africa, no tribe was considered to have warriors more fearsome or intelligent than the mighty Masai. It's surprising, then, to learn the traditional greeting passed among these soldiers is "Casserian Engeri," which translates in English to, *"And how are the children?"*

It is still the traditional greeting of the Masai, acknowledging the high value placed on their children's well-being. Even those with no children of their own give the traditional answer, *"All the children are well."*

This means, of course, that peace and safety prevail; the priorities of protecting the young and the powerless are in place; that the people had not forgotten their reason for being, their proper function, and their responsibilities.

"All the children are well" means life is pretty good. Because life can only be good if the most vulnerable among us are safe and thriving. The daily struggles of existence, even among those with so little, includes placing a priority on the proper care of the young and defenseless.

I wonder how it might affect how we looked after our own children's welfare if we took to greeting each other the same way, *"And how are the children?"* And I wonder, if we heard that greeting passed along to each other a dozen times a day, would it begin to make a difference?

What would it be like if every adult among us—parent and nonparent alike—felt an equal weight of responsibility for the care and protection of all the children in our society. I wonder whether we could truly say without hesitation, *"The children are well. Yes, all the children are well."*

The children of Israel were rich with the gold of the Egyptians when they left enslavement behind. They were free, free to follow a leader who demonstrated that God was with them through ten plagues. After 400 years of oppression, people who had only known themselves as slaves marched victoriously out of the hands of their masters.

I probably read too much of myself into this text. I'm the queen of second-guessers. I can feel so sure about something one minute, then wonder if it's the right path the next.

Just like the Israelites. Trapped between the sea and an aggressive army, they begin to second guess. And wonder what Moses was thinking at this point. He flounders a little, makes a middle-management kind of decision... tells them to just stay put, and trust that God will deliver them.

But God never intended for them to stay put! He wants them to move forward. And when the providential pathway opens in the sea, they do.

I'm sure there was that moment when the children of Israel bathed in their doubts. By walking through the walls of water on their left and on their right, they somehow were able to find solid ground on which to stand. When times got tough again, they could remember the miracle and trust.

Moses didn't bring them out into the desert to die, but to live.

In 1963, a band of their descendants in sleepy little Monroe, Connecticut found themselves moving through the waters of change. Their nation had been stunned by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Martin Luther King Jr delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech, inspiring so many.

Their little community had changed – in just ten years, residents tripled in number. There was so much that was needed, especially for the children. Everyone looked to the Congregational church to lead them through the waters.

So, in true congregational fashion, they formed a committee! That group was tasked with surveying the land and polling the members to decide whether or not they might build a structure to meet the needs of a growing Sunday school program. This project would be costly, both in time, leadership and funds. It was a tremendous risk to take.

And yet, move forward they did. After years of work, prayer, fundraising and visioning, the \$185,000 project began. It became known as Rexford House, "*The House A Dream Built.*" The dream was a simple one: attend to the needs of the children by creating them a safe and sturdy space that would last.

In the materials the builder's kept, there is a poem written by Harris Dake in honor of the committee's chairman, Bud Morvec. It encapsulates this child-focused spirit of the times:

Many Sleepless nights ago,
 A child tugged at your sleeve.
And whispered little visions,
 Unfolding little dreams.
A homeless hand was offered you.
 In simple faith and trust.
A voice that cried not that "you will",
 But pleaded that "you must!"

You clasped the unsure hand in yours,
 And warmed it with your heart.
That rascal Cupid never shot
 A straighter, truer dart!
Through the insecurity,

The doubt and somber nights,
You showed this little one the way
And gave it hope and light.

Many sleepless nights have passed,
You have shown that children's dreams,
Fostered carefully with love,
Aren't as childish as they seem.
The little child in Rexford House,
Looks south to Beardsley Hall.
He humbly clasps his hand on prayer,
And thanks you for it all.

They did not just build for themselves, although the fruits of their labors became quickly evident. They built for the people in their community who would come into their fellowship in the future and for generations to come. The first shovel, it was said, was the hardest... it just took 203 years. And we are grateful that they took the chance.

But this tremendous gift they left us has not been easy to maintain. It began with a collapsed roof in the middle of the building process. A fire started in the kitchen of the parlor, destroying everything BUT the PF cross. Water damage eventually came from a leaky roof unable to hold melting snow. Then there are limitations on what we are able to do in our kitchen, which hits especially hard in the busiest time of Father's Day weekend. The windows are drafty and need to be replaced. And don't get me started on the state of the bathrooms.

I'm beginning to sound like one of those complaining Israelites, but that's only because the blessing we have been given is showing its age. And although it is well utilized today by many community groups, I look at Rexford House and wonder if there are other ways we should be living the dream of the builders today... because it seems to me that there is so much raw potential.

Imagine a newly updated commercial kitchen kept busy by a catering company staffed by at-risk-youth. They learn a trade, gain self-esteem and get a paycheck. Most of the teens in the care of DCF have never held a part time job. How will they possibly support themselves when the time comes?

Or picture an after-school program that focuses on music performance meeting in Dineson. Studies show that students in high-quality music education programs score higher on standardized tests compared to students in schools with deficient music education programs, regardless of the socioeconomic level of community.¹ And yet, what are the first programs to be whittled away when school budgets are made?

Or neither of those seem like your thing, how about we invite therapists to do their work in counseling offices that convert back into classroom space for Sunday School on the weekend. Access to counseling and mental health services are needed today more than

¹ Nature Neuroscience, April 2007

ever. Would convertible, cooperative space in Rexford House open the pathways for more children and youth in our community to get needed mental health services?

And How Are The Children? Maybe it's time, like the builders did before us, to dream another big dream. I've shared with you three of mine. What are yours?

Moses tells people to be still. If you think about it, maybe it's pretty good advice. Change is hard, especially for beloved institutions. It takes resources of time, energy and funding. Sometimes when it seems like you feel trapped, the first thing you need to do is to stop and take a breath. *Be still.*

But then.... Quit panicking and take a moment to remember the One who has been with us ever since the sea crossing, the One who knows the number of hairs on your head is there. Stop freaking out about mainline decline and lean into your faith—that's what it's for.

No matter what the obstacle in front of us, step out into it. I love the detail that the Hebrews had to step in the sea and get their feet wet *before* Moses struck the water with his staff and parted the water.

All of those voices that rose up in protest on one side of the sea began to sing and praise again on the other side. God had taken the side of the poor and the oppressed, the ones who cry out and acted decisively to show that the ways of mercy, forgiveness, and treating each person as a person of infinite value and sacred worth will always win out. Pharaoh and his armies don't stand a chance.

God is moving, even now making a way out of no way. Keep moving forward. Leave Egypt behind. Let it go. Know the new life, the new love, the new kingdom that has been prepared and promised for us all. Amen.