



Readings for Mamas Day

Ten Thousand Baby Names

When my youngest daughter was about two years old she came across a tattered paperback on our bookshelves, *Ten Thousand Baby Names*, and for a little while this was her favorite book. Drawn by the shining face of the baby on the cover, she brought it to me over and over and demanded that I read through the names. This was a prelude to what was, at the time, her favorite story of all: How we chose her name.

What's in a name? Always, there is a story. You were named for a beloved relative or, contrarily, named after no one because your parents wanted a clean break from family history. If you were a first son and your family went in for such things, you got to be called after your father and have "junior" tacked on. If you were a daughter, you could be named for a virtue or aspiration such as Hope, Serenity, or Faith. Recalling some sweet romantic setting, your parents might have named you after their favorite Spanish or Italian village. Perhaps you carry the name of one of their heroes or heroines, or more whimsically, some favorite musician or movie star. Maybe you've ended up with an affectionate nickname born of a sibling's mispronunciation, or some jackass thing you tried as an adolescent and never lived down.

Always, there is a story.

In church on Sunday mornings we read aloud the names of the American soldiers killed in Iraq or Afghanistan each week. Alone in my study the night before, I speak each name out loud and then wonder about the stories. I imagine these soldiers as the babies they once were, held in someone's arms at a baptism or naming ceremony. The proud relatives gathered around as the name was formally bestowed, and everyone beamed as the baby cooed or wailed or fidgeted. There was so much gladness and pride in each moment of naming, and not once did anyone imagine that the road their baby walked would end eighteen or twenty years later in a mix of blood and dust halfway around the world.

As part of a witness for peace on Memorial Day, a cairn of stones was built at a busy downtown intersection in Hartford, each stone bearing the name of a fallen American soldier, or one of the tens of thousands of Iraqi and Afghani civilians who have died in these wars. How do you choose one name from thousands, to symbolize so much carnage and loss? I finally brought three stones to the cairn, one for each of my own three children. Each stone bore the name of a child who had died on the birthday of one of mine. As I placed the stones, I wondered about their names. Always there is a story.

- Kathleen McTigue, *Shine and Shadow*, Skinner House Books (2011)

reprinted with permission of Skinner House Books, www.skinnerhouse.org





My Child

Spirit of Light, in the darkest seasons of our souls we strike ourselves against life's hard surfaces to release your eternal newness. We rejoice in the birth of a child of hope. This child is as old as time and as new as the moment we lift our match of resolve. On winter's dawn the babe is born, rising in our hearts, spreading warmth on our coldest fears. A gift of time claimed from the chaos of timeless ages. A mystery dissolved into human form? Is he the living Jesus? Is she Shiva, creator of all worlds? This child cares not what we call it, only that we nurture it and let it grow into the dark places where hate grows and despair lingers. This child of love is born each moment we choose what might yet be. Let us rejoice in its holy birth.

- Stephen Shick, *Be the Change: Poems, Prayers, & Meditations for Peacemakers and Justice Seekers*, Skinner House Books

reprinted with permission of Skinner House Books, www.skinnerhouse.org





If children grow up with the consciousness that their community consists of just Mama and Papa, and then they have to deal with a problem that they alone cannot solve, they will have no-one outside the family to whom they can turn. The parents and only the parents are responsible for what the child makes of itself, and that is too much to ask from two people. Often in fact it is only one parent who has to do it all.

If children are given a wider concept of community, they will not be at the mercy of just one person. The child can then seek out another, to whom he wants to turn, and if this person doesn't help him out then he can go to the next. Since we are all only people, we all have our limits as to what we can do and what we are able to give. To raise children we are always dependent upon the support of others.

As we say in our village, "It needs a whole village to raise a child."

And it is just as true to say that it needs a whole village to look after the emotional health of the parents.

-- Sobonfu Somé, quoted in [Bless This Child: A Treasury of Poems, Quotations, and Readings to Celebrate Birth](#), collected by Edward Searl and published by Skinner House Books

reprinted with permission of Skinner House Books, www.skinnerhouse.org





For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have.

-- James Baldwin, quoted in [Bless This Child: A Treasury of Poems, Quotations, and Readings to Celebrate Birth](#), collected by Edward Searl and published by Skinner House Books

reprinted with permission of Skinner House Books, www.skinnerhouse.org





Fighting for People with HIV/AIDS” by Michelle Bates Deakin, from her book [Social Action Heroes: Unitarian Universalists Who Are Changing the World](#) published by Skinner House Books, used with permission

“I got a PhD in AIDS mothering. . . .
I got it from the professorship of my six children.”

Fighting for People with HIV/AIDS

Natalie Bryson and her son David stepped into the cemetery director’s car for a tour. They were going to pick out a plot in Seattle’s picturesque Lake View Cemetery—one with a nice view of the University of Washington and the Cascade and Olympic mountains.

David sat in front, a breathtakingly handsome model who turned heads everywhere he went. Natalie sat behind the driver, peeking between the front seats in search of the perfect plot.

“That’s where Bruce Lee is buried,” the driver said, pointing to the gravestone of the martial arts icon. “And that’s the mausoleum of the Rhodes family,” he narrated, as they passed a large monument dedicated to the Washington department store family, and he indicated that there was a single plot nearby.

David’s ears perked up. “That wouldn’t be too bad,” he said. “Then I know my mother would come to visit me at least once a month, because she never missed the Rhodes end-of-the-month sale.”

The driver swung his head around and swerved. “He almost drove into the Rhodes mausoleum,” Natalie says. He had assumed that the plot was for her, an aging mother of six children. But it was for her handsome son.

David was HIV-positive. He died of AIDS in 1994 at thirty-four and was buried in Lake View Cemetery in the plot he picked, close to Bruce Lee. It had a view of his alma mater, the University of Washington. He told his mother that he knew he would always get plenty of visitors with such a famous neighbor.

Three years later, David’s brother James, Natalie’s youngest child, died of AIDS too. The boys were two years apart in age and had been very close. James and his partner Sean had been David’s primary caregivers in his final months. James, who passed away at thirty-five, had lived with his illness for thirteen years before he died, a remarkable amount of time in the early years of the disease.

It is easy to imagine someone with Natalie’s losses retreating into solitude or self-pity. But that is not her style. She is an optimist to the end. “My sons helped me through this,” she says. “I am so fortunate that I have no unfinished business with either of them. If I am blessed with anything, it is my friends and my family, and particularly my children and my sister, Muriel.”

Natalie knows that it can be hard for people, even those who support gay rights, to deal with society’s prejudices. Fear of other people’s reactions can be an obstacle. “It took three trips to Ohio to visit my sister before I could tell her that the boys were gay and HIV positive,” she says. “I should have known, however, that she would not only accept this news but be a great source of strength and support.”





Natalie sparkles when she talks. Her hair is a gleaming white. Her lipstick is bright red, her skin is porcelain, and her blue eyes beam. She carries herself with a poise and steeliness forged through years of masking her troubles. “I had to be adorable with such heartache,” she says. She has learned to be like bamboo: “strong, open and flexible.”

Bryson’s unexpected divorce at age fifty-one opened the door to a new career—leading tours to China. Her sons’ suffering gave her the incentive and the drive to give back to her community. She resuscitated the then-foundering Kitsap County HIV AIDS Foundation (KCHAF). She became its president and turned it into a powerful local resource. Her mission was to bring the kind of support and services available to people in Seattle across the Puget Sound to her community on the Kitsap Peninsula.

Years later, when the Pride Foundation hosted An Evening Honoring Natalie Bryson to celebrate her contributions and to present her with its inaugural Community Treasure Award, she deflected their praise with characteristic humility and good humor. The revitalization of the HIV/AIDS foundation was “just something that had to get done,” she said.

Her friends, neighbors, colleagues, fellow members of the Kitsap Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, and her living children were full of accolades and compliments, calling her an inspiration and a community treasure. Bryson gave the praise right back: “It was what they taught me, not what I taught them,” she said. “No one does this alone.”

Natalie became an activist because she needed to tell the story of her sons at a time when very few people wanted to talk about homosexuality or AIDS.

In the early 1980s, AIDS and HIV were surrounded by a cloud of silence and shame. Many people viewed AIDS as a “gay disease” inflicted on homosexuals as a punishment from God. Natalie and her sons knew, however, that if people couldn’t talk about the disease, they couldn’t find a cure either. Knowledge would lead to tolerance, and tolerance would lead to treatment.

David had been living abroad in London and Japan, working as a model. After he became ill and was diagnosed with HIV, he returned to the Pacific Northwest to be closer to family. He became active in Seattle’s HIV/AIDS Support Group in the heart of the city’s gay community on Capitol Hill. David told his mother that what the center really needed was a way to help the mothers of the men who were infected. He had seen many men struggling with how to tell their mothers they were sick. In many cases, they told their mothers on the same day that they were gay and that they were HIV positive, at a time when the disease had no treatment, and the diagnosis was a death sentence. The mothers needed a place to go to support one another.

Natalie went to the center every Wednesday afternoon and helped start a support group for mothers of people infected with and affected by HIV and AIDS. Mothers began to come from every walk of life—from Seattle’s fanciest neighborhoods to its poorest. Some came on the very day their sons shared their tragic news. “We had everything from swearing and yelling and carrying on to shock,” recalls Natalie. Whatever the mothers needed to do, they could do it there with others who could understand them and what they were going through.

Many, like Natalie, weren’t public about their sons’ diagnoses at that time, so having a place where they could be open and honest was essential to their ability to carry on for themselves and to be there for their sons. For the first time in her life, Natalie was





working full-time. She couldn't risk being open about her personal struggles at work.

In 1983, when she and her husband of thirty-five years divorced, Bryson needed a job. She assumed she would have to work as a waitress. She had no work experience and no college education. She had her eye on a position at Elsie's Restaurant in Silverdale. But fate had something else in mind.

Natalie had a lifelong interest in China and Chinese porcelain. She studied both avidly and collected what she could. Her hobby spawned a friendship with the director of a museum in Milton, Massachusetts, who oversaw an extensive collection of art and antiquities from the Chinese export trade. The director included Natalie on a trip to the People's Republic of China shortly after Chinese-American relations were normalized, and Americans were allowed to travel there. "It was life-changing," says Bryson. "I had such an affinity for Chinese culture and for the people I met there. It was like I had found a part of myself I didn't know was missing."

When she returned from China, Natalie was invited to give a talk about her trip to a local corporation where many military veterans worked. "My speech had a very bad reception at first," she recalls. "They were a group of Korean War veterans, and they didn't like China and didn't want to know about China." She tossed out her prepared speech and spoke to the men off-the-cuff about what had happened in China since the Korean War. "It was the best speech I ever gave," she says; the men responded with applause.

The following day, Natalie got a call from an executive at a Seattle tourism company who had been struggling to find someone to consult with the company on China issues as it began to plan and lead trips there. Natalie signed on as a consultant that day, and within a year, was working full-time at the company and leading the trips to China herself.

She worked for that company for twenty years, traveled to China twenty-four times, and visited all seven continents. She believes her earlier life had prepared her for it perfectly. Her former husband had been a career naval officer, and the family had moved thirty times in thirty years while she raised six children. "If you move thirty times with six children, you can do anything," Natalie says. She never did apply for the job at Elsie's.

Bryson is a cheerful ambassador for her country and led her trips with charm and grace, even while her sons were ill. She remembers leading a trip for 130 people through the Panama Canal while her heart ached for James, who had recently told her he was HIV positive. "You're never just yourself. You're always the mom," she says. "On one level, I felt totally and completely unable to cope. But you have to learn to cope in order to function." Natalie needed her job to support herself and her sons. So she put on a smile and led her charges through the Panama Canal, along the Great Wall of China, and around the world.

Natalie commuted by ferry across the Puget Sound to her job and to see David in Seattle. James was living in Portland, Oregon.

Although the Seattle AIDS support groups were firmly established, there were few resources in the communities west of Puget Sound, and one of those few, the Kitsap County HIV AIDS Foundation, was struggling. While Seattle had a thriving gay community, a socially conservative tone predominated on the peninsula. Natalie's friend





Kathleen Davenport, another supportive mother involved in the community and a KCHAF volunteer, asked Natalie to attend a meeting of the Kitsap group.

Together, Kathleen and Natalie started a Kitsap mothers' group at KCHAF, like the one that had propped them both up in Seattle. Few mothers came, however—many of them fearing to go public about their children's illness. To create a more supportive environment, Natalie and Kathleen decided to shift the focus to offering service to the women's children. Among other initiatives, they started the Red Ribbon Supper Club. Once a month, they provided a home-cooked dinner in a local church for people with HIV and AIDS and their friends and family.

KCHAF was running on a shoestring. Natalie steadily increased her involvement until she was running it from a command center in her dining room. In a grant application to fund the supper club, she described the importance of the monthly gatherings, and how it provided people with a place to connect with one another and their families—and to eat “gooey desserts.” Bryson later learned that KCHAF won the funding largely on the merits of her description of the treats at the meal's end.

Bryson also began to share her story publicly to promote tolerance for people with AIDS. She would speak about AIDS wherever she was invited—community groups, conservative churches, anywhere with an audience. And she had a powerful story to tell.

She told people about her son James in Portland, who was a community activist, working to educate youth about HIV and AIDS. He was the western director of the Names Project, which produced the AIDS Memorial Quilt to remember people who have died of the disease. James was instrumental in arranging for the quilt to travel to Washington DC, for a rare full display. President Bill Clinton came out to the National Mall to view it. A personal letter from Clinton to James thanking him is one of Bryson's most prized possessions. Clinton wrote, “The Quilt is an inspiring celebration of the power of love and the enduring strength of the human spirit.”

Bryson also told people about her son David, working at the Seattle AIDS Support Group as a drug and alcohol counselor, and as a board member of a charity that provided therapeutic massage to persons with HIV and AIDS. She didn't shy away from naming HIV and AIDS. And she told people how she had learned to let go of society's prejudices and erroneous assumptions about the disease and those who suffer from it.

James was diagnosed with HIV in 1984 when he was twenty-two years old. Natalie frankly admits that her first instinct was to do what she had always done as a mother—take charge. She asked questions and tried to find out as much as she could about James and his disease. Without discussing it with him, she called his doctor and began asking questions about his illness and his prognosis. But his doctor wouldn't answer. He said he couldn't discuss James without his permission, and that he would have to tell her son that she had called.

James was furious with his mother for invading his privacy. She immediately drove four hours down to Portland and spent an emotional weekend with him. They paced on the beach together and cried and yelled and talked. “I was bound and determined that we would have reconciliation; otherwise, I might have never seen him again,” Natalie said. By the end of the weekend, they came to an agreement that Natalie would never ask James about his illness and that James would always tell her everything she needed to know. Natalie always kept her word, and James kept his. “I obeyed his rules, and he was sensitive to my needs. Our whole existence was one of great love and thought and





consideration, and I don't regret one moment of any of it. It was the most important learning experience of my life."

Natalie took away many lessons. "I learned to get to know people that I never thought I would ever have in life, from hobos to heaven knows. I got to know the gay community and how loving and caring they can be. I learned that just because someone might have been a drug addict or an alcoholic, they could still support me. I learned all kinds of things about life that I never would have known but for these experiences."

Approaching eighty, Natalie still talks to people about AIDS. She tells them what her son James always told her: "Don't give up five minutes before the miracle happens." The miracle that happened to her was learning to accept life as it unfolds. "It wasn't a million dollars or a cure for the boys. It was acceptance," she says.

Her words have helped many. After she spoke at a conservative church, a young mother approached her and said that after seeing her congregation accept Natalie and her story, she thought they might now support her and her struggle with AIDS. A retired military officer told her that he didn't realize that HIV and AIDS could be a problem for elderly people, and that she had opened his eyes to a new dimension of the disease.

Others have not been as receptive to Natalie's message. She has lost lifelong friendships because people saw the fact that she had gay sons with AIDS as a moral failing on her part and theirs. She had to overcome the feeling of shame that people tried to put on her. "As James always said, 'You're only as sick as your secrets.' It's important to share the secrets, to bring them into the light," says Natalie. "How people respond to your secrets is up to them."

When David died in October 1994, Natalie submitted his obituary to her local newspaper. An editor called and told her they couldn't print it as it was, because it said that he had died of complications of AIDS, which was against the paper's policy. But Natalie wouldn't be silenced. Instead she bought a tribute advertisement for David and published the obituary in its entirety. "There was a lot of embarrassment in those old days if someone had AIDS," she says. "But the only way you could educate anyone was if they saw that this was a wonderful boy, so handsome and smart, and that he died due to this disease."

By the time his brother James died in September 1997, acceptance had grown. He received a feature story in the obituary section of the *Seattle Times*, which explicitly told readers that he had died of complications of AIDS in his Portland home. The story's lead made James sound like he was his mother's son: "James Hill Bryson had a simple philosophy towards life: 'There's only one thing you really have to do and that's show up,' he once said."

While Natalie was president of the KCHAF, it grew from a struggling nonprofit that could barely raise the funds needed to deliver groceries each week to people with HIV and AIDS. By the time her presidency ended, the group had a pool of steady donors to support the foundation's mission and services. It also added new programs, such as Stockings for a Cause, in which members of the community make creative holiday stockings that are auctioned off to support KCHAF's outreach efforts.

A major financial turnaround for the group came when it received an unexpected donation from an old acquaintance of Natalie. The more she spoke in the community, the more consciousness she raised, and the more donations arrived. One day, she got a





call from a woman who had traveled with her on several trips overseas. The woman had heard that Natalie was doing something with an AIDS foundation, and wanted to know more.

Natalie told her about the support groups and the dinners, the groceries and the Christmas gift certificates that the clients received through KCHAF. Two weeks later, Bryson received a \$17,000 check in the mail. The woman and her partner donated the money with no strings attached, and they have been benefactors of KCHAF ever since. "I have been so grateful for their generosity and support," says Bryson. "No one does it alone."

The Kitsap Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, where Natalie is a member, also emerged as a source of support and financial backing, as well as a messenger for her causes.

Central to Natalie's support system were the sons that she lost. "I got a PhD in AIDS mothering, I can tell you that. But I got it from the professorship of my six children. They were so supportive of me, and they were the ones who got me through this."

She keeps a photo of James and a photo of David in her bedroom, and she says hello to them every morning. She lives with their deaths every day. But she doesn't dwell on their passing. She also has pictures in her bedroom of her four living children, Elizabeth, Muriel, William, and Rebecca. She says good morning to all of them too.

"I'm rarely down. I don't do the 'poor me' thing," she says. She shrugs off the health concerns. She contracted dengue fever while traveling in China, which has left her with residual health issues. And she survived two serious bouts with cancer, one while her sons were ill. Yet Bryson describes herself as the luckiest person in the world. "I've had the highest highs and the lowest lows," she says. "That's called life."

Kitsap County HIV AIDS Foundation
www.kchaf.org

