

Spaces of Courage

Stephanie Hoelscher

A guiding image: When I walk with the children through the tall, wild, and wet grasses of the meadow in early autumn, our rubber-booted feet side-step slugs and snails. Sky cloudy, mist hanging in the far hollows. Amidst this landscape of grey green shadows float cobwebs. Gossamer filaments gauze-like and light-filled they come into form with invisible connections. When the children touch them, they vanish.

When I walk with the children on this same path in the bright sun of mid-day, these gossamer connections of light, spun by the small spiders of autumn, have evaporated into the ether of the landscape.

I have taken note of this natural phenomena for years, as I companion the children in my care. And, as I now think about this question of the spirit and gesture of Michaelic courage at this time, I am seeing it as if I have never seen it before.

Courage comes in many forms. I have learned this from others. And I am learning it anew now from children, parents, and colleagues as we together walk on an earth volatile and unstable. It takes a muscle of hope to recite with the children, "The earth is firm beneath my feet."

I am freshly attentive to seeing with fresh eyes the inner and shared spaces of courage, as I consider how archetypes of courage and bravery may easily get caught up in the values and language of the dominant white culture. In the early weeks of a new school year with a class of new children, I have watched how they cross the threshold of our garden gate each morning. Some children march through the gate never turning back to bid farewell to the parent on the other side. For others the inner space of courage has a different physical manifestation. When they walk out of freedom for the first time through the gate unaccompanied, their feet brush the ground. Their eyes look downward. They dare not look back at where and who they left. And when in their own time and on their own terms they look up and into the holding gaze of me, their teacher, they know. In the shared encounter of a silent gaze, the child and teacher come to know the courage of self and the other. I thank these children for guiding me to see that the strength of courage streams from what others might call weakness or vulnerability. In these times urgently calling for classrooms of belonging, I have come to see an interior landscape where courage and belonging coexist. I know this from looking back.

A dozen children sit at four tables spaced out on a covered porch of the old farmhouse that is our school. They noisily begin to eat their warm snack of a savory grain porridge. A teacher offers carrot pieces to each child. One child is not sitting down. He follows me around as I tend to the needs of others. He is not distressed or upset in any visible way, but he has made it clear to me that he is not going to sit down with others.

Our communication is largely nonverbal. He is not yet articulating either of the two languages spoken at his home. Home with mother, father, and older brother is all he knew about the world until coming to school. During a very short moment of relative quiet, the child tugs at my hand, looks into my eyes, and points to the carrot. "Home," he says. I bob my head back and forth, as I tend to do when I am trying to show that I am working to understand. He knew I was trying.

Another teacher rushed up to tell me that the child's mother had brought a lunch box with carrot pieces. She had told the teacher, "I cut them just the way he likes them." We get the lunch box and hand it to the child. His entire being lights up as he reaches out with his hands to hold his box. He sits down at a table with others and eats. He eats the carrots chopped by his mother in the kitchen of their home and put into a box that was brought to school.

In this moment when I was struck by the deep recognition that a carrot is not a carrot I also became aware of the relational nature of courage that comes forth in our everyday life. The courage of the mother coming as it did from a thinking heart, the courage of her son in reaching deep into his being to speak without words to his teacher, and the courage demanded of me, as teacher, to listen, accept, and to act accordingly. Carrots from home alongside carrots from school helped me to see that courage is the measure of our heartfelt participation with each other. Courage and belonging are companions.

In these times touch takes courage. We know the importance of touch. We know that many children have been deprived of health touch for a long time. Can we touch the children? How do we touch the children?

Early each morning once everyone has arrived in our garden yard I gather the children for our walk.

Good morning to you

And sweet be thy day

May angels around you

Their silent watch keep

Good day good day good morning good day.

My voice is barely audible as I sing.

I sing of course for the children. I also sing for my new long-term sub assistant teacher. She is -- I would like to acknowledge -- nineteen and a self-described "materialistic, public school girly girl" who likes fashion, make-up, and perfume from France. As I -- her old and earthy counterpart -- watch her with the children who adore her, I see her as grounded, intuitive, open, and striving. I am grateful beyond words for the ways in which she is helping me to see new forms for a shared and relational courage.

And, finally, I sing for myself. I am newly aware of how I use this song each day to ground myself in the true essence of my work.

As I sing the squirming mass of bodies slowly comes together and more slowly separates as each body finds its orientation in space. I assist as needed. A gentle touch to the shoulder, a smoothing of a hat, or a full body rotation to face forward.

Finally, in an exquisitely short moment of shared in breath, I sing good-morning to each child one by one. As I sing their name, I place my hand on their head.

The children wait. They wait for their name. They wait for each other. They wait for everyone. It is a moment when I experience what Camus the thinker called living to the point of tears, not as a call for maudlin sentimentality but as an invitation to participate in life -- with body and spirit. This is an orientation of being-ness that to me requires a clear-eyed everyday courage.

In this same space and place of our garden yard, the parents of these children gathered together for the first time in community to bless the start of our year and work together. We call this our school warming. The evening came to a close with the recitation of the names of the children.

Like the gossamer connections of light bringing the autumnal cobwebs of the meadow into being the moment of sacred repose then and now vanishes. It lives on however through touch,, voice, and a courage that is what love looks like when tested by the simple everyday necessities of being alive.

And for reasons not yet clear to me I am called to close by sharing a meditative verse that I know only from working with others in a curative education course. It was given to Ita Wegman by Rudolf Steiner. It will be a task for me to understand why it speaks to me in some way of courage.

*“Hearts interpret Karma
When hearts learn to read
The Word,
Which creates in
Human Life;
When hearts learn to
Speak the Word
Which creates in
The Human Being”*