

Among Trees, Wind and Water

Learning, Teaching and Being in a Child Centered Classroom

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It has been my fortune to spend time among trees. On many mornings I've crawled from my tent and felt the wind in the sky, washed my eyes in the small light of daybreak, and listened to the silences in nature's ways. These things have helped me to find my own mind, and to be centered in the hopes which spring from life. They have quieted me, and helped me to find answers in unlikely places.

And I've had lots of questions over the years. Now in my 15th year as an educator in alternative, child-centered learning environments, I've come to feel secure in my understanding of a child's role in these settings. It feels right to see children developing independence, to watch them move with a self-determined purpose, and to share with them the fruits of their own labors. When I first came to this kind of education from a more traditional school setting, however, I was a little lost. I didn't understand what I was supposed to be doing. The freedom and momentum of a self-perpetuating learning environment, one where students can lead and where adults should follow, confounded my understanding of the role of a teacher. To which students was I supposed to direct my energy, and when? What are the balances between individualized education and whole-class experience? Between skills development and the joy of exploration? Just what, I wondered, had I gotten myself into?

On the Wings of an Angel

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Snowbank Trail, northern Minnesota

After hiking for several miles, I sat down at an intersection of trails. Soon the deep quiet of the wilderness, held at bay until now by the sound of my boots and the creaking of my pack, came flooding in around me. After life among sounds, quiet manifests to the ear as a presence rather than an absence. When it is truly quiet, one first becomes aware of the sounds of the body. Bones and muscles creek; blood rushing through the ears becomes a thunderous commotion. But soon, like eyes in the dark, my ears opened wider, aware of the buzz of life around me. Looking toward the sound of an insistent peeping from the trees above, I could just make out small, darting shapes. From far away the sound of wind was rushing toward me. It bent and caressed the trees in the distance, moving across the forest like a wave, pushing the tops of trees ahead and within it, then leaving an excited reordering in its wake. The movement passed over me and receded northward over the lake country, allowing the gentler forest sounds to emerge once again.

I used to sit in my classroom after school and remember the sounds of wind among trees. It was on a gray and windy day some years ago, while I sat at a table watching the swaying boughs outside the window, that the interplay between wind and trees finally offered some understanding for my child-centered mystery.

I had been considering the role of a teacher in a classroom where children are encouraged to explore knowledge – not a teacher who stands and lectures in the traditional way; that I had already laid aside. Rather, I was trying to envision the teacher as a guide, as someone who stirs the classroom current in a general direction, provides an impetus of movement and then steps back, allowing children’s understandings to grow into new and different patterns. The model made sense, but I had no experiential base to help me put it together.

The windy trees proved to be an answer. Perhaps the relationship between a teacher and the students is like a breeze that blows across a canopy of growing trees. A good teacher moves through the class like a wind. The children can feel the first stirrings as the classroom takes shape for a new direction of study. They twitch in anticipation as the momentum begins and then shake in a learning fury as the winds of discussion and exploration begin in earnest. Soon, however, the teacher’s role changes. The teacher is no longer the motion of a full blowing gust. The strength of instruction passes, leaving the still excited students to order their own understandings through independent projects and hands-on exploration.

Steady, Still, Like Water

The same day, further along that same trail

At another trail juncture I took a side loop path which required me to negotiate a beaver dam and then follow a switchback up a short but steep wall of stone. I was soon rewarded for the strenuous walking when a sudden glimmer of blue through the trees drew me from the path and down to the shore of a north woods lake. It was nearly a mile across with a small island rising in the center. The birch, aspen, and evergreens ringing the shore clearly delineated the open sky and created a visual boundary between land and water.

I rested for a time at its very edge, eyes closed, listening. Water is a variable thing, a changeling capable of many different nuances and strengths, sometimes speaking loudly and with power; at other times more gently, a mere whisper caressing and slowly shaping as it finds its way.

As I lay in the sunshine, I remembered a visit I once made to Niagara Falls. The water there is thunderous, plunging over the falls in massive green sheets and then boiling from the pool below into a foamy mist. The sight of it stirred me – and I also felt a little afraid. Yet water can create a much different ambience as well. In damp, dark forest cloisters I have stood with the quiet sound of water trickling through unseen passages, seeping toward streams which flow further downhill. This water is full of mystery and order, gentle to the ear and reassuring to the heart. The lake in the north country presented still another side of water’s character. From up and down the shoreline came a hushed lapping as a light breeze blew waves toward the shore and tickled the rocks and grasses into a laughter common to sunlight, blue sky and the life of a forest.

If the teacher is like a wind that blows, perhaps the action of the children can be likened to water. A stream may run fast and strong, its direction certain, its water clear as it flows smoothly between stones. Things seem secure in the current of purpose. Yet further along the course, the water may grow restless and rough; its momentum falters and the water churns itself into a tangle of paths, confused for the moment where to turn, or why. And still, all along the way, to the sides of the central flow, small pools form and are still – not stagnant, but waiting for a time before moving again into the onward rush.

Can the actions of a classroom community be seen in the same ways? As concepts are discussed and a flow of inquiry begins, the children move with purpose and decision. Their vision is clear as projects and research take form, excitement steering the course of their momentum into a running flow. And yet at times, as the processes of creation continue, children may become less certain of their course, their current becoming rough and rambling as their thoughts move through different combinations and possibilities before settling back into a smoothly running stream. And all along the way are the children who move to the sides, waiting in pools of stillness, yet full of the potency of a developing perception.

***Mist, Like Fog
September 1989
Smart View, Blue Ridge Parkway, North Carolina***

Just before sunset the sky had drawn close to the ground, heavy and grey, and the forest was darkening around us. There was enough light to see, but the evening felt cold, damp, and full of the promise of changing weather. Yet it was just this quality that gave the surroundings their beauty, the trunks of the trees dark and without detail while their branches and crowns swayed gently black against the grey sky. On the forest floor, all things seemed still, life waiting for the coming of night and storm.

I woke at 4 in the morning. The rain had come, falling soft and steady. At 6 and again at 7 I woke; no change. I settled back into the sleeping bag with the same feelings I have when school is cancelled due to snow.

By 8 the rain had stopped. I got my things together and unzipped the tent to find that the world had been changed, for a thick fog lay all around. But for the trees themselves there was no boundary now between earth and sky.

I've always loved fog, and this one proved to be exceptional. Even the trees close at hand were wispy and vague, while away down the hillside the valley of Fairy Stone lay motionless and grey as slate. The stillness was profound. Yet as I watched, there was also motion, for the fog swirled slowly in the changing morning air. On the thin twigs around me the mist condensed into droplets which grew heavy and then fell.

Fog surrounds us in a white and quiet down, creating mystery in the familiar and revealing new visions of things unseen. In a learning environment which employs thematically based, project oriented learning, ideas seem to roll into the soul of a classroom like mist upon a hill. For the youngest children, seeds of understanding are first sown through concrete and graphic representations of the world around them. In the elementary years students begin to explore ideas more abstractly, considering perhaps the creation of the planet or the forces which shape our lands. Either way, children's ideas and discoveries rise most clearly from the work they themselves achieve, their minds steeped in a cloud of imagination as discussion and growth permeate the air.

From their earliest understandings to a more sophisticated knowledge of interrelationships, opportunities for self-directed exploration draw out children's perceptions into a unified whole. Working together, as do the elements of nature, teachers and students coexist in an environment where the thoughts of each can grow in wonder. The explorations we share provide an overlook from which the ways of the world can be seen. Within the classroom, we then help children to pursue the tools of reason and communication needed to discuss the things they have learned. In

the natural world, there is a sensibility which allows for a sort of order, a presence which perpetuates itself, and which over time diversifies and grows stronger. The same can be true for a classroom community. We have only to help our children listen, to watch, and to realize the connections they find.

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