

Dear Mimi,

Thank you for coming to visit us. I really enjoy the fun we had with each other that we had with each other. I am a very shy person, but could tell your not. It's fun having you here. OH I forgot tell you that you are a very very nice friend because I think you are playfull.

From Your
Friend,
usaphea En

Introduction:

MY Next Fifty Years



For weeks in my sixteenth summer I worked as a sales clerk at Loft's Candy Store. I was fired because I couldn't wrap! (Nowadays I'm better at rapping!) Those two weeks were the only in my entire work life that I wasn't with children or involved with issues concerning children. (Imagine if I *had* been able to wrap!)

The following summer, my friend Rhoda and I were counselors at a sleepaway camp, Jekoce, an hour out of New York City. We had the "baby bunk": our campers were the infants and toddlers of senior counselors and other camp staff. I've always loved babies, but the summer I spent hanging out with those smart, honest, creative, hilarious little ones clinched my lifelong love affair with our youngest learners. Today, with all-day, five-day-a-week programs for our newest students, I'm still totally filled with awe, delight, respect, and feelings of responsibility

to preserve the sacred spirits of those youngest members of our human family. When people ask me how long I've been teaching movement, dance, and rhythms to young children, I tell them, "I have never taught one child how to move or dance! My claim to fame is moving, dancing, laughing, and celebrating with them! They already know!"

When I began teaching in 1956, my room was a stage in an old, worn country school ten miles and ten light-years away from New York's capital city. That year New York State was caught in the traumatic changes of centralizing small districts into larger, combined districts. There was also a serious shortage of teachers and classrooms in the country. With no walls, thick theatrical curtains, and weird lights, my fourth-grade "classroom" was a place without specialists, lunches off, or bathroom breaks for teachers. I was the young, new, off-the-wall teacher on a staff of strict, linear, veteran teachers whose welcome to me was, let's say, tepid! That trial-by-fire year I learned many lessons. The most important lesson: *I had to be myself!* No matter what the pressures pushing conformity, inhibiting spirit, or squelching creativity, I had to be true to what I believed was right for the children. Long before Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory, I energized my basic texts with dance, laughter, improvisation, and hands-on activities.

A few years ago a call came in from a man who was once a boy in that fourth grade so long ago. Now a grandfather, he had come across one of my books and tracked me down. We talked for an hour. He remembered things I had totally forgotten. What hit me most about that special

conversation was his saying, “Mimi, do you know what I remember most clearly from that year?” Without hesitating, he continued, “You read us stories from *Winnie the Pooh* and we danced!”

That first year I had a sad little girl, Agnes. She was mopey and quiet and could easily get lost in the dynamics of the day. One early autumn afternoon we were out in the field playing ball. I was pitching. I noticed Agnes sitting under a tree, her head down, her shoulders slumped. I yelled, “Time out!” and ran over to her. She was crying as if her heart would break. *What’s the matter?* Under my eyes, which I’d always thought of as clear and true-sighted, she’d been left out of games and friendships by cliques that had formed in the classes. How could I have missed such an unacceptable situation? I was in shock! Upset at myself for not seeing what was now obvious, furious at the kids for alienating one of their classmates, and devastated at Agnes’ loneliness and rejection, I stopped the game, called the kids over, and told them to look at Agnes and tell me why she was crying. I couldn’t go on with class work until this was resolved, so we sat under the tree for the rest of the afternoon. We talked, we all cried, and when it was over, we made promises never to let a child be hurt in our “family.”

I knew then and I know now how easy it is for kids to gang up, bully, form tightly knit cliques, and leave others out, and I know too well how easy it is for teachers to miss such goings-on. I urge every adult in any relationship with children to treat these tragic situations as *emergency*

scenarios that must be attended to immediately! When one child suffers from bullying, when one child is left out or put down, *everyone* is hurt and the spirit of the group is destroyed. The safety net is torn, and we all fall through!

That first teaching year I wore a black-and-white tweed winter coat with a fake white fur collar that draped around the shoulders. After the Agnes crisis and resolution we'd become a hugging, affectionate, loving family group. During recess, welcomes, and farewells, even the boys got their hugs from me. (We had so much fun! Many of the kids hated weekends and played healthy when they were sick in order not to miss school.) During winter break I took my coat to the dry cleaner. I hadn't noticed that the white on the fake fur collar was now a strange grayish color. The counter person asked, "What happened to your coat?" We figured out there was only one explanation: months' worth of small faces rubbing against the collar as we hugged our morning hellos, during recesses, and our afternoon good-byes! The dry cleaner concluded that the collar was so discolored, it could not be cleaned. He recommended it be cut off and a narrower throat collar redesigned and sewn. Which it was! I can still see that coat collar with the stamp of the children's faces deep in its fake fur!

The poet Theodore Roethke reminds us that teaching is "one of the few professions that permits love." For fifty years I have suggested to education students and in-service teachers, "If you don't *love* the children, do, for their sake and yours, consider a career change!" I wish I had kept that collar.

My husband's favorite hobby is magic. He always

attends an annual magicians' convention in Columbus, and I get to enjoy the big magic show on Friday night. That show occurs the night before our Columbus Association for the Education of Young Children's annual spring conference. One year, as I was being blown away by the spectacular, logic-defying tricks (*How did they do that?*), I thought ahead to the CAEYC conference scheduled for the following day. While doves flew out of magicians' empty hands and colorful scarves appeared out of thin air, I couldn't help thinking of my talented, dedicated colleagues readying for our annual get-together. I thought of the magic in *their* hands, the amazing, mind-boggling, heartstring-plucking tricks of the trade that *those* magicians performed every day, to rare applause:

- * welcoming children who know no English and helping them learn their new language while respecting their native tongue;
- * reassuring crying, clinging toddlers that they are in a safe place;
- * comforting children afraid to try, that they may find the courage to try;
- * guiding children who never play with others to reach out and touch another hand.

I am proud to call these magic-makers my friends and colleagues.

This past year our Ohio Association for the Education of Young Children (OAEYC) shared the convention center with a national cheerleaders' gathering. Brightly colored, pom-pom-waving, glittering cheerleading groups