

CHILDHOOD IS A JOURNEY NOT A RACE

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The Caterpillar

Nikos Kazantzakis, Zorba the Greek

I remember one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited awhile, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath. In vain.

It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.

That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.

Never have I observed the truth and importance of this profound anecdote more clearly than on the day I spent at the Pikler Institute.

Upon my arrival I was met by Dr. Gabriella Pushpoky, a pediatrician who has worked with the Pikler Institute since 1966. She welcomed me with a lot of warmth and explained that I would be observing the toddler group. She gave me an observation sheet with the childrens names, current weight, birth date and the date when they arrived at the institute. The sheet also had the names of the nurses of the group and she told me who the head nurse was. I was given a second sheet, which showed the layout of the room and each child's crib. This immediately told me this was a highly organised and well-planned establishment. Dr. Pushpoky then showed me to the terrace where I would be observing.

My very first exposure (before reading any books or attending any lectures) to the Pikler environment showed me a peaceful happy place where children were busy exploring their own bodies and their immediate surroundings with minimum interference by the adults during the play.

I saw one child playing with a toy, which another child grabbed. I held my breathe waiting for the 'victim' to start screaming. I was surprised. The two children sorted out the issue and it resulted in one of them walking away, choosing another toy and start playing with it. This was enough to truly pique my curiosity.....

BATHING TIME:

I started my day observing the one to one and half-year group during their bathing time. The group had seven children and two nurses (one of which was a head nurse and one a helper). Each child was called by the nurse in turn and gently carried to the bathing area. There was constant communication using a calm soothing voice, a lot of eye contact and continuous skin contact. Each child was wiped and then weighed on the scales. The nurse spoke to the child all the time and it seemed like she was explaining every action before carrying it out (to prepare the child). The child was shown everything and encouraged to be an active participant during the bathing process.

I noticed that one of the children (Boglarka) was particularly fond of water. She was given a lot of time to play in the water, splashing, raising herself on her hands and in general being very playful. She had excellent motor skills and was very responsive to the nurse. After her bath she was gently dried, all the time being shown parts of her body and being spoken to. She was given a choice of two outfits and she picked one. The nurse helped her to put it on and then showed Boglarka her reflection in the mirror. Boglarka was very excited. After each child was bathed and individually put in the crib or the play area, it was feeding time.

FEEDING TIME:

During the feeding time, the nurse told each child when it was his/her turn and carefully took each child in her lap. She held the child with the head supported and in a comfortable position. The nurse then offered what looked like pureed fruit in a glass to the child all the while talking and explaining what she was doing. The child's choice was respected and the child was not forced to take in more than what he/she was able. At the study tour workshop with Dr. Pushpoky we were informed that some children are given rosehip tea for health, and medicine is always given with a different coloured spoon so the child knows what he/she is taking. I appreciated this respect for the child as many adults try and trick children into taking medicine.

Our group met with Dr. Pushpoky twice during the day to discuss what we had observed and to ask her questions about the institute.

THE STUDY TOUR ITSELF:

The study tour started on Sunday 10th July with a registration and dinner. During the dinner we were introduced to various people and given an overview of what we were to expect. What we did experience was way beyond expectations!

Each day of the week that followed was divided into two parts; lectures and workshops. The lectures were focused on the three main elements that underpin the philosophy of the Pikler Institute. These are: freedom of movement, natural development and free play and the care giving routines. The workshops complemented these lectures through hands on activities and personal experiences that truly showed how important these elements are.

Some of my favourite workshops were conducted by Ute Strub who specializes in body movement work. One of these was where the group was divided into two. One group was the 'mothers' and the other the 'children'. The 'mothers' put chairs against the wall and had to get the 'children' to climb onto the chairs. The 'mothers' showed the children where to put their hands and feet. The 'children' experienced a range of different emotions;

anger at being put in such an uncomfortable situation, fear of falling, a need to please the 'mothers' and authority etc. Wow! It truly helped to put us in the place of the child and fully empathize with them.

Last week at my preschool, I noticed that one of the younger teachers had put a child up on a high table and was talking to him. The child had no control of his movement since he was dependant on the adult and could not move away. Seeing this, I conducted a mini version of the exercise above to get her to empathize with the child. Being put in the child's place, she could relate more easily to how the child would have felt and learnt a very important lesson in respecting the freedom and dignity of her young charges.

A RETURN TO REALITY:

The days spent in the beautiful city of Budapest surrounded by people passionate about children and their care were over too soon and it was time to come back home. During our last day, we all talked about the profound impression that being at Pikler had made on us and how we were going to take the Pikler light and spread this extremely important message back in our own countries.

Personally, I found that I came back with new eyes and was seeing everything afresh. Things that had once been taken for granted now seemed barbarous and horrific. The way I saw caregivers and parents unknowingly treat their children almost brought me to tears.

Many were the times when I recalled watching the video of an infant brought in from the hospital to the Pikler Orphanage. When the child arrived, it was clear that she was experiencing trauma and was feeling very insecure. In those days, the hospital required that the clothes be returned to them as soon as the baby was brought to the orphanage. Observing the way that the caregiver undressed and soothed the child through her actions, her words and her proximity was like watching a smoothly executed dance. Each movement was flowing and gentle, each word was soothing, full of empathy and echoed love and understanding. It truly was a breathtaking experience.

The most important message that I carried back with me was to slow down and have faith in nature. Children need to be given time, space and freedom to develop their bodies and minds. They need respect for their abilities and understanding for their individual development. In fact this lesson has also been carried over to my interactions with many adults. We all need respect and freedom to develop and hone our skills.

I have conducted a number of workshops for parents and caregivers based on the Pikler methodology here in Tanzania, E.Africa. It is wonderful to see how adults outlook towards children changes after these sessions. One of the workshops I did was based on the importance of touch conducted by Ute in Budapest. The adults present were amazed at the intense 'emotions' they experienced physically through different types of touch. They understood as caregivers what sort of messages children receive through our hands in our daily routines.

I truly believe that once you are touched by the light of Pikler, you can never see childhood as you once did. Everything I teach and do strives to achieve that sensitivity, flow and harmony that I observed during my amazing time at Pikler. I have a long way to go, but I have seen the light For that I am eternally grateful to Laura and her team. Had they not given me that life changing opportunity, I may still have no hesitation in putting a child in a high chair or 'teaching' a child to walk.

The dance of life starts with the steps of a child

Rupal Ganatra