

DON'T WORRY, MY CHILD

BY AMY AVES CHALLENGER

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO WORRY, CHILD. Not about the spelling quiz, the untied shoes, the next soccer game, the day you are late to school. Don't worry that you will have to stand in the front row of the Christmas play, that you won't be chosen for the best team, that kids will stare when you forget to wear the right shirt on green day. Don't worry about your homework, your heavy books, your body wiggling in a hard classroom chair. Don't worry about your parents fighting, the politicians on TV shouting words that you were told never to speak. Don't worry about the half-naked women on the billboards by the ice cream shop. Don't worry that you think you're not beautiful enough, that you don't have the right brand of sneakers, or that you don't have enough friends.

You are loved, just as you are.

But if those worries try to burrow inside the hood you've been pulling tight around your head – reach out and capture them inside your young hands. Box them up like oversized shoes for grownups. They don't fit you. Layer the lists of “should-haves” and “must-bes” into stacks in your bedroom, kick them into the hallway, toss them into the empty blades of grass out front waiting for your bare feet to leap freely. I will collect them, stuff stacks of them into my big SUV and haul them out of town. I'll throw them to

the birds, and then you and I will smile at the clouds, inhaling the breeze for a long hour.

“Children need structure,” you hear. “This class isn't moving fast enough. I'm worried my child will get behind,” a mom says.

You do not have to rush, child. Don't walk too fast, forgetting the way the hammock hugs you when you rest in it. Don't hurry down the creaking steps of a house that cherishes you, sitting for a moment on the last step. Don't forget the feeling of wood, of home, of childhood under your growing feet. Don't run past the smell of warm oatmeal. Your stomach is growling to be filled slowly with food, with knowledge, with the freedom of a new morning.

“Remember to check the online portal. Practice harder,” you hear.

Turn off the screens, the reminders. Silence the voices of the teachers or the coaches or the parents who have told you that you are not doing enough. Dive through the back door, a different kind of portal that leads you to the great smiling sky. Play with a neighbor or a dog or a spider. Hear the leaves applaud for you in the wind out back. If your accomplishments haven't been noticed, go find your spotlight permanently shining between the rooftops, every night underneath the stars. Feel how God lifts the sun for you every morning. See all you do have, how much

you can share with the ones who have less.

Follow that big question mark, child – that is YOU. It is your wonder. It is the music that greets you with humming questions, in wandering thoughts, in fingers pressed down into a crack in the driveway.

“Why does the road crack, Mama?” You asked today.

“Where did the roads begin, Mama?” You asked last year.

“Where did I begin, Mama?” You asked the year before.

Your wonder opens your blue eyes wide and blinks, infusing your body with treasures. Your wonder flows from you like a colorful valley opening your mind to ideas about butterflies and magical bedrooms, about boys and girls, about the moon, about birth, about football games, about love, about God. Your wonder draws new pictures of families, of hearts opening, of miracles right here in our crowded little spaces.

So no more worries, child. Brush them away to reveal the wide-eyed fields of childhood. Teach all of us how to dream, how to skip, how to pray. Sit with us in the classroom, at the dinner table, under the arms of the oak tree; and let us finally listen to what childhood has to offer.

Amy Aves Challenger is a writer and artist focusing on topics relating to the marginalized, families and children. She has been published regularly in The Huffington Post, The Washington Post, mamalode.com, and Brain, Child Magazine. Amy lives in Fairfield, Connecticut where she runs a support group for special needs mothers. She is writing her first novel about a child with special needs. Read her poetry on twitter @amychallenge.

