Girls and Boys — Feminine and Masculine

~ Louise deForest

Excerpted in condensed form from the book You're Not the Boss of Me!—Understanding the Six/Seven-Year-Old Transformation*, edited by Ruth Ker (WECAN, 2007).*

When I was coming of age in the late sixties, one of the central ideas of the feminist movement was that boys and girls were essentially the same in nature, and that it was the cultural environment around the child that helped to create the traditional masculine and feminine roles that the child would eventually adopt as his or her own. The materialistic viewpoint of the time was that if you raised a boy as a nurturer, that was what he would become; if a girl were raised to be competitive and more aggressive, she would develop a more masculine relationship to the world. In other words, it was the old nature-or-nurture question, and it was believed that we, as parents and educators, could determine through our cultural expectations the gender characteristics we wanted to foster in the next generation, regardless of the sex of the children in question.

I tried hard to believe this and closely examined my own gender beliefs and behaviors, but there was also something that did not ring quite true about this picture. In looking back, I think my uneasiness with this viewpoint was that it was too one-dimensional. It assumed that we were all blank slates at birth, waiting to be formed and molded by the world around us, instead of recognizing that we all come to earth with certain talents and experiences and intentions. This way of thinking also did not recognize that everything in this world exists between polarities, and that the masculine and feminine poles are archetypal forces that live and are at work in everything to do with life. These archetypal polarities are central to the development and expression of the human spirit. I know that, as a girl, I experienced life differently than my brothers and that it was significant to me that I was born with a female body. I also know that growing up in a male-dominated family and being the mother of three sons encouraged me to diligently pursue my tasks of uncovering, strengthening and developing my more feminine qualities.

Each individual is so unique and mysterious and none of us is one-sided—purely masculine or purely feminine—but, rather, always weaving an intricate tapestry of the two together. To say "This is masculine, this is feminine," negates the individuality of each one of us. Ultimately the higher inner essence of a human being has nothing to do with being a man or a woman.

Rudolf Steiner describes that at the beginning of human evolution there was no differentiation into two sexes. Each individual being carried both masculine and feminine forces within.

And in a far-distant future time, we will once again return to a genderless form but now with the self-acquired ability to reproduce ourselves through the power of the word. He says, "And this in the future will be the birth of the new human being—that he is spoken forth by another."[1]

Steiner does tell us that, through repeated earthly lives, we have the opportunity to experience both realities, taking on a male or a female body in an effort to most effectively meet our karma and our destiny in each life. We tend to swing between the two from life to life but occasionally, in the interest of developing certain experiences or capacities, we can reincarnate repeatedly in one gender.

We do not want to enter into stereotypes of the masculine and feminine. In our pledge to recognize each individuality, we decry stereotypes as unfairly narrowing and confining. In the realm of spiritual companionship, male and female are balanced. There are, however, gestures associated with each sex. So, could we characterize the feminine impulses as: intuitive, reflective, inward, process-oriented, fluid and flexible, receptive, softer (both physically and psychologically), subjective, spiritually-oriented, emotional, imaginative and nurturing? To characterize men, could we say that they tend towards being more individualistic, experience more through their physical nature, are goal-oriented, objective, intellectual, clear and detached, rational, and more earthly and concentrated? The physical bodies of men and woman say much about their inner soul gestures. Aside from the obvious outer physical differences, men have denser bones and more muscle mass than do

1 *Rudolf Steiner,* The Theosophy of the Rosicrucian*, 148.*

women, making men, by their very physicality, more deeply embedded in the earthly realm. If one thinks in terms of forms, the male would be the straight line, the female, a circle. If they were represented by the elements, one would be fire and the other water. But what is clear is that the masculine and the feminine are two sides of the same polarity and that together they form a whole. They are day (the masculine) and night (feminine). The female, through her imagination, longs for an intuitive union with the spiritual world. Through the soul life of woman and through her thoughtful understanding of nature, woman can ennoble and refine the willful nature and the vigorous strength of men. Men, on the other hand, through their deep empathy with the material world and their capacity for clear, objective thought and their ability to judge and evaluate, can both transform physical substance and support the evolutionary task of the development of a sense of self for all of humanity. We also know that each of these inclinations can develop into extremes as negative attributes.

On the level of the older child in the kindergarten, those of us who work with these children are well aware of the differences between boys and girls and are often at our wit's end to carry their impulses with love and deep respect. Let's take a look at two average six-year-olds who have been in the kindergarten and know how to play; we'll call them David and Sophia.

Setting the stage, let's say that it's eight o'clock in the morning and the kindergarten is now open. I can hear someone crashing against the outer door and I know it is David. David is hypo-tactile (many boys are burdened with sensory-integration disorders, especially regarding the sense of touch) and must bang against things to get a sense of where he is in space and where he ends and where the world begins. He throws his jacket towards his cubby (not in it, mind you), and bursts into the room with a familiar look in his eye. The calm orderliness of the classroom seems suddenly shattered by a wild wind. He looks around to see who is here; if he is the first one to arrive, he may run over to me to tell me the latest news; but if there are other boys already present, he does not give me so much as a glance but, with booming voice, begins to organize the play. Chairs are turned over and become trucks or snowplows; blocks are used to build space ships or piled one on top of the other to make a restaurant or an office building. Voices get louder and the play can quickly get out of hand as the boys rush to grab other materials or "rob" another house. The sounds of motors or explosions fill the air as they careen from one scenario to another, barking orders and playing with an intensity and concentration that is often exhausting to watch. When it is time to go outside, David can hardly contain himself; he pushes and shoves to be the leader of our walk. When told he must learn how to wait patiently before he can be a leader, he may kick the cubby (or punch the chosen leader as he or she passes him); and then he mopes for the whole time that we are going on our walk. When we finally arrive at our chosen play spot, again David launches himself forward, running off with his friends and in no time at all the boys are wrestling, pushing, and shouting. They run at full speed and crash into each other or tackle each other as they pass by; sticks

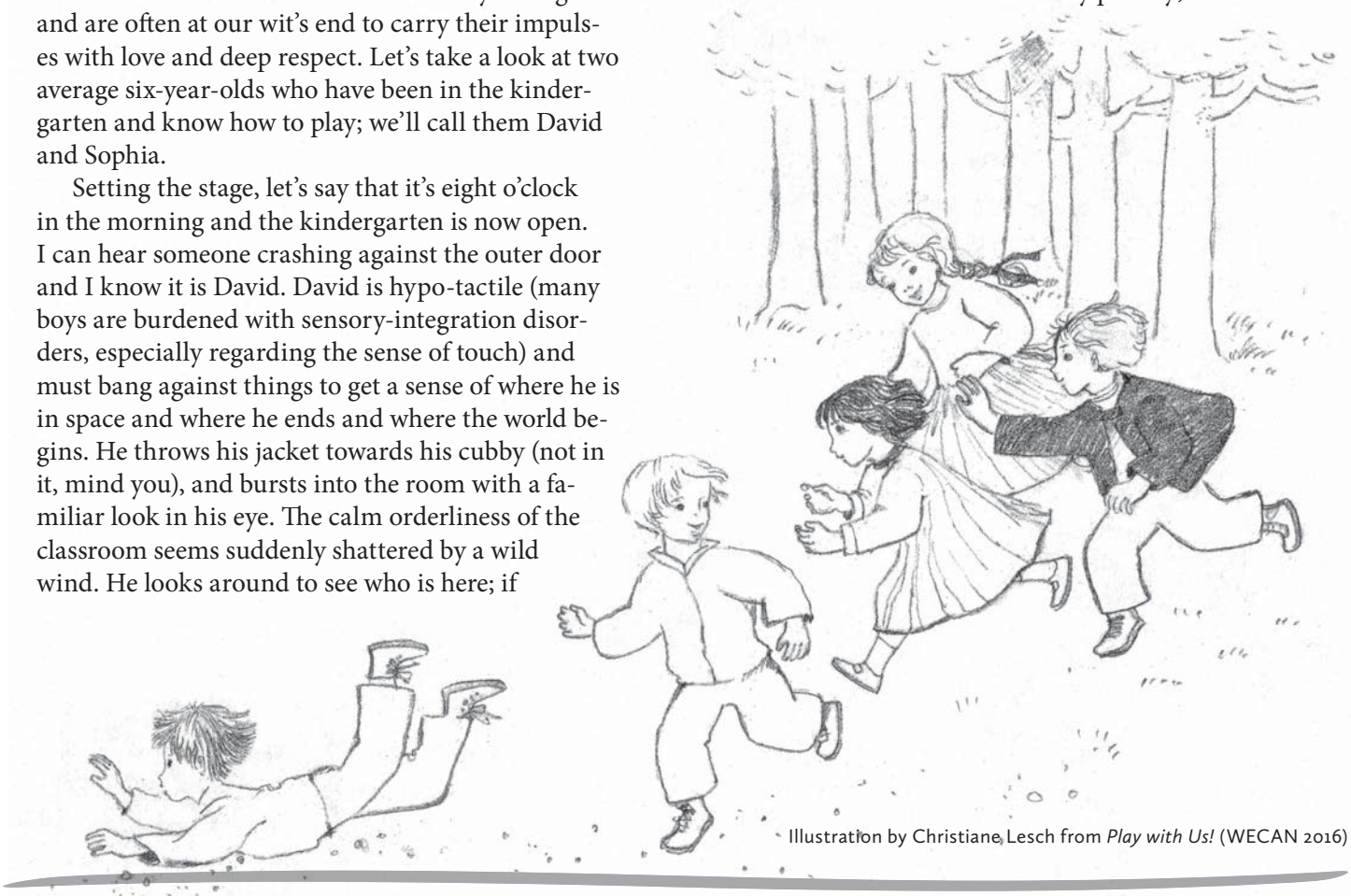

Illustration by Christiane Lesch from *Play with Us!* (WECAN 2016)

become guns and they hide in the bushes waiting to ambush an innocent (or not) passerby. Sometimes they will build traps made of sticks over holes they have just dug, hoping to trap the girls or an animal—preferably one or several of the girls. They test their strength and agility, hanging from ropes or pulling themselves up into the trees, going across the monkey bars or digging to China in the sandbox.

For a few years I had a kindergarten on a farm and the children engaged in caring for the animals and tending the land. When it was a workday, David would engage in the work with the same enthusiasm and concentration he used when at play, and he prided himself (and competed with the others) on his work. Indeed, I often noticed that after working hard physically, David could enter into play more easily and did not seem so out of touch with himself and others. Always one to make himself scarce when it was dishwashing time, on the farm he was always the first to volunteer and the last to finish and he had a special affinity with all the animals. At circle time, he balked at the group activity and remarked that what we did was "too babyish" for him. It was only his love and respect for me and the boundaries that I provided for him that carried him through this difficult time.

Sophia, on the other hand, comes into the kindergarten more quietly, pausing on the threshold to our room, and often has difficulty separating from her parents. She, too, looks around the room and greets her friends but always comes over to lean against me or to tell me a little secret before searching out her playmates. Sophia's play tends to be quieter and more family-oriented and, just as with the boys, much time is spent assigning roles: "You can be the baby, you can be the Daddy and I'll be the babysitter." While all older children tend to talk more than actually play, Sophia and her "family" of friends spend a lot of time talking and whispering and watching the boys. Every time someone bothers them or does something they shouldn't do, especially if that person is a boy, Sophia comes running to me to recount the latest outrage and often a few tears are shed. Sophia and her "family" now put on a puppet show, draping the cloths beautifully on a playstand and gathering all the materials they will need. An argument breaks out among the girls over who should use which puppet: who had a turn last time and who should rightfully do it this time. More tears are shed and a few mean words are spoken before peace once again is restored and all the chairs are placed around the puppet show. After much persuasion (and manipulation) on the part of the girls, everyone is seated to watch the puppet show but Sophia spends most of her time reminding the boys to sit still or to be quiet rather than move the puppets. The boys soon tire of this and wander back to their play.

Sophia and her friends are now all seated in a corner of the classroom making plans for seeing each other after school.

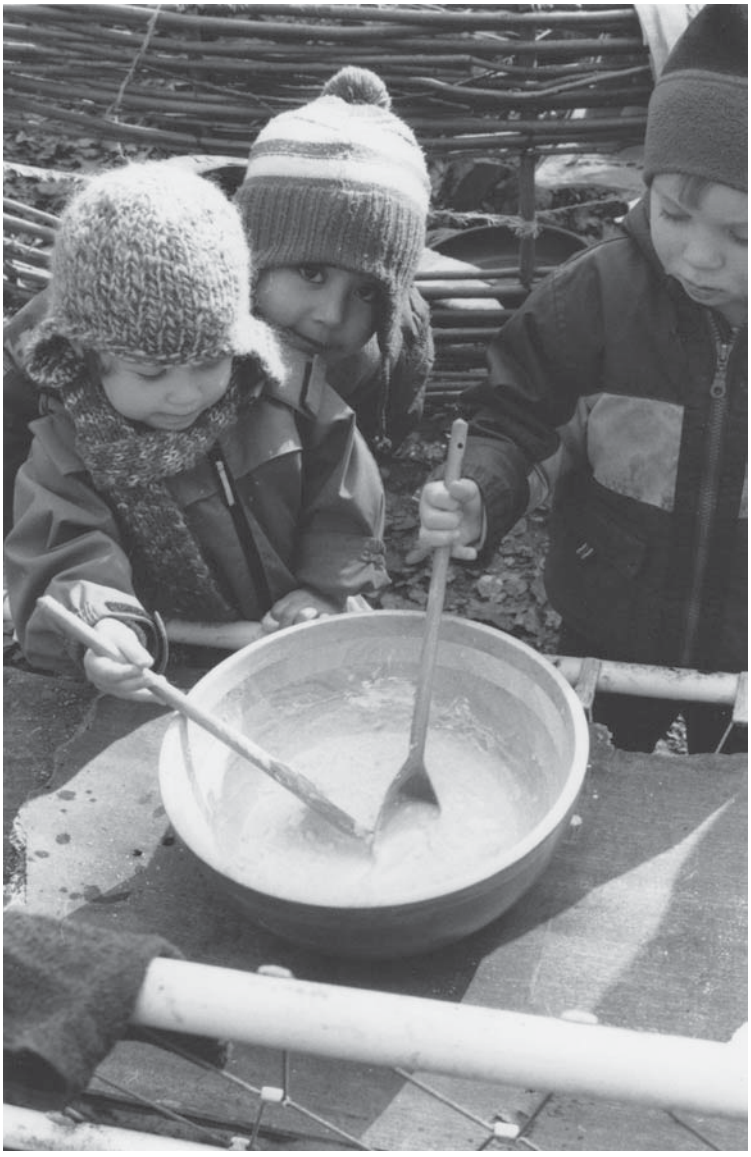

Photo by Margaret Loescher from *A Year in the Woods* (WECAN 2016)

As another girl in the class approaches to play with them, Sophia quickly tells her that she cannot play and closes off their corner with a playstand while she and her friends giggle. "We don't want to play with her," says Sophia to her friends and they all snicker in agreement. The excluded child comes to me in tears, we reapproach the group, and Sophia and her friends reluctantly make room for her in their house. When it is outside time, Sophia hurries to hold hands with her "best friend" (which changes frequently) and pushes all others away. She is quiet once she has her partner and is ready to go for a walk, watching me all the while, hoping that I will see how well-behaved she is and choose her to be the leader.

While Sophia loves to swing holding hands with her friend in the next swing, today she runs to sit under the low hanging branches of a pine tree and there she and a few other girls make fairy rings and gnome houses. They are very intent in their play and wonderful miniature worlds are created. Of course, they also like to run and are physically active — especially if there is a boy or two who wants to chase them, whereupon they run screaming to the teacher complaining that the boys are bothering them.

On the farm, Sophia was initially hesitant to take up the work, not wanting to get dirty, and showed disinterest in that kind of work. After a few months, however, she became a very hard and capable worker and took special pride in pushing the full wheelbarrow over to the compost pile all by herself. She loved the baby lambs and calves but was a bit hesitant with the larger animals. In the classroom, Sophia knew all the words to the songs and all the gestures of the circle and primly took part in the circle, occasionally casting a disparaging look at any boy who was not participating as he should. She would also try to catch my eyes so that I would be sure to see the boy who was misbehaving and that she herself was not. At goodbye time she would give me and her current favorite friends a hug before skipping off with her parent.

Of course this is a one-sided and exaggerated picture. Many boys love to play with the dolls and many girls are incredibly active physically. But these examples do highlight the different ways that boys and girls tend to learn about the world and each other. Boys tend to know each other physically, bumping up against each other and wrestling; girls tend to meet on a more emotional, feeling level, and it is the social world which holds their interest.

I should also hasten to add that children in early childhood are not as fixed in their gender-tendencies as we observe people in their later years to be. In a way, children in these early years are still beyond gender, still living in the unity of the spiritual world and in the impulses that brought them to earth. Only very gradually will they solidify into male and female, through the seven-year phases of human development, until finally, as young adults, the higher self will take on these gender qualities more strongly. But all children carry the seeds of gender identity within them. What a responsibility it is for parents and teachers today to keep open to the possibility that children need to be free to establish their pre-birth intentions about the particular configuration of their masculine and feminine qualities.

And so what does this mean for the teacher working with boys and girls in a mixed-age classroom?

How can we deal with boy energy in our classrooms? Our kindergarten classrooms tend to be very feminine in nature, striving to meet the young child's sense of wholeness and to welcome them with beauty to their time here on earth. The rhythms of the day, week, and year give them security and help them to enter into earthly rhythms. These, too, can be presented in very feminine ways. So when boys enter into our classrooms in their often boisterous way, it can feel as if they are wrecking what we have worked so hard to create. We want things to remain soft, ordered, and controlled. I am by no means suggesting that we should throw up our hands and "let boys be boys." But I do think the key to working with boys is to love their energy, to be thankful for their urge to transform the physical, to enjoy how they get things done, and to celebrate how they can make a difference. We must admire and enjoy their physicality and meet their bumping, banging and yelling with good humor and understanding. We can gently or more sternly bring them back to rightful behavior, but we must carry an inner picture of the masculine forces that are expressing themselves and know that this child really cannot do otherwise, for it would be against his nature.

The girls, too, need our patient understanding, but for many of us they are easier to deal with because they are willing and able to sit quietly, doing handwork or keeping us company, and they are so much more demonstrative with their affection. As women, we tend to relate to them more easily than

we do to the boys. However, girls certainly have their challenges, too, with their tendency to manipulate, to hold grudges and to play emotional games. How straightforward boys can seem in comparison! The tendency of girls to be "hurt to the core" also needs our guidance and courage. And here, I must express my undying appreciation for the male kindergarten teachers and the invaluable role they play in our early childhood programs. Would that there were more men for our little ones! But I daresay that, for the men working in the nursery or kindergarten, it is the girls, not the boys, whom they find most confusing. It's interesting to contemplate whether, in the classroom, it might be that women find it more difficult to understand boys, while men might feel more at a loss to find a way to embrace what girls bring.

Gender roles are always shifting to meet and reflect the times. Today I can see efforts being made by people all over the globe to bring together masculine and feminine, to expand what it means to be a woman or a man, and to break apart old stereotypes. We are no longer content or fulfilled living in predetermined roles. Today, many men are the primary caretakers of their children while their wives carry the financial responsibility of the family. Women are encouraged to satisfy their intellectual curiosity, and their work is finally being acknowledged and compensated on a level commensurate with men. Men are reveling in exploring what it means to be a man, broadening that definition from the narrow constraints of their fathers' interpretations, through deep questions, self-reflection and open sharing with each other. But our explorations of masculine and feminine are still deeply mystifying and we have a long way to go.

So it seems to me that one of the many challenges presented by working with boys and girls every day in our classrooms is to come to know and embrace the male and female qualities living in each one of us. I am more masculine in nature; and I find it easy and enjoyable to work in the fields, to build furniture, to cut down trees, all of which I have done with my classes. It is harder for me to create a space—a beautifully-draped, well-ordered classroom with exquisite wool pictures, a full nature table, and so on—and then to sit back and allow whatever will come, to come. Quietly sewing in a corner was, in the beginning of my years of teaching, an excruciatingly difficult endeavor. And yet, through the children, I was able to learn to connect with parts of myself that longed for expression.

Both boys and girls are hungry to be led by our healing example. Children want to see that we as teachers and parents, through our own comfort with the many dimensions of who we are, can accept, love and respect the life of unknown possibilities that lie before them. This requires flexibility of soul and a sense of adventure on our part. How can we stretch our understanding so that we can truly say, whether we are male or female ourselves, "I love the way girls and boys manifest the essence of who they are!"

In thinking of the masculine-feminine polarity, I am reminded of another polarity: that of light (male) and love (female). In talking about the human being's ability to offer healing to others and to the world, Rudolf Steiner says: "Ultimately everything that happens in the realms of soul and matter on earth depends on the way in which these elements [light and love] weave into one another in our life."[2] ◆

2 *Rudolf Steiner,* Manifestations of Karma*, 198.*

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