

Surprised by Children: A Call to Pedagogical Possibilities

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Teaching young children is an opportunity to live within a context of paradox and uncertainty. This paper describes a teacher-researcher's experiences of surprise in daily practice. I suggest that experiences of surprise, of the paradoxically expected/unexpected, the familiar/unfamiliar, and the childlike/unchildlike are opportunities to develop and sustain reflective teaching practice. The experience of surprise is more than a prompt to reflection. It is itself an embodied reflection. Lived experience comes to language through the encounter of the body/mind, and we awaken to pedagogical possibilities.

L'enseignement dispensé à de jeunes enfants est une occasion de vivre dans les paradoxes et les incertitudes. Dans cet article, l'auteure décrit les surprises de chercheurs-enseignants dans l'exercice de leurs fonctions au jour le jour. Elle avance que ces surprises, ces expériences du prévu/imprévu, du familier/non familier, des réactions enfantines/non enfantines, sont autant d'occasions de développer et de maintenir des pratiques pédagogiques réflexives. L'expérience de la surprise fait plus qu'inciter à la réflexion. Elle constitue en elle-même une réflexion incarnée. L'expérience vécue passe dans les mots à travers la rencontre du corps et de l'esprit et nous éveille à diverses possibilités pédagogiques.

You were not there the day the painters came to paint the classroom. Had you been, you would know I was not surprised about the painters' presence. I knew that we would have no classroom for two days, that our boots and coats would be in the staff room, and that as many children as fitted would be in a small work room. Nor was I surprised, as I stood in the hall with the arriving children, to feel as if I were trying to put the lid on a jar of grasshoppers. When I think about days like that, I am somehow reminded of one day a very long time ago, a day when I tried to get one more grasshopper into a jar for my younger sister's grasshopper collection. I accidentally cut the head off that grasshopper as I slammed the lid on the jar to keep the others from escaping.

The day the painters came, the children were talking, it seemed to me, all of them, all at once. They were asking questions, each one, and the parents too, who came with them, all had much to say. You have probably often heard teachers say to a group of children, "You need to listen! I need to see your eyes! I need to know you can hear me." That teacher was me. My eyes were trying to be on 25 children all at once. During one quick visual pass down the row of children lined up outside the classroom, Jeff's eyes caught mine. In the instant of that pause, he said with eyes flashing and a big smile on his face, "Mrs. Hill!

We can hear you with our hearts too!” Exasperation released its hold on my breath. “Yes!” I could say no more. I cannot even remember just what I did next, or what anyone did. I know that we did manage for the rest of the morning, and that there were many more surprises during the next two days, just as there have been since I began teaching twenty years ago.

When I say “surprise,” I do not refer to those moments when I felt shocked, saddened, or enraged. To hear a child say that her father is “really heavy into sex,” and then to hear what she means by that expression, is a shock. I have difficulty recognizing the words, hearing what I am hearing. This is an experience in which I feel surprise mixed with a fear that is full of horror and denial, repeated in split-second intervals, one barely separable from another. The unfamiliar and incomprehensible overwhelms. When I hear a child ask if he is going to eat today, that is a shock that leaves me in a torment of tears and rage. There is no “Yes!” of recognition. There is instead, “No!”—this can’t be so! These experiences are very different from the moment when Jeff announced that the children could hear me with their hearts. I had not known that, and yet when I was told, I knew it was so. The unfamiliar is somehow familiar. I am overwhelmed, but I am overwhelmed within a paradox of the unfamiliar/familiar. The experience of surprise is not shock or disbelief, it is not a sense of being overwhelmed by the unfamiliar.

We do not expect a bystander, watching the children on their way to school, to be surprised by children. Perhaps we may expect a child’s soccer coach or dance teacher to be surprised by the child. Certainly we hear parents tell us of their experiences of surprise. We also hear teachers talk of being surprised by children. In conversations we share the experiences of surprise, we gesticulate, demonstrate, and laugh at ourselves. We remind ourselves, though, that we did not laugh at the time. We remember that sometimes we simply stood, watching, listening, questioning, unable to know what to say or to do next. Only now, looking back, can we laugh.

I have come to expect the experience of surprise and to question the paradox of expecting the unexpected. Again and again we experience surprise. What, then, is this experience of surprise? Is there something about surprise that is central to our daily pedagogical relations with young children?

CHILDHOOD RECOLLECTIONS OF SURPRISE

Meyer-Drawe (1986) suggests that “the capability to be surprised by children has . . . to be learned” (p. 50). I do not remember learning to be surprised by children. Perhaps I have learned this, and have forgotten the learning. Perhaps, as Polanyi (1958) says of tacit knowing, what I have learned has disappeared from view as sugar does in tea. Perhaps the children have only reminded me of something that I knew as a child and had simply forgotten, or was unable to distinguish as something learned.

I do remember being surprised as a child. I remember that when I was a child my family frequently travelled throughout Canada, going on long, long train trips, as we called them. I remember, when it was dark, resting my elbows on the chilled, shiny, black window ledge, shielding my eyes from the lights inside the train to see what was outside. I looked into darkness that rushed by. Northern Ontario, at night, from the tracks, was to me nothing but shifting shades of black. Sky and stars were insignificant against this immense expanse through which we travelled. I remember the train sometimes stopping, nowhere, I would think. The rocking, clattering rhythm would suddenly, without warning, change. Brakes would screech with increasing intensity, and then, ominously, there would be only a silent stillness. I used to peer through the window, searching incredulously, and ask my father, "Why are we stopping here?" On many trips I asked this question, and always he would reply, "Someone is getting on."

I remember turning from the window to my father's face, looking for explanation. How could I understand what he said? Urban dweller that I was, no lights meant nowhere. Of course no one lived nowhere, so why would we be stopping? How could anyone live here? It was nowhere! If I looked over my shoulder I might be able to see this person. Maybe, accompanied by the familiar sound releasing air brakes, the train would begin to move and I would see the person enter into the light of the car. Then I would be able to see what had made no sense to me.

The experience of surprise was an unexpected arrest of movement in a vast, unknown, and dark territory. Surprise held an anticipation of encounter with the unknown and a hoped-for clarity of vision. As the moon casts light through darkness, to create those shifting shades of black, as shadows and glimmers of dimly lit spaces hinted at more beyond, so this train-stopping hinted at places and people I had not imagined.

Buytendijk (1953) says that surprise, in a child's experience, is an "intentional attitude," signifying "the arrest of the consciousness before the opaque and massive factuality of a perceived object" (p. 204). He suggests that the child experiences an "other," an object or person, as distinct from him/herself. Although distinct, the child recognizes a "certain familiarity." Thus, "this arrest, which we call attention, is impregnated with a presentiment of a possible translucidity" (p. 204).

As adults, do we remember surprise as intentionality disrupted, that is, as a disturbance of our anticipated consciousness of unity (Merleau-Ponty, 1962)? Is our experience of surprise similar to an arrest of consciousness, like the train-stopping of my childhood memory, hinting like moonlight before the dark expanse of an unknown horizon? Do we sense the possibility of cleared vision?

When we are grown up and we are teachers, do we experience an arrest of consciousness, an unexpected stopping, as I did on the train, in anticipation of a view opening onto possibilities of meaning not yet visible? Can we experience a similar arrest before the unfamiliar, a disturbance within the familiar, taken-

for-granted consciousness of our daily living in the classroom, so that our attention is presented with possibilities of seeing an “other”? Questions lead to other questions in a cycle anticipating yet another question. Within this cycle of arrest and question, we experience momentary possibilities for understanding, just a moment’s “presentiment of a possible translucidity” as Buytendijk says. With body and mind momentarily arrested in the presence of the child, I am drawn into a thoughtful, embodied reflection. There I experience “the encounter, the relationship, the between—the call of being, defined as presence or co-presence, [which] itself breaks through as the ultimate support of meaning” (Levinas, cited in Buber, 1988, p. ix). Unlike the shock and denial of unfamiliar and incomprehensible incest and hunger, the encounter occasioned by surprise draws and holds me within the between-space of my-self and “other.” Perhaps arrested in the time/space of between, the encounter will “support meaning” as Levinas suggests, and will offer an opportunity to understand something more about our pedagogical relationship.

THE CLASSROOM

I have learned something of this from children. Rebecca, a child in my kindergarten class, surprised me one day this school term. For many weeks I had not been sure of what I was seeing and hearing. I watched and listened to her, as she spoke with me and with her friends. I knew she was concerned about her parents’ recent divorce and her move into a different home. She had mentioned to me that she was moving, and she was always “checking up” on me to know where I was, what I was going to do next, and asking whether I would be in the room when she came back in from recess. In my conversations with her, I was not always sure of her meanings. I listened and I watched, trying to understand the language that hovers outside the words, trying to understand what I was seeing, and not seeing. I looked for meaning. I searched for that

third meaning . . . the obtuse meaning [that] is outside (articulated) language but still within interlocation. . . . We can understand each other about it “over the shoulder” or “on the back” of articulated language: thanks to the image . . . we do without speech yet we continue to understand each other. (Barthes, 1985, p. 55)

Rebecca was “an Other, a sort of stranger in [my] world” (Meyer-Drawe, 1986, p. 50). And yet this stranger in my world was not unfamiliar to my world. Her furrowed eyebrows and concentrated gaze, her anxious questioning, were familiar, yet I could not understand why she always wanted to know where I was and would be. I could not understand Rebecca’s difficulty engaging in teacher-directed tasks that were well within her capabilities. Her frequent and prolonged involvement in the dramatic play area, her reluctance to engage in teacher-directed activities, and her reluctance to persevere to the completion of a task

were puzzling to me. She was capable and articulate, and yet she needed to know where I was at all times. I could not understand until one morning she arrived late and we chatted together as she hung up her coat. I commented to her, "So, you spent some time with your dad on the weekend, and now you'll be spending some time with your mom." She replied, with her head tilting sideways, back and forth, "First with Mom, then with Dad, then with Mom, then with Dad." "Well," I said, "it's nice that you share each other." She looked at me directly, with one arm brought close to wrap herself around her waist, and replied, "It's like you're being torn apart." I looked at her, in silence that held thought still for just the moment of a breath, the still sense of surprise. Through such a small space of stillness, meaning became visible. I could say no more than "Oh." It was just a breath. As she turned and walked away from me I followed her with my eyes. Now I understood. I saw her, in her fragmented space, with her arm around herself, trying to hold the pieces of her being together with the energy of her life.

A few words, a few gestures, fragments of meaning. An arm wrapped around herself, her head tilting back and forth. Her eyes. That gaze. Just a moment passed as I watched her walk away. Familiar fragments. That word, "torn." I know that word! I know that wrapping arm! "Torn," the sound connected with the image of Rebecca's arm wrapped around herself, her head tilting. I stood there, remembering fragments, my own and Rebecca's. I was unable to say more. Images overwhelmed language. For a moment, surprise offered the way to understanding. It was as if, as Levin (1985) says, "the sensori-motor field is opened up, and there is (*es gibt*) a space of enchantment" (p. 129). The still silence of surprise opened onto a space in which I could see. In this moment I glimpsed an understanding. Listening to Rebecca's embodied expression, spoken in metaphors of the body and language, I began to understand what Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggests is a "whole charged with immanent meaning" (p. 58). Rebecca's whole being, her body, her thought, was torn, separated. Questions began to form. When she asks if I will be there after recess, is Rebecca trying to tell me about her sense of separation? Is this what she means by her haste to complete a teacher-directed activity and rush off to the dramatic play area? Do her friendships with some of the other children alleviate the sense of separation?

In many and varied classroom situations I have known these moments of arrested stillness. It was like this when Peter kissed me after I picked him up, just awakening, from his nap. Peter, who is big for a 5-year-old boy, is described as "severely autistic" and "incapable of communication." His recently established toileting routine had been, after waking, to be prompted to walk to the bathroom to sit on the toilet. This particular day, he had been waking slowly, stretching and curling, like a small child waking. I stood watching and asking myself how I could possibly force Peter to stand up and walk, when I would never do that with my own children—I would pick them up! So, I picked Peter up. He opened

his eyes, looked me straight in the eyes, and kissed me on the cheek. We clung to each other, his feet banging on my shins as I carried him to the bathroom. I could not let go! He had communicated with me! His arms around my neck felt like the arms of other children, like the arms of my youngest son, David. I knew this familiar grasp of a child's arms around my neck. I did not know this responsiveness from Peter! What possibilities were immanent in the unfamiliar? What else might Peter be able to do if only we could reach across the space between ourselves and this "other," this "stranger"?

I have learned to expect these possibilities. I have learned just enough to know that I do not always know what might happen in the classroom with the children. One day I watched Jennifer and four other girls going back and forth, back and forth, between the writing centre, the storybook centre, and the playhouse. They were carrying papers, pots, and spoons to the story centre. I began to feel like commanding "Stop this!" — but — no. It may be better to check. Jennifer seemed to be directing the others. I asked her what she was doing. "It's Jingle Bells." she said. "Yes, I could tell that, but what is this all about?" I was puzzled and the noise was beginning to bother me. She looked at me directly, and firmly said, "It's the Death of Harmony." Suddenly I saw! Yes, the papers were sheet music, five wiggly lines across the page, and notes too! Right! And I thought they were horsing around with a bunch of pots! Good thing I checked! The noise no longer bothered me. It was now a symphony, created by an improvisational orchestra, and called "The Death of Harmony"!

Unexpected possibilities are paradoxically expected. I have learned enough to know that what I plan may not happen. One morning I decided I might be able to show Jonathan how he might use foam letters to make some words. I picked up the letters and walked to the rug where Jonathan was sitting. He seemed to be watching nothing in particular, so perhaps this was the moment to capture his attention. Perhaps I could interest him in what I had seen the others doing, spelling "Mom" and "me." Maybe this would be a way for him to make words without the struggle of printing. He might feel less burdened with what for him is the difficult task of forming shapes on paper.

I knelt down and put the tray of letters in front of him. Before I could blink he had both hands into the letters. My hands darted out to stop his, but I was not fast enough. He already had two hands full of letters and was placing them on the rug before I could touch anything. I tensed, my arms stiffened with the realization that I could no longer get the letters I wanted. My intentions were no longer possible, I could not continue with my plan. But perhaps it might be possible to continue in some other way. The children around us chattered in concentration and I thought, I can stay here with Jonathan. I am *going* to stay here with Jonathan. I *want* him to see what can be done with these letters.

Memories of other days with Jonathan darted, fragmented and unclear. I saw again, in disjointed images, Jonathan interrupting, reaching for my arm, pulling on my hand, pulling me to look at his face as he spoke, pulling me to see what

he was making, to show me his latest creation. Now as I sit here in a knot of tension, the scene replays itself through my memory as if it were a film clip. This is not what I planned! I wanted Jonathan to take turns with me with the letters! Images block language, crunch thought into an “It”! “It” becomes both memory replayed and the moment, one indistinguishable from the other. I am tightening into strings, all my muscles are pulling on me. I take a breath that is full of “IT.” I need to release that tension, I cannot hold it any longer! I have no idea what I am going to say. I do not even think about that. I just need to breathe and I need to reform a plan that will enable me to follow through. I think I am about to say something, but words are not formed. Before language helps me go beyond “IT,” just when I need to release the stringy tension of arms and legs and lungs, Jonathan shouts out the words he has made. “MOM”! and “YOU”!

There—I am stopped, or do I stop myself? I am not sure. I had not known he would be able to do this! Jonathan laughs as he says the sound combinations he puts on the rug, “yooo.” He laughs and looks at me. All I do is breathe very long and deeply, and stare at him. I am no longer aware of other children, or my sore muscles. I just stare at Jonathan and the letters. I am no longer aware of the presence of my body in the way I was. I am aware that others join us and that we are all laughing. And so for me, as for the child, this arrest of consciousness has a sense of familiarity, immanent meaning, and unfamiliar possibilities.

Now questions begin to form as I continue to watch the children. What does this mean about assumptions I make about the teaching of sound-symbol associations? What does this mean to me about waiting for children, for listening in silence to the embodied language of their laughter and gaze? Have I missed other moments like this, moments when I could have learned something about the way a child was making sense of his/her learning?

I have been pulled by the children; not drawn into, but dragged toward, just as Jonathan has pulled me to see what he was doing. I have resisted, not been stopped. This is not surprise. The children have pulled my body closer, but I have not been there. I have been lingering in thoughts of my instructional plan, or lost in a whirlwind of concern about noise in the classroom. I had difficulty knowing Rebecca, knowing what she meant by her resistance to teacher-directed activities. It has sometimes been necessary for the children to remind me how to hear, as Jeff did, so that when ears fail, I can use my heart.

In brief moments, fragmented sensations and images connect with fragments of language. Pieces of memories. Trying to contain my sister’s grasshoppers, the pain of separations, a child’s arm around my neck, all are recalled to presence, now, in the classroom. Entwined times and places. What is it that leads me to question what else, and in what other way, a severely autistic child might communicate? What is this, that enables me to hear a symphony in noise, this paradoxical childlike yet unchildlike response that tells me a child hears my instructions with his or her heart?

In the language of Old French, the word surprise meant “seized.” Have my experiences of surprise, been experiences of seizure? Was I seized in my experiences with Jeff, with Rebecca, and Jennifer, and Peter? To know that surprise once meant seized is not enough. The meaning is more elusive than what is suggested by the word “seized.” The elusive quality of surprise itself anticipates something beyond, anticipates possibilities that will support meaning. Perhaps it is helpful to look in places other than the classroom.

SURPRISE AND THE WHOLE OF OUR EXPERIENCE

For me the experience of surprise with young children has not begun or ended in the classroom. It has been an experience continuous with the whole of my experience. For me and for my husband, experiences of surprise with our children have been part of the whole of our experiences, of our ordinary, daily living. From the moment of our oldest son’s birth, from the moment we first saw our second son, David, living with the expectation of the unexpected seems to have been part of our ordinary living with our children. When David was nearly two years old, still toddling, he tried to lift a kitchen chair and throw it at me after I said “No, you can’t have a peanut butter sandwich now.” A few summers ago we were flying over France. I was gazing out the window, looking down on the brown, hilly countryside, lost in a daydream about the medieval woodcuts I remembered from my old French textbooks. In the midst of the blue sky and the brown earth, seemingly out of the blue, David said to me, “There’s lots of worlds aren’t there, Mom.” I turned away from my imagined world and looked at David. His words, his gaze, called me from my imagined world. I was unable to say anything but a drawn out “Yes.”

In other places and at other times David has called me to his worlds. When he calls, his demand to listen means more than just “hear my words.” A wise old colleague told me once about listening. He said,

You have to be there, be all there. That is the crux of it. It’s perception. You try to look at the different things that would get in the way. The main thing is to be all there, to be aware of your own self, but also empty. You can’t be all tied up, you’re just empty. Then there’s more room to see, to hear, to feel. Then you’re more ready. (Phillips, journal notes, 1992)

For David too, “listen to me” means “be here, be all here.” Since he was a toddler, he has always called me in threes. He calls, “Mom! Mom! Mom!” It seems to always mean “Mom, hear me; Mom, you have to see me; Mom, you have to come.” Being close enough to hear means being close enough also to see, and to touch in the space that he is touching. It is as if he is saying, “Listen, Mom, know this world in which I exist.” One fall, in the late afternoon by a mountain river, he walked along the river bank toward me. I had burrowed into

my old sheepskin, huddled against the wind that pushed through the trees, and settled into the contours of a comfortable boulder. David called, "Mom, Mom, Mom! I'm making sparks!" I knew I would no longer be left to sit upon my rock. David pulled me by the hand, the arm, and when I would not get up myself, he levered himself into the boulders to pull me up. He pulled me toward a place under the bridge where it was darker, and then let go of my hand. Lifting a boulder, he heaved it at another boulder closer to the water and . . . there! "See! Sparks! I'm making sparks!" he hollered.

See? Yes. Now I see! David has dragged and pulled me into the presence of a moment, immanent with possibilities. I am stopped. Or do I stop myself? I do not know. But, for a moment, that does not matter. I experience the still sense of surprise, an unexpected stopping, an anticipation in the presence of encounter with an "other." Like the light of sparks, or the light in the train, the experience is immanent with possibilities to enlighten.

Here at the river with David's boulders, like a flash of lightning in the dark, the sparks reveal a view of other rivers. I see this river of the rocks, but it looks like every other river I have ever known. I see myself, in memories, with my father at this river that is now all rivers. Memories entwine within the moment, as they did the day the painters came to the school, and the day Rebecca told me she was torn apart. David called again. "See? You do it, Mom." I hesitated. Images of memories were more immediate. He insisted, "You do it, Mom. You do it. See!" His eyes were intent on my face, his gaze fixed. Just as he had pulled me up from the rock, his gaze pulled me back to hear the command "See!" Suddenly, I am aware again of the mountains. Mountains and rivers become cold and close again as the tattered little windblown memories streak through my thoughts. In the still space of the moment, I see and hear David and his friend, Samantha. I hear David's call, and the river that is all rivers is gone, replaced with this river, the one that has boulders that spark. I am no longer in the same relation with the river. Before the sparks, this was just a river, then it became the river-that-is-all-rivers. Now it is neither! David's call has disturbed my vision. I have been pulled away from huddling in my comfortable space, pulled into the presence of this other river with David. I have been called from the time of my memories, the places and people of other rivers, into the presence of David's rocks, and this river. David's call, like a rock thrown into water, has disturbed my reflection! In the momentary light of sparks, I now see that I see differently.

A thought, like mist, arises through the stillness. What if I had not come? What if I had not thrown rocks? Through the foggy mist of forming thoughts and unformed words, I see images of David and his uncle and his cousin, perched on river banks, and planted, each with one foot worked into the stones of gravel beds, like out-of-context baseball players, in that one-legged launch position. As language rises into form, words and images swirl with sensations, and I wonder, Is this how it feels for David? Is this what it is like to throw rocks in water? Is this why David likes throwing rocks into rivers? I sense a warmth inside, a

warmth so pervasive it distances mountains and cold, grey air. With a long, deep breath, I become aware of loosening tension. I feel a sense of gratitude to David and for David. In the light of sparks I see his river, the river-that-is-all-rivers. My relationship with the river now encompasses David's river.

The experience of surprise swirls into already swirling words and images, and joins with a sense of admiration, becoming wonder. No longer surprise, it is now wonder that I sense. Is this what Merleau-Ponty (1962) hints at when he speaks "of 'wonder' in the face of the world" (p. xiii)? He says,

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical. (p. xiii)

What kind of reflection does not withdraw, but only steps back to watch? Should we ask if reflection steps toward, as well as back, to slacken those intentional threads we wrap around ourselves the way I wrapped my old sheepskin coat against the cold wind?

Huddled on the rock, wrapped and withdrawn in reflection like Narcissus at the pool, I am pulled and dragged with the hands and eye-gaze of the children. I must be called with a kiss, with the language of words and gesture, called to step away from my huddled, self-enclosed space, toward an "other." The children push and pull and call me to move in a "process of transcendence towards the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiv). Arrested in the encounter occasioned by surprise, I pause, embodied in the time/space of the child's presence, drawn to hear a call that

comes from me yet over me . . . [disclosed] in the factor of a jolt . . . of an abrupt arousal. . . . Neither a who nor a what, the caller and the call occur simultaneously as a to-and-fro movement of abrupt arousal. [I am] pushed to the edges of thinking so that a new thought can emerge. (Rodeheffer, 1990, p. 129)

Called to move from the familiar unity of my own consciousness, toward the other, I find a new thought, another world. Isn't that what David was trying to tell me when he pulled me close enough with his words and his gaze to say that "There are lots of worlds"? Perhaps this is what Jeff was trying to tell me, that there is also the world of hearing with your heart, an embodied world where "The injunction to listen . . . places above everything else the quasi-physical contact of these subjects (by voice and ear): it creates transference: 'listen to me' means touch me, know that I exist" (Barthes, 1985, p. 251). A thoughtful move with young children is a move toward listening as an embodied act, toward seeing as the revealing of the paradox of double vision, my own and the child's. A thoughtful move, listening with the heart, seeing lots of worlds, these are embodied acts, a reflective move toward, not a reflective distancing (van Manen, 1991).

Yet I am not always surprised, arrested and drawn toward a thoughtful pedagogical act, when perhaps I ought to be. I do not always hear, I do not always see. I am not always “there,” arrested in stillness. I can be pulled and dragged toward the possibility of a moment and yet often I cannot see or hear, to reach and touch across the space that lies between my own being and the child’s. If I am to hear, to see, I must be present, I must be *there* in the space that opens onto possibilities, with the child, to realize meaning. Surprise, like thought, is an experience of meaning, immanent, anticipating, and brought to visibility through language. I must be there to realize what meanings yet “flutter between word and thought” (Vygotsky, 1934/1986, p. 249). The children know this. Jonathan pulls me, David insists I leave my huddle on the rock. Jeff knows, he tells me that the children can hear me because they are “there” with their whole being. So I too must experience this presence that supports meaning. It only takes a moment—just the moment’s experience of surprise.

THE ELUSIVE CONTINUITY OF SURPRISE

There—arrested in the small, still, space of the moment is marked the reciprocal beginning-end form of reflection that “suspends the faith in the world only so as to see it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 38). Overwhelmingly, daily, repeatedly and without intention, I have known the paradoxical experience of expecting the unexpected. Surprise is a paradox of beginning-ending, a recursive and recirculating expectation of the unexpected that is continually immanent. Surprise circulates through our teaching practice, as Schön’s metaphor suggests, by locating surprise at “the heart of reflective teaching” (1988, p. 22). The experience of surprise offers us possibilities again and again and again in an embodied, organic, recirculating, and renewed rhythm of the paradoxical, the expected/unexpected and the familiar/unfamiliar.

These experiences with our children slip one by one, from figure into ground, as each takes form and place. Like wind-blown clouds, each swirls from one form into another. Yet, like clouds, they are of one substance, which is the familiar sensibility of being stopped-and-overwhelmingly-drawn-into. Against this ground of the familiar, the unfamiliar becomes figure, and I become aware of a difference in my perceptual field. I am drawn into the presence of an “other.” My attention is drawn in a shift of awareness toward an encounter, as I was drawn to look in the train for the person who was getting on, and as David drew me from imagined time and place into his awareness of another world. My attention is drawn through that familiar world of the river and the river-that-is-all-rivers, into the world of David’s River of Lightning Rocks, into the world of Peter’s touch, Rebecca’s holding of herself, and Jonathan’s emerging literacy. There I learn to recognize the image and metaphor of embodied language.

It is not that once drawn into these other worlds I suddenly know everything I need to know about pedagogical relationships with children. There is only an

“awakening [of] the thoughts which constitute other people, myself as individual subject and the world as a pole of my perception” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 60). I have touched and been touched, listened, and awakened only so much as I have experienced “the living creature that miraculously unites sense and the senses into one vox” and experienced the disturbance of that form, playing with “articulations splitting up that body or reinscribing it within sequences it can no longer control” (Caputo, 1987, p. 150, citing Mallarmé).

Still, yet not still, like a moment of conception, there is a disruption of unity in the formation of yet another unity as I reflect upon my practice. And so I re-enter the reciprocity and symmetry of the spiral, and I return to the children tomorrow. Surprise, like blood, recirculates through practice with the organic rhythm of paradox. With the rhythm of the familiar/unfamiliar, the expected/unexpected, and the childlike/unchildlike holding child and teacher, surprise sustains the pedagogical relationship.

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