

## Catching the Big Fish

By JOELLEN FLORIO ROSSEBO



It's really fun to ask children about something they have created. They deliver amazing stories and explanations about what they see in a drawing or a lump of clay. They effortlessly craft fantastic stories. Children see things differently and often see things the way they want them to be. They love activities that allow them to pretend. Ask a child to be a tree, a house, an animal, or an inanimate object. Without a second thought, they just do it.

As a young child, I remember coming home from school with a three-dimensional creation from art class. I thought my creation was spectacular. It was a dog with an intense yellow body, green spots, and three legs. I also remember laughter as I presented the dog to my mother. I told her rather indignantly that it was a surrealist dog. My mother was more impressed with my vocabulary than the fantastic creation.

Even though my mother didn't appear to appreciate it, that dog sat on top of a metal cabinet in our basement for years. Other things were tossed but somehow the dog survived. I wonder if in some way it stood out from all the other crafts my sister and I brought home.

For the last 30 years, I have collected art from professional artists, but I continue to display many of the pieces my children created years ago. Each piece reflects their curiosity, perception, and imagination when they were young enough to be unencumbered by the fear of lacking skill. That's what makes the pieces interesting, and at times, humorous.

Why has the work of so many modern artists suggested the expressive freedom of children? In 1945, painter Jean Dubuffet, incensed by public outrage at his work, responded by saying "I own a portrait done by an eight-year-old, one eye is red, the other is yellow, and the cheeks are royal blue. People praise the painting for its whimsy and enchantment but if I add a

whim of my own, I am told: 'You have no right, you are no longer a child.'"

Do we lose the ability to imagine and disregard its value as we mature? It's interesting that after relegating the power of imagination to "artists," more and more people understand that it's one of the most valuable abilities that we can possess at work and in everyday life.

Sought-after authors and futurists such as Daniel Pink and Sir Ken Robinson focus on the importance of creativity, innovation, and imagination to prepare us for a globally competitive future. Even a recent Shell Oil Company television commercial touted the company's employment of creative researchers who can envision new products for improved efficiency and air quality.

There's a growing body of evidence in the fields of art and education that recognizes the importance of building the capacity for imagination through the curriculum. A new study by Lake Research Partners titled "Imagination Nation" shows growing public support for such programs. Imagination is an inextricable part of a good education.

I don't think of imagination as something I can pull out when I need it. It's more about the absence of all the junk that clutters my thought process. Imagination is the ability to clear away the junk and allow natural connections to surface. Connections from my life experience: walking in a forest, reading a book, listening to music, or manipulating cold, wet clay.

I often think about a wonderful poet and teacher, Sandy Lyne, who presented at a Young Audiences Institute for Artful Teaching in 2005. Sandy was talking about teaching children to write poetry. He used the metaphor of fishing to describe the creative process. Words and ideas are always there. We have to fish for them. Sometimes we catch a boot, but more often than not, we catch the words and phrases that capture our meaning—big fish!

What do I imagine now? How does the very kernel of an idea begin to grow? What will the garden look like this year? How do I solve a problem at work? A new system, a new thought, a new way of behaving, a new way to envision the world: anything I work toward is a product of my imagination.

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