A director shared this story:

We planned the retreat for months, the head teachers and myself. There was a great deal to do to make all the arrangements, but we were finally on our way.

And then we hit a series of snafus: the school van broke down and we had to wait hours for it to be repaired. We were using a friend’s lake cottage; and we arrived to discover that mice had invaded the pantry. It rained the whole time we were gone and someone had forgotten to bring the insect repellent.

Our actual work sessions went well — we resolved several thorny issues and came up with some exciting new projects and ideas; but things had started off poorly and we ended up tired and worn out.

When we returned to our center, the stories about the retreat were about all the things that had gone wrong. Every time I turned around, someone was complaining (or at least that’s how it felt to me); I felt under attack, unappreciated. The retreat had been planned to give my staff an opportunity to relax and enjoy each other; but I began to feel as though all they perceived was an ordeal.

Even though I knew I wasn’t personally responsible for the things that went wrong with the van, the mice, and the weather, I took the complaining personally.

Did my teachers really not remember the good things that happened on the retreat? And why couldn’t they see the big picture? Our center is a great place to work — parents, children, and staff get along well together. We are proud of the work we do and of the ways in which our center is unique. They are well paid (relatively), they enjoy significant benefits, and they usually have a good time.

So, I spent a bit of time talking back to them in my mind — Stop complaining! Can’t you see that the things that went wrong were out of my control? Didn’t anything good happen for you on the retreat? Are you forgetting all the ways in which this job is perfect for you? What about all the days when things go right?

And then it hit me — I was the one who was forgetting the big picture! I have a great staff to work with. They do their jobs and do them well. They bring joy and enthusiasm to the center and into my daily life. They are wonderful! Yes, they were complaining and, yes, they were ignoring the big picture — but they were still strong, hard working, terrific teachers and people. My focus shifted to how lucky I am to work with them.

This friend’s story struck me, because I, too, often lose sight of the larger perspective. I get all caught up in the frustrations at hand and hang my emotions on the moment. The crisis of the day blocks my view of everything else. And it’s a relief when a comment or happenstance clears the air and I can see clearly again.

Why is it important to see, or even to have, a big picture? The goals we have established, the history of our accomplishments, our shared vision of where we are going, our view of ourselves in a larger context — all these elements of the big picture guide us, giving us strength to tackle the tasks at hand.

Living the moment is often a murky business; we need to define ways of clearing our minds so that we can actually accomplish what we have set out to do.

Bonnie Neugebauer — May, 1996