

# ~ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS ~

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## The Teacher, the Wise Old Elkay, and the Seven Gifts: A legend to inspire early childhood educators

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*It has been found that student's grades (knowledge) in early childhood could not be used to predict accurately their success as an early childhood professional. A better predictor of success was a student's ability to demonstrate the following dispositions. ~ Lilian Katz*

### INTRODUCTION

For many years, Susan Harper-Whalen has been telling the story of the Wise Old Elkay as her way of introducing early childhood dispositions. Here the story has been captured in prose for everyone who has been touched by it and wished to hear it again.

The story is designed to honor educator Lilian Katz and her contribution to the early childhood field by identifying "habits of mind" so many years ago. As you read, imagine you are reading in a little book with Beatrix Potter-type illustrations on each page.

### THE TEACHER

There once was a young woman who loved children. She went to college, studied hard, performed well in her early childhood course work, and got an early childhood degree. Filled with knowledge and a sense of destiny, she eagerly dreamed of having her own classroom of young children. Before long, her dream came true.

During the first few days, she tenderly looked at the children in her classroom and thought with pride, "I've been taught all about children this age, and this will be good." However, after two weeks she was in despair. She did not understand what had happened. She liked the children, but she seemed to be spend-

ing most of her time correcting their behavior and telling them what to do.

This was not at all what she had envisioned when she dreamed about teaching young children! Something was missing, and she knew she needed help to figure out what it was. "Who on earth could help me?" she wondered to herself.

### THE WISE OLD ELKAY

Several times during college, her class had been taken to visit the home of a vibrant and witty senior professor to discuss certain topics of interest. There was something about the learned woman that made her seem approachable even about a puzzling challenge like this. Hopes high, the teacher left the program at the end of the day, hurried to the edge of town, and hiked up the narrow path to the professor's arched, stone house. Before she could change her mind, she quickly raised the tarnished brass knocker and let it fall with a thud.

She waited and waited. Just when she was about to turn away, the door slowly opened. There stood a crisply dressed older woman leaning on a cane. Her silvery-gray hair framed her angular face. Wire-rimmed glasses perched on her noble nose. The teacher was face-to-face with the sage professor—the Wise Old Elkay.

## THE FIRST GIFT

The teacher took a deep breath and stammered, "I need your help. I've spent two weeks with the children, and I just don't feel a connection. What can I do?"

"Oh, my child, I understand perfectly what you're saying," said the Wise Old Elkay in a low voice through the opening in the doorway, "and I have a gift for you."

The Wise Old Elkay turned away and then back, handing her a small gift. "If you accept this gift, it will help you every day to be curious about and delight in the children's growth and development. Once you accept this gift, you must keep it with you always."

"Thank you," said the teacher as the door slowly closed. "Thank you very much!" It took the teacher a long time to walk back down the mountain as she examined the gift. Her thoughts were going places they had not been before.

The next day, she began to notice that each child was truly unique. One child was excited about a new baby brother, and another was just learning to tie shoes. One child was sad when mother left; another waved a happy good-bye as father closed the door. "The Wise Old Elkay was right. I am curious and excited about these children," thought the teacher, feeling like she was seeing the children for the first time. And for some time, she felt quite satisfied.

## THE SECOND GIFT

Then one day, as she finished a bit of paper work while the children happily played, the teacher looked around the room and wondered, "What should I be doing?" She tried to remember something—anything—she had learned in her classes that would help her answer this question. When nothing came to her, she resolved to ask the Wise Old Elkay.

Again, she left the program at the end of the day, walked to the edge of the town, and hiked up the narrow path. She quickly raised the knocker and let it fall. The door again opened slowly. There stood the Wise Old Elkay. "Welcome back," she said sweetly. "I knew you'd come again! What did you come for this time?"

The teacher hesitated briefly, and then explained, "There is not much for me to do. I feel so useless. The children are engaged; they're happily playing, but when I dreamed of my own classroom, I dreamed of teaching!"

"Yes, I know, my child. And I have another gift for you. This gift is the ability to value young children's play. With this gift, you will be able to promote play, to plan for uninterrupted periods of play, and observe closely what happens. Now, accept this gift and keep it with you always."

The teacher barely remembered to say thank you, she was so astonished at how this gift made her feel. She took it with her, promising to keep it always. During the next few weeks, the teacher realized, "I do see. I don't have to be in front of the children telling them and showing them. I can learn so much from watching them."

## THE THIRD GIFT

To the teacher's surprise, after a few more weeks, she began to feel dissatisfied again, this time about another aspect of her teaching. She planned activities she thought the children would enjoy. For example, she planned an exciting field trip to a bakery, but everything went wrong. First of all, it rained that day, and the children got very wet and cranky. They were crankier still when the bus was late. Instead of a joyous, relaxing afternoon, it was the most stressful experience the teacher had ever had. One child completely fell apart, and she had to pull him out of the group and sit with him for a very long time. Everything she knew—everything she tried—just didn't work!

When the day was over, she knew exactly where she hoped to find an answer. Again, she walked to the edge of the town, and hiked up the narrow path to the stone house. This time, she hesitantly raised the knocker and with a sigh, let it fall. Was she expecting too much this time? The door again opened slowly.

The Wise Old Elkay leaned silently on her cane, but there was a twinkle in her eye as she listened to the teacher's problems. The Wise Old Elkay explained that the gift she was going to give her this time

would be one the teacher would use for her whole life. With this gift, the teacher would learn to expect change and challenge—to be flexible and follow children's interests, pursue their questions, and adjust activities to meet their needs. She explained that every day with young children would be different and unique. This gift would help the teacher look at differences with delight.

The teacher reverently said, "Thank you," and accepted the gift. It did make a difference. She began to see change and challenge as wonderful and fun. And for a long time, she was satisfied.

### THE FOURTH GIFT

Then one day, she began to feel uneasy again; things weren't quite working for everyone. There was this one child who just wasn't responding. What the teacher was doing was definitely not working for this child, and she felt afraid to try anything else. After all, the activities she provided were working for most of the children. What if she made a mistake and the child became even more isolated? Or what if another teacher saw what she was doing and criticized her idea or told the Director?

One day, as she watched the child at the fringe of yet another activity, she felt a great desire to help this child feel included. She resolved to wait no longer. That afternoon, up the narrow path she went to talk to the Wise Old Elkay. As she told her story, the Wise Old Elkay nodded her head and peered at her through her glasses in such a respectful and caring way that the teacher felt encouraged and poured out her heart about her concerns for this child. She told the Wise Old Elkay how she loved the child and how she had worked and worked to reach her, but she felt she had failed.

The Wise Old Elkay smiled knowingly and exclaimed that she had still another gift for the teacher. "This gift will bring you joy in your work; this gift will help you feel willing to try new strategies and activities. It will help you find the courage to take risks for the benefit of the children and their growth and learning. It will help you see everyone's mistakes as learning experiences that provide the information and wisdom they need to try again."

The Wise Old Elkay reassured her, "You know this child; you may already have ideas you could try. Develop and use your problem-solving skills. The best thing you can do for this child is to be willing to take the risks involved in trying to meet her needs."

The teacher felt tears of relief run down her cheeks as she said her thank yous. She could do this. She would do this. The child was counting on her. Oh, how lightly she walked/ran down the mountain back to her program. The Wise Old Elkay had given her permission to make mistakes! She did not always have to be right. How could she ever know whether something might work if she didn't try it?!

Her enthusiasm carried her for quite a long time. Day after day, she implemented curriculum activities. She and the children fell into a pleasant routine. Occasionally, children seemed wiggly or inattentive, but the teacher felt that it was because the weather was bad or they were just tired. Then more and more, she herself was feeling tired. She was no longer energized by her work with the children.

### THE FIFTH GIFT

This time the Wise Old Elkay opened the door before the teacher even raised the knocker. The teacher nearly tumbled through the doorway with exhaustion, as she cried out, "I'm feeling so challenged and overwhelmed. The children aren't listening to me anymore, and they are not following the rules." She went on and on, explaining more concerns. "Some of the parents are so difficult and demanding," she wailed and then fell silent.

The Wise Old Elkay smiled warmly, perhaps her biggest smile so far, and said, "I have yet another gift for you, my child. This gift will take you as far as you are willing to go. It is the gift of reflection, the ability to look at yourself, at your teaching, at the environment you have created, and at what is happening there. Not just daily, or weekly, but constantly looking and thinking. When you accept this gift, you will find new understanding and lifelong learning opportunities."

When the teacher applied this gift, her teaching matured. Her satisfaction grew. Her energy returned. The children were learning. It was working! She was

carried along day after day by her new understanding and insights, and her program grew strong.

## THE SIXTH GIFT

One uncomfortable feeling kept rising up in her as she mastered this gift, however. It welled up so powerfully that she began to wonder if teaching was the right career for her. Whatever could make such an experienced teacher feel this way? She could only describe it as the feeling of isolation and loneliness. As soon as the teacher put words to her feeling, she put on her coat and rushed to the mountain. She knew who would help her figure this out.

The Wise Old Elkay welcomed her with a kind handshake and a warm hug, and invited her to come in the house and sit down. "I knew you would come back one day, ready for a gift very different from all the others. I can tell that you are ready to share what you know—what you have learned—with other teachers of young children. You are prepared to meet and talk with your colleagues in the early childhood profession and to collaborate with them to meet both your and their professional goals."

The Wise Old Elkay was right again. Thankfully, the teacher accepted that gift, and it did cure her loneliness. She went to local child care association meetings; she joined NAEYC and read professional journals. She accepted support from her peers and was excited about her career. And she felt satisfied once again.

## THE SEVENTH GIFT

One day as she was reading the newspaper, she read a disturbing report about young children and their families. She wished the reporter had included more optimistic and positive information. She wanted them to know about her program, how it was going so well, and that children were growing and happy in a nurturing environment. She wondered if there were anything she could do to correct this false report. She felt an uneasiness that she recognized could only be alleviated by one thing—a visit to the Wise Old Elkay.

As she hiked up the mountain, she noticed for the first time that the mountain was not really all that

high. It did, however, provide a beautiful view. As she looked out over the valley, she could see many homes and businesses. She could see right up to the edge of the horizon, where the sky meets the earth. She felt strengthened by this grand vista and a sense of courage began to emerge inside her. She walked resolutely up to the familiar door, firmly lifted the old knocker, and let it fall.

The Wise Old Elkay did not go to the door, but called in a strong voice, "Come in!" By this time, she knew this teacher well, and they had grown quite fond of each other. The Wise Old Elkay listened as the teacher tried to clearly explain her thoughts. About how she loved the children in her program, but she wanted to do more. About how she was concerned about what was happening to young children in the world. About how she wanted children and families everywhere to have access to good quality care and education. As she finished, the teacher asked the Wise Old Elkay in a determined voice, "Is there anything I can do to make a difference?"

The Wise Old Elkay said, "Oh, yes, my child, there is. All the other gifts you have accepted have brought you to this place in your career. What you have told me indicates that you are ready to become an advocate. You are ready—and prepared—to tell leaders and policy-makers what the field of early childhood accepts as necessary and effective for young children's growth and development. You are ready to tell others what you know really works for young children and their families."

The teacher knew in her heart that the Wise Old Elkay was right! The teacher warmly took her hand, thanked her, and let herself out the door. She stopped on the stoop and deeply inhaled the clear mountain air. She looked out over the world before her and felt a sense of direction and fulfillment that filled her soul as never before.

The teacher wrote a letter to the newspaper refuting the negative comments they had printed and passionately defended the rights of children. She designed and gave presentations about appropriate practices at early childhood conferences in her state and local community. She developed and published a quarterly newsletter for parents of young children. From time to time, she wrote state and federal legislators advocating for support for quality early childhood pro-

grams for all children. From then on, she deliberately looked for public and quiet ways to advocate for young children and their families.

## CONCLUSION

The teacher still occasionally visits the Wise Old Elkay; they share stories about early childhood experiences over hot tea and sweet biscuits. And they both continue to grow and learn to this very day!

## RESOURCES\*

\*Carter, M. and Curtis, D. (1994). Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice, St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

\*Katz, L. (August 1979). Helping Others Learn to Teach: Some Principles and Techniques for Inservice Educators, Urbana, IL: ERIC.

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