



A Manner of Speaking

FutureThink was the title of the workshop Roger and I presented at NAEYC with help and support from experts in the field. We talked about what the future might be like, what our challenges and opportunities will be. But when I think about the future, I am also concerned about who I will be. Will I be smart enough, perceptive enough, strong enough, courageous enough, wise enough? Will I be one of the feisty older women I so admire or will I be overwhelmed by change and technology?

As we are getting older and as one by one they become grandmas, my friends and I talk and analyze as we have always done. But now, instead of talking about how to be Earth Mother or Wonder Woman or Super Mom, about doing it all or about getting any of it done, we talk about what kind of older people we want to be. We discuss the relationships we have with our parents and the relationships we have with our children.

On sunny days, we know we can be whoever we want to be, that we can consciously construct who we become, that we can build and remodel the relationships in our lives. On rainy days, we just feel overwhelmed.

In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Sherman Alexie says: "And just like everybody else, Indians need heroes to help them learn how to survive." I suggest that to help us take steps in constructing our future selves, we look for heroes and we model ourselves after what we most admire about them.

Let me tell you about some of my heroes.

Lella Gandini is the woman who began telling the story of what was happening in schools in Reggio Emilia and Pistoia and other places in Italy. She has spent her time and energy teaching others, inspiring them to see new possibilities. The other night my daughter, Amy, and I were cooking pasta with Lella — actually, we were mostly watching. But every now and then Lella would ask for something — in Italian. Amy doesn't speak Italian; but I watched as she paused and then figured it out. Teaching, always teaching — in such a natural, effective way. I want to share the ideas and joys I discover. Lella is my hero.

There is an elderly man at my church named George Gould. Before the service begins, he walks through the congregation, shaking hands and greeting as many people as he can. At first I thought he was just friendly, but as I eavesdropped on his greetings, I learned how specific and personal they were. "How was that soccer game last week?" "Is your husband feeling any better?" "Are you still planning that

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vacation?" George creates community wherever he goes. He makes people feel important. He makes them feel connected. I want to be that person in the lives of others. George is my hero.

Leona and Hans Lenschow go to Romania every year for a few months or several weeks. They work in the orphanages there, doing whatever needs to be done that day. They have come to know many of those people, and to love many of the children. What they experience there is not always easy to know, but they seem committed to lifelong participation. Rather than drawing back and inward, they are putting themselves on the frontlines of experience and risk-taking. What role models they are.

Laura Peterson had an idea. She thought that the young people of south central Los Angeles needed positive people and plentiful activities to help them feel actively engaged. So she raised \$16 million to fund Challengers Boys and Girls Club. When I asked Laura what gave her the idea that she could come up with such an idea (which is not so uncommon a phenomenon) and then know she could make it happen (definitely a rare perspective), she said, "I've just never been afraid." Laura is my inspiration for taking fearless steps to make things happen.

Finally, I want to tell you about Brenden, a 3½ year old I fell in love with last week. Brenden is the future — a little boy so full of spirit and will that he is often brought to the point of bursting.

We were taking photographs on an outdoor jungle gym. Brenden wanted to be in the picture, but he did not want help climbing into position, and he was afraid to get there himself. A few minutes later, there was Brenden at the top of the climber, crying in terror — but he did not want help getting down, and he was afraid to get down himself, and he still wanted to be in the picture.

It isn't always easy to meet Brenden's needs, but the future depends on what we do. Will the adults in Brenden's life give him the unconditional love he needs as he struggles to do things his own way? Will we wait as he struggles to untie the knots in his laces? Will we gently adjust his quilt at naptime so the RIGHT side is on top? Will our efforts be to control his impulses and his will? Or will we support the strong spirit that is his alone? Will we take away his power, or will we empower him? Brenden, the future, needs all of us who have dedicated our lives to children to work for him — with more wisdom and strength than ever before. 🧡



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