

THE REAL WORLD

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Every summer, some one hundred twenty music teachers gather together at the school where I teach and spend ten fun-filled, frolicking days slapping their bodies, wiggling their hips, babbling with phonemes, playing with scarves and banging on drums. They laugh. They cry. They make stuff up. Their days see-saw back and forth between whimsy and profundity, between “Yee-haw!” and “Ah-hah!” and between “I am musical and fun and creative and intelligent!” and “I have SO much more to learn.” Some of them go back each day to families and implore their significant others to take care of business while they write their xylophone homework. Others travel from afar, mercifully free from their normal responsibilities and get to dive in the deep end of the pool with both feet. It is the annual Orff Schulwerk Certification Course, a cross between a PhD defense and summer camp—with a heavy accent on the summer camp.

But always there comes the moment when the sensation of floating in a marvelous dream comes to an end and with hugs and tears, we all pack up our things and go back to what everyone unthinkingly dubs “the real world.” This world is not only the inevitable bills and household chores and carpool schedules, but the so-called real world of schools— meetings, report cards, colleagues who don’t understand us, administrators who insist we submit our lesson plans, parents who wonder why their kid can’t sight read Rachmaninoff yet.

Knowing that the exit from our temporary community can be jarring to the psyche, we at the SF Orff Certification Course hold several transition rituals involving human tunnels and spiraling bodies and soul-stirring songs. But this year, we also had a little talk:

*“Everybody always says that the fun is over and now it’s time to go back to the real world. I want you to consider this: **this** is the real world. Humans for thousands of years have played, sung and danced together to get to know themselves, to get to know each*

*other, to energize their bodies, animate their minds and open their hearts. They've brought their ancestors alive by singing their songs and gifted their descendants by passing the songs down. By contrast, a world where the day begins with the newspaper's daily horrors read on crowded trains with no eye-contact, where people rush by each other hooked into their private machines, where sincere conversation is drowned out by sound-byte clichés and platitudes, where children are pitted against each other and punished if they can't perform the trick of paper-testing adequately, where young people can go through a day or a week or even a year without ever singing a song in school or playing a piece or reciting a poem or dancing a dance or acting in a play or finding out about Dizzy Gillespie—well, it seems to me that **that** world is profoundly **un-real**. The world we've created here, where each day begins in a circle with a song and we pass on the tools to nurture children at our highest level—well, that seems pretty real to me! “*

That little talk seems to have struck a chord, because in the e-mails that followed the course, people told their stories about their re-entry into the “real/unreal” world. It began with the teacher whose kids were taken out of music to do POWERMath. Then came the teacher who had jobs lined up at four schools, only one of which had a room for her. There were teachers writing e-mails while sitting through boring presentations about the latest in education, impatient with the “blah blah blah” and wanting to shout, “Let's get up and DO something!” Over and over, the question of “real” or “unreal” surfaced.

So which is the real world? Needless to say, for the kids yanked out of music for math or for the teacher wondering where she's going to teach this year— or *if* she's going to teach—the effects of those decisions feel all too real. By entering the conversation with “real” and “unreal” pitted against each other like the American Idol of semantics drags us down into a game defined by those who understand one side only. This summer's Orff students came to understand both sides—the reality of “what is,” i.e., often a constant struggle to find our rightful place in schools and defend the worth and dignity of our profession, and the reality of “what if”—what if children played, sang and danced every day of their lives, as we did in those ten days? What if assessment of their efforts included the beauty they revealed, the risks they took, the inch of progress or the yard of

an unexpected breakthrough? What if the practices and principles of the Schulwerk were the center from which all teaching radiated?

And yet we often get dragged down into conversations that narrowly define reality as something opposed to fantasy or imagination or dream. That's where the trouble begins, where art becomes some extraneous and extravagant whipped cream fluff of a dessert measured against the meat and potatoes of the "real world" and always comes up short on the filling-the-belly and protein chart. In that polarized world, the newspaper is real, but poetry is fluff, the grim and grimy workaday world is the real deal, but adults playing clapping games is la-la land, the test maker's world of Facts is real education, but the Fancy of kindergarten is kid's stuff. When the conversation begins there, we are already in a defensive position. What if, like a good aikido move, we switched the tone of the discussion and began again on our own terms?

For another meaning of the word "real"—and the one that serves our purposes—is *authentic*. The real deal. The real McCoy. Not the real of Reality TV, but the real of Self-realization, coming to the bottom of something that feels right, good and true. "Real" in this more expanded sense is more an active verb than a passive noun, more a work-in-progress than a finished product. It is a committed engagement with the things that are truly important. And if we have to define it, we need the right language, one that even (or especially!) children can understand. Like this well-known passage from *The Velveteen Rabbit*:

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real." "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don't

matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

For the teacher, the phrase "it's a thing that happens to you" leaves too much to chance. I would add that real is a thing that you must *make* happen. Don't let others define "the real world" for you. *You* decide what feels true and authentic in your own experience and in your own teaching. Stand firmly in the center of your passion. Deal with those who don't get it as you must, but don't get caught in the undertow of their ignorance. Trust your own heart—you know when you've got it, even if you don't have the fancy language for it yet. Above all, in your teaching, in your relations with the children, in your life, follow the sage advice of street wisdom and "keep it real."

And one more thing: Trust the children. When they say, "Let's do it again!" listen to them— it doesn't get any more real than that.