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From a mixed-age classroom years ago: A mother in a class had died of cancer. The class teachers had held a “Birthday into the Spiritual World” party in honor of the mother. A few weeks after the celebration, two children were observed playing quietly in a corner of the room, wearing crowns and silk capes. This was an unlikely duo—a mature, kind, generous and thoughtful girl and a boy who was one of biggest rascals in the class. The teacher could not resist inching closer to the pair to hear what they were saying. The girl said, “I died.” And the boy said, “And I died.” The girl continued, “And I am an angel.” “Okay,” said the boy. “You are an angel. But remember, I have a short cut to God.” After that day, there was no more dying in play time. The whole class seemed to have digested this experience to their need and went on with playing life.

Shared by Nancy Blanning and Terri Kosmicki, Denver Waldorf School

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Taming “Wild Horses” through Imagination, Imitation, and Play

~ Eniko Reeder

Last year I was hired as a long-term substitute preschool teacher at a local private school. Though not a Waldorf program, the school leadership gave me full support to teach using my Waldorf approach, which is the only way I know how to teach.

Upon receiving my class of 3-4 year olds, I was immediately struck with the realization that this was not going to be like what I was used to. In my twenty plus years as an early childhood educator, I had become accustomed to children who were filled with wonder, who listened and followed me around like chicks following their mother hen. I accurately sensed the reality that transforming this into a coherent group of listeners and imitators would be a long and challenging journey. The children were loud and without boundaries. There seemed to be no listening and no interest toward any adult in the room.

We started each day outside, where they mostly played well; but the second I opened the door to go inside, the “little goats” got loose. They wanted to run in the hallway pushing each other out of the way, loudly laughing at each other when someone got hurt,

rushing to be the first one to get to their cubbies. The decibel level drowned out my ability to direct. I would have had to scream to have any effect. Moving into circle time was unruly. Nobody followed the teacher’s lead to sit. If they did, they would be silly with each other or jump back up and run to the cozy corner and pile onto each other.

In the past, I’ve always started the school year with a short little circle to set the rhythm and create anticipation and an experience that circle is fun. However, I quickly came to the realization that most of the children had very limited spatial orientation or listening skills and showed no interest in what I was about to offer. I also realized that painting was not yet possible. In the past, I’d place some seasonal decor in the middle of the snack table with a candle, but not this year! The children actually climbed up on the table, not only to explore, but to disarrange.

When we sat down for story time, the children loudly talked and joked with each other, not acknowledging that something new and special was coming. I sang a song and moved on to something else

in response. I left my puppets in their basket, thinking that these children were challenging me in seemingly insurmountable ways.

None of my teaching skills were working. So, I decided to completely let go of my old ways and forge a new one from scratch. As opposed to preventing the hurricane, which I was used to, I was going to need to learn to focus back on myself and “be the eye” of the hurricane—modeling calm, quiet, and no judgment—knowing that, given the right temperature change, all hurricanes eventually come to an end. As teachers, we know that children *are* our curriculum, so I had to give up my understanding of where one would typically expect children to be and begin to really let go, take interest and observe where these children were.

Prior to this experience I had founded and directed a forest/outdoor school in Fairfield, Iowa, called Singing Cedars, where we spent most of our time outdoors. There we saw first-hand how nature and long walks transformed children’s behavior. I believe that forging group coherence and developing the social and emotional health of the group is the foundation of imitation and receptivity. But how was I ever going to take this group on a walk? They did not respond to our speaking. Walking outdoors did not seem safe. I decided to limit the daily rhythm and release expectations.

The rhythm rotated around outside play, snack, indoor play, attempts to do circle. Lunch followed with clear, reasonable expectations, like no yelling when sitting at the table and no getting up and running into the classroom after a few bites. We set aside candles, rituals and quiet eating, washing dishes, placemats, arts and crafts, and story. None of that was enforceable. We just let them eat and then play without hurting each other. During that time, I used my attempts at circle and playtime with them to make inroads and gain trust. Little by little we made progress.

Since my “Let Us Form a Ring” song did not draw the children’s attention, to get their interest and pull them together, I sat down and started a loud clapping rhythm alternating between hands, thighs and floor. At this point some of the children were beginning to join in and others were still scattered about. After a bit I began chanting with it: “Clap, clap, boom!” increasing the volume a bit with each round. After a few rounds, I ended by clapping the floor with a resounding boom. At this point, I was able to introduce the clapping name game, “Bibbity Bobbity Bumblebee.”

Bibbity Bobbity Bumblebee,

tell me what your name (*Teacher points to herself*) might be.

Eniko.

Then we repeated the name syllable by syllable—*En-ee-koo*—alternating clapping hands and clapping the thigh at each syllable of the name. In this case it would be *en* (hand clap) *ee* (thigh clap) *koo* (hand clap).

Then:

Bibbity Bobbity Bumblebee,

tell me what your name (*Point to a child*) might be.

Say her name, “Paloma.” Then together we clap: *Pa-lo-ma*.

By developing the game in this way, I was able to move them all into the circle. Something about the percussiveness of the clapping, along with the allure of hearing their names chanted, worked.

For a few days, that was my circle. Then, suddenly I could see that it wasn’t going to work anymore. The moment I began to chant “Bibbity...” I could feel that I was about to lose some of my wild ones, so I quickly transitioned to “A Bee Sat On My Nose” by starting with a strong “buzzzzz” sound, while gesturing a finger-bee flying all around me using my pointer and thumb as if I had a bee between them, and began the verse:

Bzzzzz...what do you suppose? (*Finger-bee to nose*)

A bee landed on my nose.

What do you think?

It gave me a wink. (*Wink*)

The bee says: I beg your pardon,

I thought you were a garden.

Bzzzzz... (*Finger-bee flies away behind back*)

Repeat with the other hand:

“Another bee landed on my nose...”

Something about the sound effect of buzzing, the motion of winking, the bee landing on my nose, then the flying behind my back, captivated them. After a couple of days I was able to add a couple of simple nursery rhymes like “Two Little Blackbirds.”

To bravely get them off the floor while holding them together—because they all felt like wild horses

that needed to be trained—I introduced the old song “I Go With My Pony.”

I go with my pony with a walk, walk, walk.

I go with my pony with a trot, trot, trot, trot, trot.

And when I’m going, I really get going.

I gallop until I stop.

Whoever stopped well got a pretend rosy apple to eat. As they improved their ability to stop on command, I would offer that when all the ponies learned to stop, we will all go on a special walk. We played this over and over. I made horse harnesses and they began taking each other for walks and runs in the yard, as if they were riding a horse. I was able to help them with pretend play by giving them pretend apples, hay, brushing them, or tying them to a tree.

At one point I brought empty cardboard boxes into the classroom, thinking they needed to press themselves into something to help them feel where they ended. It worked! Almost all the active children wanted their own box. They began hoarding stuff in their boxes. Thankfully the boxes were not too large, so they didn’t need much in order to feel that their boxes were full. As things progressed, they began connecting them together and asking to play neighbors. Success!

On one occasion, one of the little girls moved in and played in a box all morning. Towards the end she told me she was a doll and it was delivered to my house. I opened it and said, “Awww... this is the most beautiful doll. I haven’t seen anything like it before... and look! It even came with a hair brush.” I held up a hair brush and brushed her hair for some time. This was over a year ago, and the little five-year-old still tells me from time to time with the sweetest, kindest smile, “Remember, I’m your doll.”

After three months of training horses, I endeavored to take the group out for a walk. I found a place close to our play area with no toys or manmade structures where the children could run freely, roll down a hill, hide in the bushes, climb a tree, and act out all that movie stuff they were so filled up with. It wasn’t a forest, like at my previous school, but it was unstructured nature. I prepared them by explaining that we could only go if everyone listened to me. “When I say ‘Stop,’ or ‘Hold your horses,’ you must stop!”

They were very excited about leaving the yard. I opened the gate and after a few yards one of them took off running. “Oh, my,” I said, “looks like I’m going to need to take all my horses back to the training yard.” So we all turned around and the whole group was very angry at the culprit. Back in the yard, we continued with training our ponies.

The Pony Song was definitely the song of the year. It came in very handy. I would put the horse harnesses on the children I couldn’t trust yet, and the responsible children were the trainers with the reins.

The next day we were lined up at the gate and I asked, “Are these horses ready for a walk?” “Yes,” they enthusiastically replied. “Are they ready to listen?” “Yes,” was the answer. “All right then, we can go!”

And so we went, some of them wearing the harness, some of them holding the reins, some holding hands, while we were all singing the Pony Song, walking, trotting, galloping and stopping. When we arrived at our play area they were all excited. Some of them jumped up and down, some were timid, some immediately took to exploring and began tracking, climbing, and soaking up nature. A bright spark moved into their eyes and even the most difficult children were playing nicely.

This environment created opportunities for them to get hurt in a new way. This was not the kind of hurt usually suffered as a result of aggressive behavior on the playground, but hurt from taking risks playing in Mother Nature. This kind of hurt, getting scratched by a thorny bush, accidentally whacked by a stick, or stuck in a tree, helps them to move back into themselves and gives the teacher an opportunity to nurture, care and connect with them “I” to “I”. True recognition and respect work wonders.

I began building a fairy house. Some girls joined in immediately. We began gathering bark, twigs, leaves, berries... I wanted to involve the boys too, asking my most challenging boy if he could get me a piece of bark from a dead tree, or asking if they could break a piece of stick for me. I asked them for help partially to engage their will but also for them to feel successful when I thanked them. I also wanted them to feel a part of the creative process so they wouldn’t destroy it. The fairy house was the beginning of many imaginative stories and projects.

I unobtrusively brought in songs and nursery rhymes wherever and whenever I could. "Jack and Jill went up the hill," each time we went up the hill. We had a perfectly shaped slope for rolling down the hill. With just a brief demonstration on my part, rolling down became a favorite game as all the roly polies woke up. We also made wreaths from wild grapevines to decorate our yard and made magic wands by tying leaves and berries onto the tip of a stick using long grasses. We then used the magic wands when someone got hurt. We would use fairy band aids on pretend wounds. I'd feed the kitties if they pretended to be cats, or take the birdies off the tree when they got stuck and feed them a pretend worm before momma bird helped them off the tree.

In just a few months we witnessed a transformation. The outdoor experience made the children tired enough to sit nicely at the snack table after a long walk. I was even able to sometimes share a short story while they were eating. Following a strong rhythm, keeping the children consistently acting within my expectations, and letting them play in nature in an unstructured

environment did the magic. I was able to introduce the "curriculum" bit by bit and gradually remove myself from their play. It was wonderful to see how the principles of Waldorf education work no matter what kind of environment we are in. The important thing is that we remember to meet the children where they are first, work in that realm, and slowly bring them into ours. I believe as well that without the constant work with Archangel Michael and the spiritual world, none of this would be possible. ♦

Eniko Reeder, born and raised in rural Hungary, came to the U.S. after graduating with a B.S. in education and earned her Waldorf early childhood teaching degree at the teacher education program in Eugene, Oregon. Eniko founded Singing Cedars School in Fairfield, Iowa, an early pioneering outdoor program. She has been working as a mentor and pedagogical advisor for over twenty years. Currently, she is director and mixed-age kindergarten teacher at Maharishi School in Fairfield.

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In the aftermath of the southern California Palisades fire, which had destroyed the Palisades campus, children were outside playing at the remaining Westside Waldorf School campus. There the play yard wood chips were covered in ash and fire debris that had to be watered down every morning to keep toxic fumes from rising up when the sun shone upon the surface. So the time outside was limited and play confined. After a week or so, the storage shed with all the toys and tools could be opened up, to the children's immense delight. A group of boys flooded into the shed and took out all of the red plastic buckets and rakes, shovels, all the implements available for their regular play. The red buckets went onto their heads. The implements became fire-fighting equipment and hoses. They were now a fire brigade and commenced to meet the fire in their play. Their trauma healing work had begun.

Shared by Anjum Mir, teacher and co-administrator, Westside Waldorf School

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