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**A Critical Distance:  
Of Motherhood and Pedagogy**

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I would be remiss if I did not tell you that I have no business writing this paper. That may seem an odd thing to say, but as the mother of two children under the age of four as well as a full-time preschool teacher, I find that my realm of socially-approved “business” has narrowed. I have reports to write, portfolios to complete, lunches to make, diapers to change, and two children who are at an uneasy truce as their mother furtively slips away to attempt to put a few words on paper. This means that something dreadful, and terribly messy, will most certainly happen in the next five minutes. But I am taking the chance, dusting the cobwebs off of the thinking, writing portion of my brain . . . while calling out the correct words to the Thomas the Train song at my son’s request. Because business or not, there are some things that demand to be said, some words that simply *will* be written, despite the fogginess of my post-partum brain. And so I take this covert moment of time to share with you, and with myself, a story of lost and found identity. You see, I was a teacher, before all things, a teacher, or so I thought. With all the boldness of inexperience, I was sure that something as simple as motherhood would never complicate my teacher identity. Until it did. Until I was lost, and finally found again. This paper, complete with Thomas the Train serenades, is a glimpse into

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my lost and found journey, my mother, teacher, and writer story, each identity defying yet deepening the other as we travel disruptively together.

I am writing today because I find myself on a pedagogical journey, one that led me through the realities of motherhood, critical pedagogy, and the conflicts that occur when these identities confront one another. I must preface this with a bit of explanation of my teaching practices. I believe deeply in community and critical pedagogy in the early childhood classroom (Freire, 1970; Souto-Manning, 2010). My classroom is typically a place of rich conversation, anti-bias work, and inclusion (Bentley, 2011; 2013; 2015). I believe that the early childhood classroom is a community of relationships slowly founded on the creation of new “we’s” through storytelling and the sharing of selves (Dyson and Genishi, 1994). These are practices that I have developed over my fourteen years of teaching, practices that I believed to be immovable and all-powerful. But we never expect the earthquakes, do we?

*I walked into my classroom in January, tentative and nauseated. It had been almost four months since I had taught in this room. It was entirely disorienting to have this feeling in my own classroom, my little world. Yet, having unexpectedly given birth on the second week of the school year, I found myself a stranger in my own kingdom, unsure of the habits, the structures, and the heartbeat of the community. They could call me the teacher as much as they liked; I knew what I really was. A foreigner. A stranger.*

This is the muddle in which I found myself on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the date of my inauspicious return to my PreK classroom. On that dreadful day, I had the best of

intentions. I reminded myself of the “pedagogy of listening” (Rinaldi, 2001). I promised myself, as well as my co-teacher, that I would listen, I would wait, I would find my way back into the classroom. And then I did no such thing. Despite all I knew about the building of community, the process of developing trust and understanding, I was helpless in the face of the distance I felt between myself and my classroom. I stormed back into the space with all of the delicacy and care of a hurricane. I stood before the children demanding that they listen, that they trust, that they believe in me, oblivious to the reality that I had given them nothing in which to believe. I was Teacher. Therefore I deserved this attention, this connection, did I not? “Connect with me!” I thought with futility, forgetting that there was no foundation for this desired connection.

By the end of the first week I was convinced that I should simply quit my job. I had no business trying to teach anymore. My days were an endless series of botched daily routines and dead-end curricular ideas that had no connection to the children. The worst were the everyday moments, the skinned-knee, I-miss-my mommy, fix-my-snow-pants moments in which I knew and they knew that I could not really help. I was too far away. I did not know the pivotal information, the powerful, day-to-day currency of favorite loveys, most-despised foods, and classroom stories. I was not part of the story. I was not part of the “we” (Dyson & Genishi, 1994).

Maxine Green writes, “The teacher is frequently addressed as if he had no life of his own, no body, and no inwardness....If he is immersed and impermeable, he can hardly stir others to define themselves as individuals” (Green, 1973, pp.269-70).

I share this quotation because these were the trappings absent from my relationships with the children; the self, the vulnerabilities, the day-to-day banalities upon which critical

relationships are built. Despite my experience and belief, I rendered myself inaccessible, as Green describes, an island in a sea of children, all connected to one another, but not to me. The best of knowledge, the best of intentions could not save me from insisting, no, demanding, the connections and relationships that had come to define my understanding of the classroom community. But as we all know, connections cannot be insisted upon, and relationships simply will not be demanded.

And so I stumbled along, angry, frustrated, certain only of the fact that I was now both a terrible teacher who could not connect with her students as well as a terrible mother, abandoning her children each day. Until finally, a tiny light opened up before me.

*Emily swept into the classroom stormily. As I welcomed her into the room, her beautiful, defiant face dared me to try to cheer her up. And so I did not. “You’re pretty unhappy, aren’t you?” I asked. She glared and gave a curt nod. “Ok,” I replied, “That happens to me too. I’m upset today because I’m really missing my baby and my little boy.” She did not speak, but her eyes slid toward mine, warily listening to what I was saying. “I’m going to read a book that I love, because that helps me. You can come, but you don’t have to.” With that, I walked away from her, hoping with all my might that she was behind me, that all my teaching instincts had not failed me. And yes. There it was. The sound of slightly-grumpy, little-girl-Ugg-boots stomping behind me. I picked up a worn copy of “Brave Irene,” and began to read. Emily did not speak, but her body curled next to mine, ever closer with the turn of each page. My body relaxed as her head dropped*

*onto my shoulder, and I slowly closed a bit of the distance, retreating back to my teacher self.*

This was the moment, the first step in crossing the distance back toward a critical pedagogy. These first tentative pillars of a relationship would provide the foundation upon which criticality might be built. And it began with an admission of self, an offering of story, an acknowledgment of vulnerability as a teacher (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Green, 1973). As Emily's head fell onto my shoulder, I regained a piece of my teacher self, the comforter with the power to soothe the most defiant preschool leading lady. That moment began a new journey, a genuine "pedagogy of listening" (Rinaldi, 2001), in which I allowed myself the time to listen to the children, to enjoy them, and to enjoy myself in relation to them. And ever so slowly, the distance closed.

I now find myself back in the thick of things, rich in the knowledge of the exact knack of attaching Brian's winter mittens, the particular shape in which Katie wishes her apples to be cut, and exact number of bunnies that Evan requires in order to nap on his rest mat. There is still distance to be crossed, but it is far shorter now. I chose to write this piece, at a time when I have no business writing, because I needed to tell the story of a pedagogy lost and found. Because, as harrowing as this experience was, it declared to me the absolute truth of all that I claimed to believe. Critical work is founded on relationships. Critical pedagogy is incumbent upon connections, not just between students, but between students and their teachers. And a "we" is constructed out of shared vulnerabilities and the trust forged from the willingness to expose those vulnerabilities to each other. I have always professed to believe these things, but today I

can tell you that I know they are true. Because I know what it means to lose them, and to find them again.

There is, of course, much more to write but I must leave it for now. The truce in the living room has broken; it seems the lyrics of the Thomas song are no longer entertaining and the play gym has worn out its welcome, despite all of its promises of hours of entertainment. I suppose even squeaky monkeys have their limits. I just needed to say aloud that we can be both, critical pedagogues and mothers, writers and parents. Perhaps I needed to say it that I might will it to be true. I write these final sentences one-handed, my daughter in my arms, yet another small head on my shoulder. And despite the awkwardness and inconvenience, it is in these moments that the distance closes, connections grow, and I find a place to be both mother and teacher.

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