

Speak Pictorially

— By Rie Seo

One day a visiting mentor encouraged me to speak with more imagination. While getting snow pants on, she suggested saying “A rabbit has to go down the tunnel and come out,” instead of “Put your legs in the snow pants.” And it worked like magic. I was fascinated by the simplicity and capacity of using imagination to invite children’s will without giving commands. I wanted to strengthen my imagination muscle and build my repertoire in pictorial/fairy tale language. I wanted to learn how to create pictures with words that invited the children to work freely out of their own will. At first I tried to collect words and phrases that were useful to direct children in our daily interactions with them, but I didn’t even know where to begin. Even after reading songs, stories, verses, and poems, I struggled to come up with imaginations on my own and wondered why it was so hard.

Then I went to the 2018 WECAN conference and heard Dr. Lakshmi Prasanna talk about our language, where it comes from, and about the space between the earthly and spiritual worlds. At the same conference I also attended Laurie Clark’s presentation on the Madonna series. The first picture in the Madonna series is of the Sistine Madonna by Raphael. This painting shows the Madonna holding baby Christ, depicting the earthly world and our heavenly origin. It struck me that I was forgetting where children, and we, have come from. We all come from the spiritual world, as spiritual beings, to experience the earthly world. As Rudolf Steiner and others have indicated, children are deeply connected to the spiritual world. That is why adult language often fails to reach them: because we are not speaking the same language. Small children live much more deeply in the soul world than adults do. In *The Creative Word*, Daniel Udo de Haes writes, “Even when young children are ‘awake,’ they can, in a day-dreaming way, still pass lightly to-and-fro at every moment and with each experience. For them, heaven and earth are still essentially one. The gate is always open” (13). For me, realizing that adults and children speak quite different languages became the key that opened the door to pictorial speaking.



Rafael Sanzio, *The Sistine Madonna*

That realization brought the question, “What is spoken in the spiritual world?” We need to find a language that comes from there and expresses itself in the soul at its deepest, subconscious roots. We need to understand the languages of the earthly and spiritual worlds and be translators for our children as they incarnate into this earth. To do this, we need to look at how children come to and experience the earth in their earliest years. What is the language that can bridge the spiritual and earthly worlds?

Children come into this world living in two soul realms, “that of the earthly world, and that of the spirit which contains the archetypal origins of earthly objects” (*The Creative Word* at 13). They live amphibiously between these spiritual and earthly realms. Seeing these two worlds

meeting is what fascinates children. They dreamily recognize everything they see and hear as the earthly embodiment of something from the spiritual world that still lives within them. Children are alert for things that can remind their souls of content that originates in the spiritual world. When they find it, children miraculously reunite the heavenly world and its perfection with their surroundings on earth. Even simple, everyday objects can be a symbol of the mystery-bearing aspect of our own soul.

It is crucial for us to understand this view of how the world speaks to children. There are two distinct realms in the child's environment on earth: the natural world—stones, water, plants, animals and so on; and the human realm of man-made things. But everything in the world, be it the natural or the human realm, speaks to children and reveals their hidden picture-language. A cupboard can represent the quiet guarding of secrets. A bowl or plate can bring an experience of open giving and receiving.

What speaks easily to children are things related to nature, such as animals, plants, and stars. This is because Mother Earth whispers the first stories to children that “may be read only by the dreamy soul of the child” (*The Creative Word* at 25). The image resonates to the source of all that surrounds us that lies in the spiritual world.

What's more, it is equally essential that we teachers, as Daniel Udo de Haes indicates, “must, for our children's sake, understand also these deep secrets which our surroundings whisper to every still listener.” It is the journey we adults need to take, not with our intellect but with our hearts, to meet these secrets of deep soul-life and listen to the archetypal revelations forming our surroundings. By bringing more imaginative, picture-filled language to our daily interaction with children in a conscious, warm and joyful way, we can help our children find their home on earth, to fully incarnate.

What language can bridge the spiritual and earthly worlds? Though we need to carefully wait for the appropriate age to bring fairy tales to children, we can learn the qualities of heavenly language by

studying fairy tales. Steiner's indication on fairy tales and fantasy gives us a clue to finding images to use in our own speech with children:

The fairy tale is like a good angel, given us at birth to go with us from our home to our earthly path through life, to be our trusted comrade throughout the journey and to give us angelic companionship, so that our life itself can become a truly heart- and soul-enlivened fairy tale!

~ Steiner, “The Poetry and Meaning of Fairy Tales”

Working from this indication, we can learn the essentials of the language that can speak to our children's souls. We seek images that:

- Nourish the hunger of the soul.
- Combine “the richest spiritual wisdom with the simplest manner of expression.”
- Express inner joy with its unsophisticated pictures.
- Bring the roots of human life together with cosmic life.
- Affect the soul in a “spontaneous and elementary [way] and, therefore, remain unconscious.”
- Give small images for large things and, thus, connect with archetypes.

What are archetypes? Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines them as the origins of creation; “the original pattern or model of which all things of the same type are representations or copies.” Archetypes connect to dreamy remembrance of what is carried deep within and comes from the pre-birth world.

This connection to archetypes through words is what Susan Perrow described as “metaphor” in a recent issue of this newsletter. Metaphor juxtaposes familiar concepts to reveal higher, archetypal concepts; and it speaks directly to our imaginative faculties, bypassing our rational brain. It speaks to the heart.

How can we create imaginations that speak to children and their will? We want to use imagination, not instruction. First and foremost, we must hold in mind that we want to guide and inspire the children, not manipulate them. While trying various ways to find this language, I experienced that children can detect when I am using pictorial phrases to make them do what I want. If I had a self-centered desire to make things go quicker and quieter for my own sake, my language and my images immediately lost their wonder and never reached the children. Our language must be genuine and speak directly to the children's will, not to their intellect. As Meister Eckhart's tells us, "When the soul wants to experience something, she throws out an image in front of her and then steps into it." The wonder and imagination of a proper language should conjure up an image that invites and enables children to step into it with joyful will.

As Udo de Haes states, "Now in young children this resonance is strongest in meeting 'ordinary' things and events. For them this is the 'sublime,' the 'great' in the world, for these simple things, in their own earthly appearance, can speak to them in the language of their heavenly origin. Through this bridging capacity they unlock the passage from their world of origin—which is also the child's—to the life which he seeks on earth" (*The Creative Word* at 27).

As indicated above, children are still perceiving and listening to the deep secrets and archetypal images of everything that surrounds them. They find the greatest joy in discovering those heavenly seeds planted, by exploring the most ordinary things. We, as adults, need to rediscover this "soul-language" as an inner, spiritual development, so that we can carefully unite our earthly language to the one that originates in the spiritual world, without making it too complicated, literal, or scientific. For example, in something as simple as a ball a child sees a heavenly round shape and cosmic perfection and finds delight with the reunion of these images and the object. We adults tend to focus on what is done with an object

rather than with what it is. By focusing on what each object is, we would find a better way to rediscover the secret it reveals.

This all applies to the actions and expectations we have throughout the day in our lives with children. Instead of focusing on the action of putting on a pair of shoes on and the quality of the action, we adults tend to focus on what it is for. When putting on shoes, we will hurry the children because our busy minds are focused upon what to do *after* the shoes are on, such as getting into the car and going to school. I believe that is why saying, "Put your shoes on. We need to go outside. Please do it now," fail to work. These directions do not enable the children to form a picture they can connect to. It works far better if we stay focused on shoes, toes, and feet, and the essential qualities of the action required. "Piggies have to slip into the barn to stay warm" speaks to children because it brings their attention to the feet and slipping into a protection. Once piggies are in, then we can invite them to go outside!

It resonates more with the children's stage of development if we carefully consider what to pay our attention to and what quality we want to bring to a particular moment. For example, a boy in our class chatted nonstop, as if he were afraid of silence. First, my attention gravitated toward his behavior and stopping his incessant chatter. He drove me absolutely crazy, especially at lunch time! Then I realized that I needed to shift my attention to what I wanted to bring into the room. I began to imagine a calm, relaxed, and nurturing meal time with candle light and joyful conversation, as if we were having a royal tea party. This was not an instant fix but did help me bring a different energy to the room and a more imaginative way to direct the children.

Shifting my attention helped in another situation with lighting the candle at snack time. The children had developed a habit of talking over the blessing song and waving their hands to catch the smoke when the candle was lit. I tried to bring the image of

a fire fairy and its magic. I sang, “Here is the spark of father sun’s light,” and truly focused my attention on lighting the candle, observing the flame with keen interest. Sometimes the fire fairy’s magic showed us some sparks. More and more children joined me, and we had more days with quiet blessings.

Children can give us vivid examples of how they perceive the world—if we observe and listen. One day I brought a boy to his previous parent-child classroom to put on his rain suit. He looked around and said, “I used to live in this house with my mommy. Ms. Abby also lived with me. We baked bread together and made butter. My mom still lived with me.” For adults, this was just a room where he used to come a few hours once a week. But for a child who lives so much in the present moment, memories from that time stayed with him as an image not attached to any past or future. That moment in the room stayed with him as a picture of a house where his mother, the teacher, and he all lived happily together.

Mother Earth, the great storyteller to whom our children know how to listen, offers a bounty of stories throughout the year to inspire our imaginative speech. Our class was fortunate enough to witness a little robin building a nest right above our garden gate. Before she started her construction, she seemed to be doing a site survey, flying and chirping around the tree. One boy observed, “The robin is here to tell us that spring is here.”

As the mama robin finished the construction, she laid her eggs and began brooding. We watched in awe at how still she sat upon the eggs. Later, during rest time, I mentioned the robin so quietly resting in the nest. The children were able to relate to the image easily and went under their blankets contentedly.

On the day we planted sunflower seeds in our garden, one boy could not settle down for afternoon rest, flipping and flapping his blanket. The image of the seeds having to go under the soil and rest to grow so tall and strong helped him. These images of the brooding robin and the planted seeds were taken

directly from experience and made a strong, resonant impression on the children.

As children enter the earthly realm, everything speaks to them of their connectedness. All is still one. There is no strong separation between themselves and the world. It helps in our speaking if we remember this. Instead of saying “you” and “your,” use “we,” “our,” and “us” more often. “You need to put your head on the pillow” becomes “Our head goes on the pillow.”

Even more inviting is when the object itself has a voice; “The pillow is waiting for our head.” The world speaks to children and they listen and take action in conversations with the world with a devotion Steiner calls “bodily religion.” This devoted engagement of will and body nurtures the child’s feeling of belonging unreservedly to his surroundings. Children identify the world through participation. Margret Meyerkort points out in *The Challenge of the Will* that as the child participates with this bodily reverence toward the world, “he experiences not an increase in knowledge, but an awesome meeting with what divine forces created” (59). It must be active participation, different from “following instruction.” After children are given ample participatory movement of the limbs, the outer world begins to resound in their souls in pictures. The words are there not to give them information but to offer experience through sound, movement, and imagination.

Speaking to the child’s living experience of the world can be especially inviting and effective when a child is reluctant to do what is asked or when needing to have a boundary drawn. It could be as simple as “The shoes are waiting” instead of “Put your shoes on,” or “Mr. Soap stays on his bed” instead of “Don’t pick up the soap from the dish.”

It is essential to remember that love, joy, and humor are key ingredients in making our words and images alive and magical. Only good words and phrases delivered with love reach our children; words spoken with irritation and anger can harm them. I took the hand of an uncooperative boy to go inside.

My saying, “You need to hold my hand” or “We all listen to the teachers” did not still his fussing. Then at the door I said with a smile and enthusiasm, “Oh, the old grumpy stays in the garden,” and gestured to suck something out of my face and throw it away. His mood instantly shifted, and he followed my gesture with a smile.

Especially in our busy modern times, adults are hurried and stressed. It is getting more rare for our children to engage with grown-ups who meet life with joy, enthusiasm, and laughter that is not sarcastic. Trusting that every child is golden and having a twinkle in our eyes are important capacities we need to develop in communicating with them.

My exploration of the language of children can be summarized in this:

- The world speaks, and the world invites.
- Observe and listen with an open heart.
- Offer an invitation instead of giving an instruction.
- Always have love in your heart and a twinkle in your eyes.

To develop all of this takes practice. When looking for an image and the right words, I ponder what quality the imagination should bring and what archetypal image carries that quality. It is helpful to have a clear picture/imagination in my mind, which can lead to an animal, plant, elemental, or such. Great picture books like those by Elsa Beskow and Sibylle von Olfers offer wonderful starting points.

Keep a nature observation journal, read fairy tales every night to nourish your soul and strengthen your imagination muscle. ♦

Resources:

- Meyerkort, Margret, *The Challenge of the Will* (Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press, 2000).
- Perrow, Susan, “The Mystery and Magic of Metaphor,” *Gateways* Issue 65 (Fall 2013), at 5-8.
- Steiner, Rudolf, “The Poetry and Meaning of Fairy Tales” (Berlin, February 6, 1913). Retrieved from wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/PoeTales/19130206p01.html.
- Udo de Haes, Daniel, *The Creative Word: The Young Child’s Experience of Language and Stories* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: WECAN, 2014).
- Udo de Haes, Daniel, *The World of Fairy Tales: A Path to the Essence of the Young Child through Fairy Tales* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: WECAN, 2017).

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