

# The Importance of People

Column Editor: Peggy Brogan

## The Moon Is Round

“NO-NO-NO!” insists Coco bursting into tears. “That isn’t the moon. The moon is round. Read it again.”

So once again Coco and his nursery school teacher turn the pages of the big book he has selected and follow by means of an improvised story, a simplified version of a trip to the moon. Once again they come to the place where the picture shows the spacemen exploring the surface of the moon—a rugged surface that looks flat instead of round when drawn from such close range. And once again Coco raises his objection to the flat moon. This time his teacher’s explanation that the moon just looks flat when you see it up so close, with a casual reference to the large plastic ball beside their chair, satisfies Coco. He closes the book, climbs up to the highest platform in the jungle gym, and announces to the world generally that he is flying to the moon.

Coco has lived but three years. Frequently his important grownups talk of children’s needs for exploring their own backyards before taking on the neighborhood, their own neighborhoods before taking on the community, their own communities before taking on the nation or world. But Coco seems not to heed their plans. Here he is exploring outer space before he knows the way to the grocery store. A few minutes from now he might be

bathing his dolly, painting the rain and thunder, insisting on having the *heavy* hammer for finishing his boat.

In other ways as well, Coco is upsetting certain ideas with regard to scope and sequence in his learning. “What kind of a boat are you?” he asks his friend Jolly as their bare feet skim the surface of the floor in the “big room” where it’s fun to move to music. “A red boat,” answers Jolly taking on more speed. “No!” explodes Coco with understandable impatience—knowing Coco. “What *kind* are you? What *kind*? I’m a fireboat. Shhhh-shhhhh-shhhhhhhhh-shhh. I’m putting out the fire. Putting out the fire.”

By now he is too busy putting out the fire to pursue his question with Jolly. Other children are responding to the music and uncluttered space in their own ways—some as boats or birds or airplanes—some just as freed children enjoying their natural love of rhythmic movement. To Coco they are all boats. As he pauses in his own moving, he looks at the movement in the big room. “There’s the lighthouse. The lighthouse rocking in the waves,” he chants, half-looking at the nail keg drum. “And there’s the pilot boat and the tugboat and the freighter. . . .”

When three more years go by and Coco enters first grade, how will he respond to vocabulary controlled read-

ing materials where all boats are simply *b-o-a-t, boat*? Will he be willing to read about Baby and other members of the family going up-up-up, or will he insist, as did another seven-year-old, that travelling off the surface of the earth is really going *out* instead of *up*? Will he be willing to wait until fourth or fifth grade to begin to study about the planets and facts of outer space? Will he have to engage in complicated relearning as must many of his grown-ups in order to read air-age maps where distortions must be understood in terms of a *round* earth (or moon) made flat, instead of the cylinder-shaped earth of the Mercator's projection?

And what of Coco when he goes to high school, as they all do? If this much has happened in his first three years of finding out about the world he is living in and helping to make, what will happen in the next ten or twelve? Who can predict the limits of a human being who can insist on the only dimension of the moon he knows—its roundness—and still creatively organize in various frameworks uniquely pleasing to him, the movement and color and sound in the big room? Who can help his high school teachers know what his curriculum will be? If it is difficult to think of how to limit the words in his reading vocabulary at the age of six, who can envision the best selection of learnings from the whole wide world placed at the disposal of an inquisitive boy who has lived twelve or fifteen years?

Just as Coco is busy exploring boats and outer space in these early years, might he need time as a teen-ager to explore his own community—to act-

ually rebuild it where it needs rebuilding—using the stuff of his wider world instead of nursery blocks? And what when this *stuff* includes hot rods, atomic energy, “dope,” military preparedness programs, disease, medicine, hunger, food, changing seasons, poetry, athletic prowess and lack of it, good and bad feelings toward self and others, countless ways for solving problems, creative intelligence, stifled intelligence, beliefs, love and loneliness, change and growth? *Who* helps pattern these into *what* working framework—*how*?

What picture will Coco have in his mind as he contemplates the movement in his world? In the big room on this one occasion the children are all boats—very specific and different boats—organized into rhythmic wholeness by a common body of water (the floor), one lighthouse (the nail keg), one viewer (Coco). Will his growing world of people be just as creatively conceived in their uniqueness and togetherness? Who will have helped him with the challenging transformation necessary if he is to conceive a world of boats—or people—living together in terms of *how we see us* along with *how I see them*? How significantly will this learning still depend on help from his school when Coco goes to high school? When the viewer is sixteen instead of three, which tough problems in perception will be on his agenda? How does a teacher help a high school Coco to add to and select from his various ways for doing things? How many ways will he need *then* for looking at the moon?

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