

***Building Bridges Through
The Gifts of Early Childhood***

NMAEYC 2009 Early Childhood Conference

March 7, 2009

Hello, Hello, Hello and how are you?

Teach Me In The Key Of Life

I've been waiting for you
I have been waiting all my life
To spend this time with you

I am full of questions, adventures,
Curiosity, imagination
I am full of fears, doubts, confusions,
Nightmares, dreams

I am the cowardly lion. I need a badge
For courage. So do you.
I am the tin man. So tight I forgot about
My heart. How's your heart?
I am the scarecrow. Hangin; so lose my
Brains feel unhinged. Does yours?
Sometimes I'm GrumpySleepyDopey
BashfulDocSneazyHappy.
Sometimes I'm seven new dwarfs as yet unnamed.

I love to sing
I know the words to 2,437 songs.
Teach me through songs.
Let me paint, doodle, scribble, draw,
Carve, fix, sketch-do.
I can't keep still.
I'm spaced-out, far-out, Star Wars,
Superman IV, Rock' N' Roll, Disco,

Punk, Psychedelic, tuned-out, right-
On, cool age, electronic, stereo,
Video games, computerized,
Technicolor, ten-speed kid
I need action!
Keep it moving!

I love to read baseball cards, album
Covers, TV schedules, movie ads,
License plates, t-shirts, buttons,
Posters, cartoons, cereal boxes,
Recipes, highway signs, historical
Markers, magazines, picture books,
Sad stories, weird poems, animal
Histories, lost-and-found boards...

Let me ask my questions—even if you
Don't know the answers.
Dumb questions, like who started
Numbers?
Do caterpillars know they're going
To turn into butterflies?
Where does the white go when the
Snow melts?
Why does time fly?
How do we see?
What do you see?

It's not my birthday, but everyday can't
We celebrate something?
Colors, seasons, Tuesdays, Mexico,

Circles, houses, maps, our names,
Numbers, one seed, our journals,
Favorite books, inventions, rivers,
Peace!

Why can't we celebrate our country on the
Fourth of October or the twelfth
of May.

We don't have school on the fourth of
July!

Everyday let's celebrate something!
Like the wonder and power and miracle
Of life—of being here, learning
Together, with all our fantastic
Powers.

Surprise me. Amaze me. Startle me.
Challenge me. Try me. Laugh with me.

Love me. Teach me.

In the "key of life,"

And I promise I'll

Surprise, amaze, startle, challenge,
Try, enjoy, and love you!

Good Morning, that was Mimi Brodsky Chenfield's – Teaching In The Key of Life a fitting homage to The Concept of Building Better Brains.

It is indeed a pleasure to be here with you at the NMAEYC 2009 Early Childhood Conference.

I come before you this morning as a fellow teacher and child advocate who has been on this journey for over 35 years, trying to do the right thing for children.

I come before you this morning, to applaud, and celebrate the awesome work you do on a daily basis on behalf of children, and their families.

I also come to you this morning to tell you that all that I am and could hope to be and all that I know and am able to do, I have learned in the magical, mystical, mercurial company of children, and from dedicated, determined, diligent colleagues like yourselves.

In reflecting on our collective work, I am reminded of the words of the theologian, Beverly Hass when she said, “We are Children of God, serving God’s Children.”

New York educator, Lorraine Monroe, once said, “Children are a gift from God, and our gift back to God is to do the right thing for children.”

Speaking of children and God, I would like to share with you some examples of children’s beginning attempts to construct meaning in their narratives, by reading excerpts from one of my favorite books, *Children’s Letters to God*.

Dear God,

Thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.

Signed,

Joyce

Dear God,

It rained for are whole vacation and is my father mad!

He said some things about you that people are not supposed to say, but I hope you will not hurt him anyway.

Your Friend

But I am not going to tell you who I am

Dear God,

How come you didn't invent any new animals lately?

We still have just all the old ones.

Signed,

Johnny

Dear God,

If we come back as something please don't let me be Jennifer Horton because I hate her.

Signed,

Denise

In celebration of the magnificent, eloquence of the sights and sounds of children, I have chosen for my topic today, “Building Better Brains Through The Gifts of Early Childhood”.

I will be guided in my remarks, by the Three B’s of speechmaking, as taught to me by my college speech and drama professor- Dr. Payne. P A Y N E although at times he could be a P A I N. I’m sure he would say the same about me.

Now the B to which Dr. Payne referred, was the verb, To Be,

Not B, as in the letter of the week an inappropriate practice often offered as a part of the Pedagogy of Poverty in many early childhood classrooms.

But as my friend, and colleague, Lillian Katz would say, that’s a topic for another day.

Any way, the three B’s as taught to me by Dr. Payne are:

Be Interesting, Be Brief, and Be Seated

So in tribute to Dr. Payne, I will attempt to follow his prescription for speechmaking.

Of course there's also the wisdom of a Baskley who said, "the best audience is one that is Intelligent, Inattentive, and Intoxicated".

Okay, so I'll settle for two, out of three. Who knows, by the end of this speech you may feel a little intoxicated, or perhaps wish that you were.

As I prepared my speech, I became mindful of what I choose to call *Maurice's four inconvenient truths* that must be attended to as we seek to Build Better Brains Through The Gifts of Early Childhood.

THE FIRST TRUTH

The joy of childhood is becoming an endangered, developmental species that risk extinction unless we harness our collective hearts, hands, and minds to restore it to its rightful position along the developmental continuum.

THE SECOND TRUTH

An extreme strand of toxic waste, in the form of No Child Left Behind, is spreading across thousands upon thousands of Early Childhood classrooms through a push-down curriculum and push-out of play and choice activities, placing young children at serious risk of becoming Hooked-On Phonics and Stuck-On Stupid— Totally ill-prepared to function in a global society.

THE THIRD TRUTH

The achievement gap between low income children and their middle class peers is real and significant and reversible, if we are willing to make significant investments in high quality Early Childhood programs from infancy through Grade 3, focusing on

the social/emotional and cognitive development of each child, at each milestone, while also attending to teacher working conditions and salaries, commensurate with those of the public schools. (Worthy vs. Living – 1968 salary). All this talk of Wall Street and Main Street, What about Sesame Street? The place where we dwell – Where is our bailout? We stimulate the economy each and everyday! We're the investments that keeps on giving.

THE FOURTH AND FINAL TRUTH

The opportunity for children to learn at high levels to realize their full potential, to be successful in school and in life, regardless of their zip code, home language, disability, ethnicity, culture or race, is totally dependent on having a capable, competent skillful teacher who has the will and the courage to teach like Nobody's Watching – with total Abandonment – Actively Engaged with the children.

The trick for us grown-ups is to put forth the effort to recapture what we knew automatically as children. What we learned in the sandbox.

Alan Gregerman, an internationally recognized organizational development expert, who consults with corporate America on how to get back in touch with the natural gifts of childhood, says in his book, *Lessons From the Sandbox*.

“We must draw upon the wisdom that we had when we entered the world as out-of-the-box thinkers. The out-of-the-box thinking that allowed us to eat with our hands, dance and sing for no reason, ask what and why, pick up and examine everything that adults refuse to touch, enjoy building castles, taking things apart and jumping in puddles”.

So our challenge, if we want to Build Better Brain is to reacquaint ourselves with brain-based principles that are a part of our ECE heritage and traditions – The 13 Gifts of Childhood.

1. The First Gift is the gift of Play – Move from learning must be difficult to learning can be easy and made fun. Play, to Gregerman, is to occupy oneself in amusement, sport or some other activity in which there is an opportunity to have fun, learn something, and make a mess”.

Fred Rogers said, “Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”

2. The Gift of Enthusiasm and Energy – Move from suppressing learner energy, to utilizing releasing and expressing energy.

3. The Gift of Focus – Move from fragmented sequential learning, to learning that is global, unified, thematic and reflects real life (work and activity that is worthy of their time – no death by dittos, turkeys or panda bears)

4. The Gift of Urgency – Move from low emotional impact and forced learning to appropriate high-emotional impact and intrinsic motivation.

5. The Gift of Leadership Move from tell and demand to suggest, ask and tell

6. The Gift of Wonder – Move from starving the brain of stimulation to enriching it through music, sights, sounds, aromas, and movement

7. The Gift of Discovery – Move from closed-ended didactical learning, to serving the multiple intelligences. I can find interesting things to do here

8. The Gift of Questioning – Move from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side. I can make inquiries regarding How, Why, When, and Where (ask too many questions)

9. The Gift of Trying – Move from one time exposure, to learning that is purposeful, consistent, and allows for re-exposure. I have many opportunities to try things over and over again

10. The Gift of Creativity – Move single focused topics to open ended explorations.

11. The Gift of Participation – Move from limited interactions to mobility to work with individuals and groups. I can find what I need and put things back where they belong:

12. The Gift of Cozy Places – Move from sterile, unitary uninviting environments to place and paces that provide emotional hooks that promote learning. I can find special places in the room.

13. The Gift of Accomplishment –Move from learning time is to celebrations and demonstrations of learning. (Pride, recognition, stretching Vigotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development) This is a safe and comfortable place.

If we are to build better brains through the natural gifts of early childhood, we must start by ensuring that we help ALL children develop their hopes and their dreams.

I must ask you my colleagues, is it possible for children not to have hopes and dreams?

No dreams of becoming a hotshot airline pilot or a daring astronaut; a famous brain surgeon or a professional basketball player; an adored ballerina or a glamorous movie star.

No dreams of living in a mega-mansion by the sea, or in an awesome penthouse in the sky?

No dreams of handsome prince and gorgeous children?

There are children in our country who have no hopes and dreams. You can see it in their eyes as they sit in a classroom. Their eyes have no light; they are dark, closed, and they don't let you in.

Their faces have no expression. Their hands lay listless; their bodies are limp; their hearts are hard and cold.

Nothing excites them; nothing really interests them.

“They're too young you say, Could they really have given up hope at such an early age? Are their dreams really gone or were they never there?”

If we are build better brains, we must assume the roles of Dreammakers and Early Childhood Heroes.

Let's start with the classroom. Do you know what I'm tired of? I am tired of going into classrooms observing **uninspired** teachers; **unintentionally** pursuing their teaching practices; **uncommitted** to the children their teaching; **underwhelmed** by their career choice; **unmotivated**; **unchallenged**.

I'm tired of going into classrooms observing **unmotivated** children; **unwittingly** engaged in mindless learning activities; with **underdeveloped learning potential and unrealized hopes and dreams.**

Where **are our** Early Childhood Heroes?

- Like the Mark Thackerays (of To Sir With Love)
- The Hyme Escalantes (of Stand and Deliver)
- the Jean Brodys (of The Prime of Ms. Jean Brody)
- The John Keatings (of Dead Poets' Society)
- Melvin Tolsons (of the Great Debaters)

whose inspirational passion, and dedication, turned ordinary, everyday teaching into extraordinary flights of excitement and imagination.

Teachers who lift children up from where they find them and nurture, engage and challenge them to reach their full potential.

Teachers who give them roots, wings, and the gift of time.

Teachers who refuse to promote the notion of little dreams.

Teachers who tell children to hitch their wagons to a star, who tell them long, long ago, in far-off and distant lands.

Teachers who take delight in introducing children to the sights and sounds of early language and literacy; such as “If You Give a Mouse a Cookie” or “A told B and B told C” or “There Was An Old Woman Who Swallowed A Fly”.

Teachers who have a passion for their craft. A deep, rich knowledge of content, who know the 13 gifts of early childhood, and are somewhat whimsical and playful in their approach and delivery. A place where magic happens everyday; abundantly, joyful, and worthy of children’s time and attention.

Pablo Casal said it so well when he stated, “Each moment we live never was before and will never be again. And yet what we teach children in school is $2 + 2 = 4$ and Paris is the capital of France. What we should be teaching them is what they are.

We should be saying, “Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique in the all the world. There is no other child exactly like you. In the million of years that have passed, there has never been another child exactly like you.

For many of our children and families we are their hope and their dreams. So we must become merchants of hopes and dreams – purveyors of hopes and dreams – entrepreneurs of hopes and dreams- and believers in hopes and dreams.

In order for us to become, Early Childhood Dreammakers and Heroes, we must transition from a disposition of Caring for Children to a disposition of Caring about Children.

You see, when we Care For Children, we only see them as “severely disadvantaged”, “at risk”, or “most vulnerable”. We see them as in need of a quick, prescribed, infusion of our cultural and linguistic superiority. We see them through a deficit prism.

When we Care About children, we see them as Capable, Competent, and Resourceful Learners. We start from the middle class assumption of Every Child, Every Day, College Bound.

When we care about children, we stop the blame game.

You see in order to do that you have to:

- Stop Blaming Children (Boys –Expulsion)!
- Stop Blaming their Language and Culture!
- Stop Blaming their Disability
- Stop Blaming the Head Start Outcomes and The State Early Learning Standards
- Stop Blaming their Parents! (They send us what they have)

Colleagues you have to have a passion for this work, it's a calling. If you don't want to do this work - go home –Become a Wal-Mart Greeter or work the register at McDonald.

When we Care About Children, when we are true dream makers and keepers of hope, we say, “Boys and Girls, I am your teacher for this year, and in this classroom we have hopes and dream. My hope for you this year is to help you to become the smartest, goodest, children in the whole wide world and my dream is to one day see you graduate from college.

And furthermore, you should know the following about our classroom:

- This is a place where dreaming is encouraged, not discouraged; where dreaming is supported, not condemned.
- There is awe, wonderment and adventure in this place.
- This is a place where ideas are developed and opportunities are discovered.
- There are interesting, challenging things to do here worthy of your time and effort.
- This is a place where's it's better to try and fail than to have never tried.
- No harm will come to you within this space by me or by others.

Gregerman reminds that when we were children we played naturally, joyfully, and constantly. All we needed was a ball, a rock, a tree, a dog, some shampoo, several imaginary friends, some crayons, something to write on, or some glue and three feathers from a bird of unknown origin and unknown cleanliness.

You see unlike adults, young children haven't figured out how to complicate things. (They learn that skill much later in life). They operate in three spheres: **Living, Exploring, and Belonging.**

In the *sphere of living*, they bring great energy and enthusiasm to everything. They have a compelling sense of urgency about important things.

In the sphere of exploring, they test the world and its limitless possibilities. They view the world through powerful images, create new ideas, connections and possibilities at the blink of an eye. And learn new things whenever possible.

In the sphere of belonging, they seek out special friendships and build close relationships – often with people and creatures, who are different from them. They look for opportunities to help out and get involved.

Gregerman’s three spheres, - provide a nice alignment with what Art Costa calls The Habits of the Mind.

Simply stated, Costa says that “Habits of the Mind” means having a disposition toward behaving intelligently when confronted with problems, the answers to which, are not immediately known.

Costa says that there are 16 such habits however for the purposes of Building Better Brains, I will only focus on 3.

1. PERSISTENCE – Persistence is the twin sister of excellence – don’t give up easily

2. LISTENING TO OTHERS WITH UNDERSTANDING AND EMPATHY – listen to what children say and do

3. RESPONDING WITH AWE AND WONDERMENT – Be curious to commune with the world around you – the known and unknown

Somehow, these three habits come to mind when I think of John Lewis' autobiography, *Walking in the Wind*.

John Lewis, a Civil Rights activist, and currently a congressman from Georgia gives a very compelling portraiture, of his early childhood, which I believe has profound implications for the work that you do.

He says, of his early years in rural Alabama, “Almost every neighbor we had in those woods was a sharecropper and most of them were our relatives.”

“On this particular afternoon, it was a Saturday, about fifteen of us children were outside my Aunt Seneva's house, playing in the dirt yard.

The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore; I was terrified. Lightning terrified me, and so did thunder.

My mother used to gather us around her whenever we heard thunder and she'd tell us to hush, be still now, because God is doing his work (He's rearranging his furniture).

But my mother wasn't with us on this particular afternoon, Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew strong, she herded us all inside.

Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside, small and surprisingly quiet.

All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. The storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky with us inside it.

That was when Aunt Seneva told us, "clasp hands, line up, and hold hands", she said. And we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising.

From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof.

Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down. And that is what you do on a daily basis. You hold down the house for children who

put chocolate fingers, everywhere who like to be tickled, who
sneak popsicles before supper, who scribble all over the wall.

You hold the house down for children who stare at
photographers from behind barbed wire; who can't bound down
the street in a new pair of sneakers;

Who never counted potatoes; who are born in places you
wouldn't be caught dead in - who never go to the circus.

You hold the house down for children who bring you sticky
kisses and fistful of dandelions; who sleep with the dog and bury
the goldfish, Who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch
money, who cover themselves with band-aids and sing off key;
who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink and who slurp their
soup,

You hold the house down for children who never get dessert,
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them; Who watch their
parents watch them die; who can't find any bread to steal, who

don't have any rooms to clean up, whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser - whose monsters are real.

You hold the house down for children whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry,
For those whose nightmares come in the daytime, who will eat anything,

Who have never seen a dentist; who aren't spoiled by anyone, who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep, - who live and move, but have no being,

You hold the house down for children who want to be carried and for those who must, for those who we never give a second chance for those we smother - And for those who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.

So, as we continue our efforts to Building Better Brains Through The Gifts of Early Childhood, let's remember to hold the house down.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of your conference.