A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

Sometimes you wonder what you would/could/should write about — and then a story unfolds around you.

Thelma started this one. She works with my daughter Alison as a social worker in the Chicago Public Schools. “Some of these children,” Thelma shared, “come from homes where there is no language. Their family dialogues are about eating and getting dressed — about the routines of living. When they come to school they are so far behind. It’s difficult for them to catch up. What can we do to help them?”

Shortly afterwards, I was on an airplane where two young children were engaged in conversation with their father for the entire 2 hours and 47 minutes of the journey. “See all the clouds!” “What’s that noise?” “Look at the airplane with Goofy on it! There are 2 of them. Two Goofys!” Their father engaged them in exploring the airplane, talking about their destination, reading books, sharing comments and stories and curiosities.

And then there was a young mother on the metro with a baby neatly packed into his stroller and a young girl beside her — both mother and daughter were folding newspapers into identical parcels. Daughter, like mother, gazed at the print, folded and turned the newspaper, and reengaged in what was on that corner of the page. As they came to their stop, the mother discarded her paper on the seat, but the little girl carefully refolded hers and tucked it under her arm as she left the train.

Finally, turbo child swaggered into his seat on yet another airplane. He liked to talk and he talked with gusto — which is to say, volume. Passengers quickly reshuffled so that he could sit next to his mother, rather than in his designated seat — alone — between two strangers. During this 3 hour and 27 minute flight, he spilled his soda 3 times, went to the toilet 5 times, and was constantly shushed. He wanted to talk and he had no volume control; he was eager and full of energy. Yet there were so many people in close proximity and his mom had noted all the knitted brows. “When do we get there?” “Shhhh.” “What does this button do?” “Shhhhh.” “Shhhhhhhhh!” “Who is that?” “Shhhh . . . . “

Examples are everywhere of skilled parenting (and awkward parenting), great conversationalists (and other speech stylists), good role models (and people needing them). We can learn from all and each scenario. We can inform ourselves about different personalities, effective responses, innovative approaches. We can act on our awareness of the critical need for young children to experience contexts that enrich their vocabularies and challenge their thinking, and opportunities to talk about anything and everything. They need to see print and learn to decipher its messages, to love the sounds of words, to engage in word play. They need to be heard and they need to have important and beautiful things to listen to.

All children do not have these things. Yet they are not luxuries; they are air and sustenance. We have responsibilities to see that every child learns the entry skills to literacy. Thelma raised concerns so critical to all our thinking. The only and important response is that there is always something we can do. Every child we encounter is another opportunity for engagement, interaction, conversation — taking one young child a small step closer to becoming a literate citizen.