

KIT

LESSONS FROM ANNEMARIE

DOUG EBBINGER



Quietly but persistently, Annemarie took every opportunity to learn something new and weave it into her ever-enlarging understanding of humanity.

In 1990, ten years after having retired from the school and moved to California with George, Annemarie Roeper finally wrote her manifesto, *Educating Children for Life: The Modern Learning Community*. Of course, being Annemarie, her manifesto wasn't a diatribe. Instead, she picked up the conversation she had been having for 50 years with colleagues, children, psychologists, academics, housekeepers, family, friends, gardeners, and anyone who happened to sit down next to her. Quietly but persistently, Annemarie took every opportunity to learn something new and weave it into her ever-enlarging understanding of humanity. When it was time to draw her thoughts together into one book, instead of the numerous articles, memos and speeches she'd written over her career, she drew on those conversations.

This book is the result of living my life. All my life experiences have been integrated into a conscious or unconscious pool of insights, beliefs, concepts and ideas which originate from a diversity of sources and have come together into a unified whole.

When she began to think about how to acknowledge all the people who had contributed to that unified whole, she paused.

An image appeared in my mind. It was as though a door to my mind opened and a person well-known and loved by me appeared. Soon another came, and then another, and then another until it became a crowd. It looked like a wonderful reunion. Each time a new person entered, it was clear that this particular person was really an integral part of my life and growth. Soon the room was filled, and still they kept coming.

As we discussed ways to celebrate Annemarie during this centenary year, we knew we had to pick up those threads again — those threads that were so much the essence of Annemarie. We invited a few of those who knew her to share the lessons they had learned from Annemarie so that we could keep the conversation going. Some of the following stories were spoken at a panel discussion during a faculty meeting in January, while others were submitted in writing. Let's enjoy each one as they come through the door.

ROSALIE LAKE

Retired, former Stage II Teacher

I taught at Roeper in Stage II during the decade of the 1970s. It was the beginning of a 40-year career in education for me and my family, and the last decade of Annemarie's daily presence as founder and mentor of Roeper School.

The most encompassing view of what I learned from Annemarie was the real meaning of a "cooperative community." Annemarie had a particular sense of community at the heart of her interactions as Co-Head of the School and, most intimately, those relationships she made as Head of Lower School. Annemarie's vision was based on dependable and shared trust and respect, together with an opportunity, if not an insistence, on participation and communication from ALL members of the Community. Some of these descriptive words are in many schools' lexicons. Annemarie's vision went much deeper. It included both independent and collegial decision-making. It did not eliminate a hierarchy, but its hierarchy was derived from deep respect for the Founders and was spread through and shared with those affected or served by it. At the heart was the dignity of the opinions of children, teachers, coaches, maintenance staff, and parents.



DOUG EBBINGER

On a practical level, I learned from Annemarie that the "open classroom" had nothing to do with walls or the placement of furniture. It was all about relationships: kids with teachers, kids with kids, teachers with parents, kids with their own learning. It was about

children's innate creativity with language that could teach them to read; that piling up blocks and moving them around was a math experience;

that raising chickens in the classroom was OK, knowing that one day the chicks would become chickens, ready to move on as the kids, too, were growing; and that cleaning fish in the big round bathroom sink to examine the scales and skeletons also brought the scent of an invitation to everyone in the Domes to come by for fish lunch or not.

I left Roeper in 1980 to become Head of Lower School in a very traditional K – 12 independent school in Florida. My [four] children, all of whom had attended Roeper, were with me. We began our tenure, all of us feeling that we had ideas about what was needed at the school. Roeper was “in our pockets,” a phrase I have used to describe Annemarie and George’s influence. Five years later, the school was indeed different. It had become more “cooperative,” more open and inclusive, and a lot happier.

I held a number of administrative positions before I returned to Roeper after 20 years away. Annemarie was always, ALWAYS, with me, and George, too. When I began at Roeper in the 1970s, the whole school was on the Bloomfield campus. The big kids read stories to the young ones, as they do today on Founders Day. We dictated stories to them to write down for us. Then we all went sledding or to the creek. George could see us from his office and would put on his coat and come down to join in. He and Annemarie loved the generations of the school coming together.

Annemarie influenced my whole life: the way I raised my family; how my son is raising his children; my service to the community in which I live and my neighbors there. So much goes back to Annemarie’s vision of the cooperative, inclusive community I first experienced at Roeper, first hand, about 40 years ago.

COLLEEN SHELTON

Stage I Teacher

I started here as a co-op student in 1970. I was a student at Ferndale High School, and Roeper invited people to come to the school for a year. I didn’t know anything about the school, but I knew everyone wanted to come here. We drew tickets out of a jar for our placements, and I drew Roeper.



I always felt that Annemarie had something to do with that.

The first day that I came, I was really nervous. I was 17 years old. I walked into the igloos and thought, I love this already — we’re all hippies here! Kids were running around, laughing and everyone was

talking. I noticed everyone was using first names, but I could only say, “Hello, Mrs. Roeper.” Well, you know, she would never say anything to you. We had a lovely conversation and, as I left, she said, “I’m so glad you’re here and I would so love it if you called me Annemarie.”

Annemarie has been with me ever since. I “live” in the Hill House, and every day when I leave, I hear Annemarie and Mariann talk to me about everything I did wrong that day. And I know that when I leave there thinking I did everything right, that’s when it will be time to leave.

What I learned from Annemarie is that you’re always dealing with people. I deal with the shortest people, but they come with parents, and they come with grandparents, and they come with baggage, and they come with we-don’t-know-what going on at home. What I learned from Annemarie is that you can’t just have that kid who is falling apart and not look at him and think, I gotta go find out what’s going on. I think about how Annemarie taught me to listen, to dig deep, to dig really deep.

But she also stood back. Annemarie let us make mistakes. She never told you you made a mistake, but instead said, “Hey, let’s have a cup of tea. How do you think that went?” She’d help you find those pieces. There was never a judgment; everyone was a community and had your back. Annemarie was courageous and bright and — one thing people often don’t realize — she was very funny.

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— Rosalie Lake

I think about how Annemarie taught me to listen, to dig deep, to dig really deep.

— Colleen Shelton

I thought my job was to work with the kids, and she really closed that circle for me about what a community is, that we watch out for each other, and we ask each other questions like we ask the kids.

— Dan Jacobs



JOSHUA KRISTAL

DAN JACOBS

*Middle/Upper School Forensics,
Debate and English Teacher*

I came in 1997, and the main thing Annemarie taught me — in the way Annemarie taught pretty much everything, which was by example — was that she treated me the way she wanted me to treat other people in the community. And she taught me to hit the ground running with questions. I thought I knew how to ask questions because I knew how to ask forensicky and debatey sorts of questions, things like, what do you think about this piece, and how do you relate to this character? Those are really, really good questions to ask, but she taught me to ask questions about the human being behind the work.

You know how we get together in the hallway and vent? When Annemarie visited, she would be, like, hey, let's walk around the block and talk. And I would think, oh, good, I can finally vent with Annemarie! It turned out she was *terrible* for venting. You would say something like, this kid, blah, blah, blah, or this parent, blah, blah, blah, and she would start asking questions like, well, what are they afraid of? What's their home life like? And it became a reflex in my head to ask these questions. I grew up as a pretty emotional, compassionate person, but Annemarie was the first to guide me toward what emotional literacy is, which I think is a pretty hard lesson. It's kind of easy, well, not easy to get subject matter, but it's sort of doable in a logical way, but emotional literacy is something you have to feel your way through. When I paid attention to Annemarie, I got some really good role model-ly lessons of how to do that.

It also didn't occur to me that this applied to the adults in the community. In my first year, another teacher treated me very badly. I was talking to Annemarie about him and, again, I thought I would be able to prove how right I was and how wrong

he was. But she didn't go there. She knew this person really well and knew where he was in his life, and she was able to give me insight in just a few sentences. I hadn't thought about that. I thought my job was to work with the kids, and she really closed that circle for me about what a community is, that we watch out for each other, and we ask each other questions like we ask the kids.

DIANNE O'CONNOR

Lower School Science Teacher

When I first came to the school in 1980, Annemarie had already retired, but she was very present in lots of different ways when I was first teaching. Particularly with me, I felt there was this connection with her. She sought me out; she asked me what I was thinking about things; she really listened. I think we connected because we both really cared about ideas. I remember being at their home where they invited faculty to discuss various issues. There were lively discussions with other teachers. I was a new teacher, but I never felt any delineation based on stature. I noticed that she was an active listener and a keen observer. She knew when to be quiet, sit back and really take things in, and I really appreciated that. In thinking about lessons from Annemarie, two things float to the top of my thoughts. One is getting to the heart of things. And the second one is enlarging one's tent.



Getting to the heart of things has a lot to do with the way she listened, the way she observed, and the way she cared about the way you thought. For those who know me, I'm a pretty independent thinker, and I'm also pretty principled. There was a decision made at the school that I disagreed with and I took a stand in a pretty open way. Annemarie heard about it and wanted me to go out to lunch with her and talk about it. She was really interested in my position. It wasn't only about her listening without judging as much as the way she always looked at all sides of a question and really considered them.

Enlarging one's tent was another lesson. When my children were young, I left the school to be home with them. One day I visited the school and Annemarie happened to be there. She asked me what I was doing, and I said I was home with my young children. She persisted and said, "Well, what else are you doing?" Inside I was a little indignant, thinking that of all people Annemarie ought to understand why I'm home with my young children. I was very resistant, but I have found that when I am resistant, if I stay with it, it evolves and comes out in my experience in a way that benefits me. And that question did. I began to think about other things, and in the five years I was home, I did some landscape design professionally, took courses, sold some of my knitted socks and designs, and did some adoption paperwork. And yet I was still able to be with Lily and Leland during the day. I thought, that's interesting how her question may have led me to do those things. And to this day, it's still that way. I'm always thinking about what more I can do, how I can contribute. George and Annemarie talked a lot about being citizens of the world, which really resonates with me. How can we go beyond our borders here and reach out?

LINDA PENCE

Retired, former 6th grade Science, Robotics and Lifeskills Teacher, Lower School Science Teacher, and Lower School Assistant Director

As a new teacher to Roeper in 1976, I quickly learned that Roeper was a place unlike any other place I had taught. The lessons I learned through mentoring by "old time staff" and discussions with and questions posed by Annemarie guided me to become a teacher for children. Annemarie brought



BOB BENYAS

me to understand the importance of listening to my students, their families, friends and others to develop a true relationship and understanding of the kids who came each day to class.

It quickly became clear that I needed to do more than deliver content and curriculum. The ability of my students to participate in their own learning depended on my ability to understand who they were below the surface. The oft-assigned labels of "unmotivated, lazy, oppositional" and a host more given to kids were neither acceptable nor accurate. In fact, these labels were in themselves lazy, disrespectful and prevented true understanding of each child. Kids are inherently programmed to want to learn. They each come with their own stories, experiences, fears, joys, passions, and challenges.

My job and that of our teachers, supported by Annemarie and her focus on the whole child, was to find ways to engage with students, provide a safe and open environment for exploration, failure, and encouragement to continue to move beyond what was comfortable and easy. I learned the importance of engaging with my students in and out of the classroom, not just in the words they conveyed, but the feelings, ideas, and talents shared, as well as the stories told and questions asked.

I also was encouraged to engage with parents in a partnership that helped us both to support their child, to share with colleagues, and to listen to others' experiences with each child. These interactions helped round out an understanding and engagement that led to a trusting relationship. The labels and stereotyping melted away as the individual child emerged ready to engage, take risks, and learn. These were the cherished lessons I learned from Annemarie and the Roeper Philosophy.

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— Dianne O'Connor

Annemarie brought me to understand the importance of listening to my students, their families, friends and others to develop a true relationship and understanding of the kids who came each day to class.

— Linda Pence



CAROLYN LETT

Diversity & Community Programs, Financial Aid & Scholarship Coordinator

I've been here since 1993, when I started out as Assistant to the Lower School Director, Lorene Porter. I worked with Annemarie on the schedule for her visits, and that's when I really got to know her — over the phone before she got here. One time she said, "Carolyn, I heard you're someone I need to get to know. So while you're putting other people on the schedule, put yourself on the schedule." So that's what I did — I put myself on her schedule.

We met, and she wanted to know who I was, why I was even here, what I was called to be in this community. You learned from Annemarie without even knowing you were learning because she was modelling through her example. During her visits, I saw her being very authentic. I saw people be very confident around her. People wanted to meet and talk with her, students in Stage I and all the way through. And when they came out, they felt that they had gained something, that they had been in the presence of greatness, truthfully, because she listened to them with a purpose. We keep hearing this, that she was able to listen to you. When you talk about empowering people, or self-actualizing people, they have to have felt that they mattered. They have to have felt that they were being heard, and that they are a partner in whatever it might be, whether it was finding a resolution to something or brainstorming, or whatever, but you were a partner in it. That's how she made you feel, that you were a partner in this together.

Another lesson I learned from Annemarie came from when she came for her 90th birthday celebration. I was wondering, what will be the words of wisdom from this great person? And of all the things she could have said, what she said was, "Be good to each other. Show your appreciation for people in the way you take them in, so that they are authentic and you are approachable." She was that person. When you appreciate someone, you realize you have something to learn, you're not the one with all the knowledge, and that makes people comfortable with the conversation and the dialogue. Because if

you are really a true teacher, you're a consummate learner. You're always learning as you're talking with someone.

There were just so many lessons with Annemarie. I'm getting a little misty thinking about this because remembering being with her is to remember being with a person who never asserted her position.

DIANA ELSHOFF

Retired, former Stage IV Teacher

I taught at Roeper for 26 years, 25 of those years in Stage IV as Teacher, Coordinator and later Trustee from 1998 – 2003.

I was hired by Annemarie right before she retired, but I was fascinated by her for many years to come. She was like a beacon to me of what I wanted my life at Roeper to be like and indeed what I carry with me today now that I am retired myself but still espousing the Roeper philosophy.

As a teacher, Annemarie taught me to look more deeply at myself in regard to my understanding of children and actually all people. Too often as teachers we become so focused on our subject content that we forget to see learning through the eyes of each individual student. What are the needs of this child? What motivates this person? What might be interfering with my need to see learning progress and the student's personal agenda?

In other words, Annemarie challenged me to really get to know my students, to appreciate the complexities of these gifted young people and to be willing to reflect on my own part in helping them to grow in the best possible ways. In turn, she taught me to better understand myself in the process and to apply what I learned to my own life. Thank you, Annemarie.



Be good to each other. Show your appreciation for people in the way you take them in, so that they are authentic and you are approachable.

— Carolyn Lett

As a teacher, Annemarie taught me to look more deeply at myself in regard to my understanding of children and actually all people.

— Diana Elshoff



DEB VEILLETTE

PE Teacher and Coach

I was student-teaching at a school in Lake Orion and the principal was tough and mean. Kids lost recess; they had to walk silently in the hall — it was that kind of school. I got a job at Roeper Summer Day Camp. At that time, most of the camp staff was Roeper staff, and that was my ah-ha! moment. There are people here who believe like I do: that children are equals, that we can talk with them and engage with them on a level that doesn't have to be, "I'm the authority, I'm the boss, I know everything."

I got to know Sandy Dooley Lawson Short, and she hired me as a team teacher. I was in Stage II and I got to teach with some very amazing people. And what amazed me the most was that social-emotional growth of the children was at the forefront. The lesson from Annemarie was, if they're not socially and emotionally healthy, if they don't know who they are, if they don't know where they are, how are they going to learn? How are they going to learn?

The other amazing lesson that I learned was that when it comes to discipline and rules, we have to as a group buy into them all. Kids are going to stray, and they may have conflicts, but it wasn't my job to tell them how to resolve it. If there were two children having a conflict, I was kind of the go-between. I learned to listen, and I still work at having the children own it, having the children resolve it. The children had as many rights as I did. I was there to give them guidance and to help them. Obviously, I need to keep them safe, but we're people first and we're teachers and students second.

And finally, as a PE teacher, I had sensed a question in the air about competition. I met with Annemarie and asked her how she felt about team sports and competition and whether there was a place for them. She said there was definitely a place for them, and it's not the competition or the aspect of winning that's important. It's coming together as a group, challenging yourselves, and working cooperatively toward a goal. I felt better about coaching team sports after that.

EMERY PENCE

Retired, former 7th Grade Social Studies Teacher, Alumni Director, Philosophy Dude, Middle School Director, and Lower School Science Teacher

I have two main gifts from Annemarie.

The first relates to what Annemarie taught us and what, through her writings and the living Roeper Philosophy, she continues to teach us. I want to explain about how we should react when people urge us to try harder and be our better selves.

My main contact with Annemarie was after she had retired. She would come back or get on the phone to, frankly, tell us what to do. With a purity and focus on high ideals she was our keeper of the faith, our benchmark, our guide, our nudge, OUR PAIN IN THE BUTT.

The lesson from Annemarie was, if they're not socially and emotionally healthy, if they don't know who they are, if they don't know where they are, how are they going to learn?

— Deb Veillette



DOUG LINGER

I learned from Annemarie the importance of always having and always referring to a core set of values, a perspective, a group of benchmarks that consistently reminds us that the children and their growth should be the primary focus.

— Emery Pence

Former Board of Trustees Chair Doug Winkworth tells the story of trying to take the elevator on the Birmingham campus with Annemarie as both had great difficulty climbing the stairs. The elevator required a key and she asked why. Doug responded that the school didn't want anybody who didn't need it to be able to use it, so it was usually locked. Annemarie stated strongly (she usually stated strongly) that such a policy was wasting a teachable moment, a good time for a community discussion, and a chance for individuals to learn responsibility.

Doug thought to himself, "Gee, lady, can't you just relax and let something go?" My answer was, "No, she can't because that was her job."

I learned from Annemarie the importance of always having and always referring to a core set of values, a perspective, a group of benchmarks that consistently reminds us that the children and their growth should be the primary focus. It should never be just about our convenience or just adherence to bureaucratic rules or just fear of anarchy.

Her job was to remind us who we were supposed to be without her having the shackles of having to actually live in the practical world of running a school and living in a community. She needed to keep the dream alive and the message pure because we who were so immersed in everyday life find it so, so easy for us to cut corners, to be expedient, and to become complacent.

What is our job when a former head or a current administrator or a consultant or the 1981 Philosophy or an unreasonable student or the writings of George or a professional development idea or any other source urges us to do something hard and to reach beyond the status quo? How should we respond to "You could do better"?

Our immediate reaction to such exhortations is usually much like Doug's: "Give me a break." "Easy for you to say." "I'm already doing too much." "I am not listening to you — la, la, la, la." We feel resentful and put upon. AMR had many "discussions" with me in which I didn't sit at her feet with dewy eyes. She and I only resorted to fisticuffs a couple of times.

Our job, when we have an available, high-ideal Isaiah, is to try not to reject out of hand the advice. We need to keep an open mind and get past the to-be-expected automatic negative reaction. But, also, we shouldn't easily accept what we are asked to do without wrestling with it. Annemarie's and my arguments helped me figure what I should and could do differently. After I worked through all of this and after asking her a million tough questions, any of my plans to improve and change from the status quo were truly mine and therefore weren't resisted. They were more likely realistic and doable than her advice because, unlike Annemarie, I knew more about the situation on the ground with all of its messy realities. But without her coming down from the mountaintop to drag me up to show me what could be, I probably wouldn't have ever moved forward. Thank you, Annemarie.

AMR Lesson #2. Our great national poet once sang, "He who isn't being born is busy dying." Annemarie lived her entire life fully, unlike many who have given up even at an early age.

An old joke has a person saying they are so old they don't risk buying green bananas. Annemarie in her 90s was planting banana plantations. On her death bed, she worried about her Roeper and how she could help it.

Annemarie taught us that to find meaning and purpose in this absurd existential situation we call life, we need to create, to reach out, to change, to connect, and to be so busy being born. Annemarie was my mentor on how to be a better person who is more fully alive.

KAREN ROEPER

Daughter, former Stage II Teacher and Roeper Summer Day Camp Director

This discussion is about lessons from Annemarie, my Ma. I keep having the urge to share this one particular story which happened in my adulthood, because I feel like it's such a beautiful example of who my mother was. Both my parents and I lost our homes in the big Oakland firestorm, which was more than 20 years ago. We both lost all our photographs in that fire. If we had duplicates, we lost both of them. That's one of the hardest things, to lose one's history. Six months later, my mother handed me memories she had

written down, memories of images of me she'd recalled from the photographs we'd lost. It just brings tears to my eyes to think about it again — that she had the creativity and the thoughtfulness to want to give me that as a way of remembering the parts of my childhood we often relive through photographs.

In concluding the panel discussion, Karen returned to her opening questions. Although the discussion had been by and for teachers, her thoughts are relevant to everyone within the Roeper community.

What comes back to me is the question I asked you in the beginning: For the sake of what have you chosen this path? What is the heart of the matter? You wouldn't be here if you weren't bringing your heart to it. There are probably a lot of other places that would be easier to work in. Working here is demanding, and requires honesty, openness, and curiosity. When I think about both of my parents, those are among the first qualities that come to me. Their minds were open. When they moved to California, they were open to the things that were there. They were always wanting to learn and be curious about what came to them.

A phrase that I think also expresses my mother's orientation is to "replace ambition with curiosity." This doesn't mean you don't want to grow and get somewhere, but when we get blindsided by ambition, we lose sight of what's around us. Keeping sight of what's right here and now is another important learning you bring to the kids. And my parents were led by love. Love is really what it's all about, and love is what you were all talking about. Love is what we bring to the kids. Letting yourself be led by love is really the heart of the matter.



MARCA RUFF

You can purchase *Educating Children for Life: A Modern Learning Community* by Annemarie Roeper from Royal Fireworks Press at <https://www.rfwp.com>. ♦

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yourself be
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— Karen Roeper