Social Justice Education: A Formative Experience

The place where I grew up is isolated, old, haunted, and ethereal. There are three enormous buildings and a dozen smaller resident houses. One of the main structures, "the Barn," is a long building. On one end is a giant octagonal room, and on the other is a large kitchen; the first floor houses the children's school, the second, at least a hundred bedrooms where guests and participants of various seminars sleep.

The children's school is an unconventional space— for lack of a better way to describe it. The walls are covered with a mural that my mother and some other women on the property created, which depicts something like a map, but lifelike— with wildlife and trees. It's sort of like the Borges short story about cartographing life on a one-to-one scale. Also, Sufi art, or paintings of men with long beards, bowing to the Beloved, and abstract portraits of majestic chickens hang on the occasional open space. The Octagon was where we had recess. It was enormous. The ceiling is higher than any other room I've ever been in, maybe. And half the ground is covered by a raised wood floor— an optimal space for what we called "movements." These unique spaces were what I imagined most buildings looked like when I was a kid, and as a result, I'd say I understand the value of intentional, affective physical space. Back to the memory.

My first, second, and third grade teacher, Steve, was a handsome guy of about thirty. Of course, when he was my teacher, I thought he was unthinkably old and was not one to assess how handsome or unhandsome an old person was. He had a red beard and wore flannel or flax button down shirts every day. His wife, Melissa and their daughter, Nelly, lived in a tipi made of canvas somewhere on the property. They had a fire pit in their home's center, and we'd use the charcoal to draw the illustrations to our stories.

Steve had us sing to the Sun at the beginning of each class— stretching out our little limbs with a rhyme to help us remember our lefts and rights. He invented captivating adventure stories for arithmetic, and he gave us each a case of square, beeswax crayons to capture the visions which moved us.

One day, a day I remember was sunny and cool, after we'd done our morning songs and stretched, Steve walked us, his little army of very adventurous children into an open pasture maybe half a mile from our classroom. I remember being the height of the grass, and grabbing and ripping at the tips because it just felt interesting and my hands wanted to feel something. Once we'd stopped, he had us close our eyes and breathe, an activity which, when I was young, I couldn't help but rebel against. I wanted my eyes open. *"Imagine you walked to this field alone. And when you arrived, you were met with the most beautiful and powerful animal. You walk up to it, and the two of you meet for the first time.... this is your special power animal."*

Eager to meet my special animal, I finally closed me eyes, and in the field that morning I met a wild, grey tiger, with huge bright blue eyes. She was soft and had a natural affinity for me, but she wasn't completely tame, and so I wasn't completely fearless. The size of our class had now doubled; my sister, Dani, stood next to a large black wolf with blue eyes; my friend Margaret was shoulder to shoulder with a dolphin, who hovered a few inches off the ground. We proceeded back to our classroom.

Steve then explained that it was time for us to make masks and costumes, and we would use our new friends as our models. So, we spent the day slopping wet, gluey newspaper to head-sized birthday balloons, patiently waiting for them to dry in the sun. While we waited, we began to write our script. He asked us, "How would all of your animals interact? They should have an adventure together." That was easy enough to invent— we could just ask them. So we finished our second skins and built our props, and the next day, we gathered our parents, our friends on the community, and our new animal

partners to perform our adventure.

I like this memory because it was spontaneous, silly, playful, productive, and it demonstrates how we were empowered as kids. Sure, Steve facilitated and guided us, but we took his suggestions and created and performed a play without thinking twice about the logistics. Each step was an opportunity to be creative, to meditate on who we were. And this was not an abnormal week at Claymont. It was inventive collaboration everyday.

That said, I think that innovation and limitless creativity exist in everyone at birth— as children, because we are still fluid. Our socialization— those invisible rules (and very visible rules) for everything: speech, movement, identity expression, learning, etc... have not yet solidified. Thus, children conform— we learn how to exist "successfully" instead of pursuing our creative impulses. **But hope isn't lost.**

Through my own processes of experimentation and discovery, I've determined that a promising starting point for me in this daunting, sometimes seemingly hopeless pursuit, is language. Committing myself to using conscientious intentional speech. Think about it. If language (the language and structures of language which exist) determines (or at least guides) the way we think— and controls the framework of our ideas, it makes sense that the ways we conceive possible to express ourselves are limited to that language. Thus, if we challenge and revolutionize language (perhaps through artistic media, education, or simply on our own and in our friendships, by consciously eliminating from our vocabularies those words and phrases which carry with them/perpetuate oppressive systems) we can free ourselves from the confines which existing forms have established.