

Sailing Our Ship in Calm or Stormy Weather

Tim Bennett

The following is an excerpt from the recently published You're Not the Boss of Me! — Understanding the Six/Seven-Year-Old Transformation (see Stephen Spitalny's review on page 37).

As the teacher of the Rosemary Kindergarten in Seattle, I am the captain of my ship, as well as the navigator of its daily journeys into charted and uncharted waters. Inwardly the captain's heart holds two questions: Who are these children? What are their needs? Because of my responsibility for these children from the moment they pass through the gate until the moment when they return into their parents' arms, there are a few important rules I follow when on board this ship: keep things simple, slow down, be present for each family and child, and don't forget to have fun and smile.

The parents are asked to drop off their children between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m. I use this time of arrival to tidy up outside, do garden tasks, talk to parents and so on. It is the transition time from home to school and an opportunity to play outside in our schoolyard. We have swings, a slide, balance boards, stilts (for the six-year-olds), and shovels in our sandbox ready to dig for pleasure or for treasure. I also have parents turning a jump rope. And of course there are the chickens: Honey, Ruby and Blackie. We check for eggs and say good morning to our beloved chickens. Sometimes our chickens also have unusual adventures — like the day when one of the older children took Ruby from the chicken house and held her while skipping rope.

Ahoy maties! At 9:00 a.m., I gather the families together and we begin to form a circle. As a community of people, we greet each other and greet the day. I always have a little song or verse for the season. If it's raining, as is sometimes the case in our fair city, I sing:

*John has a great big pair of waterproof boots on.
Splish splash, splish splash, splish splash splish!*

*And John has a great big waterproof mackintosh
and John has a great big waterproof hat!
And that says John is that, and that says John is that!*

Then we become a bit more reverent for a moment and we say our morning verse:

*Our hearts open wide, light streams deep inside.
Stars, moon and sun shine down on everyone.
On earth now we stand, giving all our hands.
Good morning, dear friends.*

Then I sing what will happen today: "Ring a ring a Rosemary day, welcome, welcome, nature walk day and painting day." After this opening to the day, I begin to feel that we are a group and that we have built up some substance through our interest in each other and our movement together as we have our daily greeting.

It is time for our ship to set sail! We head for the school gate, where we find walking partners and say goodbye to the parents and little brothers and sisters. The captain is at the helm, the crew is ready and we set out to seek an adventure in the great wide world, waving to the parents as we go. As the captain, I carry a sturdy backpack, filled with a long rope, snacks, water, a first aid kit and a cell phone. My faithful first mate (also known as the kindergarten assistant) has a red flag that we take with us to help us get across the five-way intersection on our way to the park. My rule for crossing the street is that the red flag must be in the middle of the street before any child takes a step off the curb. My intrepid assistant goes out onto the road, makes sure the coast is clear, and then we can all safely cross the street. Upon reaching the other side, the children know that they are free to run, skip, and cavort. Our nature walk has truly begun.

We have set sail and are now out on the open seas, surveying the landscape far and wide! Nature adventures are rich and nourishing for the children in so many ways. The most obvious healing aspect is simply being in nature, in the outdoors in all kinds of weather during the four seasons of the year. In

the Pacific Northwest, this is possible because of the mild temperatures in both winter and summer. The children really have a daily dose of what it means to be on the earth, surrounded by nature and the ever-changing weather. We always “dress” for the weather. For most of the fall and winter, we wear raingear and a warm hat. Being in nature also brings the possibility for a strong connection with the fairy world and the materials of the earth: sticks, stones, leaves, moss and so on. The senses are enlivened when out in nature and the children more easily fall into play in a lively and healthy manner. Dirt, mud, dust, rivulets of water, autumn leaves, bugs, squirrels, spring blossoms, still air, and whipping winds all build their feeling for beauty, goodness and truth. These experiences provide a foundation in the child’s will and feeling life to support the science lessons that will have deeper impact in future years. Experiencing the gifts of the earth in these early years will plant the seed for caring about the future of our planet in later years.

I started the daily nature walks because more children were coming to me who were weak in their physical and etheric bodies. There were also other children who were overly physical in their limbs and could not find any rest or peace. Both of these kinds of children found a healing in the movement possibilities of the nature walks. The weaker children found strength and eventually a great joy in movement. The overly physical ones could freely move and gradually come into a rhythm through the regularity of our walks. Being among the trees and under the great sky gives the children a picture and a feeling that they are a part of the kingdoms of nature. In sharing the space with the elements of the earth and the kingdoms of nature, they can find their place in the world. Of course, this happens for them in an unconscious and powerful way.

As the navigator of the journey, I chose to go to different parks during the week; we have three parks within walking distance. We go to a large woodsy park twice a week. This place is full of maple, fir and cedar trees. There are lots of hills and valleys to explore. Here the children can really get a taste for adventure, sliding down muddy hills, climbing up a fallen tree, jumping off small rocks and cliffs, and building fairy houses or shelters in the woods for those cold winter days. Sometimes I throw a rope over a tree branch and make a rope

swing for the children. The older children love this. Usually we walk for a while and then stop to play in whatever secret garden we have found. This is when some of their deepest play happens. They build houses out of sticks and branches, play knights in the forest, build fairy houses or gather treasures: a bottle cap, a special key, a magic stick or stone. The children often name these beloved spots on our walk. We play at the “Rolling Hills,” where there are many dirt bike hills just perfect for running up and down. Then there is “Bunny Hill,” a place where a huge pile of rocks provides a home to ongoing generations of wild rabbits and former “pet” bunnies. Naming a spot makes it our own and places it on the children’s growing map of their expanding world.

At this point, the crew often becomes a bit tired and hungry, so we take a short rest and serve up some grub: salt fish, biscuits and rum. Well, we’ve run out of fish, biscuits and rum, so it will have to be trail mix, rice crackers and water for the captain and crew today. After snack, we start back to school. On our way back, I usually play a short game to re-enliven and focus the children, helping them come along home together as a group. I like to play “Sheep and Wolves.” Half the children are sheep or shepherds (the shy ones who only want to watch the game) and the other half are the wolves. I say, “Run, sheep run!” and the sheep run out from their house (a tree where they have previously gathered). Then I say, “Run wolves run!” and the wolves run and try to catch the sheep before they can get back “home.” If a sheep is caught, it can become a wolf if the child wants to. I keep the game fun with a lot of running about and I always play with them. I am usually a sheep and the children love to catch me. Other games we play are seasonal games that work well outside: “What Time Is It, Mr. Fox?” or a simple version of “Red Light, Green Light.” I play any simple game that has to do with running, chasing, and stopping.

I also take a jump rope along with us. We can tie one end to a tree and do all sorts of jump rope games. The games can help to build up different rhythmic movements, as well as build self-confidence in one’s growing physical abilities. After games, we continue on our way back to school, stopping at different points along the way to wait for the slower ones and slow down the faster ones.

During the entire walk, I watch the children form their social connections for the day. There is something about the nature walks that helps the children breathe out into the world of the “other,” not just into the world of nature. I always get the sense that the children come from all over the city and need to shed the morning car ride and whatever dramas might have been going on at home. Our adventures help the children to come into social harmony. The walks allow them to shed the past, live in the present, and move, literally, into their future. This is the magic of the act of walking into nature. The children are drawn to the world around them and then are drawn to the friends who share this world. Again and again I see the forest being the mediator in helping these friendships to blossom. For example, children who like to go “hunting” for imaginary raccoons or coyotes join together in close camaraderie. Other children who like to collect treasures gather together in search of special leaves, sticks or rocks.

Our ship glides into port at the schoolyard gate between 10:30 and 11:00 a.m. We all disembark for circle or story time. We have circle on Monday and Tuesday. We have story time on Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday, we have circle games. I also like to incorporate folk songs, simple folk dances, and some basic circus skills. All the children love to stand on my shoulders and become a giant! At story time, I usually tell the story. After the class knows the story, we can act it out. The six-year-olds always lead the acting out, showing the little ones what they know. I also do puppet shows in a similar fashion, first doing it myself and later having the six-year-olds move the puppets that have a minor role in the show. This is a place where the six-year-olds can really let their new capacities shine out for the whole class to see.

Next, we move on to our snack time, seated at three small tables. I strive to make this a time to be nourished by the food while we are in the presence of each other. I use snack time as a breathing in during the flow of the day. So we have a quiet snack with “no talking.” I find that if I say, “No talking,” this is clear for the six-year-olds, and the little ones will follow along. The children take this time to rest and enjoy the quiet and peace around us. Also, at snack time, I always choose two six-year-olds to be the “waiters,” pouring tea and water for the others.

The younger children love to be served by their older friends.

Next is our free play time. In fall and winter, we play indoors, but in spring we play outside when the weather allows. Besides the free play, in the winter we have opportunities for the six-year-olds to be involved with some projects. They make felted hats and mittens that can keep both their heads and hands cozy. I have also found that the six-year-olds like to build elaborate structures, so I make sure that there are a lot of ropes, pulleys, large pieces of driftwood and sawn wood, metal clips, and wooden clips. These materials encourage the older ones to use their growing physical strength and newly acquired ability to carry out plans to their hearts’ content. It is during this free play time that we also do our artistic activities: painting, coloring, beeswax modeling, baking and cleaning.

At 12:20 p.m. we have cleanup time. First everyone leaves the room to wash their hands and get their lunches from their cubbies. When they come back into the room, they put their lunches at their places at the table and then begin to tidy away. There always seems to be a bit of magic at tidy-away time, as we set our house in order and anticipate eating our good food.

At 12:40 p.m. we have lunch. Again we begin lunch with our quiet voices, and, once everybody is settled down and eating, I tell a story from my life or stories that have been passed down to me by some colorful characters. The children love these stories and sometimes share them at their dinner tables at home! They then get ready to leave school. I often put up a balance beam on two chairs and have the children “walk over the bridge” to say goodbye to me after they have packed up their lunches. Having sailed over waters both calm and stormy, the children then find their parents, who are waiting outside on the porch to sweep them up and take them home. The old captain and his faithful first mate swab the decks, secure the rigging and make everything ship-shape for the next day’s journey.

Tim Bennett has been teaching kindergarten since 1990. His interest in young children and movement led him to meet Helle Heckmann and visit her school in Copenhagen. His own kindergarten incorporated a love of nature and joy in movement.