



WHITE

*turning toward love in a world divided by privilege*

PICKET

*amy julia becker*

FENCES

If there were ever a writer who can wrest beauty out of deep complexity and pain, it is Amy Julia Becker. Written with elegant honesty, her new book explores the burden of privilege and the responsibility and call to steward it well. I'm grateful for Becker's willingness to wade into deep waters and to emerge from them with a timely vision of human flourishing for all.

KATELYN BEATY, author of *A Woman's Place: A Christian Vision for Your Calling in the Office, the Home, and the World*

Without shaming or victimizing, Becker considers painful truths and beautiful possibilities for healing the divisions of our present moment.

GABE LYONS, founder of Q Ideas

A deeply human book. As a woman who shares many of Becker's advantages, I've been immensely helped, by Becker's words, to begin believing that God can use our suffering—and our privilege—for good.

JEN POLLOCK MICHEL, author of *Teach Us to Want: Longing, Ambition and the Life of Faith*

Amy Julia Becker allows us to enter an important—but not easy—spiritual journey of awakening and enlightenment. Writing beautifully and elegantly in prose that does not allow us to shrink from a painful reality, Becker challenges us to move out of the stagnant state of “benign” racism. Without “white-explaining,” Becker presents a convincing story of everyday privilege, a disruption of that privilege, and a necessary transformation.

SOONG-CHAN RAH, author of *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church*

I want to read every word Amy Julia Becker writes. No one else I know captures so completely the ache and the joy of being human. *White Picket Fences* is her most compelling book yet, tackling one of the thorniest topics of our time and illuminating it with honesty, humility, and hope. Privilege so often involves a conspiracy to forget, and this book gently, unflinchingly insists that we remember. But it also helps us believe that in a world so often torn by violence and indifference, love can still have the last and best word.

ANDY CROUCH, author of *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk, and True Flourishing*

Discussing the reality of privilege is both uncomfortable and essential. In *White Picket Fences*, Amy Julia Becker explores this critically important topic without being heavy-handed or didactic. I was pulled in from page 1 by Amy Julia's writing, which is warm, honest, and inviting as she beautifully explores her own life and story of privilege. Compelling, wise, and vital.

TISH HARRISON WARREN, author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*

As a white mother of black children, I find this topic to be nuanced and highly personal. Amy Julia masterfully created a safe space for my heart to explore what has otherwise felt like a loaded subject. This is a book for every thoughtful soul.

SARA HAGERTY, author of *Unseen: The Gift of Being Hidden in a World That Loves to Be Noticed*

Renouncing privilege isn't always possible—or even desirable. In *White Picket Fences*, Amy Julia enters this conversation with wisdom and candor, inviting the reader to consider the transforming power of grace and gratitude to direct what we've been given to do the work of love.

RACHEL MARIE STONE, author of *Birthing Hope: Giving Fear to the Light*

A writer of beauty, bravery, and compassion takes on a topic as searingly painful as it is depressingly timely. As she shares her own journey so unsparingly, Becker nudges readers toward self-reflection, inspiring hope for new beginnings and opening hearts to healing.

RACHEL SIMON, author of *Riding the Bus with My Sister: A True Life Journey*

Through Amy Julia's raw and vulnerable storytelling, I discovered not only the harm my own privilege has caused but also a God-birthing desire to actively engage in reconciliation and healing. Captivating and deeply personal, *White Picket Fences* is Amy Julia's best work yet.

JEANNIE CUNNION, author of *Mom Set Free: Find Relief from the Pressure to Get It All Right*

It takes a special kind of writer—a special kind of person—to write about privilege in a vulnerable way. Amy Julia Becker is exactly such a writer and such a person. Becker offers an unflinching examination of what obligations and obstacles come with privilege in a world marred by so many injustices done to those without the

advantages many of us take for granted. *White Picket Fences* is a must-read for all who wish to break down the barriers that divide our communities and our nation today.

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, author of *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*

*White Picket Fences* bravely confronts privilege whilst challenging readers to do the same. As Becker gets personal with her reader, she offers more than perceived answers: She offers space and grace. At a time when allies continue to peel back the layers of privilege in their lives, *White Picket Fences* is timely!

CAROLINA HINOJOSA-CISNEROS, Tejana poet and freelance writer

*White Picket Fences* sparks conversations that promote mutual compassion and respect as Becker celebrates the diversity and intrinsic value of all people. With a watchword of *hope*, Becker inspires readers to bridge our divides united as a community, strengthened by the Lord, shielded with prayer, and armed with love.

XOCHITL E. DIXON, Our Daily Bread Ministries

Both an excellent primer for entering the conversation and an invitation to change, as told through the art of story, with generous amounts of grace. I have no doubt that Becker's book will help steer a much-needed dialogue of examining our own stories and entering into repentance.

CARA MEREDITH, author of *The Color of Life: A White Woman's Journey toward Love and Justice*

Amy Julia Becker puts poignant and powerful words around a subject that is sensitive but so necessary to discuss, perhaps now more than ever. In our hyperconnected yet increasingly siloed world, we need personal, humble, and openhanded conversations like *White Picket Fences* to help us on this path of healing and flourishing together.

KATHERINE AND JAY WOLF, coauthors of *Hope Heals: A True Story of Overwhelming Loss and Overcoming Love*

Amy Julia Becker is opening herself up to being raked over. She doesn't have to do it. Nevertheless, she doesn't shy away from the good, bad, and ugly of her privileged upbringing. Gentle and beautiful, this book is hard-hitting.

MARLENA GRAVES, author of *A Beautiful Disaster: Finding Hope in the Midst of Brokenness*



W H I T E

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P I C K E T

*amy julia becker*

F E N C E S

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*foreword*

## Strangers at the Gate

*I first met Amy Julia Becker* in a classic “privilege” moment. She was an editor. I was a writer. I am black. She is white. We’d never met, not even on paper. I hadn’t read her books. She hadn’t read mine. In the sticky potential of this power dynamic, my concern was immediate and race-based. Would she, as a white woman, tread lightly over my precious (as I saw them) and hard-wrought words? Or would she grab my topic and slash and burn? My humble article was on race relations, and her audience that murky November—just a few short months after Michael Brown was gunned down and killed in Ferguson, Missouri—was mostly white. I am black, indeed. And these times are tough and rugged.

In the midst of the push and pull, Amy Julia was faced with agreeing, as literary icon James Baldwin said of writing, that “the point is to get your work done, and your work is to change the world.”<sup>1</sup> Or as George Orwell, author of the classic novel *1984*, observed of his writing: “When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce

a work of art.’ I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.”<sup>2</sup>

This can be scary stuff—seeking to bend the universe with a few trembling words. Thus, my initial anxiety about Amy Julia was this: Would she lay down the editor’s pen long enough to hear my side? Or, rushing, would she tone down its arguments? Send back my essay covered in ink? Reject the piece outright, saying it wouldn’t appeal to or address her audience?

None of that happened. Instead, as I discovered, Amy Julia asked the right questions. Next, she listened. Then she reflected. *Then* she made one suggestion: Weave in a little more faith. That was all she sought from me, her writer. A little more Jesus. But not with a heavy hand. She allowed me to point to Christ in a Matthew 14:27 sort of way: “Take courage. I am here!” (NLT). And for her, that was the ticket. Just enough.

In her, therefore, I found a brave combination of many things I respect not just in writers and editors, but in all people: namely, restraint, fairness, intelligence, curiosity, kindness, courage, hope. Over the next two years, as our paths continued to intersect, eventually she became the most important thing—a friend.

That is who you’ll discover in *White Picket Fences*. It’s an extraordinary book not because it’s so urgent, which it is, or because it’s profoundly well written—also undeniably true. You’ll also discover Amy Julia, however, in fellowship,

because this book is offered in the spirit of a welcoming traveler, someone wrestling with universal life issues—life and death and everything in between—but all examined through the lens of what, ironically, is called privilege.

The concept, in these times, raises hackles and seething defenses. Draped in the sound of something grand—*privilege*—it has become not a positive idea, but politically charged to a fault. Mention “privilege” to some who enjoy it and they recoil, defenses raging.

Amy Julia asks readers to hold the noise—to consider the hard reality that, in a society, “privilege harms everyone, those who are excluded from it and those who benefit from it.” Even more, she asks readers to widen their lens on privilege—to look at race, yes, but to wrestle beyond race matters to explore the privilege of physical ability, gender, economic status, birthplace, education, and more.

As a mother of a child with Down syndrome, Amy Julia displayed her capacity to examine the heart and soul of such spiritual struggles in her book *A Good and Perfect Gift: Faith, Expectations, and a Little Girl Named Penny*—named one of the Top Books of 2011 by *Publishers Weekly*.

With *White Picket Fences*, she moves again into tough territory—first asking white people who are skittish about race to take a leap of faith and trust her enough to fully examine their own privilege, even if their very sense of self is broken up and rebuilt in the process. Then she invites the rest of us to build alongside, not sitting idly by and quiet, but affirming her right to add to the ongoing conversation

about these national matters—because every voice is needed. No matter when that voice enters the room.

As she says: “I want this story to open up the conversations we are afraid to have, to prompt the questions we are afraid to ask, and to lead us away from fear and toward love, in all its fragile and mysterious possibilities.”

Is this indulgent writing? When *un*privileged folks are getting gunned down in the streets—by civil servants hired to protect them?

In fact, it’s the kind of writing encouraged by researcher Dr. Peggy McIntosh, the scholar credited with affirming the problems of white privilege in 1988.<sup>3</sup> Taking a hard look at her privileged life as a white, Ivy League academic, McIntosh observed that

My schooling followed the pattern . . . [that] whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us.”<sup>4</sup>

Fearless to expose this tension, McIntosh then called for more transparency:

We need more down-to-earth writing by people about these taboo subjects. We need more understanding of the ways in which white “privilege” damages white people, for these are not the same ways in which it damages the victimized.<sup>5</sup>

The privilege conundrum is not a neutral matter, to be sure.

Yanked from the academic sphere and into our everyday lingo, privilege demands to be examined from all sides in our culture, and in brave ways. Not with denial but with determination, and also with guts. Amy Julia Becker decided to rise to the challenge and take on urgent questions: *If I'm privileged, and that hurts the people who aren't, what can we all do about it? What, indeed, is God asking us to do? And how, personally, do I prepare myself to help offer answers?*

The result is the story of her journey to try and figure it all out.

And here's the thing: Her story is beautiful and it is right.

I say that as an African American woman, even though I don't agree with every single conclusion that Amy Julia makes. She and I went back and forth on when to tell children about hard things such as racism. I argued that the question itself is a luxury allotted to children who don't have to worry about this particular terror—while children of color, by default, are forced to see from their earliest months that they are targets, often, of many kinds of racism.

Thus, all children, I argued, should see that racial terror exists—just as they're taught that a stove is hot, a speeding car can kill them, and sadly, so can other mayhem. Racism kills, too, and all children, no matter how young, should know about it. Then they can become justice allies and advocates, no matter how young.

I write those words in my own rush to fix a broken world,

forgetting theologian Richard Foster's wry and wise reminder to "lay down the everlasting burden of always needing to manage others" or, indeed, to "set others straight."<sup>6</sup>

Watching Amy Julia wrestle with such matters helped me acknowledge one hard reality of the privilege coin. Everybody has a viewpoint, and it's critical to hear it, even if every view doesn't line up with my own. Yet, if we're listening, that means we are talking to each other. Or getting closer to it.

That's what Amy Julia did with me and many others as she wrote this book. She shared, listened, reflected, and replied. Now she asks the same of readers. Allow her to talk about the privilege problem. But don't stop there. Talk back.

As she acknowledges at the book's ending, she's not an expert with all of the answers. Instead: "I am one vulnerable, distractible, self-centered human being trying to come to terms with the gifts and sorrows of my life. It will take thousands upon thousands of others who are willing to do the same, to bow our knees and take up a posture of humility, of listening to others instead of insisting on hearing our own voices, of admitting our own complicity in harm, of opening our hands and hearts to healing even when it hurts."

To weigh our own stories, therefore, consider hers. It's the least any writer asks. Turn the page and read. And with tough topics, here's the thing. The journey is beautiful. And it is right.

*Patricia Raybon*

# Introduction

*My left eyelid flutters*, a tiny movement, an unpredictable and intermittent distraction, like a fly that buzzes and twirls and lands with an abrupt stop, only to take flight again. Then the right eyelid joins in, sometimes playing a solo, sometimes in a cacophony of motion, as if competing with its pair. After a few weeks, the twitch settles into my right eye, persistent and uncontrollable.

I don't wear glasses. My eyes have never twitched before. I think I must be spending too much time in front of the computer, but sometimes my eye will twitch when I'm not staring at a screen, and sometimes I spend hours replying to email without any twitching. Eventually, I notice a pattern. The twitch surfaces whenever I am working on, or even thinking about, this book.

I mention this minor affliction to a friend.

"I think you're flinching," she says.



I think she might be right. It seems possible that my subconscious mind has been imagining all the critical words that could be flung my way if anyone pays attention to the stories and arguments and hopes inside these pages. It is as if I am already ducking and taking cover. It is also as if I am afraid of what I might see if I keep my eyes open.

After my friend's assessment, every time the twitch returns I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and say to myself, "I am safe." Then I pray, "Protect me."

That very day, the twitching slows, and within a few more days, it is gone.

Apparently, my body wanted to send an alert, to help me recognize the fear I feel as an affluent, able-bodied white woman trying to address topics like race and class and disability. What surprises me is that the twitching doesn't stop because I conquer my fears. It stops because I decide to keep my eyes open even though I am afraid.

I am afraid that in writing this book, I will look at my life and come face to face with truths I don't want to see about myself. I am afraid I will criticize the very people who have given me the safe and stable neighborhoods I have enjoyed, the education that has opened doors for learning and growth, and the religious faith that has anchored my soul. I am also afraid that I will mount a defense of myself and of the individuals and systems that have brought me here, and that I might do so without regard for the people who have been cut off from the neighborhoods and schools and opportunities I have known. And finally, I am afraid of exposing the darker

sides of privilege, afraid of what I might see when confessing the ways wealth and power wound others and the ways they wound the wealthy and powerful.

This book tells a story of my growing awareness not only that I have received unwarranted benefits by virtue of my white skin, Protestant heritage, and able body, but also that these unwarranted benefits have done harm to me and to others. In an era of political division, concerns over the plight of immigrants and the working class, movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, and news reports about police brutality against people of color, I am not alone in confronting my place within these systems and seeing pain there. I join these other voices with hope that exposing the pain can lead to healing.

But healing is not easy.

Last winter, I spent a few days in Florida with my husband. We decided to take a walk through downtown Miami, so I put on my flip-flops for the first time since summer. By the end of our walk, the top of my feet had become a line of blisters underneath the leather straps of the flip-flops, oozing and raw. In the morning, I couldn't put on my shoes without wincing. Over the next two weeks, the blisters scabbed over, and the pain turned to irritation. As the new skin grew, as these minor wounds healed, the itching even interrupted my sleep. My whole body squirmed from the discomfort of growing new skin.

Recognizing the advantages of my position as a white woman has been a little bit like waking up in the middle of the

night with those blisters. The analogy works only on a superficial level: Acknowledging my own privilege has exposed wounds that already existed, and the pain from wearing flip-flops is absurd in comparison to the depth of injury human beings have inflicted upon one another in our efforts to gain advantages and prestige. But that visceral response to the work of healing—the fact that my whole body paid uncomfortable attention as the new skin grew—makes it seem like an appropriate comparison for the concept of healing on a cultural level. In recent years, I've become aware not only that privilege exists—that laws have been written throughout US history to protect and support certain groups of people, people like me, at the expense of others—but also that privilege operates in predictable, soothing, and ultimately harmful ways. Identifying the wounds of privilege is one thing, and an uncomfortable one in and of itself. Participating in their healing is even harder. I hold out hope that wholeness lies on the other side of the discomfort, even if the scars of the past remain.

Our three children were born to two white, wealthy, educated people. They were born into privilege. Our oldest daughter, Penny, was also diagnosed with Down syndrome shortly after she was born. She was born into a set of genetic and social disadvantages over which she had no control. When Penny was two years old, I was looking for a preschool program for a few mornings a week. I called one that had been recommended by a friend. I talked with the director and explained that our daughter had Down syndrome. She

cut me off before I could say anything more. “We wouldn’t be able to accommodate your daughter,” she said. I didn’t fight back. I just hung up the phone, disoriented, angry, and with a taste of being excluded from consideration because of what category my child fit into, rather than based upon who she was as an individual.

Penny’s situation heightened my awareness of negative assumptions and social barriers I had never encountered before. Throughout the past decade, I have begun to see that I am insulated from many of the obstacles faced by the rest of our society, not only when it comes to disability but also when it comes to both racial and socioeconomic disparities. What’s more, I have woken up to the call for justice and mercy and healing throughout the history and Scripture of my faith tradition. As a Christian, as a mother, as an affluent white woman who has struggled with seasons of worry and sadness and long stretches of drinking too much wine, I want to participate in human connection instead of division, in healing instead of further harm.

I err easily on the side of utopianism. I grew up with an ability to trust institutions and authority figures because they rewarded me for playing by their rules, and I still tend to think every problem can be solved through hard work and a positive attitude. But wrestling with a fractured national identity, with the divisions of race and class and ability (not to mention gender and nationality and sexuality and political affiliation, though those topics extend beyond the scope of this book), has humbled me. I have started to see that the

only adequate response to the ruptures within our culture is a mutual one, one in which disparate groups of people are willing to work together.

Most of the time, being white and affluent and educated puts me in a position of strength, but in looking for ways that our culture might heal, I find myself in a position of weakness. The only way healing can happen is if the people who have been excluded and marginalized are willing to forgive and trust people like me.

I have come to believe that privilege harms everyone, those who are excluded from it and those who benefit from it. I want this book to be an invitation, especially for people from a cultural background similar to mine, to consider the reality of privilege, the benefits and wounds that come from privilege, and whether we can respond to the fact of our privilege with generosity, humility, and hope. I am not claiming to be an expert, nor am I trying to prescribe action steps for individuals or communities. I want this story to open up the conversations we are afraid to have, to prompt the questions we are afraid to ask, and to lead us away from fear and toward love, in all its fragile and mysterious possibilities.

*chapter one*

# LIFE IS A GIFT

*I only hear her speak Spanish.* We lie side by side in the hospital, a white curtain pulled tight between us. I never see her face. I see the scuffed sneakers and blue jeans of the kids who I assume are her older children. I hear the cadence of their voices and pick out words I learned years ago: *Hola, Mamá . . . Tranquila . . . ;Qué linda!*

We have both just given birth at Yale New Haven Hospital, and we are lodged here together temporarily, until private rooms open up. I am warm and exhilarated and grateful, as if waves of light are pouring over me. Marilee lies in my arms, bundled and asleep. Peter has stepped out to buy lunch and to greet my mother when she arrives with our

older children, Penny and William. I gaze out the window on my side of the room. The barren winter landscape stands in direct opposition to my emotions—the gray sky looks almost white with cold, the gray water of Long Island Sound lies flat in the distance.

A midwife comes in, one I haven't met before. She has short brown hair, and her whole body looks efficient: shirt tucked in, clipboard in hand, glasses pushed firmly in place on her nose. "This is your third child?"

I smile down at Marilee's round face and murmur, "Yes."

"Have you considered an IUD?" she asks. Something in her tone puts me on alert.

"Um," I say, "no, I haven't."

"Do you use contraception?" I can't tell if she is bored or annoyed.

"All three of my pregnancies were planned, if that's what you're asking," I say.

"Well, you might want to consider an IUD. It would protect you from pregnancy for five years, though it wouldn't protect you from sexually transmitted diseases."

I feel like a little kid receiving a reprimand for breaking a rule I hadn't known to obey. Her eyes seem to narrow into a glare. I glance down at Marilee's peaceful face again, take a deep breath, and remind myself that I have done nothing wrong in bringing this child into the world.

"Thank you for the information," I say.

As if we were in a standoff and she has conceded, she nods with a quick bob of her head, turns on her heel, and leaves.

An orderly comes in to move me to a different room a few minutes later, and soon after that, Penny and William peek around the doorframe to see their baby sister for the first time. William, two and a half, wears a button-down shirt and a charcoal gray sweater, his face stern with the responsibility of touching his sister's cheek. Penny, who has just turned five, kisses Marilee's feet again and again, her eyes wide, her face holding a perpetual smile at the excitement of a new member of the family. They bring cupcakes and we all sing "Happy Birthday" to their new baby sister.

After they go home with my mother, I review the day in my mind, as if replaying the events of the past twenty-four hours will cement them in my memory. I think back to the contraction that woke me at 3 a.m., the call to my aunt and uncle to stay with the kids until Mom could arrive. I trace the route to the hospital, the dark empty streets, the serious expression on Peter's face with both hands on the steering wheel, the reminder to myself to breathe. The pain of labor and delivery has already become imprecise, a rivet of hardship filled in by the sweetness, the joy, the embrace, the blessing, yes, the blessing of Marilee's bare body curled upon my chest, her breathing steady, her eyes closed. Today was the third time I have given birth. With Penny, the nurses swaddled her and handed her to me, but soon took her out of my arms for testing. Two hours later, the doctors diagnosed her with Down syndrome, and the warmth and light of her birth seeped away, replaced, for a time, by fear. With William, I was so depleted from the all-night struggle to bring him into



this world that I didn't have the strength to hold him. But with Marilee, there is no drama. We lie together, content, skin against skin. Blessing.

I move in my memory from the delivery room to the temporary room with the woman speaking Spanish from the bed behind the curtain. I will never see her again, but I feel connected to her. Our children share a birthday. Our bodies share the knowledge of intensity and wonder and welcome. Although I do not even know her name, I try to imagine her life. I conjure up a person based on an incongruous amalgamation of her kind voice and the statistics I have read about the city's Hispanic population. Peter is a graduate student at Yale right now, and I know from his remarks that the public schools in the city are struggling, that the poverty rate is high, that unemployment is high as well. I have read university security warnings about gunshots a few blocks from the campus and incidents of theft and sexual assault and murder.

I wonder if this woman's story fits into the demographic picture the reports have painted. How many children does she have? What kind of home are they living in? Would she welcome the news of an IUD, or would it come to her as an affront, a suggestion of incompetence or irresponsibility, as it had to me? My doctor later tells me that city hospitals make a point of talking with women about permanent birth control as soon as they've gone through labor. It helps avoid unwanted pregnancies, abortions, the financial distress of too many mouths to feed. *It wasn't a conversation designed with you in mind*, my doctor says.

Marilee's life stretches out in front of me. I know from experience the tedium that will come—the cries that cannot be comforted, the sleep that cannot be restored, the toenails to cut and diapers to change and the constant attentiveness required. But right now, the future is a promise—the wonder of discovering who this little person is becoming, of hearing her giggle for the first time, of watching her eyes follow her big brother and sister around the room, of feeling her soft breath and holding her close in the middle of the night, of swaying and rocking and giving of myself for her comfort, her peace.

I don't know the details yet—that Marilee will grow up to be my barefoot girl, the one who will toss her shoes and socks to the side even when the ground is frozen, or that she will have the gift of hospitality, always looking for ways to welcome a stranger into our midst. I do not know that she will spread her arms wide and rock her whole body with exuberance in the face of the smallest joys, or that her skin will become splotchy with hives after she experiences grief for the first time. I do not know that she will come up with a nickname for me, Mossy, or that the bridge of her nose will be covered with freckles in the summer, or that she will have trouble sitting still. But I know that her particular life is a gift, just like all the other babies born here today.

It comes across as a trite saying, a cliché: Every life is a gift. It prompts the questions I first asked in late-night conversations as a teenager: What about the lives that come into the world unwanted? What about the poor, the medically

fragile, the refugee, the mentally ill—the lives that take up a disproportionate amount of time, money, attention? What about the ones like Penny, the ones who may never live independently, who may never participate through production in our consumer economy?

On the night Penny was born, when the contours of the future had become blurred by her diagnosis, a nurse came into the room. Peter's breathing had slowed as he slept in the pullout chair next to me. But I lay on my side, vaguely sore, replaying the events of the day. The nurse, an African American woman with a sturdy frame, said, "I had a special child too."

I made eye contact. "How old is your child now?"

"He died a long time ago," she said. Her voice stayed peaceful, but I felt the flutter of panic inside my chest. Her words named the very loss that terrified me.

"I'm sorry," I said, swallowing hard.

She shook her head, as if I didn't understand. "He was a gift," she said. And then she turned and left the room.

It took years for me to receive the truth of her simple statement. She wasn't saying he was a gift in spite of his needs. Or he was a gift in spite of his death. *He was a gift*. Pure and simple. Like the orphaned child and the premature baby and the little girl who will go to foster care tomorrow. Like the baby born to wealthy investment bankers. Like the baby born into poverty. Like Penny. Like William. Like Marilee, this little girl breathing so quickly and peacefully, heart pumping

with the ferocity of life, eyelids fluttering, pink lips opening ever so slightly. A gift.

A hospital volunteer knocks and enters. We need to fill out forms—one for her birth certificate, Marilee Fuller Becker. Another to decline official photographs from the hospital's photographer. Another to review the experience—the check-in procedure, the nursing staff's demeanor, the décor of the room, the food. And then she gives me a book. It is a board book with a red cover, with what look like cutout bunnies on front. "This is for you and your baby," the lady says. "As a part of an early literacy program we've started." She hands me one more piece of paper. "If you fill this out, we'll send you another book when she turns one."

I overthink it: We have dozens, if not hundreds of books at home. We don't need this organization to spend money on us. But I believe in what they're offering me here. I want to applaud the effort, to demonstrate to donors that new mothers will welcome any support we are given to teach our children. I fill out the form, shaking my head at my ability to turn everything into a problem.

I think again about the woman from the bed next to mine, and I wonder how I would feel if our roles were reversed. I don't know if she only speaks Spanish, but it was the only language I heard, so I assume Spanish feels most natural to her. If I were raising my children in a different country, what would it feel like for me to try to read a picture book out loud? Perhaps they offer these books in Spanish, but I

wonder—Would this mother be able to read this book to her baby? Would the words feel unfamiliar on her tongue?

We read to Penny and William most nights before bed, and I always think of those books as a bridge, a point of connection to other times and places and peoples. But, at the moment, this book feels like a wall, a subtle construction that separates me as a mother from the mother in the bed next door, like the curtain that separated us from seeing each other's faces. It is easy for me to read to my children. Easy for me to delight in the words, with my college degree in English literature. Easy for me to pass the building blocks for reading along to my children before they even go to school. Will the gift of one book do anything to help a mother in need?

I am well on my way to pitying this anonymous woman when I remember that five years earlier, when Penny was born, I was the mother in need. My college education and white skin and financial security did nothing to prepare me for the news that our daughter had Down syndrome. If anything, those marks of my social position brought with them unacknowledged expectations that life would be easier for us. I had never realized how wealth and education and all the unspoken benefits that accompany whiteness stood as barriers against Penny's diagnosis, walls that I thought protected me from vulnerability, from suffering, from discomfort, from fear, walls that kept me from understanding that life is both fragile and full of beauty in all its forms.

With the words *Down syndrome*, we moved from a category of self-sufficient parents into a category of parents

eligible for significant social support. We needed far more than a program offering us a book. We needed therapists and specialized doctors and, eventually, public preschool with specialized teachers. We also needed friends and family and a church community to pray for us and bring us dinners and rejoice that our daughter—our needy, vulnerable, beautiful daughter—had been born. That web of support, from individuals to community organizations to state programs, held us up and eventually helped us move from a place of fear and sorrow to a place of joy. We were given what we needed to care for Penny, to see her thrive, even. She learned sign language. She learned to walk. She charmed everyone she encountered with her big eyes, her wide smile, and her habitual happy greeting—a wave and a breathy exclamation of “Hi!”

Marilee wriggles in my arms and interrupts my memories. Her little mouth puckers even though her eyes stay closed tight. I lift her toward my breast and begin the awkward attempt to feed her. My womb contracts as she suckles for a few minutes and falls asleep. The pain in my abdomen persists, and as much as I wish I didn’t need to endure it, I also marvel at the way nourishing this little one is part of putting my body back together again, part of the painful, restorative act of healing. I nudge her awake but soon she sleeps again.

Just a few months earlier, when I was pregnant, I wrote an article for the *New York Times* parenting blog about my decision not to screen for Down syndrome with this third pregnancy. I had a higher chance of having another baby

with Down syndrome, but our experience with Penny and other people with disabilities had convinced us that we would gratefully receive any child we were given. When I explained my reasoning in print, the comments poured in. Many came as affirmations of the path we had chosen. But many people criticized my decision. They even chastised me for it. To bring a child with Down syndrome into the world, some wrote, was unethical, in light of the suffering the condition would bring to the child, the burden it would place on the child's family, and the cost society would have to bear.

I hand Marilee to Peter and shift slowly to the side of the bed. My body is still bleeding. My flesh is still filled with fluid and fat and nutrients intended to sustain her life. I shuffle to the bathroom, my mind lingering on the responses to the *New York Times* article, to all those who wrote that it would be better not to have people with disabilities among us. This utilitarian logic used to make a certain amount of sense to me. Now I see it as a mirage. Like any utopian vision of independence and autonomy and health and happiness for all, it exists only as long as we eliminate the lives that involve need. As long as we prevent weakness from entering the world. But to eliminate weakness is to eliminate us all. Penny has helped me to recognize my own neediness, my own limitations, my own humanity. And she has helped me begin to see that even the people most different from me have gifts to offer.

I glance in the bathroom mirror. The harsh light draws attention to the dark lines under my eyes, my pasty skin, my

unplucked eyebrows, and my dreary hair pulled back in a ponytail. I smile at myself. *Every life is a gift*, I think.

Penny has introduced me to the lives and stories of countless others with intellectual disabilities, hundreds of thousands, millions, the world over. I used to think a satisfying life of purpose was available only to people like me—self-sufficient, intellectual, able-bodied, affluent people. I have started to see that a satisfying and purposeful life is available to all, especially once we recognize our need for one another. As I slowly make my way toward the bed, I think back to the time a teenager with Down syndrome sat with William—my fussy, colicky baby boy—and with her calm presence brought more peace to his body than I had ever seen before. Or to my friend Elisa, whose daughter with an intellectual disability helps time slow down in their family as she walks through their days with gratitude and peace instead of busyness and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> I remember people I have read about over the years—the seminary students who live with adults with intellectual disabilities and grow to love and serve one another, the mother who writes about the profound wisdom and beauty of her adult child who needs constant physical care, the testimony of men like Jean Vanier or Henri Nouwen, who lived among people with Down syndrome and received gifts of love and acceptance they had never encountered elsewhere.

These stories leave me confident that even the individuals who appear broken by social standards are no more or less broken than I am, no more or less capable of contributing to



our world, even if people like me have never learned to value their gifts. The inability to recognize that value is a failure on my part—a failure of imagination and of vision. When I refuse to see myself as sharing my humanity with people with Down syndrome, with people whose bodies function differently than my own, with people of a different ethnicity or skin color or socioeconomic status, I cut myself off from seeing my own need. As I weave a web of invulnerability, I cut myself off from allowing others to love me. The logic of self-sufficiency is a logic of loneliness. I understand the pragmatic argument that life with an intellectual disability is a burden to the self and the society, but I have begun to see that reasoning for what it is—a barren landscape, a desert.

I settle back into bed and turn to Peter, who stands by the window, gazing at Marilee. She looks so fragile in his arms. So many things could harm her. But the reason we could bring her into the world without prenatal screening tests and without fear is not because we believed she had won some cosmic genetic lottery and we were assured of a strong and healthy child. It is because we have learned that love—in all its vulnerability and need—is stronger than fear. That while some people judge Penny's life, most welcome her. That her doctors and teachers care for her with delight. That strangers and friends haven't retreated from us, but instead have been drawn near through Penny's welcoming presence as much as through their own willingness to receive her.

If I could go back to myself as a new mother holding her newborn baby and hearing the words *Down syndrome* and

crying and feeling the fight of fear and love inside her chest, I would tell that frightened mother to trust her love. To trust that love will always be stronger than fear.

Now, fear has receded, leaving only a trace of its presence, like a line of seaweed after the tide flows out. Love remains.

I hold Marilee close. And I whisper to myself—and to the women who have given birth today, and to those struggling to conceive a child, and especially to those who have given birth to babies who are premature, or poor, or diagnosed with a disability—I whisper the truth that can so easily become muffled in a world of suffering. All of life is fragile and uncertain. All of life is beautiful and valuable. All of life is a gift.