

For those of you accustomed to being taken from point A to point B to point C, this presentation may be somewhat difficult to follow. Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web—with many little threads radiating from the centre, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made.

- *Leslie Marmon Silko of the Laguna Pueblo Nation, 1996, pp.48-49*

The Level Story

It is a dry and sunny day, one of the last before the winter rains settle in for the remaining months of the year. The children are rolling the log rounds with impressive strength from one end of the garden to another. They have a plan and my partner and I stand by—we are on stand-by—and watch as seven people between ages two and six pause and talk, give directions to one another, point here and there, smile and laugh. The little apple tree is at the centre of it all. It is crooked and nearly without leaves; covered in a lichen we call 'old man's beard' because it resembles a faint green and coarse facial hair. The children are trying to 'fix' the tree. They have moved the log rounds, about eight of them, so that they are now placed on their flat sides and cannot roll and so that wooden planks laid on top create a sort of scaffolding. They have a toy toolbox with plastic replica tools, and they have sticks and rocks, and they are tapping the tree or 'sawing' its branches and trunk while humming and talking as they work.

It is rare that all seven young members of our playschool invent a game that includes everyone. My partner and I speculate that it is because of the new toolbox and all of its brightly coloured contents. A four-year-old approaches us and asks, 'What's this do?' He is holding up a red rectangle that looks like a level without the small glass tubes of liquid and bubbles; instead

there are shapes cut out where the useful parts of the instrument would be. I open my mouth to speak, to give its name and explain its function, but I stop myself. I smile and invite him to go to the shed with me; ‘Would you like to see what that tool really looks like?’

I dig around for a minute and produce a small aluminum level, about ten inches long, complete with tubes filled with yellow liquid and bubbles. He runs back to the tree with both levels, imitation and actual, and proceeds to compare them, study them, and then try them out; he places them both on one plank of the scaffolding. Another child, about five-years old and with a muddy face, crouches down to see the level and asks, ‘What’s *that* for?’ They both take turns handling it and talking about it. I return to standing beside my partner; the children don’t press us for an answer as they experiment. Another child joins and now there are three of them crowding around the levels. They are interested in the bubbles; do they come out? They know that these pockets of air are important. The levels have been set on a plank and I hear one child say ‘don’t touch it’ as another one picks up the short end of the one-by-four plank and lifts it slightly off of the log round on which it had been resting. There is some excitement. The two children closer to the level are pointing and talking and they instruct the child with the plank in her hands to slowly lower it to the ground. The original curious kid runs my way; ‘Come here! You’ve gotta see this!’

We crowd around the plank, which has been resituated on two log rounds and is parallel to the ground ten inches below. The level, the real one, has been set on the plank; the little red rectangle, the mock level, is nowhere to be seen. The ‘hammering’ and ‘sawing’ has ceased, and the children gather around us. He begins: ‘At first, I thought it was a measure. But it was not having numbers.’ This was true as what numbers used to be on the level had faded away. He

continued in his little kid way, ‘So this thing has a bubble inside of it and the bubble moves around when you move it, see?’ He holds the level up to my face and tilts it from side to side with a slow and steady hand. I tell him that I see it moving. The other children are very close and clamouring to see it and talking and telling me what they have done. The child places the level on the plank and proceeds, ‘See how the bubble is in the middle? This wood is flat. And then we move the wood...’ He instructs another child to move the wood; everyone clears the way and is suddenly quiet. ‘And look! The bubble moved all the way this way! Do you see?’ He sounds triumphant and his eyes are bright. I acknowledge that I see what he means. The child holding the plank returns it to its place and takes over: ‘That’s because it’s not flat. Now it’s flat and the bubble is in the middle!’ The little ones are excited, and they all talk and pass the level around; they go from plank to plank and test it again and again.

Later on, my partner and I discuss that moment and how difficult it was for each of us to *not* intervene. We exclaim to each other that we both wanted to explain the level to the children, tell them what it does and how it works, and show them how to use it. We agree that we are glad that we refrained, that we watched this experience unfold, and that we learned about learning right along with the kids. But to quash this compulsion to explain, this deep need to show what we know, was so much more difficult than the usual role we take on. We talk about why it is that we are revisioning our roles when we are with our kids and the other children with whom we work. We reflect on our feelings during the fifteen or so minutes of consciously resisting the urge to pass on information; the tension in our bodies as we hold back, the suspense as we grow impatient (it would be so much faster just to tell them!), the mild frustration when they fail to think of the answer in the way that I would have presented it, and

then a melting and release. At first, we each felt constrained and then the invisible walls around us, boundaries of our own making, disappeared. Suddenly we were experiencing our emotions *with* the kids. For me, that moment was when the triumphant child asked me, 'Do you see?' and I noticed in that split second before I responded that the knee-jerk reaction that I usually experienced, the one where I repeat back to the child the explanation for what occurred, one that seemed so essential to me before, was not there. Instead, I felt a strange relief and a deep connection with his story of discovery. There was excitement and curiosity and the sort of raw energy that one encounters when on a mission and he was recounting this adventure and I was being welcomed to share in that experience. Explaining his experience back to him in my teacher/parent way would have separated us in some way.

I believe, upon further reflection, that the initial sense that I was confined by this active restraint was because I was trying *not* to do something; I was *sure* in my intention to resist explaining the level. I was *unsure* of what I was *doing*. I'm a teacher and teaching *is* scaffolding a carefully approached lesson. What were my partner and I doing if not teaching? What were the children doing with the level if not learning? The lines were blurring and there was uncertainty and vulnerability that came with our roles being unboxed. I felt I could choose to rein it in, bring the situation back to something with which I was familiar and perhaps regain the assurance of my position, or I could let down my guard and explore the unknown, the unscripted, and what other possibilities there may be. The children were clearly engaged in the latter. I wanted to be with them.