
Hope, a Tonic for the Future

~ Laurie Clark

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (etymonline.com), the word hope comes from the Old English hopa, which means confidence in the future.

When children are confronted with the troubles of our world, it can cause them a great amount of anxiety and distress. Following the recent pandemic, the traumatic impact of isolation still casts its shadow on the young child's path of development, along with the fear that Covid-19 carried with it.

Intellectual explanations about the worries of the world obscure rather than clarify the situation for the young child. The young child thinks in a pictorial way and has no "filters" to shut out the foreboding within dire situations. The children depend on adults to offer a protective shield around them while still offering them truth within the bounds of hopefulness.

Engendering Hope in the Early Childhood Classroom

As we find our way into the future, what is really needed? What healing gestures can teachers provide so that the children in our care can feel safe, secure and full of trust as they navigate their way through life? How can we engender hope in their lives? The teacher can become a kind of sensing organ to see what is needed to bring assurance to the children.

Hope is something that we need to cultivate. It involves the ability to live with the uncertainty of the future, while still holding the confidence that whatever it brings, we will find a way to meet it. The cultural destiny that we all find ourselves in at the moment is calling for us to awaken and meet each unprecedented situation with strengthened inner capacities.

Hope involves envisioning the future while recognizing that there will be challenges, setbacks, and unknown circumstances to face. The ability to have courage for the future, even when things seem to be moving in the wrong direction, involves the resilience and power of the indomitable human spirit. It enables us to keep going in the face of adversity. When the care-providing adult has assimilated hope into their inmost being, the young child, who learns through imitation, will be able to absorb it because the child has

placed their utmost trust in that person. For a child, the starting point for feeling hopeful comes streaming into them from the person that they trust.

There are many things that we already do in the classroom which help the children build trust in themselves and others. When we understand how these activities can also soothe and comfort the children, they can be even more nourishing and supportive.

Strong Rhythm and Routine

It is essential that the children are carried through the day with a strong and predictable routine. One activity follows the next just as day follows night. Knowing how the day unfolds helps the children to self-regulate. Each snack has its own day. It is very reassuring to know that every Monday, for example, is rice day. If something else appears other than rice, panic may set in, especially for the extremely sensitive child who needs to know things in advance in order to feel secure.

The child who often asks, "What is happening next?" may have anticipatory anxiety. They have excessive worry about future events and can even have panic attacks. Young children cannot verbalize why they have anxiety or where it is coming from. Questioning the young child about such things can cause even more anxiety. Often these children need more time to prepare for transitions from one activity to the next. The teacher can let the child know, before the rest of the class, what will happen next. Preparing these children before transitions and providing them the gift of extra time can help before they become overwhelmed. The old saying, "All things come to those who wait," is something to keep close. This kind of empathy by the caregiver for the child's soul situation is a welcome gesture that gives relief.

Creative Movement Possibilities

If a child has experienced trauma, the child may cope by disassociation, which causes loss of contact with themselves and the world. The child can have a kind of soul soreness and feel excluded. They may "move away" from themselves through aggression or depression, and may feel stuck and unable to "move"

from one soul state to another. There can be a sense of disorientation that makes it difficult to make sense of how life works.

We can find ways to be creative with these children who are experiencing painful soul movement by carrying extreme sensitivity and understanding with them. It is important to help them find interest in daily life. Inviting the child to help cook and bake, wash dishes with the teacher in warm water, and sweep the room together gives the child the opportunity to move. When we accompany the child in this way, it lifts their heaviness of soul, gives them mobility, and assures them that life is good. All is well.

Humor also is a lifting gesture for all of the children and especially those who have had trauma. It is important to bring developmentally appropriate silly things that make the children laugh. Laughter is a breathing out, a kind of letting go. In a circle, humor might come in the little chickadee verse: "On a hazel branch I spied three little chickadees side by side. On the left is Felix, on the right is Hans, and smack in the middle is SMARTYPANTS Franz." A little bit of naughtiness can be hilarious to the young child.

Circle time provides many benefits. Everyone is welcomed and warmly greeted. Cooperation is needed to move in the same direction, hold hands, and become somewhat aware of our friends. We build community as we move, sing and recite all together. This cooperation with others plants the first seeds of a healthy social life, the very first experiences of being helpers to our friends.

Spatial awareness, motor planning, balance and body geography can all be integrated into the circle adventure to give the children lots of movement opportunities, accompanied with seasonal imaginations that weave a story motif.

Free Drawing

Drawing freely with no instruction from an adult gives the child the opportunity to express what they are not able to verbalize, including their thoughts, feelings and worries. If the child has had a traumatic event in their life, it can become a therapeutic tool to "draw out" what would otherwise remain unspoken and stuck. Drawing gives children a safe space to express on paper what they are inwardly experiencing, all the way from joy to soul stress, a means for powerful feelings to safely come to the surface.

The teacher does not comment on what the child draws, but views this communication with unconditional acceptance. Observation and contemplation of these drawings may bring the teacher deeper understanding of what the child is trying to express

Festival Life

Festival celebrations play an integral part in early childhood and throughout life. These celebrations remind us of the wonder of how the human being, nature and the spiritual world all work together. We are all citizens of the earth and of the spirit.

The autumn Lantern Walk is a good example. Days shorten, nights darken and become longer, and nature dies away. As the sun's power lessens, our inner light seems to grow brighter. Lantern light will shine like the stars in the heavens. In community with family and friends, we brave the dark night and carry our precious lantern light accompanied by song. Together we will find our way. When future uncertainty challenges us, we can find spirit courage and give spirit courage to others.

Festivals throughout the year ignite our lives with living images that guide us with spirit. They are a touchstone for our true being, and give life meaning as we celebrate in community. Festivals can be healing, reminding us of spiritual wisdom that stands over and above our lives.

Fairy Tales

Sharing fairy tales with young children is like giving them a beautifully wrapped gift. As the teacher tells the story, the children unwrap this present as the pictures unfold. In their own imaginations, they "try on" each of the characters and situations.

In many of these stories, there are three very difficult, seemingly impossible tasks that the main character must accomplish to achieve the goal they are seeking. Often there are helpers that come to the aid of the person who has taken on such an adventure. The main character performs a helping deed out of kindness offered without any expectation of reward. Yet those helped return the favor. This kind of theme runs through all cultures.

The resilience and fortitude of the one with these unbelievably hard tasks are a wonder! The characters overcome their difficulties and become transformed in the process. How can this happen? It

seems beyond human capacity to find the way through such challenges. How often in our own lives might we relate to this kind of experience when it seems that our tasks are beyond what we think possible? Yet we go ahead with spirit courage, even with uncertainty of how things will turn out. Perseverance through adversity when working to do good in the world makes one stronger. The children picture themselves in the story and deeply feel that they are able to achieve these victories. The perseverance, resilience, and courage in these tales are all needed to fortify hope for the future.

Fairy tales strengthen the heart and the forces of the soul. These stories bring an inner security and reassurance to the child amongst the harmonies and disharmonies of life. Fairy tales gift the child with encouragement now and for the future, and remain a living force throughout life.

Strengthening Our Inner Capacities with Spiritual Hope

In a lecture entitled “Faith, Love and Hope,” Rudolf Steiner implores us to embrace and permeate ourselves with “spiritual hope.” Steiner goes on to say, “The forces of hope are life-giving and bring confidence for the future. We cannot take a single step in life without the force of hope. We actually know nothing about the following day, even whether or not we will be alive. We know about the future just as much as we need to know. Life would be impossible in the physical world were not future events to be preceded by hope. Would anyone sow seeds if we had no idea what would become of them?”

Hope counteracts uncertainties and provides a powerful antidote to despondency. It encourages steps towards the future, even as we know that our plans might need to completely change to before we can reach our destination. Flexibility and adaptability at every turn are needed. To bathe one’s soul with spiritual hope provides an inner gesture of healing and will be a gift to the children in our care.

The spiritual hope that we hold in our hearts can be enkindled through the advice given by Henning Köhler in his book *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children*. He prescribes qualities that teachers must develop to help children who have experienced trauma. These are **protecting attentiveness**, **comforting trust** and **accompanying interest**.

Protecting attentiveness requires teachers to extend their understanding to “listen in” with deep devotion and reverence to what each child needs. The teacher adopts a quiet and alert attention without talking about it with the children. This kind of inner listening initiates a sense of “listening acknowledgment” that embraces the children.

Accompanying interest involves patiently “standing at the child’s side with a waiting attitude.” Trauma and anxiety do not disappear quickly, but accompanying the child creates the quality of being deeply interested and involved. This gives the child the gift of time without expectations to hurry through their ordeal or change. This kind of teacher’s participation is subtle but powerful and respects the process of the child’s development without demanding results.

Comforting trust is perhaps the most important of all. The child’s emotions need to be met by the teacher with empathy and confirmation. A most important way to establish comfort and trust is through providing all the healthy things we know to do for the young child. Strong and predictable rhythms, nourishing food, homelike activities and being in nature create security and well-being. Simplifying and reducing our transitions can be helpful in changing from one activity to the other. However, Köhler describes that the most comforting way to establish trust is to ask for help from the child’s angel. This is the key that opens the door to true comfort and will instill the deepest trust between the child and teacher.

Henning Köhler describes healing as not “an elimination of illness but rather a guidance to the essential. Healing means giving hope, to give hope means to have hope. A person’s hopeful thinking about a person is loving thinking.” ♦

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