

How You Are Like Eagles

Thought, Imagination, and Fourth-Grade Nature Study

Jack Petrash

(published with kind permission from
Renewal, vol 21 no. 2, 2012)

It was a perfect fourth-grade question: “Who is the fastest runner in the class!” The hands shot up. I knew they would. Fourth graders divide their classes like fractions into a wide array of categories, the fastest runner being just one of them.

“Matthew” was the first answer that came from the students, and there were nods of agreement throughout the classroom.

“Who’s second?” I asked.

“Lydia is the second fastest.” Again there were nods of agreement, no dissension.

“Third!” I continued.

“Ben,” they said.

“Okay,” I said. “If I were to ask Matthew to stand by the window of our classroom and, when I said “Go,” to run across the playground, touch the fence, turn around and run back, how long do you think it would take him?”

The students thought for a few seconds and then the hands went up again.

“Sixty-five seconds,” one student suggested. “No, that’s too long,” came an immediate reply. “Forty seconds.”

“Twenty-seven seconds,” an exacting student offered.

I wrote all of the times up on the board and then said something that I knew would make this lesson memorable.

“Matthew, stand up. I want you to climb out of the classroom window and, when I say “Go,” you are to run across the playground, touch the fence and run all the way back. But first, who has a watch with a stopwatch?” (There is always a fourth-grade boy with one of these!)

Matthew climbed out the window while envious classmates looked on. He waited for his signal and raced across the playground and was back in thirty-two seconds. Lydia went next. Her time was thirty-five seconds. Ben was third, and his time was thirty-seven seconds.

Of course, there were more students who wanted a turn, both to run and climb out the window, but we needed to move on. I had a lesson in mind, and all of this was just the beginning.

I started my Waldorf teaching career nearly forty years ago, and I can’t always remember where I get my ideas for lessons. So many conversations have faded in my memory that I have started to think that these ideas are mine. But the lesson I wanted to impart on this day I knew originated with Dorothy Harrer.

Dorothy Harrer was a master class teacher for many years at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York City back in the 1950s and 1960s. Her imaginative and effective methods of presenting the Waldorf curriculum have been preserved in a series of books on teaching mathematics, English, and other subjects. The lesson I was planning to use in our fourth-grade study of the eagle came from Harrer’s book *Nature Ways*¹.

Now I was ready to ask my students the next question. “Can anyone think of a way to get to the fence and back more quickly? I scanned the faces of my students and I could see by the look on one student’s face that I had not been precise enough with my question.

“But you cannot use a machine,” I added.

The student in question sighed with exasperation. He had been thinking “motorcycle.” However, his spirits revived instantly.

1 Harrer, D. (1973). *Nature ways in story and verse*. Chicopee, MA :Inspiration House

“Bicycle,” he said.

He was disappointed when I informed him that the bicycle is also a machine even though it doesn't have a motor. Now the rest of the class was puzzled, as well.

Then a quiet girl who sat in the back of the room calmly raised her hand. When she answered, I realised once again how perceptive and thoughtful these quiet children can be “With my eyes,” she said. “I can look at the fence and look back to the school instantly.”

I smiled and then said to her, “But what if I had asked Matthew to run all the way down the hill to where the first-grade plays at recess? What if I had asked him to go to a place that you couldn't see, how could you get there quickly?”

Another thoughtful child in the back of the room raised her hand.

“In my imagination,” she said. “In my imagination I could go to the first-grade playground and back in an instant.”

Now we were at the place where we could really begin Dorothy Harrer's lesson. I asked the children to close their eyes and to imagine that they were all outside the classroom, as Matthew and Lydia and Ben had been. Then I asked them to imagine themselves in the air above the school, something they had done when they had made their map of the school grounds - also part of the fourth grade curriculum.

“And now,” I said, “imagine yourself flying west above the asphalt. Look down; there are the basketball courts and the trees by the first-grade playground. Let's cross the Potomac River. We are over the state of Virginia. Look up, you see the mountains in the distance. Those are the Blue Ridge Mountains. Let's keep going.”

I continued to describe our imaginative journey across West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois - states which, as I told them, we would study in fifth grade. We crossed the Mississippi and looked down on the Great Plains. Finally, we could see the Rocky Mountains in the distance. From this point on the lesson was pure Dorothy Harrer:



Blue Ridge Mountains, Virginia in the distance

Let's let our quick, wakeful thought make its way, now, in this instant, to the high mountain cliff that rises up above the prairie way off to the west, farther than the eye can see, or legs can run. Let's go to the rocky ledge, like a platform, where the storms have made the rock break away. Far below us lies the prairie. Far up above rises the top of the cliff. Here on the ledge we find that a bird has its dwelling, which looks like a giant robin's nest. Sitting in the nest are three strange-looking young birds, already bigger than any robin. We hear the sound of wings beating in the air. As we are only here in thought, we are invisible, and the great bird that soars down to the nest doesn't even see us. And life goes on as if we weren't there at all. The big bird has a body that is almost as long as Neal is tall. Its wings spread out so far on each side that we could lay a yardstick down three times from one wing tip to the other. Now we know that it is an eagle.

In its great, hooked claws the eagle carries a fat, but lifeless jackrabbit. This it lays before the young birds, which crouch and spread their small wings and utter squeals of excitement; but they do not approach the rabbit. The mother bird then stands on the dead rabbit and with her strong hooked beak begins to tear it into pieces, swallowing some herself and passing some with her beak over to the beaks of her children. Each one of the eaglets patiently awaits his turn. It isn't long before the rabbit has disappeared entirely.

Just as the meal is over, the father eagle soars down from the blue sky, carrying in one foot a dead mole, which he soon disposes of with a few sharp strokes of his beak.

Then, as the mother settles down and draws her eaglets under her great wings, the father perches on the rim of the ledge. He scans the sky as if on the lookout for any enemy that might sail down upon them. He peers downward toward the prairie as if to spy out another meal moving among the grasses far below.



Water colour by a Taruna Diploma Student – Tutor: Van James

As I describe the eagle lifting up and rising on the warm air currents, I tell the children how the eagle is a kin of the air, how its feathers have air within them, as do its bones, and how it even has small air-filled sacs within its body. I describe how, as the eagle rises high above the land, it can with its keen vision spot prey hundreds of feet below. “The eagle,” I say to the children, “has remarkable eyesight. I have been told that if an eagle could read, it could read a newspaper from a quarter of a mile away.” When I finish saying this, the eagle draws in its wings and plummets toward the earth like a bolt of lightning, grasps the prey with those sharp talons and carries it away. Finally I say to the class:

Do you know, children, how you are like an eagle? It is in your thinking that you can see so clearly. It is in your thinking and your imagination that you can soar to such height and move from one place to another in an instant. It is in your thought-filled, wide-awake mind that you are like eagles.

That was my moment of insight, and I wondered why it had been so long in coming. In a Waldorf school, we are continually helping the children understand what it means to be

a human being. We teach many subjects and develop a wide array of capacities, but that understanding is the underlying aim. I realize that above our school entrance there is a sign, written in invisible letters, like that in Plato’s Academy: Human being, know thyself. What else should a school based on anthroposophy - the wisdom of the human being - offer its students?

I had started out to teach the children about the eagle. But, in the end, they also learned something about themselves as human beings, that in their capacity for imagination and thought, they have the power and strength of that magnificent ruler of the skies.◆

Jack Petrash is currently the sixth grade teacher at the Washington Waldorf School. He is also the director of the Nova Institute (www.novainstitute.org) an organisation working with parent and teacher education and teacher renewal. Jack is the author of *Understanding Waldorf Education: Teaching from the Inside Out* and *Covering Home: Lessons on the Art of Fathering from the Game of Baseball*. Over the years Jack’s articles have appeared in *Renewal* and the *Washington Post* and his audio segments have been broadcast on National Public Radio.

