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THE MASTER TEACHER
A Personal Reflection

Carol Hillman

I am considered a master teacher. It's not the length of my time at work that makes it so--although the years count in their own way. Rather, it is the depth of experiences that blend to form the person I am, the person whose ideas and feelings can be translated in the classroom. Indeed, longevity on a job is not necessarily a plus. It may be easier to do the same thing year after year, but that offers little excitement or satisfaction.

Working with young children requires, more than anything else, an attitude based on a willingness to grow. An attitude that puts you, as well as the children, in the role of the learner. A dynamic attitude and a personal commitment, so that excitement and satisfaction can be there for you.

There are all kinds of ways to grow. Some are obvious and a delight to pursue. Some are more obscure, difficult to understand, and harder still to see in proper perspective. But each has its place in the scheme of things, to make up that very real person and that very real teacher.

I think a lot about who I am and who I want to be. Where I come from is not as important as how I structure my day and my dreams for the future. I see dreams--or goals--as vital forces in one's daily decision making. When the alarm goes off at 5:30 each morning, it is often a struggle to remember that I have made a conscious decision to walk briskly each day before dawn, to keep myself in good physical condition and my energy level high.

Two years ago I decided to return to Bank Street College of Education after seventeen years, in pursuit of a second advanced degree in Supervision and Administration. Returning to graduate school has been a tremendous source of intellectual stimulation. New books and ideas have had an immediate bearing on my classroom techniques, and the infusion into my life of new people who share my work interests has stimulated my thinking and helped me assess where I was in relation to where I wanted to be.
Many years ago I made another momentous decision: to buy a farm in Western Massachusetts that I had once shared with my former husband. This brought a whole new dimension into my life. It became an opportunity to deepen my enchantment with nature. I concentrated on growing things—organic vegetables and small fruits. I could go birding, spend hours observing happenings at a beaver pond, walk along an old dirt road in search of efts, and restore an abandoned apple orchard to its former production and beauty.

Each summer, I grow milkweed in my garden to attract the Monarch butterfly. I collect the caterpillars that emerge from her eggs and take them to school, so the children can observe that miraculous metamorphosis. I take long walks in quest of abandoned bird nests, so the children can see how each species constructs its home. I dig ground pine and pipsissewa and gather British soldiers and star moss to arrange a natural habitat in an old glass fish bowl for the red efts that I have found, and I take it all back to school. I take crickets and earthworms from the compost, as food for the toads that I transport to the classroom. I gather apples for applesauce, baked apple slices, apple muffins, apple pancakes, apple crisp, apple snacks for our guinea pig, and apples for the staff and the children.

A ribbon snake suns himself on a large flat rock by the climbing pink rosebush by the side door, and I have come to terms with him and his ilk. A resplendent red fox gathers mice after the meadow is mowed. Once I met a porcupine in the raspberry patch. I asked him, "What are you doing here?" and soon found out.

I see matted grass in the orchard where the deer come to sleep and to nibble tender end buds from the trees before retiring. Rich material for stories to tell!

Each summer I put my sleeping bag near the perennial garden and lie on my back to drink in the night sky. Sometimes I rise early, before the sun, to tune in a symphony of bird calls that greets each day. I share this special world with family and friends, and I continue to grow as a learner. In nature I find a certain calm, which I carry back to school.

One of the teacher's most important jobs is to create a climate within her classroom that balances comfort and stimulation. The teacher is architect: seeing that walls are painted a soft pastel—a good background for children's art; and carefully choosing pictures—male
and female construction workers with hard hats on, a lone lighthouse guarding a rock shore—all mounted on shiny, brightly colored thick paper from the local printer.

Many years ago, on my first job after college, I worked at a New York City art gallery and learned, among other things, how to hang an exhibition. Since then I have carried with me the importance of placement. Those spaces in between are just as important as the pause in music. Blocks in their shelves. Baskets of parquetry blocks. Puzzles and pegboards. Each needs to stand apart, to command its own space and importance. These ordered arrangements give visual effects. Thus, the shelf in our library corner displays fewer rather than more books.

I think about groupings and the difference it makes having eight children at one table and six at another. I think about ease of conversation and availability of materials, and I set up projects accordingly. As an architect, I think about movement and the natural flow of activity as children move through the morning involved in their various work. A long strip of red mystic tape on the floor directly in front of the block shelves provides an aisle where children do not build, but can move with ease to fetch the blocks they desire. Block building is not done next to the cubbies, because cubbies are a private place, always available to their owners. Floor puzzles should stay clear of the passage way between rooms, and the housekeeping corner is a no-parking zone for the big tow truck.

I think about aesthetics, about establishing and maintaining a beautiful environment. Setting up is the easier part. Maintaining that fresh, inviting look demands far greater effort. Each new art project means fresh newspapers on tables, because paint and glue find their way off paper and wood collages. It means that easels are attended to and paints checked each day. No muddy yellow is allowed to remain. Each morning the easels look like new.

When block play is in progress, unused blocks go back on shelves to make floor space more available and inviting to those smaller sized architects. And at rest time I remind the children they should be islands unto themselves, contrary to what John Donne pronounced.

As an architect, I am keenly aware of safety in the classroom, on the playground, and in our large motor room. Children wear hard hats when they build tall buildings or work near them. Floors are
dried quickly when a bowl of soapsuds overflows or orange juice is spilled. We have one-way traffic in the large motor room on the tumbling mat and the balance beam. Outdoors, I watch for younger children walking too near the swings.

Being an architect in the classroom requires thinking about many things. It requires creating and maintaining an aesthetically pleasing world, with an eye towards maintaining an easy traffic flow, continual visual order, and safety. These are cornerstones.

In the classroom I must be a scientist too, for there is much to be gained by observation. I spend time watching. I would rather be all-seeing than all-knowing (if I had the choice) because it puts the emphasis on observation and interpretation rather than on definitive answers. I want to be a better listener than a talker. I like to be there when the children are actively engaged in their work, after we have had our morning meeting and everyone has a plan. I want to be there if I am needed.

I sit in a small orange chair in the corner of the block room, next to the housekeeping corner and not far from the science area. I am there so I can tie a bow at the back of a summer frock which serves as a bridal gown, or put our guinea pig on a child's lap or back in her cage again. I want to be there to ask of our builders: "How can you attach one building to another?" I want to help the children expand their thinking. But basically, I am there to watch and listen.

I keep my red leather notebook with me, and spend some time writing anecdotal records. When the children ask what I'm doing, I tell them I am writing things down about each of them. That it's part of my work, like building is part of their work. A question is asked and answered. Soon we both go back to our jobs. I like being there because I'm learning. I see and hear that David has gained more control; he is talking about being angry, instead of throwing blocks. He is trying hard to work things out. I see that Steven is still on the periphery of the group, still examining the equipment by himself, not yet ready to move. I like to be in the presence of children.

I like to be with the children so I can think about what's to come. To listen to their talk and find out their interests, so that together we can build our curriculum. By listening and watching I can find out whether it is time to introduce pulleys and elevators for the block structures, or whether it is time to bring out the batteries and bulbs to light up "The City" at night. I like to let the children give me ideas
about the curriculum. Listening and watching them does this for me.

There is much to fathom near the science corner. I make sure the guinea pig has fresh food and water with vitamin C. I make sure someone sprays the red efts, to keep their environment moist. I make sure that our two small toads get their daily worms. I watch the interaction between children and animals. I like to be in the presence of children and animals.

Near housekeeping corner, I hear what is being served for breakfast, be it orange juice or pina coladas. I see highheels go on. The gold lame dress is adorned with a fake grey-fur stole, and one child turns to another to exclaim; "Hurry up, damn it, I'm late for the meeting." As a scientist, I am there to listen and observe, and I like being in the presence of children who are also listening, observing, and working things out.

The learner, architect, and scientist in me come together in the ultimate role of caregiving—as child and parent advocate. I watch out for, tenderly tend, and defend.

School should be a place that parents believe in, so children will love it too and participate to the fullest extent of their being. To somehow win the trust of the parents seems to me to come first. I want them to be teacher and school advocates. It must be a two-way street.

This year at parent orientation, I decided to make the first move—to tell parents something about myself, my interests, and where and how I spend a good deal of my time and why. I shared this information to begin a dialogue and hasten the process of building trust. I hoped to ease the apprehension some parents feel before we sit down together at our first conference. Being a parent advocate can be hard, too. When one parent upsets another, I try to mediate. This risks confrontation and subsequent anger. It takes courage, but is part of the job.

I watch out for the children and let them know I am there for them. Each person takes a turn as "mail carrier," delivering the week's paintings to each child's cubby. Each gets to turn out the lights at rest time. The children know their turns will come because their names are all written down in my red notebook. I watch out to see that children try different activities. I encourage a child to paint a maple leaf and then to make a print—to taste success. I watch a child hammering at a workbench with wood, nails, and brass jar lids and
hear him shout; "Oh, my God, a nail goes through metal." A child rubs his tummy and says, "Yum!" when he tastes the maple syrup that has been boiling down all week in the classroom. I like children to feel good about what they do and about themselves, so that they can become risk takers and can expand their social and intellectual horizons.

When things don't work out so well, when the corners of the child's mouth go down and eyes fill with tears, I have a lap available and an arm to put around that small shoulder. I say that we can work things out and together figure how. When a child throws a block, I ask him to go into our other room until he is steady enough to return to work. I watch out and say, "Stop, you are not allowed to push in front of John," or "No, you may not take blocks from Elisabeth's building."

As a master teacher, I revel in all these roles--as learner, architect, scientist, caregiver, and advocate for children and parents. There is great satisfaction in that.

Carol Hillman is currently the head teacher of four year olds at The Nursery School--Westchester Ethical Humanist Society in White Plains, New York. She is a 1967 graduate of Bank Street's Early Childhood Education program and in June, 1987, will receive a second degree, this time in Educational Leadership.