Director’s Corner: Lead from Within

When we begin to anticipate the ways that we and others can “Be a Contribution”, then The Art of Possibility’s fifth practice, “Leading from Any Chair”, is a natural extension. As with many of the book’s anecdotes, this practice’s signature phrase originated in an experience the second author, Benjamin Zander, had while conducting an orchestra. In this case, Zander’s insight came from his recognition that the “silent conductor”, who makes none of the symphony’s beautiful music, is truly powerful only by “his ability to make other people powerful” (p. 69). He then reflected on ways to best create conditions that would encourage “the greatest possible attentiveness and participation of all the players” (p. 73). He gradually discovered that by intentionally seeking and then actively utilizing the input of the musicians, including occasionally asking them to conduct, that he could more effectively partner with the orchestra to offer the best performance possible.

At the Children’s School, we try to create such synergy by going beyond valuing each individual’s contributions to actually inviting leadership from within the organization. As Zander explains, “A leader does not need a podium; she can be sitting quietly on the edge of any chair, listening passionately and with commitment, fully prepared to take up the baton (p. 76).” I distinctly remember a shift in the Children’s School staff culture when educators stopped bringing problems for me to solve and started coming instead with descriptions of challenging situations, ideas about possible courses of action, and a suggestion about which one to pursue. In similar ways, the teachers aim to balance proactive planning of each day’s learning activities with flexibly responding to the children’s ideas and initiative. Fostering that type of culture within a school, or indeed within a family, requires that those in the official leadership positions prepare themselves and those they lead by offering diverse opportunities to explore varied roles. During the units on Storytelling (3’s), Folk Tales & Fairy Tales (4’s), and Patricia Polacco (Kindergarten), the children re-enacted stories in the role of different characters, took turns as the narrator, compared and contrasted different versions of stories told by different authors, became authors and illustrators of their own stories, etc. This month, they will all be studying “Building”, which is another context in which they can practice collaborating and contributing their ideas about what will make their constructions stable, functional, and aesthetically interesting.

Regardless of the unit topics, our educators aim to facilitate children’s effective interactions in social situations. For the natural leaders among them, that means helping them practice being inclusive rather than bossy; whereas, for others, it means helping them to stand up for their rights within the peer group. One of the books we have utilized recently to prompt this discussion is called “One” by Kathryn Otoshi. In the story, “BLUE is a quiet color. RED is a hot head. RED likes to pick on BLUE. YELLOW, GREEN, PURPLE, and ORANGE don’t like what they see, but what can they do? When no one takes a stand, things get out of hand. Until ONE comes along and shows all the colors how to stand up and COUNT.” I’ve read this book during several Question & Answer sessions recently because parents have asked how to help their children navigate the common power struggles among siblings and peers, as well as how to respond to situations in which their children witness injustices in the world around them. As we begin a new year, let’s commit to dialogue and partnership so that together we can help all of our children gain confidence in their ability to lead from within their families, their classrooms, and their communities.