

MY LIFE WITH KIDS

Ruth Lampert

The following is from my memoir in progress, "Ruth On Wry." I used it as a handout at my October, 2004 workshop in Seoul, Korea, and have since shared it at other presentations. Names and identifying characteristics have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

Renata was eight years old, a petite, serious, conscientious only child, considerably more verbal in therapy than the typical eight-year-old. Her parents were furiously divorcing. On this afternoon she fixed round blue eyes on me and said with a small sigh, "About the divorce - my parents say it's not my fault."

"It's a confusing business all right," I said. "Sometimes you 'get it' here (pointing to my head) but not really here (pointing to my heart.) But I'll just say it over again, because it really is true: "It's not your fault."

"Like the kid in the book we read last time?"

"Exactly."

She was referring to *Divorce is a Grown Up Business* by Janet Sinberg, now out of print but firmly entrenched in my affections and those of my young clients'. We laugh about how old-fashioned everyone looks (bell-bottom trousers; weird hair-do's ...etc etc..) and talk about how nevertheless it is all so true, so true!

"Now I'll use the sand tray," Renata announced.

After carefully smoothing the sand, she examined the objects arranged on shelves: little stone bridge, pewter wizard and castle, green plastic dragon, wooden boxcar, white church and matching house, small but stately grandfather clock, metal washboard and tub, straw figures of assorted sizes and shapes, a large fish variously used as a shark, a dolphin, or a whale, two gaudily painted kangaroos, one with a pouch; red plaster flames (threatening? warming?); three paper-maiche palm trees, a tranquil purple Buddha, and a group of curiously shaped sea shells. Then she checked out the clear plastic shoe boxes under the sand tray table, where more objects are kept by categories: animals, furniture, people, vehicles, marbles, and "miscellaneous stuff." She ignored the container of soldiers, as (for reasons I frequently ponder) do most girls.

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As she was creating her scene with a family of horses, she surprised and charmed me by asking in her small, sober voice:

"So, Ruth, have you always liked children?"

I thought for a second or two, and then answered honestly, "Yes, I always have."

So whose therapy is this, anyway? Renata's ingenuous question started me on an introspective, retrospective journey. What led me into this line of work, and has kept me here from over three decades?

Of course it all began in my own early childhood. As the youngest of three children, I yearned to have a baby sibling. Even after Daddy died when I was nine, I nourished the hope that somehow Mother would find a way to have a baby. Clearly my knowledge of the facts of reproduction were sketchy, because although I knew it took a man and a woman to make a baby, I did not wish for a stepfather; it just seemed that if she understood how much it meant to me, she would find a way.

She did not, and although she did remarry when I was 13, (yes, by that time the gaps in my knowledge of sexuality had been filled in) the union "produced no issue," which was a good thing since they divorced (yes, messily) about 10 years later.

My dreams of the future had always included both a career, originally as an actress, then as a writer (psychotherapy did not figure in my early plans any more than did the secretarial work which I did grudgingly though well for a number of years.) and a family, complete with four children.

Why four? I confess that one reason is because I figured that if my emotionally disturbed mother could raise three, part of the time as a single mother, surely for me, with my wisdom and stability and a happy, enduring marriage a given, four would present just enough of a challenge to make it all interesting. I know, I know.

During my first year as a college student (the discontinuous street of my higher education is explored elsewhere) I held a job as "mother's helper" to a family with five children. I loved them, they loved me. It was tiring work, and the efficient, emotionally stable, well-married and financially secure mother of that brood sometimes showed signs of wear and tear: a glazed, frantic look in eyes that cried out for more sleep, a slight tremor in her voice as she said at the end of my three hour stint, "we all look forward to seeing you again tomorrow, right?" None of which fazed me or caused me to question for one moment the wisdom of my plans

And I did have four children — Wilene, Laurie, Brian and Betsy — after completing two years of college, marrying, and helping to put my husband through graduate school with various jobs

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including reporter for a small town paper and receptionist for a big time CPA in downtown Los Angeles.

When Wilene was two and a half, we enrolled as a family in the Compton Cooperative Nursery School, an event that influenced my life at least as much as the children's. "Cooperative" meant that Moms worked as assistant teachers one day a week, Dads helped maintain and improve the school which was on the grounds of a local church, and we all were involved in fund raising, parent education, and developing wonderful friendships.

There were no "working mothers" in cooperative nursery schools then, and the first I knew of a man who participated as assistant teacher came much later. We considered ourselves progressive, and though we hadn't yet heard that it takes a village to raise a child, the notion was implicit. We believed in what came to be (inaccurately) called a "permissive" outlook; that is, that feelings were always acceptable although not all behavior was, and that children could and should be taught limits without ever being hit. We staunchly believed that a proper pre-school program eschewed formal academics. We did not see it as a precursor to a prestige college and a high-paying career. Sigh.

Those experiences, that education, still serve me well in my psychotherapy work with children. Times have changed and so have many of my notions, but I still think that babies learning to read is nonsense, and that giving children sufficient time to develop academic skills is sensible. As an educational therapist as well as a psychotherapist, I frequently point out to parents that being "learning disabled" means having difficulty with tasks that happen to be required in a specific time and place, and it is just sensible to strive for competence.

The basic philosophy as expressed by Dr. Benjamin Spock, (not the nonsense often mistakenly and mean-spirited attributed to him) that children, and parents, deserve to have their needs respected was confirmed when I later studied child development and worked in the field. These days when I am consulted about a child younger than five, I might do some assessment, and see some configuration of the family; for the "I.P." I recommend a good (not necessarily one officially designated as "therapeutic") pre-school.

The other important thing I learned was that I did have a "knack" with kids.

A lot of things happened between then and my eventual entry into the field of mental health as a "professional" - financial ruin, enormous emotional strain, re-locations and dislocations - traumas and joys and achievements and disappointments and all the usual stuff of living. During a period of relative, though short-lived, marital calm I found my way to a center for educational therapy (another transforming experience, described more fully elsewhere) where I talked my way into being the assistant teacher in the pre-primary class of children with profound learning and emotional disabilities. My "knack" proved to extend to kids with "differences" and after awhile I became head teacher.

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Of course I began with hopes (expectations?) that I would work miracles, and of course I did not, but I did have some impact for the good in the lives of the kids and their families.

The impact they had on me was far-reaching. I still remember Benny, the beautiful autistic four-year-old who never, ever spoke. I would sometimes dream that he suddenly started talking, and in the dream I would run to tell everyone at the center, "Benny can talk! He can talk!" The sorrow I felt when I awoke to reality gave me some tiny sense of the anguish his parents lived with.

Belinda was also diagnosed autistic, but her situation was more hopeful. She was one of a large, boisterous family who all adored her, and we never knew to what extent that loving stimulation accounted for her progress. She had an impish sense of humor and related to others in an increasingly "normal" way — eventually she was placed in a special school for aphasic children.

Whereas in the cooperative nursery school setting children did not need to be "taught" to come to the juice table - socialization was a normal developmental occurrence - these little guys took no cues from others. And the relaxed dictum "they will learn when they are ready" had no place here'

We insisted on certain conformities, such as the utterance, from kids who were verbal, "please" and "thank you.." no matter how wooden. As with kids now diagnosed as "Asperser's" we knew that leaving them to "work things out" with their peers was in fact not respectful, but cruel.

Where are Benny and Belinda now, I wonder? How are they doing?

Sometimes I do hear from former clients. For example, one day I answered a knock on my office door, prepared to say "Please respect the no soliciting sign" and found a lovely teenager who looked familiar. "You probably don't remember me," she began, but when I heard her tremulous voice I knew it was Cameron, who I had last seen eight years ago when she was seven, and her parents were agonizing over whether to keep working on their tormented marriage or call it quits

Fortunately I did not have a client when she knocked on my door, and she came in and sat where she usually had when the whole family came.. They had relocated to another area, hoping the change in venue would effect a change for the better in their relationship.

"They finally split," she said now. "It was pretty rough and I asked to see the school counselor because therapy had helped me before , and it did help me again. Your hair looks good. Keep it that way."

"I won't promise, but thanks! What brings you to the old neighborhood?"

"My cousin's bat mitzvah. I was driving by and thought, 'I'd like Ruth to know that even though I don't remember much of what we actually did here, I liked coming.. The school counselor said she could tell the therapy I had when I was little had helped."

"You've made my day," I said, and it was true.

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And Angie, the younger sister of Hal, who was my client for about 3 years. Sometimes Angie and her mother did errands during Hal's session, but frequently she played absorbedly with the blocks and doll house in the waiting room while Mom read or worked on her laptop. Hal, who had learning problems, told me once that his little sister was smarter than he was in school, but boy, she sure had a lot to learn about getting along with people.

Almost 10 years later Mom called to say that Hal was going to college, struggling but making it. This call was about Angie, who did fine academically but had no friends, and had told Mom she was lonely and sad. Mom suggested counseling and Angie said, "Can I see Ruth? I was always jealous of Hal for getting to go."

Another ego booster.

I wonder if there are younger siblings somewhere who, when therapy is suggested for them, cringe and sob and plead "You aren't going to make me see Ruth, are you? Please, please, not that!" No doubt there are.

Sometimes parents ask me if I have children. The love I have for my own children is fierce, primal, inviolate, embedded in my very bones as well as my heart. I don't share this with parents in answer to their question. What I usually say is,

"Yes, I have four, all grown now, and all high functioning, emotionally secure, and successful. Not one ever gave me a moment of grief. And if you believe that, you'll believe anything."

That seems to set a nice tone.

In casual ways too, children have played and continue to play a large and rewarding role in my life. In the course of any ordinary day, kids are a source of delight. My condominium, which in the bad old days was restricted to adults, now has an orchard of youngsters.

In our building alone there is Danny, born on Tony's birthday, and his little brother, Charles, both graced with that special Eurasian beauty, as is saucy, spunky, 18-month-old Heloise. There is Lester, with his perfect round face and deep blue eyes. He was cared for by his Polish speaking grandmother until he went to school, and his new little brother Jason, with the same round face and blue eyes, is now doted upon by the other grandmother. We've watched African-American Dorian grow from a chubby little guy who liked to ring our doorbell and run away to a tall, muscular teenager arguing with his mother ("it's my room!" etc)

On the first floor are "the three little boys" whose names we can't pronounce. Many a time I watched from my kitchen window with amusement as the eldest, while still the only, chucked his toy fire engine through the balcony railing - more fun I'm sure than tossing toys through the playpen rails or off the high chair tray. Once in the elevator to the parking garage he said to Tony "I know

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you, you've got the old brown car, it doesn't start, ERRRRRERRRRRRRERRRRRR!" Later, he was the first neighbor to comment on our new Toyota: "Nice car! Starts good! No more ERRRRRERRRRRRRERRRRRR!" When little boy #2 was born, the parents closed the openings between the rails. Smart move.

As we walk through what the real estate ads describe (accurately) as "park-like grounds" we encounter youngsters watching the ducks and doubtless wishing they could feed them; it's hard to understand that "people food" is not healthy for ducks. On any given day you can see kids being wheeled in carriages and strollers, playing ball, chasing each other around trees, usually watched by nannies and/or relatives, since most of the mothers here, unlike that first nursery school, work outside the home. They swim and play and holler in the pool until their fingers are all wrinkled, and when they have to go in for dinner they whine "Just a little longer, pleeeeee?"

Sometimes on my way to the store I see a long line of children from the elementary school on a field trip, walking toward the bus stop. What a spirit-lifting sight they are! I wonder what they are thinking about as they walk along in that carefully supervised line. Where are they going, and where have they been, literally and figuratively?

Admittedly, my attitude is romantic and even a bit saccharine. I know that some of these kids will grow into adults I would dislike, or worse; having some of them as adult clients would pose a major challenge. And as with being a grandmother (don't get me started on that - I will just mention that I have five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren) I don't have to shoulder the responsibilities of parenthood. I'm not kept awake by screaming colicky babies or puked on by dyspeptic ones. I don't have to scramble through bushes with tangled prickly branches to retrieve expensive toys tossed away. I'm not responsible for the behavior and safety of kids on field trips, which may just as likely be boring as interesting. It's not in MY unit that the odor of dirty socks and spoiled milk and God knows what else fights for supremacy with the smell of pepperoni pizza and exactly what is that acrid aroma seeping out from under the door of an adolescent's den?

I've been there, done all that. Now I have the privilege of being a fond observer, and, on good days at the office, an agent in reducing misery and promoting well being.

Which segues us back to Renata at the sand tray, composing her idyllic scene of a family of horses - mother, father, and colt, near a neat building designated as "the barn where they have always lived." We stay with the metaphor, and talk about how wonderful it would be if all animals could always be so happy and secure. Then the colt falls down. Renata leaves it where it lays, saying, "Too bad."

I'm not willing to end the story there.

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"Who is going to help the colt get up? Even though it is strong and healthy, it's still really young and needs to be taken care of."

"Well maybe one of the horses will notice, or maybe the farmer will come out.," she says.

"That's very likely," I say. "Such a fine colt deserves to be looked after."

Naturally there was much more to this family saga. Renata's parents were able, eventually to do a good job of co-parenting, in spite of their personal animosity.

As for her question to me, "Have you always liked children?" — my exploring the answer helps clarify how all my experiences — the early and later losses, the wish to repair the torn places in my own psyche — combine with so much else to inform my work.

The full answer is: "Yes Renata, I always have. And the best part is that they like me too."

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