

Parenting Advice from Kahlil Gibran by Maria Popova

In the final years of his long life, which encompassed world wars and assassinations and numerous terrors, the great cellist and human rights advocate Pablo Casals urged humanity to “make this world worthy of its children.” Today, as we face a world that treats its children as worthless, we are challenged like we have never been challenged to consider the deepest existential calculus of bringing new life into a troubled world — what is the worth of children, what are our responsibilities to them (when we do choose to have them, for it is also an act of courage and responsibility to choose not to), and what does it mean to raise a child with the dignity of being an unrepeatable miracle of atoms that have never before constellated and will never again constellate in that exact way?

Art by Derek Dominic D’souza from *Song of Two Worlds* by physicist Alan Lightman.

A century ago, perched between two worlds and two World Wars, the Lebanese-American poet, painter, and philosopher Kahlil Gibran (January 6, 1883–April 10, 1931) addressed these elemental questions with sensitive sagacity in a short passage from *The Prophet* (public library) — the 1923 classic that also gave us Gibran on the building blocks of true friendship, the courage to weather the uncertainties of love, and what may be the finest advice ever offered on the balance of intimacy and independence in a healthy relationship.

When a young mother with a newborn baby at her breast asks for advice on children and parenting, Gibran’s poetic prophet responds:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might

that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Art by Alessandro Sanna from Crescendo.

Complement with Susan Sontag's 10 rules for raising a child and Crescendo — an Italian watercolor serenade to the splendid prenatal biology of becoming a being — then revisit Gibran on authenticity, why we make art, and his gorgeous love letters to and from the woman without whom The Prophet might never have been born.