Taking on Woolf's Non-Humanist, Humanist Challenge

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Stephanie Burdick-Shepherd begins her "Cultivating Childhood Friendships as an Educative Aim: Virgina Woolf's Non-Humanist, Humanist Challenge to Philosophers of Education" with dinner table discussions with her six-year old daughter about friendship. I have an almost six-year old granddaughter, Lizzie, and she and I talk about her friendships (and mine) when we play and eat together, too. I'll bring her voice in to this response later. First, let me describe Burdick-Shepherd's argument. Her central claim is "that childhood friendships *in and of themselves* are both educative and an important educational aim." I completely agree with her, and commend her for bringing this topic to our attention. I plan to extend her argument. She uses Virginia Woolf's little known novel, *The Waves*, to illustrate her central claim. I was unfamiliar with this work, and still struggle with why Burdick-Shepherd thinks it helps make her point, but I will turn to my critique shortly.

Burdick-Shepherd points out that classic definitions of friendship, such as Aristotle's, focus on adults, and define ideal friendships as "practiced between those who are good and alike in virtue and wisdom," whereas "the young are only concerned with pleasure and passion in their friend making." She describes childhood friendships as "founded within wild pleasure, and fleeting temporality"; … they "include difference, fragmentation, and chaos." She suggests that, if we imagine humanism as a non-humanist, we can disclose and find ways to think openly. In today's world, "we need ways to understand imperfect, and unequal, relationships. Childhood friendships are an experience of these relationships."[1] Burdick-Shepherd acknowledges that there are other sources we could and should turn to; she is not arguing that Woolf's novel is the best way to re-imagine and re-consider this complicated relationship, just one way. She suggests that because Woolf's novel is not a typical novel but rather a "poem-play," Woolf moves us beyond the traditions of humanism.

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Burdick-Shepherd gives us a basic description of the poem-play, the names of the main children, and the time frame. She outlines three aspects of childhood friendship in Woolf's novel: the experience of vulnerable differences between friends; the recognition of friendship within a fragmented self (Woolf's characters never feel quite whole, she maintains this fragmentation across each one's adult life); and the challenge of public life in friendship. She explains to us Woolf's small hope: "Childhood friendships are experiences of making moments in a life meaningful." "Woolf's children come together as friends, not because it is easy or pleasurable (as Aristotle might tell us) but because in the moment of connection and insertion something else becomes possible." We need friends to help us understand ourselves. In our incongruity we remain vulnerable in all our moral relationships. It is worth cultivating this vulnerability and impossibility with children for "young friends, in their experience of difference, fragmentation, and impossibility also uncover, as children, the beauty and grace of ordinary human life." Burdick-Shepherd warns us that "we should not discount childhood friendships because of their fragility and fleeting temporality – they issue a challenge to us to rethink educative aims." She ends with suggestions for how we can help foster childhood friendships in schools.

My almost six-year-old granddaughter, Lizzie, has good friends, temporary friends who can be flighty, and even bullies she has encountered in her short lifetime at daycare and kindergarten. This year we have talked a lot about bullies. I am waiting to read longer stories to her about childhood friendships, with other children and animals, favorites of mine that I have read to my children and students in my elementary classes (e.g. *Sounder*, *Where the Red Fern Grows, Rascal,* and *Tom Sawyer, To Kill a Mockingbird, Harriet the Spy*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*). My son has named his daughters after favorite authors and characters. My younger granddaughter is named after Jean Louise Finch (Scout, from *To Kill a Mockingbird*), Louisa Scout is her name, and my older granddaughter is named after Jane Austin and Elizabeth from *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Jane is her name. The love of stories is alive and well in my extended family.

Burdick-Shepherd shares with us her love of Virginia Woolf, as an author, and introduces us to a little known poem-play Woolf wrote, hoping more of us will come to know it. She has already succeeded, as she has introduced

The Waves to me, and now you, and I thank her for that. I do recommend the read. The poetry is beautiful and the metaphors used powerful. But, to help us appreciate the educational value of cultivating childhood friendships, I am not sure it is the best choice, or even a good choice. It didn't tell a story of childhood friends as I anticipated. Woolf holds the children at a distance, she only lets us be inside each of their heads, one at a time; we never see them interact from an outsider's perspective. I don't feel like I got to know them as friends. It's not a story I would read to a child; it's written for adults, to reflect back on childhood friendships and the journey of ageing. Lizzie would tell me: "Bubbe, that is a bad story!" Just as she told me "Mary Poppins" was a bad movie because it was too long. But then she watched it again, and again, at home, and learned the songs, and decided it was a good movie after all. *The Waves* is not a story she and I could read again and again, and enjoy it more; it is a story she may want to read at various times of her adult life.

For me, besides the reading of favorite books about childhood friendships, the experience of teaching in Montessori schools, where children remain in their classroom for three years and then move on to another classroom where they spend three years together, taught me a lot about the value of childhood friendships.[2] My youngest son, Sam, who is at high noon age-wise, to use Woolf's metaphor, has friends he made in his Montessori school from preschool, the early dawn. They are still in touch, and cheer each other on as they go through life's up and downs (one is now in a wheelchair due to a car accident at age sixteen, for example).

I observed the importance of childhood friendship in China's schools too, where the elementary children stay together as a cohort for six years and make life-long friends, and in Japan, where the focus is on helping the children make friends and putting them together in *hans*.[3] My graduate students from China and Japan are still in touch with their childhood friends and have explained to me the sweetness of these friendships. Their friends have given them the courage to come to the USA to study, by sharing that experience with them.

In the USA we seem to worry more about our individual child and who their teacher is, than whether they have good friends. In our public elementary schools we move them each year to a new class, and pull friends apart. If child-

hood friends have the good fortune of being placed in the same classroom the next school year, teachers will likely not let them sit together or work together. My childhood friends were my neighbors more than my classmates. We saw each other regularly after school, on weekends and holidays. We rode the bus thirty minutes to and from school every day, and even though I moved away, my parents retired to my old neighborhood, and once again we saw each other, met each other's partners, children, grieved divorces and career ups and downs. In the late afternoon, early evening of my life, when my parents passed away, my childhood friends were there to stand with me and help me say good-bye.

I agree with Burdick-Shepherd; schools are important places to look for fostering childhood friendships due to the amount of time children spend there. They need free time to interact with peers, and in today's world have less time to be together than when I was in school. Children need private spaces to be together, secret or sacred places; for me it was forts. I was always building forts, inside from sheets, blankets, and furniture, outside in trees and hillsides, behind garages, within hearing range. Lizzie and I are friends on our iPads, and we Skype pretty regularly, and now she has begun to build forts with her bears and dolls. When I come to visit Lizzie (and now Lou, three), I have been known to go with her to daycare so I can meet her friends and play with them too. I am not going to carry *The Waves* in my backpack, but I do have it on my kindle, and I have already reread Chapter One.

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1 Stephanie Burdick-Shepherd, this volume.

2 Barbara Thayer-Bacon, *Democracies Always in the Making* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

3 Barbara Thayer-Bacon, *Beyond Liberal Democracies in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).