

Lecture #3: “The Growing Self Encounters Relationships: School and Society”

Delivered by Annemarie Roeper at The Roeper School

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Annemarie Roeper: I’m very, very happy to share this platform with my friend Sharon [Lind]. We share other platforms. I think we share a professional platform because we both believe in a holistic approach to understanding children. And at this point I think it is almost a political platform because often not many people look at children as a whole but in different parts, and it’s just wonderful that other people carry the same message I think that I do, in different ways, because they’re different people with different backgrounds. So, it’s a treasure to have you here. And the way we thought we’d do this is that I will begin to sort of consider the series. And then, at certain point, Sharon will take over.

You might have noticed that we are following a series. The first was when the child was born. The next was the relationship between child and parent as of very great importance. Often the relationship is really a kind of lifeline in helping the child enter this world. And this one is the next step, and it’s called, “The Growing Self Encounters Relationships: School and Society.”

It’s the step into the world away from home. It is merely another new beginning. No matter what point the child enters school, some will be at the age of two and some at the age of five, but it is a step away from home. It is a totally new thing and this, again, will become a prototype for the future, and any later experience to be seen against the perception of the first one, as the child first enters school. We can understand other or older children’s reactions, and even our own reactions, against the background of the first perception of the outside world in an institution away from home.

I feel that this repeats itself every time a new step is reached. When a child moves here at Roeper from one Stage to the next, and especially when they move from the Lower School to the Upper School, and again to college. Each time they take the step into a whole new world, and each time the Self is exposed to totally new pressures and experiences.

And, I guess I have ... the older I get, the more I see myself in the face of the child, the more I look at the world from the eyes of a child and with them, and try to understand the excitement and anxiety that comes with this. We must try to envision the high drama of this situation. It really is a situation, a dramatic situation. It is in some ways even more filled with sensation than the birth, because, in the meantime, the child has developed a vast psychic landscape with peaks and valleys, oceans and cities – that’s one way I see it – inside of themselves, so much has happened. And I

believe that it is the David and Goliath situation. On one side is the child: the child, the Self of the growing child, has developed into a complex unit, which balances the contradictory inner forces.

And the gifted child brings to this situation an even more dramatic inner plot – a strong inner agenda filled with daydreams and desires – to incorporate the world they are discovering – the world of everything: the world of science and math because they need a larger understanding of the world; the environment; the beauty; the nature; imagination; and creativity. All of that they have developed by the time they have entered school. Even when they are very young, they have the beginning of this. They have developed already special interests and abilities. And even the very young child, and again the gifted, will have a specialty, will have something that they are so eager to discover. They are poised to unlock the secrets around them. The building blocks of nature and mankind – they wonder what makes it all work. They also wonder, “How will I be received? Is there a place for me? Will I find an echo for my experiences?” Many of these children are really brimming with their inner excitement. You know, when you watch a little child, you can just see that excitement. And I love to just go to a playground or see children playing anywhere. It’s something that you hardly see later on. It’s really driven by so much eagerness.

And in the gifted there is also a deeply ingrained perfectionism that deeply impacts almost every action and encounter. They really want to master this world and they want to do it well. They want to see the whole of everything. And they also very early have a well-developed sense of justice. The gifted also at the point of entering school are aware of parental expectations for them. And most of all they anticipate school as the vehicle which will open this world for them. It is exciting when you talk to children before they go to school — the expectations they have. For one thing, they expect to learn it all at one time, especially the gifted. They don’t know that it takes trial and error. They think that this whole new world is going to be open for them. They think that school will give them the necessary tools to unlock the mysteries of life and help them cope with it. And they hope and expect that school will receive them with open arms and recognize who they are. The thought of the big, new experience fills them with excitement and with terror. And this is, I think, where the child is at the moment of entering school.

Some of this repeats itself each time a new school year begins. At the end of the summer, children begin to be anxious about it. They show symptoms of stress because again, they have to repeat this situation. This specific tension – a mixture of anticipation and anxiety – re-occurs with many of us all through life. The Sunday night depression is a well-known phenomenon of gifted children and adults. Facing the day in the morning is another moment when we experience these feelings, and it is amazing how many people have told me what a difficult thing it is to again face what we have to bring, and bring it together, combine it with the outside world around us. Many people have told me about this morning feeling, that it’s not necessarily fear, but a sort of a daily

refocusing, and again, for the gifted, this is almost a complex process all the time – finding again the balance between the inner and outer world. That is really I think what it is a task that children face and adults face.

That is the child. On the other hand, there is the school. And the school is the Goliath, with its complex array of factors that will influence the way a child is received, their expectations of society, the inner life and outer demands of teachers and administrators, the other children, the physical environment, group dynamics, and last but not least, the goal of education itself. Does the goal of education, the goal of what we expect, match the goal of the child? And this goal of the child is not something he invents; it is something that's there. The child has an inner goal. They need to fulfill their inner agenda, and the school wants them to fulfill their agenda and that is a really dramatic situation if you think about it. And I think we often don't think about it.

Often, no, not often, *sometimes* a school is aware of this (Roeper is, I think, in many ways) – that these two agendas exist and that we need to build a bridge between them and we need to bring them close together. But usually there is no awareness and even when there is awareness, it is a daily task to make this happen. And it is a potentially explosive situation. It can lead to wonderful cooperation – it can lead to growth for the child, which is the goal – and it can lead to disaster. And I think many of the clashes that happen between children and teachers, and children and school, are based on this. To me, it's something I think that I spent a great deal of my life dealing with, because when these clashes happen it is rarely interpreted as being this situation (the conflicting agendas of the child and the school). It's usually interpreted as the child's fault. It's usually interpreted that there is something wrong with the child, and that is one of the reasons why there are so many so-called learning disabilities. Right now, I am hoping to try to bring this situation under control in such a way that we can find the real learning disabilities and differentiate them from those that come from this particular clash.

These forces, of course, are so unevenly matched and this is I think why I feel that I must see it from the side of the child. The adults represent school and society and so-called reality. And there is a whole lot of power behind the demands of society, and it often becomes a power struggle, but a very unequal one.

And again, as I told you last time, the child cannot face this situation by himself. He is exposed to this new environment, these new experiences, and he brings his little, his small Self into this situation. And just as the relationship to the parent became the lifeline on which the child can build his relationship to the world, on which the child can start his new journey, the relationship to the teacher builds upon that original relationship. But it becomes one that exists by itself, and it's the basis on which the child can face this new life experience – the one away from home. It is the lifeline that allows him to continue to build his own inner structure.

Of course, at this point, it's augmented by other kinds of relationships – by relationships to other children, and even objects and the world around them. The areas they want to learn, the areas in which they want to achieve mastery, are tools that allow him to build up this Self, this unique Self. And so, in a way, the subject matter becomes another part of this lifeline and how the child relates to the subject matter, if the subject matter sort of coexists or agrees with his own inner agenda.

And so the teachers really have a double task. They have the task of relating to the child and they have the task of creating a way of teaching that allows the child to grow. You may notice that I see any kind of education from a psychological point of view. I think that it's the psyche that really is where motivation for learning, motivation for growth comes from. There is an inner relationship between the intellect and the psyche, but it's the emotions, I think, that really drive the desire for learning.

And of course, as the child grows older, many other relationships enter this picture, such as peer relationships and sibling relations. In certain situations, these relations become the real lifeline and support of the integrity of the Self. And this is a very important area because often teachers or parents will make a judgment on whether there should be a certain relationship, on whether a child should have a certain friend. And again, I think it's something we need to look at very carefully because I have seen relations between parents and children threatened when a parent or teacher tries to separate some relationships. I think we used to think it's mostly the relationship to a parent that the child needs for their inner security, but often friendships almost take over. Sometimes it may be necessary to separate children but we need to be very, very careful because we might really be destroying something. It is something we need to approach with a great deal of empathy.

Actually, again, all of this comes back to the basic relationship to parents and to the opportunity the child has to be able to truly relate to parents. It's been a sad experience to find out how often children feel they can't talk to their parents because there is going to be judgment right away, and they have to be careful of what they say. And we don't even know that we are often very critical because we have our own point of view. I'm not speaking about anybody here; I'm speaking really about my broad experiences over a lifetime, which, as I've said before, make me want to be the advocate for the child. It is quite a surprise to me to find that there are children who have nobody they can talk to. They have to face the world by themselves. In these situations (in which the adults disapprove of a friendship), there is often real disagreement, and they just don't understand each other.

Actually, there is one way in which we can see whether something has a very deep meaning to the child, a meaning that goes close to their basic security (and this is not only in relationship to other siblings or friends to almost anything). When you have a child react with more feeling than you think the situation would warrant, there is something else that is driving the child. And so instead of saying, "Well, it is just not

that important,” or “If you lose this toy, I will buy you another one,” when for some reason this particular toy might have meant much more for this particular child, we really need to be open to what the child is trying to tell us. I’m not saying that one always has to give in to children. I’m not saying that one should be permissive. I’m just saying that we really need to be open to what the child is trying to tell us.

And the same thing is true for the teacher, although that is very different because the teacher has a whole group to deal with, and it’s a different, more circumscribed situation. But actually learning will not take place unless the teacher really has related to the child. The basic encounters repeat themselves all the time through life, and the way we encounter things as a child, whether we can do them in a trusting way or whether we develop a distrust or a feeling that we are in danger of losing ourselves, will make a big difference.

The new relationship with the teacher grows out of the familiar one to the parent. In fact, this transition must happen very carefully, allowing the parent to endow the teacher with the trustworthiness. And that again repeats itself, not in the same way as they get older but it still must happen because the child is continuing with a journey to build more and more trustworthy relationships, so that he feels respected and feels noticed. And that is something that happens with children often: that they feel that a teacher doesn’t notice them or that the teacher doesn’t know them. That means that the child feels totally, basically disregarded. Only when that real relationship exists can he go through the trial and error of learning and making mistakes without feeling in constant danger. Time must be allowed to establish the relationship between teacher and child. And it really takes place against the background of the parent-child relationship.

One thing that I think never should happen, and I think that it doesn’t happen here, but it happens regularly at nursery schools, is that parents are sent away before a child has made an adjustment to the school. I just recently got a call from a mother who wanted to know if I thought she was a bad mother, if she had not given her child enough security because she was taking her three-year-old son to nursery school and she insisted that she stay the first day, and the school didn’t like it. The next day they said that she needed to leave, that he was too much attached to her, and it was time for him to let go, and all the kinds of things that I thought we had learned 50 years ago to be careful about. But disregarding the needs of the individual seems to happen over and over again. We seem to have to keep teaching parents and teachers that children have to be very, very respected. I know actually I don’t need to say this at this school, but the core of what I think is important for people know – and to remind people of in this school -- is that we must always be aware that we have so much more power than the child. It is so much easier when something goes wrong to think of the child as the problem.

Seeing the teacher as the child's second lifeline to the world rearranges the traditional role of the teacher, which I think is important, too. The teacher is usually seen as the person who transmits knowledge. That it (transmitting knowledge) has to be based on a relationship is not known by most teachers. And in fact, they reject it. When I say to teachers that they need to consider the feelings, they say, "But I am not a social worker." At school, even more than at home, a child is traditionally expected to live up to expectations. The teacher's role is the conveyor of knowledge, information and skills. I think this is true, but there has to be an established framework first wherein a trust relationship has been established. This can only happen if the goal is agreed-upon by teacher and child. Within the teacher-child relationship the process of education takes place, but this process itself can create wear and tear in the relationship. This is where the discrepancy arises over and over again. Is it education for society's expectations or for self-actualization? Is the emphasis on teaching or on learning? Personally, my belief is that only if we educate for life and help the child fulfill his agenda and establish a bond of safety can we reach either of the two goals. If a child feels threatened in his Self, in his Self-growth, he will resist the efforts of the school.

Whenever a child likes a class, it is because there is an unconscious bond between teacher and student and subject. What motivates a child to learn? We need to think about that. We don't often think about that. Is it grades? Competition? Approval? All of these things do play a role, but the real motivation, especially for the gifted, is mastery and understanding the world, the patterns, the concepts, creating an inner image of what this world is about. And that is why gifted children are concept learners, and not so much skill learners.

Children will learn information relevant to their quest. If there is resistance, we need to evaluate it in terms of the child's inner needs and in terms of the teacher-child relationship. Only after that can we decide whether it is a learning disability or attention deficit disorder or whatever else we think it might be. I am always surprised how children understand complex computers and that's to me so surprising because I don't understand, and they don't have a teacher. The kinds of things even two- and three-year-old children learn on their own is absolutely amazing. And nobody pushes them, nobody gives them marks for it, nobody even explains it very much to them. A one-year-old learns how to turn on the television. They learn all sorts of things just because they are motivated to do this. Sometimes I think I want to examine this and see if there are maybe other ways in which we should approach children with learning. Reading, for instance. It seems so simple and yet it takes us years to teach children how to read, even with all our incentives and things. There must be some reason for it.

There is an African saying that says, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." It takes parents, school, and that child to raise the child. It is a triangle. It is something we always need to be aware of. And here, the relationship between parents and school is a very important part of this triangle. Here again unconscious forces and prior life experiences come into play. The relationship between parents and teachers is again

built upon each of their previous experiences. Parents who distrust teachers, who have had negative experiences with teachers, will apply that to the relationship of their child to the teacher. It will be difficult for them to trust the teacher enough to give the child what the child should have. So one needs to look at one's own background, at one's own relationship. Often they relate in a beautiful manner in their common effort for the child. In other situations there is a great deal of mutual distrust between parent and teacher. The child needs the support and careful guidance of both of them. I think it's one of the most difficult situations that I have dealt with for probably 50 years. If there is a conflict between a child and a teacher, that it often becomes very quickly a conflict between the teacher and the parent. It is very difficult then to untangle this and often the child gets lost in this situation.

And the child really needs the support of both of them in different ways. They each play a different role. The teacher presents the child with tasks. The home is still the place where the child feels most free to express himself, and he needs to feel that the parent is an ally. It's very, very important that the child feels that he has one place, or she has one place, where they can express their feelings and feel understood. That also includes times where the parent needs to move back from the school a little bit and allow that relationship between teacher and child to grow, once the parent trusts the school.

This triangle is a very complex one. I have seen it from both sides. I have seen it where I felt a child needed the parents to be an ally and I've also seen it where the parents somehow hindered the growth and independence of this child because they stood in the way of the relationship between the teacher and the child.

Human relations are very, very difficult. Another thing that often happens, and presents a very difficult situation, is when a child feels that both home and school have united against them. That is very difficult. We must put ourselves in the child's place. At that moment, he feels totally deserted. Take homework, for example. Homework is an area that is so fraught with conflict. In fact, I have often felt that maybe we should give up on homework as we know it and find another way of dealing with teaching that material. Homework has been a conflict for almost any child that I see in my practice. Here schools do try to use the parent. In other words, this big, powerful institution then gets aligned with the home institution. The parents don't want the school to think they are bad parents, so they really work on the child and make the child feel even more incompetent. I'm not saying all of this is wrong, well, actually I AM saying that it's wrong (laughs) but I'm trying to say that there's never an absolute solution. I'm saying there needs to be empathy all the way around. There needs to be empathy for the teacher on the part of the parent. People need to see each other in a more human fashion and need to understand that they all have feelings. I have often noticed that parents are surprised that teachers have feelings, that they love their children or that they have anxieties. And it's the same thing the other way around. It is very easy, depending on who one is, to blame either the school or the parent. It's their cooperation that is

necessary. It really is true that it takes a whole village to raise a child, and it takes a whole village to do this very carefully.

When there are conflicts, we must look at the whole situation with empathy. It is at these moments, when the relationships are tested, that the whole relationship has to be carefully looked at. One of the things we need to do is to really clarify our own goals. The schools need to do that over and over. Actually, it usually comes down to the question of a success model versus a growth model. Do we try to create an outside success? Or do we live by the growth model and allow to child to grow? In the end, often it turns out that the growth model is the way in which they can achieve success.

In order to really be the parent and the teacher for the gifted child, in order to really understand what the lifeline needs are of this particular child, we need to really to understand and incorporate the characteristics of gifted children because it is often their specific characteristics that create conflicts. Even though we all know that we are dealing with gifted children, we forget that they truly are different. They are not better and faster; they have a really different way of looking at life. And I think that very often it is this different awareness, this different agenda which I have talked about, that brings them in conflict with the forces that be.

I think that I've said enough now and Sharon could tell us a little bit about what these differences are and how they clash with society.

Sharon Lind: Do we have till midnight? (General laughter.) I've been listening to Annemarie and thinking about what she said, and I think that looking at the characteristics not only helps us understand the conflicts that are created, but it also, I think, helps us as parents – and me also as an educator – to kind of develop the trust she's talking about. If you have a better understanding of the nature of the person with whom you're dealing, you tend to make better judgments and not such quick judgments or just negative judgments. I think we tend to be more accepting and create safety for the child. I have a list, but what do you think are the characteristics that make these children different? If you're in that mode, could you raise your hands? Do you have any thoughts?

(Sharon and Annemarie led a discussion eliciting the ideas from the audience.)

Audience: Imagination, creativity

Sharon: Okay, imagination, creativity, we see it really early, don't we? And very often we see it at times when we wish we didn't. No, I mean, it may happen...

Audience: At church

Sharon: At church, there's a point. Or it may happen when you have some...

Audience: Bad timing

Sharon: Bad timing, or you have some task that needs to be done, or whatever, or you're teaching and you're really talking about business and they're over here on Mars. Okay, what else?

Audience: Sensitivity and perception of all sorts of stuff that's going on, emotionally and technically. They just seem to be aware at a level that a lot of us aren't.

Sharon: Absolutely, and we all have some levels of awareness but they, absolutely...

Audience: They seem to be *more*...

Sharon: Exactly. And the "more" can be...or the kinds of areas that we look at and the signs we see, the children that are very psychomotor-intense or sensitive, and so they love to move and moving is very important to them. They probably talk a lot and talk fast. They want to get things done that are important to them, not necessarily that are important to us, but are important to them. There's this drive, so some of the kids show it that way, and some of them are real sensory, and so they're very acutely aware of sounds. Like, I don't know about you, but this speaker's driving me crazy. Or they hear the lights, or I'm told that some people look at fluorescent lights and see, like, an aurora borealis.

Annemarie: You know, today I sat in a music class at Roeper, and a student was holding her ears all the time. Even if she held her hand up, she covered one ear. I asked her music teacher about it and she said that there are a number of children at Roeper who really can't stand it and I've noticed it's really a sign of giftedness.

Sharon: For some people, that sensitivity could be to smells, or to touch, you know the tags in your clothes and the seams in your socks. So there's that kind of sensitivity. Or it could be the three-year-old that you can't tear away from the beautiful flower. And you just want to get the trip on, you know, you're out camping and you want to keep going and they want to look at the...

So there's that kind of intensity. There's intellectual intensity where there's this kind of curiosity that drives you nuts. They want to know the answers *now*. They don't want you to tell the answers to them. And they tend to interrupt, so you have that kind of, you know, they don't want to wait for me to finish asking the question. They've already figured out the answer, and, in fact, they're four miles down the road and I'm probably not there yet.

There's also that creativity you talked about. That's a kind of intensity. There's also emotional intensity that Annemarie talked about, you know, where they're just

born very, very emotionally sensitive. Boys and girls alike – it's not just a female attribute here – and if they're like that, they have heard so many times "chill out" (that's the latest phrase, you know, to "you're over-reacting") that we could pay the debt we owe United Nations if sensitive people just got a nickel every time someone said to them they were over-reacting.

Audience: The word of the '90s: hyper.

Sharon: Hyper. Absolutely. What are other characteristics?

Audience: Intense memory skill.

Sharon: Good memory skills. For some of these kids, they are phenomenal, visually and orally both. With some of these kids they have an incredible visual memory, so that you want them with you when you're mugged, you know? But they really do remember everything you ever said, which for a parent is a killer, you know? Okay, no, it's not great for teachers either.

Yes?

Audience: They remember from a long time ago.

Sharon: Absolutely, they remember from way before you even knew they understood what you were talking about.

Annemarie: I had an experience from one of my grandchildren. He's been at my house, and he'd been to my house two years before that, and he had a certain toy that he had hidden some place, and I didn't know anything about it. He came to my house, ran to that place and took it.

Sharon: What are other characteristics?

Audience: Their ability to do more than one thing at one time.

Sharon: Multiple tasking. Whatever you want to call it. Absolutely, more than one thing at a time. Can be talking on the phone, doing calculus homework, reading a book, and knitting or whatever. And not looking at you. Or listening to you, and doing calculus homework and you really think they're not paying attention to you.

Audience: And then they respond.

Sharon: And then they respond. So absolutely, doing more than one thing at a time. And for many kids, it's simply impossible for them, and for adults as well, to learn to be productive when they only have one thing to do at a time, that really thwarts them.

They need to be doing multiple things. So when you say as a mom, or as a teacher, "I want you to look at me, and put that pencil down," you may, in fact, be making it very difficult for them to comprehend what you're saying. When in fact, we just want some kind of clue that they know what's going on. You know, I teach kids to nod, and look and smile every once in a while. Because then they're giving the message that they are paying attention and they're still able to do more than one thing.

That's great. What else?

Audience: Annemarie said before, perfectionism.

Sharon: Absolutely, perfectionism, but never in what we want them perfect in, right? Yeah, absolutely, perfectionism.

Annemarie: It keeps them from doing things too.

Sharon: Absolutely, it keeps them from doing things.

Audience: Curiosity

Sharon: Curiosity. Absolutely. They want to know why, how, because, how did that happen? Yes.

Audience: Take things apart.

Sharon: Take things apart, absolutely, take things apart. What else?

Audience: Frustration with the neighborhood children.

Sharon: Okay, it's really difficult, especially for the younger ones, to understand why there's such a discrepancy between what they can do and what the other children can do. And for some children, they get very, very frustrated. You're right. And very impatient. Others...I think there's a smaller group of gifted kids who recognize it right off and back off and they pick their place to be gifted, if you will, or they pick their place to show their expertise and that's a weird group. It's a small group, but there are kids who will do that, and kind of thwart themselves when they're around people who can't do what they do. But, you're right, for many it's very frustrating. And they're also frustrated with us as adults because we're not keeping up, you know, intellectually with them, or as teachers, as well, because they're just way ahead of where we are. What else?

Audience: Did anyone mention impatience?

Sharon: Impatience, that certainly fits in there, because they want to know now; we're not going fast enough for them. Either because we can't keep up or because we have other people we're talking to at the same time.

Annemarie: They're not going fast enough for themselves. The real impatience is before they've learned something.

Sharon: Absolutely, they want more and more now. What else?

Audience: Manipulation.

Sharon: Okay, some are very manipulative, aren't they? Why is that?

Audience: I guess a desire to control their environment and the world around them

Sharon: At least have some control over something. I'm not convinced that they're trying to control the universe, but I am convinced that they're trying to get some control in their lives. And I think, for me anyway, you may not agree with this, Annemarie, but for some gifted children, they're so aware of all the things in the world that are out of control that they're trying to find control in their environment in order to feel like something over which...

Annemarie: I do agree with that, but I think there's also something else that happens to them mentally, that gifted children are so capable, that they almost don't have to give up this very early time of omnipotence when they feel that they can do everything. They learn to manipulate, and sort of see themselves as the center of the universe for, sometimes, longer than the children who are manipulated.

Audience: Along those lines, because of the sensitivity and the perception, is there also just a natural tendency to try to emulate ways that people control? A way of practicing the methods, so to speak, that are used to control their lives.

Audience: I have a question related to this. We implemented Boss of the Day because it seemed like every day as adults (we have an only child) he saw us as always being the boss, so we would say, "Today is Boss of the Day" and he would be boss of the day. The only thing he couldn't boss was over health and safety. You know, I felt he might eat pizzas for three meals that day. It really became related to, you know, my psychology was that he was a control freak, and this negated authority figures, which since there was a mom and dad in the family, we felt the need for us to do that. We tried to deal with, I don't know what you call it, control. I do think that they might want to change the universe. I like that. But I do think that it's going on on a constant basis and it's great.

Annemarie: Yeah, I think that that is a real difficult characteristic of gifted children. Because they learn so fast and so well, they engage in a power struggle with the parents. I do think that it's important that, with all the empathy that I'm talking about, that we remain the parents, for his own security. Because I've also seen children who, because their parents were in such awe of them because they found out that they were gifted, that the family was turned over to the child and that was disastrous. It's a very, very delicate situation.

Sharon: I think that's right. I think they're so acute at analyzing that they analyze that adults have power and there's no reason why they shouldn't. Just because they're three, it's logical to them. Part of it is giving them power in ways that they feel comfortable, but not turning them into small adults or giving them control they shouldn't have.

Audience: Well, part of that is justice, a real sense of what is fair and what is right.

Sharon: And it comes very early, a real sense of morality, a real concern about global issues, about homelessness, and war, and whatever. And it's very real for them, and very intense, and very early. It's hard for us as adults to not say things like, "Don't worry about that."

Annemarie: What is also hard for them is when they do think that they should be omnipotent. I mean, I once met a boy who thought he was going to stop the Gulf War and he was really upset when he couldn't do it.

Audience: Caution. Sometimes they're slow to take risks and I think it's because he thinks ahead and he sees a possibility...

Sharon: So they're able to look ahead. And the other thing is that they're very confident, and sometimes I think they're unwilling to take risks because they don't want to look like they're not confident. So that's another way, another reason that the same behavior shows up.

Yes?

Audience: A heightened sense of responsibility.

Sharon: You see that in worrying about other children, as well, worrying about their friends, family members, and so forth.

Audience: Children often feel that they're their own best company.

Sharon: And why do you think that is?

Audience: I think it's because they amuse themselves really well.

Audience: Well, this relates to that. I was going to say that they prefer adult company, or older children's company. I noticed that with my child before coming here. He'd never sort of established any relationships with his peers.

Sharon: They go for an intellectual, or sort of an interest peer instead of an age peer. Right.

Audience: They're wonderful negotiators

Sharon: Wonderful negotiators. They're very logical. That's right, and as a parent that's really tough. I got into gifted education because I have a gifted daughter, and I just thought, "I better learn everything I could as quick as I could." And you're right. One of the hardest things was that half the time, when she thought it through, she was right. That's really annoying.

Yes?

Audience: Our son has a very keen sense of humor. They seem to have it at a younger age than most kids do.

Sharon: Excellent. That's right. And very often they're very witty and can sometimes be unkind, unintentionally unkind with their humor because of what they can see and think about.

Anything else? No?

I have couple. One is passionate. We kind of talked about it, and Annemarie talked about it, but it may be passionate about things we don't want them to be passionate about necessarily, or we'd rather have it to be physics. But they do tend to have passions, and they may be passions that last a lifetime, or they may be passions that last 15 minutes. It depends on the child. Some just seem to me to be like butterflies and just keep popping along. And others, I never could catch up with my daughter. I would just be getting her to the library, to the arboretum, and she didn't care about leaves anymore. Now she was thinking about something else. And other people who are just passionate about one thing forever.

Annemarie: I was just thinking that that's one of the reasons why the Lower School is organized the way it is, why we give the young children the choices. Because that way they can express their passions, and find places where they are passionate about. If they love art, they can do art everyday, or they can do music everyday, because they have a passion that should be listened to.

Sharon: The other thing about giving them passions at school is that they're learning with their passions. It's not something you have to do, but then they're more likely to learn about other things as well, which they might become passionate about.

Anything else?

I have one more that Annemarie referred to as well, I think. That is this need to kind of have a global understanding, a need to understand, a need to make sense out of things. They're constantly looking at the big picture and trying to pull the pieces together and make sense out of it, and sometimes what happens with our bright kids is that they don't have enough data and so they pull the picture together wrong, if you will. But other times, they simply have a need to understand how everything goes together, and very often this is a type of learner who needs to know ahead of time what you're going to be teaching them, as opposed to the kind of learner who only sees what you give them. They simply have to see the whole thing first.

Anything else?

Do they all have all of these characteristics? No. And I think that's really important. They're not all the same.

Anyway, I think it's important to understand that there's a basis here, and you'll see a lot of those characteristics in your children, but you probably won't see every one.

Audience: I remembered! The need for a sense of purpose, and that kind of goes along with this thing about seeing the whole picture. They want to know why they're learning this. I remember being really dissatisfied with math instruction when I was a kid. I was not interested because I didn't understand really why I had to do all of these problems. I think that that's a really important component of educating *all* kids, really, but especially gifted kids, you know, to see that sense of purpose about why...

Sharon: And they don't seem to be naturally born with the ability to figure that out. They're so bright about some things, and then there are other things... I know, I was surprised at my own child. I thought she would be a better problem-solver. I thought because she's bright, she'll somehow know how to do that. But that's not necessarily the case. Nor are they necessarily able to project far enough to know why fractions might be important.

Annemarie: In fact, that's one of the big concerns, is that they want to do things this moment. They don't understand that growing takes trial and error. We used to actually have a class we used to organize, because we'd feel that three- and four-year-olds needed to understand why they can't be grown-ups, why they can't do things that other people do. Because they have this impatience. We used to bring the younger children

to the classroom and have older children explain to them how they used to not be able to read and how it took some time, and I think it really made a difference.

Sharon: Yes?

Audience: A couple things that Annemarie said earlier about the scope of what these children are interested in and what they want to learn. I teach computer science in the Middle and Upper School, and it's amazing to me that I've got Middle School children who know more about machines that were made before they were born than most adults do. I mean, about the inside workings, how these things...they don't have the entire picture, like you said. They don't have as much exposure to it. They know more about what they do on a daily basis. But they have this insatiable need to understand how the whole thing works, how it all fits together. And, you know, it's a pleasure to teach them. They just love to learn and soak it all up.

Annemarie: One of the frustrations is that they do have the big picture. They can sometimes understand the whole situation and they don't have the tools to carry it out. We had a child, a long time ago, who had figured out, before we had telephones, he was going to install a telephone, a difficult telephone system between all the buildings we had. And he had it all out on paper. It was very intricate and the teachers looked at it and said it was unbelievable. But he had no way of doing anything about it. He also tried to organize the other children to help him. It's the kind of situation where I think one really – and that's what we did – we helped him. We got the tools. We made it and it functioned for a while. It was really miraculous. But those are the kinds of things I think where we should listen to children. In fact, very often, I think the teacher, rather than having a very clearly worked-out program, one needs to take a cue from the children. And that can help them.

Audience: That still happens, where Upper Schoolers who never knew about computers have some very viable ideas about how to do it. They may not always be cost-effective,
but....

Annemarie: We once had a little boy, and he came to school all dressed up. We didn't know why, but he was very handsome. He came to me and I think he sort of wanted to see if we would let him do what he wanted to do, but he said he needed to make a telephone call to Washington – he was eight – because he said he found a cure for cancer. Somehow, when I told him he couldn't do that, he still got to the person – the telephone operator – and he said it. He knew the person he should call and he did call that person and it turned out that there was something that he knew that really was an ingredient that would be a helpful thing.

Sharon: Sort of a parting shot: When you talk about these characteristics, most of you sounded really loving, but they also sometimes aren't a lot of fun to be around. We need to realize that sometimes these wonderful characteristics don't feel so wonderful.

And so, I guess my message is, as parents and teachers, we need to be really accepting of them, and not say, "Don't be this way," but rather, "How can we be more comfortable living together because this is the way we are," or, "How can you function better at school because this is who you are," as opposed to "Change!" Because this is what I like to call original equipment. This is really who they are and to say, "Don't get so upset" is, I believe, an inappropriate thing to say. "How can we make you more comfortable?" "How can we help you deal with it when you're feeling this way?" "How can we prevent your feeling this upset next time?" as opposed to, "Don't feel this way." And that's easy to say and hard to do.

Annemarie: And we also need to think of the parents as well as the children. It's not easy to be a parent.

Sharon: Oh, it's awful.

Annemarie: It's exhausting. And I think we need to think of the teacher and we need to think in terms of the rest and recreation that adults need. I've really known so many parents who have worn themselves out and felt guilty if they took some time away from their children, and that is really a necessity.

I guess it's maybe time to close. Next time we're going to talk about the relationship to the community, which I think is one of the major important areas, not only for the child, but for adults also, to find ways in which they can feel at home in the community.

Transcribed by Diana Elshoff, edited by Marcia Ruff, September 2009