

Bringing Cultural Consciousness through Stories and Circles

Can implicit messages be as effective and powerful as explicit ones?

~ Holly Koteen-Soulé

For those of us who carry responsibility for building inclusive and caring communities in our early childhood classrooms and with the families in our Waldorf Schools, the current social questions loom large. Out of our understanding of child development, we know that young children learn through imitation and modeling. So, our continuing inner work with our own unconscious biases and assumptions is essential. We also need to be prepared to respond appropriately to specific situations that arise in our classrooms which need explicit statements that support differences of all kinds and invoke a gesture of inclusion.

At Sound Circle teacher training, two of my colleagues and I facilitated an online early childhood workshop in which we explored creating stories and circles to bring important themes and healing gestures to the children in our classes. Working groups of four created stories to carry suggested themes. By week's end, stories that lent themselves to movement became beginnings of movement circles. Others became new puppet plays.

Colleagues identified healing gestures that we can model and illustrate in our stories and circles. We wish to strive to:

- Recognize and work through antipathy or discomfort with things and people that are different from us.

- Stop labeling and shunning or shaming others because of labels.
- Listen to one another.
- Move past an “us and them” orientation.
- Solve problems by collaborating with others.
- Show ways for everyone to get a share, even if we feel fearful that there isn't enough.
- Redeem hurt or conflict by making it better.
- Breathe as a healthy community with a permeable boundary.
- Live by grace, love, forgiveness, and humility.

Stories included appreciating differences of skin color, family constellation, gender stereotypes, developmental or ability differences, and multi-language situations. Offering pictures of belonging and inclusion was an overarching theme throughout.

There was a great enthusiasm among the workshop participants for creating new material that supports the reawakening of cultural consciousness that speaks, not didactically, but in a heart-felt way, to young children and their families. The following story, “Blackberry Bunnies,” served as an example for the workshop participants.

Blackberry Bunnies

Once upon a time, there was a rabbit named Poppy. She did not live on a farm or in the wild, like other rabbits. She lived in a small village near the sea. How Poppy and her family and the other rabbits came to live in the village was a mystery. It is possible, some of the villagers said, that a few rabbits escaped from the County Fairgrounds when someone forgot to close the door to their pen.

If that was so, then it made sense that some of the rabbits made their home in the meadow next to the Fairgrounds. After a few years, there were more and more families of rabbits living in burrows around the edge of the meadow. There were rabbits of all colors living there: chocolate colored rabbits, caramel colored rabbits, dark-as-night colored rabbits, rabbits as white as the summer clouds and rabbits as soft and grey as pussy willows. Some rabbit families were all the same color and others had baby bunnies of all different colors. Life in the meadow was good and there was lots of grass to eat.

When Poppy was a baby bunny, Mother Rabbit taught her to come running back whenever her mother thumped loudly on the ground with her hind leg. That was a sign that danger was near. The rabbit families were safe enough when they were snuggled in their burrows, but when they were grazing in the bright green grass, they could be easily seen by the high-flying hawks and eagles. On sunny days, Mother Rabbit kept a close watch on the ground for the shadows of the big birds who lived in the nearby forest.

One day, Poppy's mother and all her baby bunnies were grazing in the meadow when a hungry eagle spied the baby bunnies below and began to dive. Mother Rabbit thumped loudly, and all the baby bunnies ran toward her. Their burrow was on the other side of the meadow, but close by was a thick bramble of blackberry bushes and Mother Rabbit and all her children ducked quickly into this shelter. The hedge was so dense that the eagle could no longer see the rabbits and flew away. Mother Rabbit found the safety of the blackberry thicket so comforting, that she dug a new burrow beneath the prickly canes.

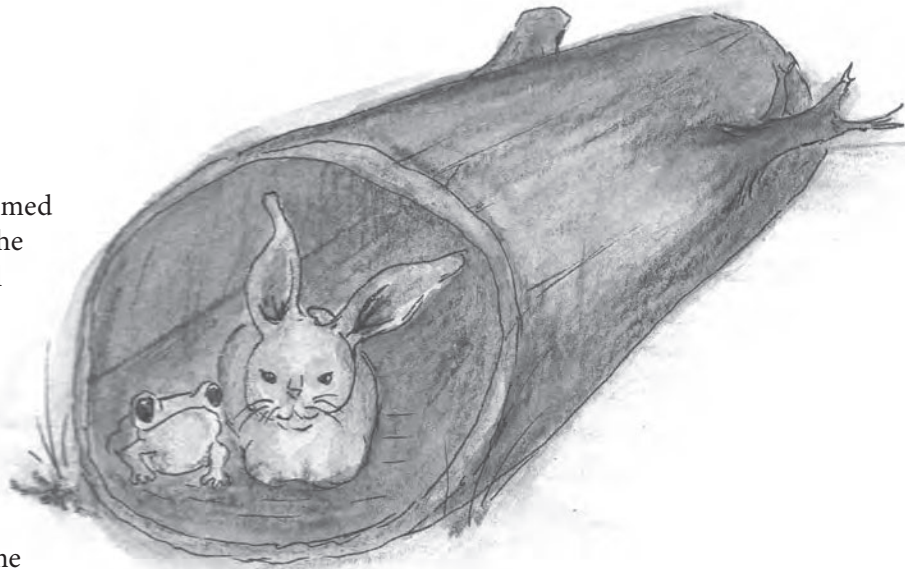


Illustration by Deborah Grieder from
Tell Me Another Story (WECAN, 2019)

When the other rabbit families realized that the blackberry thicket was the safest place to live, they all moved in as well. Poppy liked her new home, especially after all the other bunnies moved in and she and her brothers and sisters had lots of new playmates.

Sometimes the children of the village came to visit the rabbits and brought carrots for the baby bunnies. The children liked all their different colors. There were chocolate colored rabbits, caramel colored rabbits, dark-as-night colored rabbits, rabbits as white as the summer clouds and rabbits as soft and grey as pussy willows. Some of the rabbits were shy, but some came right up to the children and nibbled at the carrots that the children were holding in their hands. If the children were too noisy or moved too quickly, all the bunnies would duck quickly into their blackberry bush. Life in the meadow was good. There was lots of grass to eat, a thicket of blackberries to keep everyone safe, and a colorful collection of bunny friends. ♦

This article is reprinted with kind permission from Kindling, the UK journal for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education and Care.

Holly Koteen-Soulé is Early Childhood Director for Sound Circle Center in Seattle. She served as kindergarten and parent-child teacher for 25 years at Seattle Waldorf and Bright Water School in Seattle. She is a member of the Pedagogical Section Council and a WECAN board member.