



A Manner of

# Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

*Carlos charges into the room, a beamer of a smile on his face as he deadheads it for the art table. Baskets of markers, nature magazines, and several sizes of paper are arranged within reach. Ginny is discussing wild animals with the children; she suggests that each choose a different animal to draw. Seemingly oblivious to the sound of Ginny's voice, Carlos is carefully choosing markers. With intense concentration, he selects a magenta marker, then a purple, a red, and finally a blue. He arranges them in tight order and stares at them for several seconds before he adds a green marker to the lineup. Smile intact, Carlos begins to draw. "What animal are you going to draw, Carlos?" Ginny asks. "A SNAKE! I'm going to draw a snake." He never looks up as he creates his beautiful snake, alive with color.*

Carlos makes me realize again that not all people learn in the same way, not all people approach a challenge from the same perspective. The other children at the art table chose animals before they put marker to paper. They spent at least moments thinking about the shape of the animal; some even looked through the nature magazines for ideas and information. But Carlos' drawing begins with color.

*Ed sits in his car until 3:59, because he has told us he will arrive at 4:00. He sits with my son Adam and carefully works through the instructions for their mentoring partnership. He has obviously practiced his responsibilities and produces sharpened pencils and the necessary paper. The guidebook says: Introduce yourself — he tells Adam about his wife's death and a story from his childhood. The instruction says: Write for five minutes — he times it by his watch. Look this up — that is precisely what they do. He says his goodbyes at 5:30, just as promised.*

It never occurs to me to follow directions carefully. I have assembled and disassembled many riding toys and small appliances, ripped out seams — but haven't learned. Ed's way of meticulous adherence to schedule and detail is quite alien to me. But Ed's sense of precision and his dedication and style of concentration appeal to something in Adam. Their friendship grows through brief encounters and shared stories.

*Ute invites me to her kitchen to learn how to bake her specialty cake. I arrive to a Julia Child experience. Ute has set out duplicate sets of tools and ingredients. She follows the recipe exactly, times blending, and stirs only in one direction. Her cake emerges from the oven a work of art. Mine looks pretty good, too, because she doesn't let me stop stirring when my arm gets tired, or pour in an ingredient that measures almost to the line.*

These people remind me that not everyone is like me. That should be obvious, but I seem to forget that people process information differently, hear different messages, respond to different triggers. I keep making the same mistakes, thinking: all staff will read my memo, everyone will hear the announcement, this is as important to everyone else as it is to me. I'd be willing to bet that you've made this mistake once or twice yourself. . . .

And it makes me wonder. Could it be that at least some of the needs of the adults and children in our society are just different ways of listening, seeing, responding than our own? Special needs do, of course, exist in the form of differing abilities that must be recognized, appreciated, and supported. But we can ask ourselves these questions: Do we manufacture special needs which are really just particular needs when we choose only one means of communicating information? When we are comfortable with a limited range of activity? When we create one type of learning or working environment? When our expectations are narrow or rigid? Do visual learners, quiet observers, active explorers need less *special* attention and more acceptance?

We talk a great deal in early childhood about things that are developmentally appropriate for young children, but do we really accept each child's rate and style of development as normal for the child — even if development varies significantly from the norm? Are we willing to take responsibility for meeting each child's needs, understanding that all needs are particular to the individual? This would lead us to consider each child in the moment — not compared so rigidly to standards and charts — but just herself, a child living and learning and doing right now — a child we are working to understand, a child we value just as he is.

Perhaps problem children and intractable co-workers would no longer be so, if we could realize moment by moment that they are just different from us. This mindset would force us to engage, focus, and observe. I think we would learn quite a bit that could turn out to be pretty interesting. 🧩