

# Inspiration from the Work of Henning Köhler

— Laurie Clark

In Chapter Three of his book, *Difficult Children: There Is No Such Thing*, Henning Köhler opens the way for the teacher to understand the child by way of the heart. He implores the teacher to allow the phenomena to speak without judgements, conclusions, or diagnoses that can get in the way of truly knowing the child. In a sense, the teacher is asked to come as a witness, to bring an inner listening that hears the wellspring of intentionality that the child is bringing into life. Köhler offers an artistic rendering in a selfless offering

through the poems that he writes for the child he is trying establish a connection with.

Taking this advice to heart, I began writing poems for the children in my class. One of the six-year-old boys in my class came from a Russian orphanage and was adopted when he was two years old by a family that welcomed him with open arms. His experience at the orphanage was traumatic during these first tender years of life. I will call him John as I don't want to use his given name here.

John often made loud, unexpected sounds and uncontrolled movements in the classroom. He often had a look of scorn on his face and appeared to be fighting a battle within himself, struggling to find some grounding. What appeared to the onlooker as misbehavior was the honorable struggle that he valiantly took on in this incarnation.

John could not bear to be the one chosen in a game, to be in the center of a circle or any circumstance where he felt exposed. One day, at story time, we were dramatizing the story of the Donkey, which we had heard told several times. The story is about a king and queen who wish for a child, but are given a donkey to raise. The king insists that he will grow up and wear the kingly crown. The donkey loves music and learns to play the lute. One day, he sees his donkey form in a well and leaves his father's kingdom and enters another kingdom where there is a beautiful princess. The donkey ends up marrying the princess and shows her his true form: when his donkey skin comes off at night, he is a handsome prince. The princess is the only person in the kingdom who knows this. When the king finds out, he takes the donkey skin while the prince is asleep and has it burned to ashes. The prince becomes anxious when he cannot find his donkey skin in the morning, but the King meets him at the door and begs him to stay and show himself as he truly is. The prince stays and inherits two kingdoms and "lives in all magnificence."

When I asked who wanted to be the donkey in the story, this boy shyly raised his hand, much to everyone's surprise. He played the part of the donkey with courage. It was hard not to come to tears while I witnessed this experience and realized the profound significance this part had for him. His intense desire to portray the donkey and the transformation into the prince showed that this was the story of himself.

Inspired by Henning Köhler's poems that he synthesized into an artistic picture of the child he was working with, I wrote a poem about this experience with John. A deep, unspoken communion occurred in my relationship with him; a kind of inside-out understanding of the soul condition of this child was reflected in me. I began to feel what it must have been like to have his birth mother abandon him and his struggle to understand his life. I knew why the story of the Donkey was his story. ♦

*She gave me away*

*I opened my mouth for her milk*

*But she left and I swallowed the wound instead*

*That pierced through my body*

*It still runs through my blood like a fire*

*And I have to fight to still the pain*

*I become a hunter at sunset*

*Searching for my life*

*Have you seen it?*

*The wild animals that live inside me*

*Hold parts of me hostage*

*They seek me out*

*And I am the hunter and the hunted*

*At night, I lay my skin beside my bed*

*And am lifted up to the king*

*Meet me there at the gate*

*For this is where the wedding takes place*

*You must be my forgiving guest*

*Always be my forgiving guest*

*There, each night*

*To inherit the kingdom of my life*

*Meet me there*

*This is the conversation we never had*

*This is the only conversation we must always live*