

Our Children: Our Guides Towards Becoming Truly Human

~ Louise deForest

I started my teaching career in a daycare center, working with young three-year-old children. That is where I met Natasha. She was the only child of a poor, uneducated family. Her skin was pasty white—a sure sign of lack of nutritious food—she was obese and had a little upturned nose. She had tiny blue eyes and long, straggly hair. Every day she would stand in the door with her large body and announce, “I’m here,” in a whiny, nasal voice. Outwardly I treated Natasha fairly, just as every other child; whenever she wanted, she sat on my lap and she joined in all our activities. She was a member of the group, but inwardly it was clear to me that I did not like her. When she would announce her presence, I would experience a sinking feeling in myself and would inwardly groan. I was glad to see Natasha move on to the four-year-old class.

But I have never forgotten Natasha; all these years later she is still with me. I failed Natasha. Natasha invited me to go on a journey with her, which I refused to take. She was providing me with an opportunity to develop and learn something that I had not yet learned. I think Natasha sacrificed herself for my growth as a teacher and now I always feel her right behind me.

Every child comes into life with an intention, choosing a country, language, culture and family. There is great wisdom guiding these choices. Every child has an intention in coming to us in the classroom, as well. Each child comes to receive gifts from us that perhaps we do not even know we have—aspects of ourselves that they can use in their life to come. They also come to strengthen us in areas which we have not yet developed or where we are weak, to help overcome something within ourselves that we may also not be aware of. It is a great gift to us each year that these little ones bring, often disguised as unruly behavior or a mysterious way of being that does not match our expectations.

There have been certain groups of children that I have had over the years that can be characterized as difficult groups, where there is conflict and unrest among the children. Sometimes it has manifested

as a few children who seem to go out of their way to disturb each other—children who just can’t get along with each other, bringing many days when there are bitter tears and angry voices—and sometimes it is the whole group that cannot find harmony. There are also groups of children where harmony prevails and the relationships are warm and loving. But more often we see that the group is a challenge—transitions fall into chaos, perhaps, or the children cannot hold form and there is tension in many of the relationships. Over the years I came to think of these groups of children as groups who rub the hard edges off each other, groups that are doing a social deed with each other. We can often see that where there is much conflict in a group one year, the next year these children are the best of friends. But I also began to see, pretty early in my teaching, that they also come to rub the hard edges off of me, to make me socially more fit and capable, to deepen me as a teacher and as a human being.

I became a better teacher through Natasha’s sacrifice and through my failure; other times it has been through my striving that I have grown—striving to understand the inexplicable, to meet the child I do not understand, to be interested in who a child is rather than who I want that child to be. Children call upon us to be interested in them, to confront the mystery of their being with our striving. With sincere longing, with true effort on my part, I have felt that I am taking another baby step as a teacher and as a human being. In Chapter Two of *How to Know Higher Worlds*, Rudolf Steiner reminds us that “for every one step you take in the pursuit of higher knowledge, take three steps in the perfection of your own character.” This means we must be with others, for, to quote Goethe, “Talent develops in quiet places, character in the full current of human life.”

It takes courage to walk into the classroom every day, to greet each child and parent with warmth, no matter what happened the day before. Each day must be like the first day of creation. Everything is possible, everything is becoming. It is a bit like the meditative

life we strive to establish. We cannot have any goals. We never can get to the point when we can say, there, that's done. One starts anew each day. We often meet with no outer signs that signal any changes, with no defined goal, no guarantees, meeting the same challenges of yesterday, last week, last year, and often not feeling any different after our meditation than we did before. But day after day we try again. And each time we have the thought, as teachers, "Now I know how to be a teacher. Now I've got it," this is a guarantee that the next class will be difficult and once again we will know nothing. You will find that what you have done in the past will not work with this next group. The class is calling for you to do something different.

I have a friend who once said to me, "When you see trouble coming down the road towards you, drop down on your knees and give thanks, for you are about to learn something important." I don't think I have gotten to that point yet, but I do recognize that there is something incredibly valuable in being challenged, in knowing nothing and starting over. When we are at our wits' end, we are the most open to inspiration, to intuition. As an Alzheimer's patient once said to me, in a lucid moment, "We do not have to know where we are to find ourselves there." When we don't know anything, we are poised to learn something, and when we feel helpless, we will be led to find a way to serve the other.

A friend had a class where everything was chaotic, day after day. One day it was so bad she stood in the middle of her class and did not know whether to cry or to leave. Then she had a moment of inspiration and looked into her pockets and said, "Oh, dear." Children began to gather. Then she said, "This is not good news. My dear children, I am sorry to say there is only this much [*thumb and forefinger showing a tiny amount*] patience left." The whole room changed.

Another colleague had an inspiration for a group that was very argumentative. Every day there were tears and confrontations. He walked to the children who were in tears and indignant and said, "It looks like Old Man Trouble has been here again." Old Man Trouble began to be a presence in the classroom, objectifying the difficulties that were tempting the children to fall into unruly behavior. When the children began to argue, they would stop and say that Old Man Trouble was coming near.

We have to push ourselves into activity. We must work consciously with spiritual forces and work on our own inner development with great resolve. When I was a new teacher, my mentor said that an early childhood teacher has to be willing and able to sacri-

fice one's adult needs. In our adult lives, we crave stimulation, spontaneity, change, novelty and we digest our experiences through talking; but these are not good things for our classroom. The rock we live on in our classrooms is rhythm and routine. These are cornerstones of each day. A good day in the classroom is one in which time ceases to exist and yet somehow, miraculously, we have snack at a reasonable time, circle and story flow and the children are ready to go home when the parents arrive. We are quiet in the classroom, always doing tasks, and hopefully our every word and gesture are imbued with intentionality.

But we need to go deeper than this. We need to overcome adult attributes that we associate with modern-day adults—such as being critical, wanting to define and categorize, and wanting to fix. None of these will serve us in working with the children. We must free our thinking if we are to respond to the call of the future. With our thinking we can enter into the realm of ideas and ideals, and it is within our powers to be able to find the essential within these realms. Thinking is an active meditation, allowing us to be instigators of metamorphosis. If we can commit our thinking and feeling to something outside of ourselves, this will bring forth life-giving forces into our work. The more we can remove ourselves from sympathy and antipathy, the more easily can empathy arise in us. We need to develop what Henning Kohler describes as active tolerance.

When we have answers, it is an egotistical act that does not enter the reality of the other. Every child has a reason for incarnating as he has. If there is a hindrance, we can offer help and support but the child may or may not choose to change it. Active tolerance means that we leave others free to be themselves in all their individual expressions. It means we observe and think about them with gentle and unprejudiced interest and that we strive to understand them enough so that we can honor their way of being and behaving without judging them by our own standards or forcing them to meet our expectations.

Far too often we are reactive to life, including the children in our groups, saying "Oh, my goodness" about a child, a group, or a situation. Even if we think we have an ideal class, we are defining. It is important how we think about our children; they are particularly dependent upon our regard for them. The child's social development is aided by the fact that she lives into the soul life of the adults around her. Through ourselves we enable the connection between child and self. We are the self that the child is eventually able to find within herself. ♦