The Art of the Transition

~ Roxanne Gregorio-Anthony

As a Waldorf teacher of children anywhere from eighteen months to four years old, I spend a lot of time establishing rhythm in the classroom and having conversations with families about rhythm. Just the other evening at a parent gathering, after discussing bedtime rhythm challenges, I found myself lost in that slightly dissociated way of proselytizing about rhythm, yet again. Sometimes I just get so fired up because I have been down that other road; I have seen what lies there. And I really want to help.

I was a parent for nine years before my youngest son was born. I raised my eldest very similarly then to the common parenting practices that I come across in my class families. I asked my child what he wanted to do next, I gave him lots of choices, I negotiated getting into the car seat, I had elaborate bedtime rituals and wound up lying down with him for way too long. I played with him instead of having him learn to play by himself. From his infancy, I tried to fill his mind with all the knowledge I had to give him. I was exhausted. When my younger son came along, thankfully I found a book about how to get my infant to sleep through the night called *Babywise*. And yes, my youngest did sleep through the night from six weeks old. The key to the *Babywise* method was, you guessed it, rhythm.

There are so many great articles and books written on the use of rhythm in a Waldorf early childhood classroom and in the home. Kim John Payne and Helle Heckmann are two of my favorite authors on the subject. Heckmann has written *Slow Parenting* and *The Five Golden Keys* and Payne has written *Simplicity Parenting* and *The Soul of Discipline*. I will attempt to briefly summarize what they have so eloquently written on the topic of rhythm, as rhythm and transition are so intertwined. Suffice it to say that rhythm is what human beings respond to in a natural "pre-wired" way. The rhythm of a beating heart is one of the first sounds that is heard by a fetus. When young children have a rhythm to their day and week that is pretty much the same, they know what to expect, they know what comes next. This dissipates anxiety and creates a happy mood in the child.

To follow up on my own experience, the *Babywise* book had generated some links to Waldorf education even though the two are generally unrelated. I hungrily devoured all the online Waldorf early childhood resources available. Eventually, I was able to take a position as an assistant teacher in a Waldorf school. There I got to see all that I had read put into practice with a large group of children. All I had read and had been attempting at home with inconsistent success, was solidified for me: "Rhythm is magic!" "Work is magic!" "I don't have to play with my child all the time!" I also saw how the teacher was always striving to facilitate smooth transitions from one activity in the daily rhythm to the next. I eventually became a lead teacher and have learned through many trials the art of the transition. This is a key tool for maintaining rhythm in the day and managing challenging behavior. This was the part that I gained by working in the classroom but that was not as easily gleaned from other resources.

After having so many recent conversations with parents about daily rhythm and weekly rhythm, I realized that I had neglected to mention transitions as an important aspect of rhythm. I had forgotten that this was the hidden gem! Many questions arose in my parent body, after they had worked so hard to establish a solid rhythm in their home during the COVID-19 shelter-at-home time, about difficulties in getting their child to go on to the next thing.

This art of the transition that one learns when working in a Waldorf early childhood classroom is a very different thing from mainstream transitions. It consists of *practical steps* and *energetic steps*. Mainstream transitions usually consist of a practical step or two only, and can often be jarring. For example, there is the ubiquitous clapping game. *Clap Clap clap-clap-clap Clap Clap Clap*...then everyone does the same clapping all together. When everyone is clapping, the lead teacher has attention. Other times a teacher may use a shrill whistle to get everyone's attention and announce what comes next. Well, this might work in sports or for older children, but for young children

any type of loud interruption in their play can be quite jarring. When children are disturbed in this way, they are abruptly brought out of their imaginative play or their dreamy half-consciousness and brought up into their head space. Then there is heightened anxiety and lots of questions. The more the questions are asked and answered, the more the anxious energy spirals.

If the adult looks at a watch and sees that it's 10 a.m. and just announces loudly, "OK, everybody, it's time to go outside, get your shoes on," they should be ready for a challenging time. For most children, an abrupt shift like this could actually lead to a melt-down or hyperactivity. Then the next hour or two is colored by an outburst or by chaotic energy.

In the Waldorf early childhood setting, there is the practicality of the teacher's awareness of time and the practicality of the teacher's knowledge of what comes next in their daily rhythm. But since this is a rhythm, and not a strict schedule, a bell doesn't go off on a phone and then the teacher starts the tidy up song.

When things are coming toward that transitional moment, the teacher instead senses the mood in the room. Depending on what she senses, she may slightly shorten or slightly lengthen the current activity. A teacher can feel when the free play portion for four-year-olds and under-three-year-olds is winding down. In my experience, 45 minutes to an hour for three- and four-year-olds is enough. Two-year-olds and under have less stamina for this out-breath of free, self-directed parallel or interactive play. So dependent on the group mood of how the play is moving, this portion may slightly lengthen or shorten. The teacher may sense that the transitional activity may need to be gone through very slowly and softly to quiet some of the energy in order to transition through to the next activity. Or the teacher may feel that the tidying transition activity can be a little more upbeat and slightly quicker (never loud or super-fast).

Once the teacher senses the transition should begin, she does not announce anything but carefully and consciously puts away the handiwork, cleaning supplies or cooking utensils she has been busy with and begins to slowly tidy up a corner of the room while not immediately impinging on the play space a child is in. She has a melodious song that is used every time for this task of tidying up. It can even be a hummed tune, but it should not be overly loud, just loud enough for the children to hear. The more beautiful, melodious and pleasing the song is, the better.

In the Waldorf world, music in the mood of the fifth is the optimal type of singing done around and with small children according to Rudolf Steiner. In *Gesture Games for Autumn and Winter*, Eleanor Winship writes in the preface that "mood of the fifth music stays floating in the realm of early childhood—still intuitively connected to the cosmos and to nature. Similar to medieval chant, which also floats, the melodies waft as a gentle breeze, while the rhythms are also not yet 'of this world.' " Songs in the "mood of the fifth" hover around A, moving only a step to B or down to G, while keeping A as the center.

Be assured that the children have probably noticed on the periphery the teacher's movement to put things away and tidy up. They have also felt the shift in her energy and consciousness, away from the task she was engaged in and toward this new work. Then they will hear the song as she continues to tidy around them. They end their play and imitate the work to tidy up. If they seem to be resisting by playing harder at the play (the cow is really banging down hard on the wooden floor now) or they start running around, the teacher or assistant teacher will calmly and gently put an arm on their shoulder and use imagination to enter the play they were or are still in, "The cow is really tired and wants to go back to the barn."

The teacher is steadfast in energy and in strength of will that she and the children are all tidying and she is facilitating the mood and energy of the room to gently help the children to ride the wave of this transition. She may continue to give imaginative ideas to the tidying, such as, "The trains need to go back to the station" and then she drops some in the basket and hands one to a child to drop in. It is usually better to navigate any challenge from a child during

the transition with an adult's help through song and imagination. Then the next activity can be entered into more peacefully. The teacher may use a short song or verse to end the transitional activity. "All is tidy, all is clean, thank you for your work." Then a song may be used to begin the next activity.

At home instead of school, the next activity might be putting on shoes and a coat to go outside for a walk. In this scenario an adult might say, "All is tidy, shoes are hiding, where O where are the shoes?" This might lead to a happy little game with the adult to find the shoes and get ready. Helping a young child to get dressed to go outside is an in-breath activity where an adult can provide help as needed in an adult directed way. Circle time is also an in-breath activity, where the activity is adult-directed. So, in moving from the out-breath activity of self-directed play to the in-breath activity of circle time or getting dressed to go outside, the key is that the caregiver has not pulled the children out of their imaginative consciousness into the adult world of schedules and consequences. The adult who holds the rhythm is meeting them in their world of imagination and song, not insisting they be pulled into the adult world. This is the art of the transition, and in some small way a protection of childhood.

It requires a conscious look at your day and week with your child. It requires adult homework of sitting down and writing out all the must-dos each day and the like-to-dos each day, while keeping in mind the breathing in and breathing out rhythm. Then imagine fully what you would like the transitions in between activities to look like. For example, "I am seeing my child rise up from playing with the barn and then gathering all the animals to put them away." Be very detailed in your imagining. As Kim John Payne says, "Imagination activates the will forces." When the children know you are fully committed to what is being asked, they feel the confidence in your energy and move with you.

Transitions are hard for everyone, especially young children. They count on their adults to co- regulate with them through such times. Moving from free play to going outside or to circle time are just two examples of working artfully through transition, but the concept can be applied to all transitions with the child.

I am not a fan of using timers, because once again it pulls children out of their developmentally-appropriate consciousness into the adult world where time is a concept. If you need an alarm to remind you, it should not be one the child can see or hear.

The adult should definitely be watching the time, but cue the child through physical movement and energy shifting in their will forces and consciousness. This is what the children are very attuned to at this age. The adults should move through the transition the same way each time. Adults get bored with repetition, but young children thrive on it; they know what to expect and feel safe. As the child grows toward the age of seven, the teacher can begin to "play outside the box" now and again, and have a day here or there where a holiday trip or an emergency necessitates an abrupt transition. Since the child has built up confidence and assuredness in their parental relationship, in teacher relationships, and in themselves through rhythm, they will be better able to manage. And then the next transition on that topsy-turvy day, can be a more artful one, and the child will be back on track.

Drawing out these transitions and making them artful is part of the slow parenting that needs to happen when you have a little one. Their behavior will show you when and where you need to go slower in your transitions. Behavior is a way for a child to communicate. As we adults are continuously expected to move faster and more efficiently, it becomes harder but even more more important to give children what they need most in today's busy world: our time and our energy. ◆

Roxanne Gregorio-Anthony *has been the lead teacher of the Snowdrop Nursery at the Waldorf School of Philadelphia for the last eight years. Class ages have spanned from 18 months through four years, currently with a class of two- and three-year-olds. Roxanne is a graduate of the Birth-to-Seven program from Sophia's Hearth. Her special interest is the young child.*