

## **Standing By Our Words**

Stephanie Hoelscher

The power of words. Public and private; shadow and light; sacred and profane. Words carry truths; they are impactful even when depleted of meaning. Words matter. What words can one stand by as stepping stones into clarity of thought, action, and purpose? What words does one stand by as gateways into a wider web of affirmations of what we do, why, and how?

I share with you five good words, words that I turn to for help in the creation of images to guide children back into imagination, imitation, and play. They also keep me grounded to what is essential in a time of change. Lastly, these five good words prompt me to stay honest, authentic, and accessible in how I talk and write to others. Five good words that I hold in my pocket.

**“Home”** The well-being of the warm animal protected in its nest is a sense of safe haven that we all share, adult or child. Home in this imagination is not a physical space but any inhabited space that bears the essence of “home” as an experience of closeness, of being present, authentic, and connected in the relationships we have with others. Home conjures up sacred hospitality. Home is serving the tea, watering the plants, laying a blanket on the grass for my parent-child class, the greeting at the gate upon arrival, and the escort upon departure.

**Home holds hands with “Earth”.** We help children build bodies that are happy homes and this happens on Earth: The Earth is firm beneath my feet. Earth is my gateway imagination into a pedagogy rooted in place and purpose. In our day-to-day work with the children, Earth graces me with concrete and imaginative possibilities. When I talk about rhythm with parents, I turn to Earth. When I strive to create a shared understanding with families about the need for movement, practical work, and play, I share living pictures of the children that are intimate, proximate, and specific to the here and now on Earth. One may trust that wonder, awe, and joy await discovery when walking on Earth if certain conditions are met: patience, presence, and attention. Earth grounds, inspires, recalibrates. Perhaps most importantly, Earth awakens us to the urgent need for healing.

**Home and Earth flow into “Play.”** As a recognized right of childhood under the United Nations, play is a pillar of our pedagogy and a gateway into understanding, alliance-building, experimentation, and self-development. Play is a bridge into lively conversations with parents in that it begins with a common, shared experience: we have all played. Play is a lens into understanding children; it allows for observations which in turn are a mirror of how I need to be in order to guide them in their own becoming. In their play, children are telling me to deepen my skills at facilitating play. They ask me to be playful, to bring a light note, to infuse the

spoken word with a spirit of the silly in puppetry and storytelling, because in the end, it is good not to take things too seriously.

**Play flows into “Spirit”.** Spirit first came to me in the form of a single encounter. In an intimate scene familiar to us all, parents and teachers sat in a circle for a meeting. An assistant teacher spoke to describe how she perceived her role with their children: “I see my job as keeping the heartbeat.” These words brought the circle to a threshold of a new way of seeing, animating courage, and provided me with my

working understanding of Spirit. The root of Spirit is the Latin *spirare*, to breathe. The circle breathed together. We are led to feel ourselves inextricably part of something larger than the narrow, personal, ego-defined self. We are reminded of the world's permeability and our interconnectedness with all beings and the natural world. Spirit brings us to find meaning and purpose in life. It opens the door to beauty, wonder, and awe.

**All Stream into "Wisdom"**. Wisdom awaits. Wisdom is the repository of everything that has come before me. Wisdom resides in the next person we meet; it shines in the play of children; it rustles through the leaves on the wind through the trees. Wisdom waits to be received through serving, caring, and being open to needs beyond oneself. Are we available, accessible, accepting, adapting, attuned, attentive, and listening? Standing by wisdom means that our differences do not divide us; we do not stand on opposite banks of the river but join together in currents carrying knowledge of the past dissolving into the present, illuminating a way into a future.

**Home, Earth, Play, Spirit, Wisdom**: Five good words premised on freedom, stitched together with attention intertwined with the connective tissue of love and hope. Words to stand by, as an ode to being human. What are your five good words?