

# A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

“I looked into your eyes and thought, ‘Oh, there you are.’” Tina Reeble spoke these powerful words to the program presenters for 2014 World Forum on Early Care and Education in Puerto Rico. Her message crossed the miles and months of preparation, the thousands of e-mails and remote communications. She brought us together in the moment, into the present intimacy of eye-to-eye physical connection. Her delivery and her choice of words made each of us sit up proudly in the joy of being recognized. Isn’t that what we all want, what we all need, after all — to be seen?

We came into the room as individuals, many as strangers to one another, and yet we were able to recognize each other through the power of our common purpose. We knew each other through our shared vision to lift up our world’s young children. “Ah, there you are. I see you. You matter to me.” It feels good. It’s empowering — being recognized, feeling visible, having presence. It’s acknowledgement and connection. It’s validation. Being seen, we feel more accountable for our actions. This connection to others brings us into the open and exposes us. And we move forward as our best selves.

*“If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.”* Wayne Dyer

Many of us come from cultures where eye to eye contact is a sign of respectful seeing, others where this intimacy is

inappropriate — where there are other ways to know and be known. Some of us have been taught strategies for how to raise hands so that ours is the hand recognized. It was the 4th of July and as the parade wove through downtown Manzanita, Oregon, clowns and firemen threw candy to the children, well, most of the children. There was definitely an art to being seen, even when it was about candy and children. So Blake offered on-the-job training to his kids on how to be seen during a parade so the clown tosses you a Tootsie Roll. Jonah worked on his wave and the candy flew his way.

“Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It’s about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.”

Brené Brown

*(The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are)*

Presidential candidates and children and sometimes all of us want to be visible, but each of us has times when we don’t want to be seen, when we want life to swirl around us.

When Roger and I lived in New York City in a previous stage of our lives, we learned that to possibly appear as an insider, one never looked up, one never looked at faces passing by — one moved as if in a bubble, bumping against and surrounded by others but not connecting. I'm sure we didn't fool anyone, but then we were the only ones who knew who we were trying to be; the rest of New York City wasn't looking!

*"I am invisible, understand,  
simply because people refuse  
to see me."* Ralph Ellison

We were having lunch in a lovely little bakery — my daughter, granddaughter, and I — and Schon wanted a cookie. We gave her the money to pay for it herself and stood nearby, giving her some space but on the alert. She waited patiently, and then she just waited. No one saw her over the high counter. She was short and small, putting on a brave face to try out a new social skill; and then she was short and small and frustrated. Sagging shoulders revealed her emotions.

My mother and I went shopping for a jacket, and although she was the one choosing the jacket and fully in possession of her faculties, the salesperson addressed me, only me. My mother was invisible because of her age; and, she was humiliated and angry.

*"Everyone has an invisible sign hanging from their neck saying, 'Make me feel important.' Never forget this message when working with people."*

Mary Kay Ash

There are many ways to be invisible, to be marginalized; there are many reasons we do not see and make connections with the people we encounter. Time, stress, routines, distractions all get in the way. But seeing others is one of the most powerful things we can do in a classroom or a community. When we acknowledge others, we are changing the way they see themselves and that, in turn, will impact what they do.

*"It would be too easy to say  
that I feel invisible.  
Instead, I feel painfully visible,  
and entirely ignored."*

David Leviathan

The Exchange Leadership Initiative is about making leadership in the field of early care and education visible. It's about seeking leaders in a diversity of roles and organizations who are directing the course of change for children; it's about acknowledging them, connecting them, maximizing their potential and giving them space to use their power. It's about searching, finding, and then taking the moment to say, "Oh, there you are." We know that children need us to really see them, but we as adults need to be seen as well. We need those moments when the world stops spinning and there is calm and connection. It is in those moments that we know more clearly who we are and what our lives are about. Every day many people look at us and we at them, but how many people do we truly see?

*The sky is filled with stars,  
invisible by day."*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

