

From the Hearts of Children

“Why did they have to die?” “I hate them for not staying!” “I’m so sad.” “Teacher, you should have saved them!”

None of these words were said by the three-year olds who listened as their preschool teacher gathered the class around her to announce the death of the four hermit crabs who had lived in a glass tank in their classroom since September. Instead, the children sat still, some with eyes fixed on Ms. Collins, others diverting their gaze from the source of such painful news. Gradually, several children began to fidget and move around the collapsing circle they had formed on the floor in front of their teacher. Ms. Collins opened the tank, reached in, and held out the four motionless animals for her students to see or touch. “Will they ever move again?” asked one youngster, clinging to her sincere wish for the rebirth of the class pets. “I’m afraid not” replied the teacher. In a calm and tender voice, Ms. Collins explained that the crabs were dead and that means they can no longer move or eat or play.

Even as she spoke, Ms. Collins knew that the children would not accept death as a permanent condition for living things. At this age, children do not understand death’s irreversible nature. To them, it’s more like a kind of sleep state or transformation into a different form of life. Loss, however, often feels like a personal blow. Kids’ feelings outpace the maturity of their thinking. They understand and grieve enduring and unexpected separations from loved ones, protectors and familiar environments. Since they view the whole world exclusively from their own perspective, preschoolers may blame themselves for the death or disappearance of an object of their affection. “Perhaps it was something I said or did or thought that caused the crabs to die.” Moreover, adults are supposed to be all-powerful and all-knowing. “How could they let this happen?”

As I observed this poignant scene unfold at a neighborhood preschool, I noticed that none of the children actually got mad or tearful. No one mentioned how they felt about the death of their pet crabs. Only their uncommon silence, downcast heads and shuffling feet belied their tender feelings. Then something extraordinary happened. About a half hour after the discussion memorializing the dead crabs, the teacher began story time with a reading of a picture book called “Where’s Spot?” This adorable tale follows a mother dog who frantically mistakes all sorts of funny objects and animals for her missing pup. On one page, she imagines she has finally found the wayward Spot only to expose an unsuspecting duck. Upon being disturbed, the duck squeals in protest. Three-year old Michael, who had been listening intently, thumb planted between his lips, suddenly jumped up and loudly declared to his teacher that the duck had every right to feel angry at Spot’s mother. It wasn’t the duck’s fault that Spot was missing. The mother should have been more careful than to lose him. The alert and sensitive teacher asked Michael whether he thought Spot might be in any danger. “He could be dead!” he declared, revealing more of his own raw nerve than his rational thinking. “Let’s read on and see what happens,” suggested his wise caregiver. When, a few pages later, Spot returned safely to his mother’s side, Ms. Collins asked the children whether we could have saved the crabs. A wonderful discussion followed in which each child expressed his or her regrets, wishes and sadness. The matter resolved beautifully as the group decided to bury their pets in the school yard under a favorite bush where they would always be close enough to see and talk to.

I felt so privileged to be present at this special moment. The kids and their caring teacher reminded me that young children interpret their experiences emotionally long before they can objectify meaning. Rather than exasperate herself and her students by forcing the biological concept of death or by ignoring the power of this tender loss, Ms. Collins supported the emotional needs of the children and at the same time guided them to a peaceful resolution that made sense to three-year olds. Children will show us their true feelings if we wait patiently while offering the strength of our attentive and comforting presence. Precious lessons like these teach children at a young age how good it feels to know there are people in their lives who care about how they feel. From such a positive emotional base, they will develop the exquisite capacity to relate and to communicate the feeling of life. In truth, everyday moments like these inspire hope that the next generation may learn to use compassion to safeguard humanity.