

# worthy of our children

by Margie Carter

In these uneasy, uncertain times it's especially hard to lose some of our forward thinking, outspoken champions for children. Three of my professional heroes are now gone, Anita Olds, Tom Hunter, and Jim Greenman. I know we will lose others and the work will go on, but with each passing I want to integrate the essence of their contribution into our early childhood rubric. For some years now I have been citing Anita's "children are miracles" and Jim's "places for childhood" as central to my thinking. Because Tom's words were often put to music and we played, planned, and did presentations together along with Deb Curtis, his voice stays in my ear as ongoing stimulus for my work.

One of Tom's quiet, yet persistent calls to action is his song, "Worthy of Our Children." It is one of those easy zipper songs where new phrases are offered as new verses:



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May the work we do  
Make the world we live in  
A little more worthy of our children.  
May the \_\_\_\_\_  
Make the world we live in  
A little more worthy of our children.

It occurs to me (Tom often used this phrase to offer a gem of a thought) that this simple song holds great potential for examining our work as early childhood educators. We have all sorts of assessment tools available to us now and I find this song a compelling addition. The thesaurus right here on my computer lists these synonyms for the word 'worthy': fully deserving, commendable, praiseworthy, laudable, admirable, valuable, precious, creditable. Each of these words adds a new dimension to the task of rating the quality of an early education program. Review them again. Mentally walk through a center that is familiar to you, trying on each of these words in your mind's eye . . . fully deserving . . . commendable . . . praiseworthy . . . laudable . . . admirable . . . valuable . . . precious . . . creditable. Does this center earn these descriptors? Yes, these are subjective words and they harken us again to Anita Olds:

"Believing that every child is a miracle can transform the way we design for

children's care. . . . We make it our job to create, with reverence and gratitude, a space that is worthy of a miracle."

What if our profession were more values- and less data-driven? Imagine including criteria for quality that referenced reverence and gratitude toward children! (For decades Marion Wright Edelman has demanded that our nation's policymakers provide for children in this way.)

If our work is to be worthy of our children, we must go beyond notions of programs being acceptable, meeting minimum requirements, or even attaining accreditation. Notice the sequencing of phrases in Tom Hunter's song here: May the work we do, make the world we live in, a little more worthy of our children. His call is to have our work improve the world, not just be stars on a rating scale or data on test scores. When he was alive, Tom's songs, work, and life offered teachers sustenance and inspiration. Now that he's gone, I have been singing more. And I'm offering his songs as a provocation to think again, consider other possibilities, and work with an audacious spirit of hope.

## Worthy work

Far too often we settle for mediocrity in our field. We have excuses, gripes, barriers, good reasons to feel like more is not possible. The centers I see that rise above have a strong sense of purpose, philosophical clarity, and values — rather than regulations — guiding their priorities. Instead of “They won’t let us . . .” you hear them say, “How can we figure this out?” Rather than “We can’t . . .” their mantra is “What *can* we do? What next steps can we take?” Administrators have to set the tone for this to happen, one which goes beyond cheerleading. They have to lead by example, build a strong relationship with each staff member, and put structures in place to support an ever-expanding set of respectful and collaborative relationships throughout the center. When teachers are treated in ways that reflect the worthiness of their work, they are more likely to see how their daily interactions and decisions are connected to making the world a better place. What can directors do to move this process along?

In his writing, Jim Greenman (1998) raises questions that help centers redefine their own goals and objectives. I often heard him say that we have to get a center’s philosophy off the walls and into each person’s mind. To me, this begins with the interview and orientation process where directors invite teachers into a dialogue about the values each person believes will make the world a better place. This dialogue involves diving under professional buzz words to explore deeper meanings.

### Strategy: Explore your work to build democracy

Make time in your interviews and ongoing conversations with staff to discuss how your work is connected to strengthening a democratic society. For example, if you value multiculturalism,

explore options for negotiating diverse perspectives whether or not your center demographics represent significant diversity.

- In your efforts to work as a close team, have you considered whose voice is missing at the table?
- Are there any blind spots in your assumptions or communications that are making it difficult for someone with a different perspective to contribute to your thinking?
- How might insights about this impact your ongoing interactions and planning process?

As a staff you could consider how collaborative inquiry relates to the principles of being an active citizen in a democratic society. As you take up these kinds of conversations, call for practical examples of how your values can be incorporated into your early childhood work.

- If you believe children should be respected, how does that translate into the environments you create, the routines and activities you offer, and the ways you converse and interact with them?
- If you want teachers to conceptualize their work as contributing to a less exploitative, more equitable and sustainable world, how will their workplace give them a palpable sense of what this looks like?

Generate a list of possibilities and then choose one to start your implementation process. Experiment with ways to document how you see your work as building democracy — one child, family, and employee at a time. The more teachers practice articulating this connection, the better they become at educating others about the significance of their work.

## Strengthening the teacher’s voice

In my opinion, teachers often experience a disconnect between how we expect them to be with children and how they are treated as professionals. We too easily create a culture of compliance around our standards and regulations rather than inviting staff to become a community of explorers and inventors. I see this as parallel to classroom behavior where teachers continually remind the children to be quiet, do what they’re told, and remember “the rules.” In a culture primarily focused on compliance, innovation — not to mention democracy — is at risk. When their voices are silenced and they are rewarded with worthless wages, what will inspire teachers to stay on the job and continue to examine ways to make their work more worthy of our children?

In sharing our dismay at the discouragement and lack of vitality we see in so many teachers, Tom Hunter and I often referred to the writing of Bill Ayers (1992) in our conversations. We particularly resonated with his call to bring forth the voices of teachers. “Recovering the voice of the teacher, usually a woman, increasingly a person of color, often a member of the working poor, is an essential part of re-conceptualizing the field of early childhood education. . . . The question ‘What can these teachers tell one another and the world about teaching and about children?’ has largely been ignored in favor of more distanced questions, such as ‘How shall we explain what these teachers ought to know?’”

### Strategy: Zip in more verses

Use the strategy of a zipper song to encourage teachers to find and add their voices to the vision of doing work that is worthy of our children. You could use Tom Hunter’s song (2000) as a provoca-

tion. What new verses might they like to add to express the elements we have to be intentional about if our work is to be worthy of our children?

May the *places we create*, make the world we live in, a little more worthy of our children.

May the *words we speak*, make the world we live in, a little more worthy of our children.

May the *lives we live*, make the world we live in, a little more worthy of our children.

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