



They Call You Social Worker

For *all* those who serve children with honor:

They call you *social workers*
but I drink my drinks from *Legend*
so I recall a time when family and community
were one and the same
it was called a compound
and there were those people of great sensitivity
entrusted by the adults
ratified by the elders
to place their hands upon the shoulders
of children
and turn them to face a better wind

they call you *social workers*
I call you those who turn lives around

you seep into cracks
like salvation blood and fill up the spaces
so precious little ones won't fall through

they call you *social workers*
I call you spirit keepers
denizens of the light
I mean to say you reside
in a house called hope
and keep the light on
so babies and lost folk can find the way home

they call you *social workers*
but the ground you till is not social
it is spiritual
it drips with black richness like strong coffee
picked from heaven's hills

the seeds you protect are not simply children
not simply tomorrow's daylight
but the reason for our past
and the purpose for our people to be
to be

I drink from *Legend* so I know
mud caked fishermen work the banks of the Nile
and have a faith that Creation will grace
them with good catch even on stingy days
that they will be able to return home
to their families and fill bellies
with substance beyond yams
this is your name

and the griot
she ol' and over by the stump
still got that reach even though her joints
are stiff
still got that reach to go on
and pull ripened fruit of symbolism
and legacy from the highest tree branches
and the most shy and hesitant clouds

pickin' 'em and pickin' 'em
and puttin' 'em in her story basket
so that the young ones can fill their
minds with substance beyond what is
extending out to what ought to be
and what used to be

she just griot
and she ol'
but she young enough to set
young ones free
this . . . is *your* name

they call you social workers
in child welfare
I call you medicine women and men
in family welfare
I call you glue in the community
when rain come to pull things apart



I call you doctors, priests, healers
teachers, palm readers, fortune tellers
prophesies, negotiators, mediators, advocates
instigators, pacifiers, storytellers, truth dwellers
getting downright dirty in shameful cellars
cleanin' up mess'
settin' crooked straight

child soul caressers
Man, I call you *masseuse*

irrigators, investigators, neglect haters,
keeper of the cage that carries the canary
deep into the dark of human caves
looking for that first sign of something foul
praising that first sign of something beautiful

and then there is this:
in a nation that says this community
is less than that one
and this family is less than that one
and this child is less than that one
and why bother with all that pain
they call you social workers who
go out and keep the faith

only one reason
one reason be
so far as I can see:
even the Blackest poorest
brokest community
is made up of beautiful
families and children
trying to get free
endowed with the full potential
of the Universe
unshakable masterpieces
of canvass untouched
by foolish nation
using the wrong paintbrush

and you . . .
in the morning when you rise
you peel the frustration
from your sleepy face
and wash it away down the sink
with all that dirt *System* put in your way
and you walk clean out the door

cause you believe
you believe these children are good enough
these families are worth enough
these communities deserve enough
and you absolutely have what it take enough
cause we don't ever make enough
money, material, status, superficial dough
to ever let it be okay
to let some folk
not even some kind of folk
slip for just one day

And I ask and I answer:
you got to be warriors
cause you fought my battle
you got to be magicians
cause you carried me over wide water
with your barest feet
you got to be the locksmith
helping somebody who cared
for this little Black boy
silent boy
lost boy

helping that somebody
turn the key and let me just be on my way
to being what I was put here to be

Check:
don't you ever think that
any one of these children could never
grow up to become legendary
we are not the wisdom of Creation
we occupy a more humble place
called imperfection
and from this rippled surface
the distorted reflection we are able to catch
is the Beauty of a day on down the path
when the storm calms itself
and quits its crying

warped reflection
in the mirror of child welfare
is the child fared well
is the day's bounty brought home
to somebody's hungry family
to fill bellies with substance
beyond yams



when I began this life
you were there
you carried me
first to a safe way station
then to my people who would
bring me up

child welfare
or child farewell?

I put my money on the honey
the sweet stuff
stories of success
cause I am one
cause you were one for me
triumphant that is
triumphant you were

I am the reason
you get up and go out to work
even in the bitter stretches
when fierce wind blows you back
and sharp sand stings your face
you lean forward
and I

I can't just thank you
that would be understatement
I have to remind you of your
greatness and how you leave
it in your wake so a child like me
can come 'round and lap it up
and taste some sweetness.

It tasted so good to me back then
you want to know why?
because I
I just wanted to be able to grow up
and have the chance to taste
some sweet potato pie
I didn't want to slip through the cracks
I didn't want to erode or fade away
and I didn't want to die
I just wanted to be able to grow up
so's I could have the chance to taste some
sweet potato pie
cinnamon in my dreams
fresh from the oven
heavenly steam in my eye

there is something called the system
it is some parts working right
and some parts doing wrong
but then there is the one who toils
for the well being of the child
made of flesh and spirit
some parts mad revolutionary
calling for change when everything around
seems to just want to sit still
some parts little child on the street corner
selling lemonade
trying to make some coin
so she can get what she wants
to make the day feel good
in her hood

and they
lemme see now
they . . .
call you a social worker . . .

I call you Legendary.

I was one of the children . . .

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From Jaiya John's book *Legendary*, a poetic tribute to
those who honorably serve devalued children.