



From 2006 newsletter.

Becoming Me

Some time ago Sara Stanley and I added “Becoming Me -- a story of creation” to our recommended book list on our website. I had used it with a class of Year 3’s (7-8 yrs) and was very impressed. I was really pleased to receive a message on our Discussion Forum some time later from Martin Boroson the author, thanking us for recommending his book and asking us about the work we were doing in P4C (Philosophy 4 Children). This was the beginning of a correspondence which started with me outlining the session I had done with the book.

I described how I had picked up the book on the way to a lesson which was to be observed by a visiting Headteacher (the school incidentally has since taken on P4C across the school). I was teaching my challenging Year 3 class who had grown to love the chance to lead discussion during our sessions. I read the book and showed the extraordinary pictures – they are abstract paintings full of colour and movement. I remember feeling a little uneasy as I read the unfamiliar text and wishing I’d prepared a little better. Then there was silence.....for a very long time, and my unease grew. Finally someone said “This is too difficult...it’s Year 7 stuff”. I said something along the line of “Well, in Philosophy we are discussing the puzzling – now this is REALLY puzzling – start with that, start from what you don’t understand.”

I watched as very slowly they started to draw and write their questions. They were as follows:

- Is "me" the world?
- How do people have babies?
- How did he turn into a baby?
- Who is the child?
- Who is you? and me?

- Is it a boy or a girl or half and half?
- Why is the story called "Becoming Me"?
- What makes a person?
- Who made God?

Then a dialogue began - Who is "Me"? - How do we know what we believe is true? What is believing anyway? We talked at length about "Me" in the book: was "Me" a spirit, an alien, God? This brought up the notion of "Who made God?"

We led on to a series of negotiated questions which became:

- Who made the world?
- Is God Nature?
- How was the first person born?
- Are heaven and hell real?
- Is the person who made the world, in heaven?

The discussion that followed led on to the idea that we are trapped by God's magical powers. There was a strong majority who argued that we have no choice - which led to further dialogue.

The question that went home was: "How did the world come to exist?"

It was into one of the best sessions I'd had. It taught me a lesson – not the one perhaps OFSTED would have liked about preparing better but one about not being too careful with stimulus, allowing the children to struggle and trusting them to find their way through it. I have since recommended the book on courses for all age groups.

Then last year Martin sent me a rough cut of the DVD of "Becoming Me". I now had a Year 1 class (5-6 yrs) and had done a lot of thinking skills and Philosophy with them. Some of them had also worked with Sara Stanley in the previous year. We were getting near the end of term and I decided to shelve everything else and do a few days work on this resource. I would use it to assess their skills as well as the resource itself.

We had a great week. We started off by playing the DVD on my Interactive whiteboard which meant the images were huge and compelling. I asked them to draw and write in their journals about the most vivid part of the story. Many chose images of a person alone dancing beneath a burning tree. Others chose the grey images of smoke and tanks on battlefields. All were asked to describe why

they thought these images had stayed in their mind: “Because they made me sad” “Because it reminded me of me”.

We spent an intensive few days coming back time and time again to the spare text and the powerful images. We listened to the music and discussed the issues raised of love and conflict, identity and community. I felt a little worried about returning to the text so many times but let the mood of the group lead me. I had no plan (a recurring theme!) just a series of starting points. When I asked them for questions these led to areas of exploration.

I had never used painting in this way within a P4C session before. I asked them to paint an image that could be included in the book. I asked them to think of a caption or a word that would go with the image. I was pleased with the enthusiasm and the understanding of this task. All children with a huge variety of abilities and needs worked together on these tasks.

The thing that struck me so vividly was the focus and the interest of the children. I had been worried that they’d soon have enough. I had done weekly sessions with them but never a 4 day project of this type. The last part of the work was based on their questions. We had enquiries about war, about love and friendship. They kept a record of every step in their journals. Children kept adding to their drawings and notes as we went along.

Finally we looked at the DVD for the last time and I placed random themes (not specific to this text) that we had used before, on cards on the floor in the middle of the circle. These included such things as love, justice, power, identity, sadness, good, bad etc. I asked them to think about our work and then choose a theme that they thought occurred in the book/DVD. They could then pick it up and explain why they thought it was important in the book. If the theme was not there they could add a new one.

They soon started to link the themes and explain how they linked. Some examples as follows:

- “I think it’s about love because the mother loves her child”
- “That links to sadness because of the war. The child eventually goes to war and dies, so that’s sad.”
- “Yes it’s sad because she loves him so much”

Another example was:

- “I think magic is a theme because ‘me’ keeps changing shape into different things. You can’t do that so it must be magic, I think”
- “I disagree – I think it’s courage because he has to have the courage to change because he doesn’t know what’s going to happen – it could all get messed up.”

Finally, I asked the questions for assessment – Could the children go beyond the book? Could they pick themes and justify them? Could they make links between arguments, ideas etc? Could they apply the ideas in the book to their own lives? Did they believe it to be a worthwhile task? This was the basis of my assessment and I had evidence to show that these things were happening.

To view some of the online discussion, go to www.childrethinking.co.uk (Teachers Philosophy Forum and then Discussion Board).

For more details of the book and DVD of “Becoming me – a story of creation” go to www.becomingme.com.

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