
My Path to the Forest

~ Rachel Kennedy

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As teenagers, my best friend Margaret and I would contemplate life as we sat in her kitchen. How do you become what you are meant to become? How will we find the right path? We were full of questions and not much wisdom. One day Margaret's mother told us that life is a patchwork that cannot be understood with each stitch you take or even each patch you complete. But when in time, you look back at the pieces you have sewn together, a pattern emerges that begins to make sense.

So here I am looking back at what may be the half-finished afghan of my life, seeing the patterns that have formed and the threads that hold it together, and wondering at how they seem to weave into the future.

From the time I was a child growing up on a homestead in the Maine woods, purposeful work and connection to the land have been woven into my life. I played with magic stumps and built houses for wee people, had milkweed wars with my brothers, clipped brush from the edges of the pastures, dug outhouse holes, swam in the lake as the loons called, and was acutely aware of the wonder of life.

Later, in a high-powered, suburban Boston high school, full of questions and feeling distant from that wonder, Margaret and I contemplated college. At a college fair I wandered the tables uninspired until I came to a big poster of two hands covered in mud tending to a task. It said "Working Hands. Working Minds." My heart sang with resonance.

As Margaret went off to Princeton I went to the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. I swung an axe, read literature of the rural experience, learned to drive draft horses, canoed rivers with my hand-made paddle as the ice broke, planted seeds, and studied environmental economics. I felt alive again.

After Sterling College, I became a carpenter. With my toolbox and my purple pick up truck, I got a job with an environmental contracting company. We renovated barns, the Union Oyster House in Boston, and lovely country homes. I had the satisfaction of working with my hands and the gratification of tangible work. But something was missing; more questions came. Was this meaningful? I felt disconnected from some central part of myself.

Then three things happened. I met Dan Kennedy at a "Groovasaurus" concert when he asked me for

my number. Then the contracting company asked me to build bird feeders with a school group. Around the same time, I saw a sandwich board advertising a speaker at a school in Lexington. Torin Finser was to speak that evening about adolescence. Unsure of what I would discover, I went to the talk. Inspired by his words, by his presence, and the visible beauty as well as intangible qualities of the school, I called the next day with questions. "How do I learn more about Waldorf education? How do I become a Waldorf teacher?"

I called Margaret. "I am going to marry Dan and become a Waldorf teacher," I told her with excitement.

Four years later, I was married to Dan. Margaret gave us a patchwork quilt for our wedding. I had a Waldorf teaching certificate and Margaret and I became mothers for the first time on the very same day. Our sons, Caleb and Noel, were born 48 minutes apart. Second children, Sarah and Silas, came along after a while. Needless to say, as new mothers we were full of questions and very little wisdom.

My son, Caleb was a busy fellow, a big-bodied little person. He needed to move—a lot. I recalled my childhood as I watched my children grow. We were missing the trees, the streams, the exploration, the purposeful work. We went to visit Margaret and her family on their beautiful hillside homestead in Western Massachusetts. Not so far away there was a Waldorf school. It had a working farm and was nestled in green rolling hills.

We bought a farmhouse surrounded by fruit trees, and Caleb entered first grade at The Hartsbrook School. Sarah entered the nursery and soon I applied for the newly open position of kindergarten teacher. On my application I cited Love, my connection to the land, and my interest in purposeful work as my main qualifications. Somehow I got the job! My colleagues were wise, steadfast and supportive. I grew in my teaching as they listened to my questions.

Each year I teach, I have more questions. What do modern children need from Waldorf early childhood education? Young children before the age of seven learn through imitation. Why are they not imitating? Or perhaps a more accurate question is: What are they imitating?

One morning in circle time I made full-bodied raking gestures, singing a merry little autumn song, while the children started up their leaf blowers their motors purring. One day, on a walk into the meadow as we gathered for a little snack and story, a child began to speak without pausing in the middle of my tale. Later, with the sun shining down on the golden grass surrounded by birdsong, he told me that the memory on his iPad was full. In their lives, are the children witnessing human activity worthy of imitation? Am I as their teacher offering them what is essential and true, the wonders of life on earth?

In the book *Work and Play in Early Childhood* Freya Jaffke talks about the mantle of the child's life forces. She says: Let us look first of all at the mantle which is created through our own behavior, our actions and attitudes. We shall call it the "mantle of activity." Most importantly it should involve the creation of a world worth imitating. Rudolf Steiner says in this context: "And so the task of a kindergarten teacher is to adjust work taken from daily life so that it becomes suitable for the children's play activities." "Adjust work" is the key element.

I had more questions in my heart as I entered the barn one cold winter morning, tending to the cows to give our dear farmer a much-needed rest. The children in my classroom had been tired, restless, and unkind. Where can modern children find rhythm in their lives, their lives that are so full of rush and worry? How can we help them build within themselves the social capacities for caring for one another? It had been a difficult week in the kindergarten. I needed help.

The cows' breath was warm and visible, and their tender eyes met mine eager for their grain and hay. I pulled my notes from my woolly pocket, which told me the location and order in which to tie up the four cows. As I led each cow willingly into place I felt I was falling into a familiar path that the animals knew. The rhythm of the farm was alive, tended each day by purposeful work. All I had to do was enter the flow.

But the farmer does not have to create the rhythm from scratch the way a teacher does. There are the natural rhythms of the rising sun, the hungry beasts, and the full udders. Mother Nature is the teacher here. These dear creatures were so devotedly dependent on me for their care, and the work of caring for them so richly rewarding. Their wet noses sniffing me, strong tongues felting my wool coat . . . you don't really know love until you've been kissed by a cow.

It came to me as I tended these animals that the elements I work so hard on as a kindergarten teacher—creating a breathing rhythm full of work worthy of imitation, and helping children to develop a social sense of the other—these elements are so fully available outside my classroom doors.

We don't have a farm to help children become future farmers, although it might happen. We have a farm to help children become human beings—human beings who are connected to the rhythm, order and beauty of the natural world, human beings who can direct the strength of their will in service of another being.

Earlier this year I had to ask a student to leave my classroom and the school for the first time in my career. It was heartbreaking to have a student I could not meet. For the first time I had real doubts. "Here are so many children in my classroom with needs I want to meet," I told a dear colleague. "They have needs in the realm of sensory development, movement, attention, and social integration. I don't know if I can meet them. I don't know if Waldorf early childhood education can meet them. And if it can't, then what?" My colleague told me, "Let your questions drive your teaching." And so I sat still, had courage and listened.

In between each patch in this colorful blanket of my life, holding them all together is the love and support of family, friends and colleagues. Without their courage, strength and wisdom my blanket would be full of holes.

I went to visit this former student, whom I will refer to as Henry David, to say goodbye. Sad and scared and not sure what to expect I asked our angels to accompany us. Henry David greeted me excitedly and showed me around his house and toys in a bit of a panic, and he asked his dad if we could go for a walk in the wooded ravine below his house. We bundled up, got some shovels and set off. Through crunching leaves, over rocks, logs, down into the valley and up on to the ridge. "I can see the whole world from here," Henry David said with joy and exhilaration as he looked out from the highest point on the ridge. The deep and healing wonder of the natural world was all around us.

We stayed together as we walked along the top. It was nearing the holidays and Henry David collected some bits of evergreen as we walked. We saw some trees standing on their roots—"on their tiptoes," we thought. And then Henry David saw a beautiful little fir tree. "We could cut it down for a Christmas

tree,” he said. “Please?” “You could come back and decorate it another day with your Dad,” I suggested. But it was clear that that was not going to satisfy. This boy needed this tree. And then he remembered our shovels. “We could dig it up and plant it in a bucket and it could be my Christmas tree.” I was not going to say no. The soil was frozen and the roots were deep but we did our best. As we carried it together back to his house, he told me “Shhh, the trees are sleeping.” And they were. Quiet and leafless, they slept in the frozen November air.

After we found a bucket and loose soil in the shed and planted it. We sat down together on the couch, with tired legs and wind burnt cheeks. He took a book off the shelf, a book a beloved teacher had given him: Margaret Wise Brown’s *The Little Fir Tree*. We sat close together in the warmth and read the tale of a boy unable to walk, whose father digs up a little fir tree every year at Christmas time to bring to the boy’s bedside and then replants it in the spring. One year no one comes to dig it up. As the tree sits waiting and wondering the boy comes walking to the tree. We read it twice, this book about the healing power of trees and love.

I drove home stunned and moved. What a gift I had received. Something sleeping in me came alive. “Wake up!” it said. “To the woods.”

That night as I lay in bed I read from Richard Louv’s book *The Last Child in the Woods*. He spoke of modern children suffering from what researchers were calling “directed attention fatigue” marked by symptoms such as impulsive behaviors, agitation,

aggression, and an inability to concentrate. He says, “If you can find an environment where the attention is automatic, you allow directed attention to rest. And that means an environment that’s strong on fascination. The fascination factor associated with nature is restorative, and it helps relieve people from directed attention fatigue.” A little boy in my class cannot sit still, and it can be challenging for him to be kind or calm. But when he finds a woolly bear caterpillar or an ant a change comes over him. He is centered and gentle and slow.

I ask the questions, listen and slowly the answers come:

The cows in the barn said “Let mother nature be the teacher, rhythm, beauty and care are her specialties.”

Freya Jaffke and Rudolf Steiner told me to adjust work to make it suitable, worthy of imitation.

My colleagues told me to let my questions drive my teaching.

Henry David and Richard Louv said, “Wake Up!” “To the woods!”

The faculty chair, the college of teachers, and the enrollment director said “Okay. Let’s do it.”

And so last fall I started a Forest Kindergarten at The Hartsbrook School.

I am, of course, full of questions and little wisdom but two threads will weave through this work into the future: Purposeful work, and a connection to this beautiful land.

Blessings on your questions. ♦
