



Recapturing the Land of Milk and Honey

Photos by Scott Blissad

Fremont Community School • Seattle, Washington

by Tara Katz

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I am fortunate that I have a vivid memory of my childhood. I grew up in what might have been referred to as the Land of Milk and Honey – Palo Alto, California, 1959. Back then the drive from our house to our grandparent's house wound through orchards of persimmons and apricots, oh, and apples – thus the name: Apple. My sister and I would wake up, eat a bowl of cereal, and run outside only to return home when our mother whistled, like every other kid in our neighborhood. It was expected that we would not come home until either we were whistled to, or it started to get dark. Pure bliss.

These days of childhood were loaded with exploration and adventure. Time seemed expansive and there were no limits to what we could do, because no one was watching. We seemed to live up in the old plum trees, eating the fruit



Born in California, Tara Katz and her family went to the island of Cyprus for a holiday when she was 11 and didn't return to the USA until she was 18. After completing her bachelor's degree at Oregon State University, she moved to England, where she completed her

master's in Waldorf Education. Katz moved to Seattle in 1985 and joined the team of teachers pioneering the first Waldorf School in Seattle. She returned to England to teach at the Brighton Steiner School and returned to Seattle after three years away where she has continued to teach and raise her daughter and son. In 2001, Katz joined the Fremont Community School and started their first preschool. Katz continues to be the director and lead teacher of Fremont Community School and has opened three other preschools of her own called Tara's Tots. Katz is committed to getting preschoolers outside for as many hours as possible, rain or shine, and in Seattle that's mostly rain.

daily until it was actually ripe; I know the taste of fruit through every stage of its development. When we weren't climbing trees we were tunneling or building forts. We put on the Nutcracker Ballet, complete with newspaper 'snow' which we spent hours shredding, and then we climbed up on the rickety arbor and had it "snow" down on the ballerinas. We sewed our costumes and rehearsed for weeks. Not one camera came out during the performance, no one even thought of filming it, it was just done for the moment.

Perhaps my favorite memories are those of the nothingness of these early childhood days – lying on my back, the deep smell of green grass, watching the clouds float overhead and seeing all the magical creations they formed. Hours stretched on forever, never rushed, free form and open ended. Our toys were chalk, cardboard boxes, rope and sticks and our own imaginations. In our adult-less world we built our own "homes" by stomping down the tall grasses in the field next door. There were roads, and rules, and relationships. "I'm the mom and you're the baby." Differences were worked out between kids, by kids.

My big sister held school every summer. She was seven years old, and she gave us homework every day. No one gave us workbooks, we made our own. The

neighbors had a tree house that was impressive and exclusive. If you wanted to be allowed into it you not only had to learn to climb the fireman's pole up into it, you also had to learn to climb the rope. No one pouted about this, no one was helped, we just kept at it until we mastered it and had our glory moment of accomplishment. That moment was glorious and deeply memorable.

Early childhood years are magical. Everything is new to the child, and exciting and a cause for wonderment. The senses are alive and alert in childhood. Through the child's eyes the newness of the world is brilliant. How have we lost sight of the need for children to explore in an unfettered way? How do we, as educators keep the joy of exploration and discovery alive and well in children and still teach?

Why do we constantly interrupt children, "What are you pretending? Are you a kitty?" As educators shouldn't our goal be to retain, and perhaps even enhance those senses? Life is extraordinary in and of itself, but if we, as teachers, can view the world through a child's eyes we will be able to view the world through their lens and meet them in that place.

How do we best nurture that awareness within ourselves? To begin with, I believe we must slow down and simplify, and try to imagine what it feels like to see things for the first time. Additionally, when we

walk into our classrooms we must leave our own worries and troubles outside the door and enter the magic kingdom of childhood with enthusiasm.

Adults can experience this awareness through a simple yet brilliant mindfulness exercise: Take one raisin and for a few minutes just look at it, feel it, smell it, without eating it. Finally, put it in your mouth and roll it around without chewing it, and lastly with all your attention focused on the one raisin in your mouth. First, bite it with your front teeth to feel the subtle toughness of the outside skin and next, the explosion of sweet flavor as you bite through. This is how young children experience everything new to them. Most of us have seen internet videos of babies having a first taste of lemon, and laughed at their surprised reactions. Watch any baby closely and you will see this exercise repeating over and over.

Once we have gained awareness and the ability to view the world from a child's perspective, we must then bring our consciousness into our role as educa-

tors. When a child asks, "Why?" must we always come up with an answer? Of course much depends upon the age of the child, but even three year olds will know the answers to many of their questions.

"Why can't I take the worm home?"

If instead of giving the obvious answer, we instead turn the question around, "Why do you think?"

More often than not they will have a ready reason, "Because it will miss its mom," or "It might die."

It is tempting to give answers, but as teachers our role ought to be more conscious than rote. We must retrain ourselves to pause, and to allow the child to ponder. I love the smile that oftentimes accompanies a child's answer, as if to say, I knew all along.

If we give children the chance to answer their own questions, we empower them to be aware, to come up with answers and to be courageous. It doesn't matter if we know the answers; we want them to feel their intelligence. Even answers that are "wrong" can be corrected without making a child feel wrong.

Child: "Where do Komodo Dragons live?"

Teacher: "Where do you think they live?"

Child: "In Seattle."

At this point you might be thinking that Komodo Dragons do not live in Seattle, you know they are from an island in Indonesia, but you keep up with turning the question back.

"Where would they live in Seattle?" You could even add humor, which children love. "Do you have a Komodo Dragon living at your house?"

Child: "NO! They live in the zoo!!!"

Now we know the child saw the Komodo Dragon at the zoo, and further education can happen without the child feeling like they don't know what they are talking about.

"Do you think the Komodo Dragons all came from the zoo, or do you think someone brought them here from another country?"

This delving can help them to see that many times there are many truths to a question. Let's imagine that the child says they are from Seattle; Komodo Dragons DO live in the Seattle zoo. One could mention the exhibit and how it is a desert exhibit, hot and dry, while Seattle is cool and wet. We have not seen them walking around our neighborhood, or shopping at the grocery store, so they must live in the wild – somewhere else. You can see that there is a gradual unfolding of information that allows the child the room to think and contribute to the question.



Photos by Scott Blistad



Ultimately a preschooler is probably not going to know that the Komodo Dragons originate from Indonesia, but you have never told them that they are wrong; instead you have worked together like sleuths to discover all there is to know about these creatures. By the time you bring up Indonesia the child is probably going to remember that fact forever. I love this challenge in my teaching practice. It keeps my teaching exciting and vibrant when I can't slip into the same old same old.

It is easy to see how we can change our verbiage with children, and take on this challenge in our classrooms, but it is a lot more challenging to take on how we allow kids to play outside freely, without inserting ourselves into their play. I love Waldorf Early Childhood Education for this very reason. The job of a Waldorf teacher with young children is to model work. This philosophy allows the children in preschool and kindergarten to work alongside of their teachers. Waldorf teachers usually use the word "work" when referring to "play" in children. In our society play is seen as something frivolous, something you do after work, and is seen as a luxury. I see play as absolutely essential to the health and well being of children, and it is a shame that this is still a generally unaccepted norm. When we, as teachers, work alongside the children in our care we are modeling an excellent work ethic. Additionally, we are nearby to help a young child excel in social and emotional well being, and we are available to help those children who do not know how to play. In my 30 years of teaching I have seen a dramatic increase in children who do not know how to play, and some

who do not identify with their peers. Our work now is more important than ever.

What is the difference between carefully laid out classrooms with their "zones" for different play (block play, dress-up, home, etc.) and outdoor play with stumps, boards, pots and pans, sand, water and mud? Everything. Both have their creative sides, but where they veer away from each other is the opportunity for open-ended play. One of my greatest memories is of visiting a friend. As I walked into her house her fiery redheaded son, who was three years old at the time, walked past me with a little wooden doll stroller and his "baby." I looked into the stroller I saw that his "baby" was nothing more than a two liter bottle of water rolled up in a baby blanket. Tobias took care of his baby the whole time I was there and his mother told me about how he found the bottle, wrapped it up in a blanket and had spent days taking care of it. At a conference I attended a few years ago, Bev Bos implored us to get rid of the toys in our classroom and replace them with art materials and open-ended materials: wood, rope, water and sand.

Imagine a block of wood. In a child's hand this block can be anything: a cell phone, an ice cream cone, a baby... Now imagine a baby doll. That's all it can be – a baby doll. When we allow children unfettered outside time, even in a urban

setting, but with access to sand, water and wood in any form, blocks, stumps and pallets, they are able to create anything they want... ships, houses, wolf dens. Try asking parents to bring in their trees after Christmas; the children can create endless enchantments, and when the trees are dried up and losing their needles, there are endless skills and uses for those trees. By clipping and sawing branches the children can make their own branch blocks, or branch gnomes to play with in their outdoor play.

Even in Seattle, with our endless days of cold gray rain, we bundle up the children in the school's muddy buddies and insulated rain boots and they delight in being outside. One preschool I visited did not have access to a proper yard, as they are located in a commercial building; instead they were able to fence off an area of the parking lot and create a fun play space. It takes only creativity and patience to create an outdoor space for exploration.

As a bonus, in my years of teaching I have found that the more time we spend outside, the fewer illnesses the children get over the winter months. So bundle up, let the parents know you promise to send their children home dirty, tired and happy at the end of each day, and set the children in your school free.

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