

Nine Dancing Princesses

— Susan Bruck

A few years ago I taught a nursery class which consisted of nine three-year-old girls, although one boy joined us mid-year. Our administrator nicknamed the girls “The Nine Dancing Princesses.” We often think that boys present more challenges in our early childhood classes, but this particular group was the most challenging one I’ve had in my fourteen years of teaching. In this article, I will share my observations, reflections, and ongoing questions.

Here is a snippet of a typical play time with the princesses:

Six girls dance together as they sing “All the Single Ladies” by Beyonce. This is definitely not a pentatonic song, nor is it in the mood of the fifth. Lizzie¹ sits in my lap and cries. She tells me about

¹ *To protect the privacy of the children, I am not using their real names.*

a nightmare she had about lots of bad men breaking into her house with guns and bombs who wanted to kill her and her family. Carlie is with my assistant teacher, Ms. Kate, who is bringing a tub of water into the classroom for dishwashing (sadly, we don’t have sinks in our classrooms). Sarah is still home in bed and won’t arrive for another hour or so.

In their enthusiastic dancing, Jessica bumps into Terry and Flora. Terry falls to the ground and starts to cry. Flora pushes Jessica back. A loud argument ensues. I put Lizzie onto my rocking chair. She starts to cry very loudly. By the time I get to the girls, who are only a few feet away, I hear the words I came to dread that year. “You’re not invited to my birthday party.” Jessica bursts into tears. By now Ms. Kate is back and is passing out little pieces of dough to most of the girls. There is a little arguing about who gets to

sit next to her but nothing too exciting. I put an arm around Flora and Jessica and pull them close.

“Mommies and daddies decide who will come to birthday parties,” I say.

“My daddies said I could invite whoever I want,” is the reply.

“Come help me knit,” I say as I take their hands and get my knitting basket. The basket contains my knitting, which this year was often full of holes, and lots of little balls of yarn as identical as I can make them. There are also some extra wooden needles and sticks. The three of us sit on the floor near my rocking chair, and I give Jessica and Flora each a little ball of yarn and some needles. They immediately start poking the sticks into the ball of yarn and winding it around the needles. I offer the same to Lizzie, who is still sitting on the rocking chair. She declines but climbs onto my lap and holds my hands as I knit.

“All the Single Ladies” was the theme song for that year. It was a funny, inappropriate song to hear coming from such little girls. It was also an interesting choice as they entered their threes and experienced their first feeling of being separate from the world as singular beings or, dare I say, “single ladies.” I do suspect, however, that these girls experienced this separation earlier. I could tell they felt very alone and were very sensitive. And it showed in the classroom. There were few moments of harmony during this year. Most of those came with teacher-led activities like circle and story time. And there were also moments of amazing creative play as well.

The other refrain for the year became “You’re not coming to my birthday party,” followed by the uninvited one bursting into tears even if she had just said the same thing to someone else. Four of my little girls—Flora, Jessica, Terry and Janie especially—fought over everything and nothing. They didn’t believe the word “no” applied to them, but felt free to use it with their friends and also their teachers. These girls experienced life in extremes of joy, anger and sadness; there was no middle ground and they switched among these extremes with great speed.

With my other classes, as I got to know the children I could generally see when a child was getting overwhelmed, hungry, tired, or about to lose it. I could usually stay close enough to intervene if necessary. But I couldn’t keep up with these children. I felt sad to see them struggling and often frustrated that I couldn’t provide them with more comfort.

Some of them had extra challenges. Lizzie, the girl with the nightmares, often arrived late after dropping off her brother in one of the mixed-age classrooms. Delivering him to class was quite a trial, and she was exhausted by the time she arrived. She often sat in my lap and told me about horrible nightmares, although sometimes she just cried. Her mother was shocked when I told her about these dreams because her daughter had never mentioned them at home. Her mom did start dropping her off before her brother, which helped somewhat, but she was still a troubled child. My gesture with little ones and their families is generally one of welcoming them into my classroom, our school and Waldorf education. I like to take time to get to know them and let them settle into their time at school and in life. I usually don’t recommend outside intervention. But I did encourage Lizzie’s parents to get an evaluation for her.

Sarah, the one who arrived late after sleeping in on that typical day, wore the same velvet party dress to school for months—when she came. She had a hard time waking up in the morning. Her mom often didn’t bring her at all or brought her halfway through the morning. She was very particular about what she wore. In winter she refused to wear a coat, boots, hat, or gloves when we were dressing to go outside. I started carrying her winter gear (and sometimes her if the ground was wet) outside when I realized that she would put everything on when she felt the cold.

The remaining three girls were easy-going and sweet as could be.

I had been teaching either the nursery class or parent-child classes for ten years when this group came along. The year before, I had had a class with mostly boys. They argued a lot, especially over a wooden disk they named the “greener”; and they loved to play with guns. I worked hard to redirect their play. We started our day in the playground. I would playfully pat them down for weapons when they arrived. It made them laugh and eventually the gun play transformed into other more acceptable forms of play. I worked hard with that group, but I wasn’t bothered by their behavior. I knew that these were natural forms of play and interaction for young children, especially boys.

But the meanness of the girls bothered me. I hadn’t seen this kind of verbal fighting much in such young girls. They pushed my buttons more than any other group I’ve worked with. Although I didn’t

express my feelings in the classroom, I'm sure they could feel my discomfort on some level. I worked with meditation to transform my own feelings but didn't completely succeed. I also worked with my daily rhythm to try to meet them where they were. I had always started my day outside, feeling that it was good for the children to have a chance to run and play after what may already have been a stressful morning of getting ready for school and driving through morning traffic. I started out the year the same way. But as the cold weather settled in, which happens early in Chicago, I decided to start the day inside. We had only been able to use the playground from eight to nine and then we were inside until noon. I noticed that the outdoor time didn't really help them settle down, and the three hours that followed felt like a long time indoors. I felt they needed the warmth and boundaries of being inside to make the transition into the school day.

To start the day, parents brought children to the door. I greeted them. My assistant washed their hands in warm lavender water and dried them with a soft towel. They gathered around Ms. Kate and me as we waited for all the children to arrive so we could start our circle time, which was now at the beginning of the morning. This was usually the best part of the day, although a couple of the girls cried almost every day when they got dropped off.

Free play was the most difficult time. Because I couldn't tell when they might switch from dancing to fighting, I spent free playtime near them. That wasn't hard; my classroom was very small. They loved to help with whatever activity was going on. Ms. Kate and I tried to both have an activity going on during playtime that they could participate in. I usually kept mine very portable, with supplies I could keep either in a basket or my apron pocket so I could move quickly when I needed to. I had the knitting basket with knitting needles and yarn for me and lots of little balls of yarn and some extra knitting needles for the girls. I sat on the floor or in my rocking chair and knitted. Four or five girls often sat with me on the floor or my lap as we knitted together. They really liked this. They had to stay next to me with the knitting needles, but the balls of yarn often were used as strings of lights to decorate houses for parties. When the parties started they came around and offered me, and everyone else, wine or beer. I generally opted for tea.

We also sewed together. They helped me pull the needle through the wool felt when we made heart shaped lavender sachets for Valentine's Day. Whenever I sewed I had loosely woven fabric, wooden needles, and doubled thread, already knotted, for them to sew however they wanted. Having everything prepared ahead of time was essential, as was having enough for everyone to have their own. We played with wool fleece, fluffed it, felted it, or turned it into indoor snow. And we did lots and lots of washing. We washed the dishes, the napkins, the placemats, the toys, the stones, the furniture, the chairs, the doors. My classroom was never cleaner.

In my inner work that year, I often contemplated this quote from *The Kingdom of Childhood*²:

In so-called 'good children,' as a rule, their bodies have already become heavy, even in infancy, and the spirit cannot properly take hold of the body. Such children are quiet; they do not scream and rush about, they sit still and make no noise. The spirit is not active within them, because their bodies offer such resistance. It is often the case that the bodies of so-called good children offer resistance to the spirit.

In the less well-behaved children who make a great deal of healthy noise, who shout properly and give a lot of trouble, the spirit is active, though of course in a clumsy way, for it has been transported from heaven to earth; the spirit is active within them. It is making use of the body. You may even regard the wild screams of a child as most entrancing, simply because you thereby experience the martyrdom the spirit has to endure when it descends into a child-body.

I appreciated their struggles, although I'm not sure I ever reached the point of enthrallment. I loved them immensely and observed them carefully to see how I could best care for them. I had my colleagues come in and meet them as well. They supported me with love and encouragement. I had been teaching long enough at that point to know that some year's classes were just harder than others. I generally resisted the

² Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood: Introductory Talks on Waldorf Education*, Anthroposophic Press 1995, Page 8

urge to blame—myself, the parents, the children, the world—and instead asked myself what I could do to support these girls who were struggling to find their way into their bodies and the earth.

I also often thought about this quote from *The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy*³:

Thus the joy of the child in and with his environment must be reckoned among the forces that build and mould the physical organs. Teachers he needs with happy look and manner, and above all, with an honest unaffected love. A love which as it were streams through the physical environment of the child with warmth may literally be said to 'hatch out' the forms of the physical organs.

The child who lives in such an atmosphere of love and warmth, and who has around him really good examples for his imitation, is living in his right element. One should therefore strictly guard against anything being done in the child's presence that he must not imitate.

I did love them for who they were, even though it bothered me when they were mean to each other. I did my best to infuse the environment with warmth and joy even though I often didn't see the results in the children at the time. Our work together and being close to my assistant and me seemed to have a calming influence on them. Even though my preference is to let the children play and work out their disagreements by themselves as much as possible, I intervened a lot that year. The children didn't seem to be able to find their way through yet.

I also worked with the parents, both individually and in parent meetings. After I told the children that mommies and daddies decide who comes to birthday parties, I realized I should make sure that the parents and I were on the same page. We might not have been at first, but when I explained the situation the parents worked with me. I spoke with them about the importance of providing rhythm and lots of warmth for their children. We read *Simplicity Parenting* by Kim John Payne and discussed it. I felt it was especially

important for the adults caring for these girls to avoid what Kim calls the “four pillars of too much: too much stuff, too many choices, too much information, and too much speed.”⁴ It was good to work together. We all needed support to take care of these spirited, strong girls. Most of the things we tried helped, but the girls still struggled. And that was okay.

When we were placing the children in the mixed-age classes for the following year, I suggested that my four feisty girls be put in separate classes. But for reasons I won't go into here, they ended up together for the next two to three years. They continued to be challenging to their classmates and teachers during their time in the early childhood program.

Some of the girls moved into our grade school, and they have settled into themselves more. I look forward to knowing them as they grow. I believe that karma brought them together and brought them to me. I hope their struggles in early childhood, and the struggles of their teachers and parents, serve to make them strong and healthy as they grow into adulthood. I know that I did my best to nurture them. And I learned a lot from my nine dancing princesses.

Some years before I had this class, Kim John Payne worked with our faculty on Social Inclusion. One of the things he spoke about was the gift of conflict. He told us that conflict is an opportunity for growth. He spoke about how many adults suffer from harmony addiction. My biggest lesson from the year of the princesses was making peace with the conflicts and tears that occurred all year long. The parents and Ms. Kate and I did all we could for these girls. But all of our love and care didn't make their lives easy. We did provide them with a safe and loving place where they could struggle and find their way into their bodies and the world. I know I am a better person for my year with the dancing princesses. ♦

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³ Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy*, http://wn.rsarchive.org/Articles/GA034/English/RSP1965/EduChi_essay.html, published online June 23, 2002.

⁴ Kim John Payne, M.Ed., with Lisa M Ross, *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids*, Ballantine Books, 2009, Page 5.