



The Touchstone Center

A Way Of Imagining

by Richard Lewis

Editor's Introduction: For this issue of Paths, we are pleased to present the following profile article on The Touchstone Center, a non-profit educational organization, located in New York City, which was founded in 1969 by Richard Lewis, the Center's current Director. In previous issues, we featured profiles of various sorts of learning centers and environments. The Touchstone Center is rather unique among our profiled paths of learning, in that it is more a traveling set of assisting programs and projects than a stationary center of activity. As its brochure rightly proclaims, it "has been a leader in creating interdisciplinary arts programs in public schools, as well as producing a variety of exhibitions, publications, theatre events, and workshops and seminars committed to sustaining the imaginative process as a means of deepening individual and collective understanding." We invite you, our readers, to enjoy learning about this unique and wonderfully exciting venture in child-centered, child-honoring learning and thus, even if only vicariously, to join the many children, parents, and teachers who have been fortunate enough to use the Center's services.

She sat near the back of the room. And when I asked all the children in this third grade class to bring their chairs closer to me, she decided to sit on the small carpet in the middle of our circle. I took a very small envelope (the kind you put small change in) from my bag and slowly opened it. Inside was a torn piece of paper. I held it up and said this was the seed of my imagination. I explained how, if I plant this seed of my imagination in my thoughts,

it will grow into a garden. Not the flowering garden the Center had planted outside the school the year before, but a garden of our imagining that each child was about to construct in their own cardboard box. Most of the twenty or so children in the class looked at me — and the seed I held in my hand — approvingly. But she, quietly and firmly, said, "I don't believe you."

This, of course, was not the first time a child had doubted my playfulness. Nor was it the first time, given the dynamics of childhood believing, that someone in a large group of young children had insisted on playing according to the standard rules of logical thinking. And as I had done many times before, I politely demurred and said: "Be patient. What may not be true for you now may be true later." Having said even that, I'm not sure I had quite convinced her, because I could see on her face that questioning half smile of "well, show me — prove it, please."

She (for the sake of her privacy, I will call her Alissa) was one of the reasons I founded The Touchstone Center for Children in 1969. It had been a long-brewing idea of mine to establish an umbrella under which I could explore the purpose and value of imaginative thought, particularly as it existed or didn't exist in schools. Ever since I had begun working with children in a community arts center, I was interested in seeing how imaginative thought might become the central axis upon which all of children's learn-

ing could pivot. I was determined, as I continued to see the ways children responded through their imaginative thinking, to reposition the imagination, not simply as a part of human intelligence, but as the very stuff of intelligence — and perhaps as the life-blood of our perceptions.

The Touchstone Center for Children, Inc. was officially given its non-profit status as an educational organization in August 1969, the same year and month we humans landed on the moon. I was on vacation with my family in Maine and I remember well our excitement watching, on a neighbor's blinking television set, those first extraordinary black and white images of our human footsteps on the moon's bleak surface. My daughter, two years old then, was still trying out her newfound ability to walk, especially that summer, when she practiced the art of maneuvering down the winding stairs of our rented two-story house.

With my daughter's fragile steps on the earth — and those of the astronauts on the moon — I became aware of a quality of thought I had hoped the newly born Touchstone Center could encourage. As my family looked up at the moon that August night, the conflict between the scientific imagination and the poetic and mythic imagination seemed apparent. Would it be possible to reconcile these different forms of imaginative thought? Could we look at any object or observe any natural phenomenon through the common ground of our instinctive amazement and awe?

It seemed that if Touchstone were to find its distinctive reason for existence, it would have to center its mission on locating the ability of our imagination to balance and counterbalance these many competing directions. It had to become a process, a touchstone, out of which we could understand our imagining selves — and experience first hand, by being involved in the imaginative act, how our view of the world is brought into focus through the different lens of our imagining. It had to be a way of knowing arrived at by the uniqueness of our individual perceptions shaped and given meaning through our imaginative thought.

That said, I made a conscious decision in the early days of Touchstone that the Center not be confined to a

permanent space, but be the movable spaces of my own and others' imagination. I envisioned an organization that would evolve and create, in different environments, a variety of performances, workshops, exhibitions and publications, in collaboration with children and adults interested in working together.

One of the very first collaborations took place at Public School 9, an elementary public school in the upper West Side of Manhattan. With funds from the Edward J. Noble Foundation, Touchstone was initially brought to the school for a three-year period beginning in 1971. Working with three other artist-teachers representing the visual arts, dance, and story telling, I intended to experiment with different ways to enlarge and support the imaginative experience of both children and teachers at the school. One of our first concerns was how to create a separate environment for teachers to develop their own imaginative projects, which they could take back to and use in their classrooms.

Because of large budget cuts in the city school system, an empty classroom became available to us during our second year at the school. We decided to make this room into a "studio" where all the teachers in the school were welcome to come during the day in order to explore various artistic materials, as well as to devise and develop imaginative projects. Touchstone's role was to support and encourage these projects, so that each teacher could maintain the project in their classroom.

At first, what was exciting was the degree to which many teachers who had never had the opportunity of expressing themselves began to use the studio to paint, write a poem, tell a story, work with clay or create a sculpture. Particularly at lunchtime, the studio was a beehive of creative activity, where teachers, sometimes in absorbed silence, sometimes in impassioned conversation, were able to rediscover their own imaginative resources and redirect these resources into the art of teaching children.

One of the teachers spoke of her experience in the "studio" in this way:

The program takes you up from the bootstraps and pulls you out of the depths, stirring your creativity and



imagination. You feel that you can do, that you can be, and that you are." Another teacher said: "An extremely rich experience — it released the self — gave spark, new directions (not just learning skill perspectives). It was a loosening up of the mind" (Goldberg 1984, 122–123).

Early in the fall of our third year at the school, a teacher with whom we had worked the year before walked into The Studio and said she wanted to create an Eastern Woodlands forest as part of a Native American curriculum she was going to use with her third graders. The forest, she thought, could be constructed in the wooden flower box she had brought with her. As we all talked about such a forest, it became clear that a flower box was just not going to be big enough. As serendipity would have it, a classroom next to the Center's studio was being emptied out (unfortunately due to further budget cuts). With a bold leap of faith and the euphoria of playing, we suggested that the forest be built inside of this vacated room. And so, with the blessings of the school's generous principal, a forest — an *imagined forest* — began to be built the following week in the empty classroom.

But why an imagined forest? As we soon learned, many of the children in the school had never seen a forest, and many, despite living only a block away, had never been to Central Park. By allowing the forest to be imagined, we were asking its makers (and this eventually included almost all of the children, teachers, and parents in the school) to create from their collective memory and their personal sense of what they thought a forest might look like. Little did we realize that such an invitation would encourage the creation of not only a forest as it might seem, but also a forest that represented our interior view of our most elemental feelings of fear, longing, delight, and wonder. Within six months (it took almost another two years to finish the forest), this once empty room began to be filled with children's finely constructed caves, nests, prehistoric creatures, glowing moons, suns, flying birds, waterfalls, staring frogs, ancient seas, and secretive hunters moving in the shadows of old trees. Teachers and student teachers often added richly colored leaves and flowers, and parents (curious to know what their children were talking about at dinner time) some-

times came to the forest to add their own creations, frequently inspired by their children's work.

Every kind of material was used to make the forest: colored tissue paper, string, cardboard, clay, wire, upside down chairs and tables, discarded boxes, and scraps of wood. Tucked away beneath a three-dimensional tree or a palm-sized cave were poems and stories written by the children. On the walls were paintings and drawings of volcanoes, dinosaurs, and luminous skies. And, hanging from the ceiling, each time a window was opened, were mysteriously moving mobiles of rainbow colored fish, beckoning stars, and far-away planets.

Speaking and writing the very word itself — *forest* — had become, we realized, a way to unlock images and memories that were, for many of the adults and children in the school, a part of the biological underpinnings of their imaginations. For those of us ushering in these images, the forest proved to be an exciting insight into how rich the imaginative life of children (and adults) was and could be. The numerous teachers, parents, and just plain curious persons who came expecting to see a real forest — in progress — found instead a room not unlike the unraveling of our imaginative thought, perhaps a confusing world, but for others, a blessed revelation.

After nearly two years of sustained creation, The Forest was officially declared opened in a daylong celebration in the spring of 1976. The third floor hallway was crowded with teachers, families, and many of the children who had constructed the forest and were now acting as its informed guides. Here is an excerpt from a community newspaper, *The Westsider*, reporting the event:

The forest was asleep. Or so Alita Lyons said: "At night," the wide-eyed nine-year old explained, as she led visitors through a wonderland of flora and fauna on the third floor of PS 9, "the animals come alive. The birds fly; the rhino walks and the deer runs." She took a tiny guest by the hand and led her to a table covered with small clay figures. "Here are the bumble bees," she said. "They won't sting you now, but you have to be careful at night." For the young Ms. Lyons, the forest was clearly a magic world.



Richard Lewis founded the Touchstone Center for Children in 1969 in New York City. The Center presents workshops in schools and environmental centers for children and teachers emphasizing the role of the imagination as central to all learning. He is also the editor and author of a number of books, among them being *Miracles: Poems by Children of the English-speaking World*; *When Thought is Young: Reflections on Teaching and the Poetry of the Child*; and *Living by Wonder: Essays On The Imaginative Life of Childhood*.

And so, with the forest as a designated space in the school, as important as the gym, lunch room, the library, and a single classroom, it became obvious to us that here, right in the midst of the school, lay numerous themes and images that could be explored with children as the beginnings and sources of their imaginative selves. A question continually arose amongst us: Was the forest merely a forest, or was it, metaphorically, the ever-evolving space of our imagination? As we kept that question in mind, for the next five years we saw the forest flourish with the extending of themes and images that already existed inside its bustling life.

Using the large sun and the moon hanging on either side of the forest, made specifically for The Forest by kindergarten children, we began the next year of Touchstone's work in the school with a year-long thematic exploration based on children's perceptions (both scientific and mythic/poetic) of the origins of the sun and the moon. With a winter celebration of the *Birthday of the Sun* and a *Spring Celebration for the Moon* — in which children from the school assembled at dusk on the lawn outside of the planetarium of the Museum of Natural History to look through telescopes and read their mythical stories of the moon's creation — we had begun to use The Forest as a sheltered home out of which children could reflect upon, both scientifically and poetically, what emerging life in all its manifestations meant to us.

In subsequent years, The Forest inspired us to investigate amphibians and reptiles in a thematic overview entitled *Creatures of the World*, followed by one entitled *Humankind: the First Artisans*, in which we envisioned, through many different art forms, the ways early human life first created images. These yearlong, in-depth explorations became the basis of Touchstone's work over the next two decades. Expanding upon its school-based activities, the Center, during this time, engaged in several creative ventures. We began a theatre company, which performed original theatre pieces in museums and environmental centers (*Cave and Creature Tales*). We completed various publishing projects (poster-booklets, *Air Sings*, *Earth Dances* and *Sing We of Creeping and Crawling Things*). We created touring exhibitions (*Haiku and Prints and Poems by Japanese Children*). And we held workshops for teachers and parents (*Learning and the Imagination* and *The Magic Word: Children and Their Poetic Vision*).

In 1980, Touchstone ended its residency at Public School 9, and The Forest was dismantled, tree by tree, creature by creature, to make room for a regular classroom. The Center continued its work in various elementary schools in the South Bronx, East Harlem, and the Lower East Side; in a middle school, Intermediate School 227; and, most recently, in the Townsend Harris High School, both located in Queens. In these schools, the Center variously explored a six-year theme, *Realms of the Sea, Sky, and Earth*, followed by a group of themes, which we then presented in various publications of ours, related to the specific qualities of imaginative thought — *In The Spirit of Play; The Many Ways of Thought; The Many Ways of Feeling; The Bird of Imagining; and The Making of Worlds*.

At present, the Center is finishing a three-year project entitled *Speakings: The Many Voices of Language*. The intent of this project is to locate not only the language capacities in us, but also the ways in which language functions as a faculty of expression and communication throughout the natural world. Working in three schools (PS 20 in Manhattan, IS 277, and the Townsend Harris High School), the Center has altered this project to fit the needs of each school. In the high school, students created a tile mural, hung in the main lobby of the school, based on their original art and writing inspired by their study of the origins of human language. In both the middle and elementary schools,

From the chapter "The Story the Child Keeps" in *Living By Wonder: The Imaginative Life of Childhood*.

A story is simply about what happens. If so, stories are everywhere, both inside and outside of ourselves.

When [one student] said, "It's amazing how the wind moves the trees. It moves my mind also," he was speaking to all of us about the story that each of us keeps. Within everyone, child or adult, an elegant narrative of a story exists between ourselves and the life around.

That story is a place of possibility in which we take part in a world that enhances, enlivens and offers us something with which we can identify. Through that identification, we grow. We become more than we are. We learn how to get from here to there. Though a story may challenge what we already believe about our world, ultimately, it is through stories that spirit is nurtured.

In a time when children can easily lose the birthright of imagination, we must find new ways to help children to the sources of the stories they urgently wish to tell. Each time they speak their stories, they establish once again the fertility and importance of their imagining selves....

Touchstone, in conjunction with school staff, has created outdoor school gardens surrounded by tiles and murals decorated with students' original art and writing, inspired by the *Speakings* theme.

And how is Alissa doing in her third grade class? Has she changed her disbelief of my planting a seed of the imagination in my thoughts? Has she, with the other children in her class, begun making her imagining garden in the small cardboard box we had given to each child? Did she understand the parallel we drew between the growth that takes place in the garden outside her school and the growth of thoughts in her own imagination?

Now, in the third session of our workshop with her class, I watch her work quietly, intently balancing a small piece of paper between her two fingers — and with her other hand, spreading glue on the paper's edge. The classroom is filled with all the outside noise of urban life, but she, like most of her classmates, doesn't seem to be bothered. She bends over her box and, with the care of a much older artisan, attaches her yellow paper in and around the carefully arranged twigs and stones she has already put into the garden of her box. Standing near me, she asks: "Richard, do you like my yellow flower?" And for a brief moment I hold my breath as I realize that what had been her fear of the imaginative process had now become her innate ability to believe that even a yellow piece of paper, cropped and folded, could become a flower.

In the weeks that followed she wrote down a few of her thoughts about her growing garden:

"My garden looks up and thinks how it is to be in the sky. My garden always thinks about the sky."

"My sky sees my garden like little ants. The sky looks down and says 'Oh, it's amazing down there.' The sky wishes it could touch my garden."

What had happened to Alissa that made her feel at ease with her imagination so that her making a garden in a cardboard box and her writing about the relationship between the garden and the sky came to her without any sense of falsity and disbelief? Was it just a matter of our showing her a different way of thinking and feeling, a way that we merely and quite naturally introduced into her day-to-day classroom activities? Or was her change due to something else, something which reaches into the larger and deeper textures of childhood thought?

While I won't diminish the importance of bringing into classrooms another form of thinking, I also believe that by emphasizing the imagination as a reality to be considered and expressed we have touched upon something too often absent from the classroom experience. At the beginning of our work with this class, we purposely decided to offer each child a small envelope with a piece of torn paper inside in order to say to all the children: "We know you can imagine. We are also confident that your imaginative thought will be able to transform a piece of paper into a seed that you can plant in your thoughts."

From our earlier work on *The Forest*, we learned that there is another form of childhood thinking and feeling that is profoundly important as a basis of learning. When the natural world is used as both a starting point and a larger context for imaginative thought, there is the possibility that the imagination can be seen as a part of the natural world itself. It has been our experience that children, whether they live in urban, suburban or rural environments, need to be continually brought back to their probing questions "Where am I? What other aliveness is growing with me? How can I connect to trees, the sky, oceans, the patterns of insect wings, the flight of birds?" Children's initial empathy for the natural world is not simply a passing phase; it is a deeply rooted concern for the establishment of their place within the phenomenon of their being alive. If this instinctive empathy is ignored, and the use of the imaginative as an expressive link to this empathy is disregarded, significant personal learning, which springs spontaneously from the child, can be permanently damaged.

Whether it is Alissa or any other child we have worked with, one thing has become clear: When a child uses their innate capacity for wonder and their natural ability to imagine, a new interest in learning often follows. Not necessarily only academic learning, but the learning that no amount of tests and assessments can measure. A learning, in its intimacy, that we strive for when all the facts and figures have been put aside and we are alone, within the solitude of our thoughts and imagining. Such learning, in the end, never disappoints us. And such learning, when encouraged, is what adults, as well as children, need in order to sustain them in the course of a lifetime.

If we succeed in our work at the Center, we do so because we help both children and adults realize that there are many dimensions to learning. Even more important, we help them understand at the deepest levels of their core being that the learning that takes place when our imagination is acknowledged and utilized is a learning that represents the depth and extent of our personhood — open and responsive to our ever evolving and innate creative capacities.

As we were leaving Alissa's classroom, after our final workshop with her class, I turned around and noticed a group of children in the front of the room. They were playing with their clay figures — about an inch in height — that they had made as inhabitants for their gardens. I tried to say goodbye, but they didn't hear me. No matter, though. For, one of them had written earlier, as they watched their imagining gardens grow, "My imagination is the cover. It is like a rainbow guard that is protecting my garden." I felt assured that they were doing what their imagining was asking of them: To be fully engaged in and attentive to the ebb and flow of their imaginative thought. A seed had been planted.

Reference

Goldberg, Lillian. 1984. *The Touchstone study: Bringing the arts to the Schools*. New York: Touchstone Center Publications.