



BOLDness, Be My Friend

Taking a Risk to be your Best Brave Original Loving Direct Self

by Holly Elissa Bruno, Ruth Ann Ball, Alicia D. Smith and Beverlyn Cain

Boldness has genius, power and magic to it.
 —Goethe

Being bold, pulling back your shoulders, stepping out of safe predictability and speaking up for what matters. Does this describe you or how you yearn to be?

Each time we choose BOLDness, being Brave Original Loving Direct, scary as those times can be, magic happens. Our vision clears, our hearts rejoice, we grow. Our actions radiate hope for all. Our true self high-fives our terrified self. Smiles glow and spread.

When we choose BOLDness, we also risk being body-slammed. Messengers of change can get shot. BOLDness and resistance to being BOLD compete in a ritualistic dance. Which prevails? So much depends on forces beyond our control. Given the kneecapping dangers, why choose boldness in our gentle profession?

Or, why on earth not choose BOLDness! Even if our BOLDness fails, we shall have taken a chance to make a difference.

"In the cellars of the night, when the mind starts moving around old trunks of bad

times, the pain of this and the shame of that, the memory of a small boldness is a hand to hold." —John Leonard

Holding a hand is something we early childhood professionals do instinctively. BOLDness invites others to take our hands and partner with us in making things better. Courage we did not think we had emBOLDens us.

Why Risk Boldness?

Because we speak for those without voices, our BOLDness can make a world of difference to babies, children, underrepresented folk, underappreciated educators, the power of play, the wisdom in kindness and to every soul who suffers because she experiences our world differently than the majority.

When were you last BOLD, standing up for what you believe in? What difference did your courage make? How did you brave your way through the claws of resistance? In this moment if you listen closely, does your true self call you like a hound of heaven to step up again? What

is that difference you know in your heart you can make regardless of resistance from within and without?

Tales of BOLDness from Everyday Educators

We four, everyday early childhood professionals hailing from Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Arizona and North Carolina, invite you to reflect with us on those defining moments of BOLDness in each of our lives when we are able:

"...to do at last what I came here for, and waste my heart on fear no more."
 —John O'Donahue

As we reflect together and affirm our actions, perhaps we will rekindle courage to do our next BOLD thing.

May we (Holly Elissa, Ruth Ann, Beverlyn and Alicia) tell you our stories of BOLDness and the difference it has made to ourselves, and we hope, others? Even the tiniest of choices can change a life.

B is for Brave

by Holly Elissa Bruno

I hold this belief: as an educator, I want to live what I teach. My mother, a woman of slogans, stressed: Practice what you preach. I believe each child and every adult deserves to be respected, listened to and appreciated for her/himself.

While holding myself to this worthy standard of authenticity, I confounded my vision with something dark and un-seeable: perfectionism fueled by terror. Perfectionism was a cover for my feeling unworthy and inadequate. I feared people would see my flaws and fire me. Darker still, I pushed down secrets I hid from myself about my uneasy history.

Obedying the unwritten “Don’t talk, don’t trust, don’t feel” troubled family rule, I acted as if everything were hunky-dory in my family (*Adult Children of Alcoholics*, 2006). Don’t educators need to represent healthy families while setting a good example? Given that my childhood was unhealthy, how could I be a healthy teacher?

Brave called my bluff of all places in the midst of presenting one of my earliest keynotes (translated into Vietnamese) in Boston. Sharing research on children and abuse, I flashed back to (pictured) myself as a child passing out during a violent beating by a family member’s fists. That unbidden ghost-memory clutched my throat until I could not breathe, speak, nor stop tears inwardly tsunami’ing toward my eyes.

Run! I wanted (as I had as child) to run screaming for the hills. “Shut up!” the abuser yelled at the little child inside me, flash-freezing her into a pillar of ice. Chilled, terrified I would faint (with what I later discovered is PTSD), I felt shame threatening to flush me off that stage and out of my livelihood!

With extraordinary inexplicableness, my heart became my voice. I stopped holding my breath and planted my feet on the floor to notice where I was.

In that wobbly moment, I determined I must tell my truth: I was sexually, physically, emotionally and spiritually abused throughout my childhood. I had kept silent out of loyalty to my family. I was the statistic I was talking about in my keynote.

From my heart then, I thanked each early childhood professional for her/his life-giving role in helping children like me feel safe, protected, cared for and yes, loved. I described how Michael Gonta, my first teacher, valued me and provided my first sanctuary for learning.

“Without teachers like you and Mr. Gonta, I wouldn’t be standing here today,” I marveled.

I then interlaced my story as a survivor with the research, wrapping my keynote with enough clarity and ample conviction. Applause beamed light on my truth-telling path waiting to unfurl before me.

To speak up for wounded children, I claimed my truest voice. My greatest vulnerability became my greatest strength. I discovered I could stand up for children with invisibly bleeding wounds. Since that moment, I have spoken for survivors because, as Diana Nyad says, “Freedom lies in being bold.”

Through near failure threatened by collapse, I found the Brave in BOLD.

O is for Original

by Ruth Ann Ball

May I share a secret with you? When I became a teacher, I did not know how to talk to children, how to ask questions or even what words to say. I wanted so badly to learn how to connect with



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Ruth Ann Ball, a recognized leader in the field, studied advanced studies in family education, child development and early childhood education; transformational learning. She is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Central Oklahoma and holds leadership positions in state, regional and national early childhood professional associations. Her past experiences include being a teacher of young children, director of a child development laboratory center, faculty member at a two-year college and four-year university and a founding member of the Center for Early Childhood Professional Development at the University of Oklahoma. Ball is a world traveler and educator; author of professional articles in referred journals, co-editor of a book; presenter at state, national and international conferences as well as in college and university classes.



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Beverlyn Cain holds masters and doctorate degrees in Early Childhood Teacher Curriculum Studies UMass at Amherst. Her experiences in the early childhood field include, classroom teacher, lab school director and faculty in early childhood teacher education programs. She presents at NAEYC Professional Learning Institute and NAEYC Annual conferences. She presented at the Oxford Round Table, Oxford, England. Cain is a NAEYC program reviewer and is published in peer reviewed journals. In March 2018, she was the target person to earn NAEYC Higher Education Accreditation for Early Childhood Teacher Education Four Year Programs for Fayetteville State University’s Birth-Kindergarten Programs.

children, greet them, ask questions and make welcoming comments that fostered thinking and learning. What resource inside of me would help me get through this unknowing? I wondered: how can I be original and creative in my teaching each day?

How in particular would I respond to children with special needs? How will children treat classmates with spina bifida, or autism (in the days before “on the spectrum” was well understood)? When two little boys, Michael, 4 years old with spina bifida and Steven, 6 years old and autistic, showed up in my class of 4-year-olds, I was overwhelmed, not knowing how to interact or what activities to plan.

When I myself was a child, daughter of a Czechoslovakian immigrant family, my rural school was that one-room school-house most people have heard about. My classmates spanned ages 6 through 12. Some classmates were different from me. They all were, actually. No one else spoke Czechoslovakian at home and some had undiagnosed physical or emotional disabilities.

Our differences did not confuse our teacher, Miss (Ms. did not exist then) Records. She unceasingly viewed us as learners with a job to do: Learn! Because we had the same job, to learn, I learned to accept all children as my peers. That became who I was. Age did not matter, ability did not matter. Our job was to learn to the best of our ability.

Reflecting on my own childhood experience, I determined I had a job to do: make my classroom a sanctuary where every child could learn. I had not studied special needs in college in the 1960s so I found myself a beginner again. How would I support every student’s learning? Time to be original and figure it out as best as I could with help from the children and their families.

I began by asking the boys’ parents about the boys before they started school. That gave me pointers such as, ensure Michael has ample space to navigate the classroom and monitor Steven’s responses to peers for stressors. I also invited the children together to problem-solve. “How can we help if our friend falls with his crutches?” and, “What if I think my classmate is weird because he doesn’t talk or walk like I do?”

Everyone wanted to learn how to walk on crutches so I provided child-sized crutches in the dramatic play area for any child to try out. Michael became the expert who helped his fellows learn.

The boys’ parents helped out. Betty, a beautician, set up a beauty shop in the dramatic play area. Steven, fascinated as Michael’s mom curled a classmate’s long hair, innocently touched the curling iron, burning his fingers. He screamed and cried. I was there in an instant, plunging his hand in cold water. His mother was shocked. I was terrified by her reaction, expecting at that moment my teaching career was over.

However, Steven’s Mom was stunned with gratitude because she had never seen her 6-year-old son show he could feel pain, despite having injured himself at home. (I do not recommend hot curling irons in a class for 4-year-olds!)

Because I smiled all the time, Steven’s mother asked me not to smile when I was concerned about something inappropriate her son was doing. My smile confused her son and her. Point well taken.

All around me things evolved. Children helped children just as they did in my one room school house years before. If crutches fell, they were picked up and

handed back. When we worked at easels, a child made sure Michael had a chair by his easel. Children were spontaneously taking one another’s hands when help was needed.

Michael, Steven and all “my” 4-year-olds served as my teachers. They reinforced my intuitive sense gained as a child that we all have value and we all desire respect and deserve dignity. We can problem-solve together. Teachers do not have to know all the answers.

Later when a 4-year-old with challenging behavior pleaded “Help me” with her eyes as she struggled during pick up time, I sat beside her asking, “How would you like me to help you?” Each time I learned to help a child, I learned to help myself. I became more open and responsive to each child, acknowledging her/his positive behaviors, eager to plan and change activities as the children dictated.

This ability to be respectful served me well when I became a director as well as a teacher of college students. As director, I challenged my teachers to pay deeper attention to what a child needed rather than get hooked by “acting out” behavior. As a professor, my voice emerged as original and BOLD as I challenged students to share how they had been creative and inclusive in their classrooms.

My journey still evolves. My one-of-a-kind experience in that one-room school house in Oklahoma with Miss Records, who treated each child as capable in her or his own way. I got the message and made it mine. Keep learning, keep growing, face my fears and look for everyone’s gifts. That is how I know to be original in my BOLDness.

Boldness be my friend.

—William Shakespeare

L is for Loving

by Alicia Smith

As I experience bold moments in my life and career, I have discovered loving must be real. If I cannot feel love at the heart of my action, I cannot be real. If I cannot be real, I cannot be bold. Authenticity is essential to leadership.

I had opportunities to choose BOLDness as the child care administrator for the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in the late 1980s. I would like to tell you about one such opportunity. Was it my most defining BOLDness moment? Probably not. But it was one of those choices that helped me define what matters.

I provided direction and administrative oversight for two campus child care centers. I worked to ensure collaboration with campus departments, programs, student organizations and local, state and regional entities.

My work also required that I repair and rebuild the sagging reputation of the child care program. While the program provided exemplary quality with a multicultural focus for an international population, staff morale was low. Leaders behaved like manipulative parents in a dysfunctional family where everyone competed for favor.

Soon after I began, our state legislator recommended I be appointed to the board of the Massachusetts Children's Trust Fund, an organization committed to eliminating child abuse by shining light on issues that caused families to stumble. The trust fund developed programming to strengthen families and communities through family and parenting programs, public education, and research, with the support of public policies. Board members represented Eastern Massachusetts businesses and corporations, state agency heads, and executive directors of philanthropic and nonprofit service organizations. I was the only African-

American and one of possibly two people of color on a 12 to 15 member board. Once a month I made that two hour, 94-mile drive across the state sparring with infamous Boston drivers en route to our downtown Boston board meeting.

Our board decided to seek the services of a public relations and advertising firm to develop a public service campaign to advance statewide awareness and spark corporate and donor giving. After months working with the board and staff, facilitating focus groups, the firm developed a tagline and preliminary printed materials. Refinements were made and development of our public service announcement video began. Actors were auditioned and cast. An air of shimmery expectation was created as the agency readied the launch for the board and our executive director.

The reveal was a well-attended, much anticipated board meeting in Boston. Board, staff, PR firm principals and invited guests were present. With eager anticipation, conference room lights were dimmed, and the project manager pushed the video "play" button.

An alabaster-white middle-class family, breadwinner dad in a suit, smiling mom in heels, pearls and pressed apron, a pasty girl and a slightly older boy (I swear, a family dog/cat patrolled in the background) stared at us, reciting their predictable story. On this All-American trip down memory lane, a Beaver Cleaver nuclear family was purported to represent healthy American family life.

Lights came back up. Most sitting around the table had seen their family's lives reflected on the screen. I had not. In the early 1950s, I was a little Black girl growing up the segregated south.

The director called for feedback. I scanned other board members at the table and then checked faces in the crowded room. Searching for allies, expecting, even hoping that someone would see what I had seen: white privilege abounding.

I waited through accolades for cinematography, actors, dialogue. Did no one see the elephant? Discussion tilted toward winding down when I at last addressed the group. Yes, the presentation (actors, script, cinematography) was good; but, the 1950s were not a time of nostalgia for many Americans. In fact, like members of other disenfranchised groups in America, I did not look back on the '50s with fondness.

I found my voice to say that a large segment of the families whose strengths and struggles we wanted to acknowledge would not see themselves either. This could not stand as our signature marketing piece.

The executive director paused to let my words hang in the air for a moment, before giving me an ever so slight nod and speaking.

"As most of you know, I wait to hear your comments before adding my own. The technical aspects of the project are excellent and I applaud the creativity and hard work. I have to agree with Dr. Smith. Our message must be true and give voice to all families. If you know my background, then you know too that I did not see my family depicted on the screen today."

The PR company was invited to find still images that better shared the wide ethnic, economic and regional diversity of the state and the family stories of its people. They went on to create a beautiful collage of contemporary families that faded on and off the screen: Asian, black, brown and white; single moms and dads, grandparents, teen parents, and two-parent families with children; depicted in rural and city locations and representative of an array of economic lifestyles. The production schedule and timeline slipped only a little.

The executive director signed "Thank you!" from across the room and when the PSA video aired, it did so with the support of a more informed board.

Staying silent in that moment would have been easy. However, I would have regretted not being real while allowing fear to steal my voice.

Love and loving are not always directed at people or living things; sometimes love and loving focus on principles and beliefs. Being BOLD is standing up for ideals that promote love and the loving understanding and appreciation of others. Being BOLD is loving yourself and the work we do, enough to face the terror of speaking up! Becoming real, being BOLD, is about being true to our inner voice.

D is for Direct

by Beverlyn Cain

I prefer a direct approach to learning; although, as an educator of young children, my teaching style is facilitative. I pay attention to children's curiosity and help them find pathways to learning. While studying and refining my approach to supporting young children's growth and development I earned my doctorate in our field.

After 27 years of classroom teaching, I boldly decided to step up to teaching teachers. I said yes to my first higher education position at a small Southern university as associate professor and laboratory school director.

Put the lab school on the map, the powers that be announced as my marching orders. Earning the top five-star state rating by upholding and exceeding designated standards would be the measure of my job well done. I was confident and I was ready.

I had not anticipated the clang of clashing mind sets. I assumed the lab school would

practice developmentally appropriate practices because DAP was a basic truism in the north.

Before I could blink, I was freaking out about the lack of knowledge about DAP. I was further taken aback by ongoing professional development having low to no priority. Why are they teaching young children using a boot camp drill approach or telling children, "Lay your heads down on the table?" I shook my head. Why are they so resistant?

I determined to take the direct approach in a no-nonsense way by instructing teachers, "Here is what needs to be done," "You need to ___," and, "We need to move full steam ahead to accomplish the goal." My direct approach was the best way to go, or so I thought. Turns out northern and southern mindsets do not always jibe.

I began to discover their mindset: "Who is she anyway?" "We have been doing things this way for years and it works fine." And, "Let's get parents to complain about her to the powers-that-be."

I began to think this job was a bit much for me. I also was not going to allow myself to run away from the challenge or be manipulated into maintaining inappropriate practices.

Back up. Wait a minute.

After frustrating meetings on bringing the program up to state guidelines, slowed down by consistent staff resistance and some parent push-back on any new strategy, I had my Aha moment. I needed alternative approaches. Specifically, I recalled studying reflective supervision as a helping relationship. This method calls for strategies such as facilitation, delegation, cooperation, and role modeling to get the job done.

Yes, I would still be direct about meeting high standards, but in a reflective fashion.

Follow the yellow brick road.

Delegation was my first new strategy. Each teacher became responsible for part of the staff meetings. One teacher took notes; another teacher's role was to report on playground equipment inspections. Delegating gave teachers a voice in discussion and decision-making, which relaxed the atmosphere somewhat.

A second new strategy was support for professional development. I made sure everyone had the opportunity to get to a conference. Third new strategy? Role-modeling. I used DAP strategies in the classrooms. By being indirectly direct, I noticed teachers buying into the value of change.

Here is what I learned: Take time to get to know the flavor of the Kool-Aid when it comes to staff mindsets. Do not assume my mindset will be the new setting's mindset. Observe everything before deciding on strategies. Change is hard for people in the north and in the south. Using indirect approaches in small stages to directly accomplish a goal? Yes, that can and did work.

The lab school earned its five state stars and one year later, the program was NAEYC accredited. I still favor being direct. That's who I am. Now, I also see the value of slowing down my process to make it more collaborative.

BOLDness is Within You

If you were to share your story of BOLDness, which story would you tell? You, like the four of us, have perhaps found yourself at a crossroads of shaming failure

Be bold and brave enough to be your true self.

—Queen Latifah

or taking a risk to grow. Hiding is a temporary option. Denial solves nothing. To render our life and the lives of others better, choose to be BOLD.

Where do we find courage? One thing we four have in common: We listen to our inner voices, although maybe not always nor in the beginning. When stuck, we pay attention to our own way of knowing, that timeless clear “felt sense” of intuitively knowing the next right thing to do. We detach from our egos, lift them to the side, give them a rest, and choose neither to be seduced by showboating grandiosity nor torn down by people-pleasing to placate authority. We do what we are called to do: speak up for children.

Our most paralyzing resistance comes from within. That inner voice we trust can be out-screamed by fear. Our most basic need, Maslow reminds us, is to be safe and part of a protective community. BOLDness can threaten our security. Fearful reactions can separate, or worse, isolate us from ourselves and our community.

Two beacons enlighten and warm our choice to face our fears, rather than be controlled by them.

Beacon one: Folk who truly love us do not abandon us. We need to place ourselves at the top of that list. If I make a choice that puts me in danger of rejection, I need to believe in myself enough to ask people who love me, “Stand by me, please.” When fair weather friends scatter, they clear my path.

Beacon two: Rejection, shaming, shunning and exclusion pain us just as wrenchingly as a punch to the stomach, a kick in the back, or a slap across the face. The pain center in our brain lights up (gets just as activated) when our tribe rejects us as when we break our

back (Goleman, *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence*). Think about it. Our bodies are primitively warning us that it is not safe to be alone in this dangerous world. Pain evokes defensive responses, the least courageous of which is selling our soul to survive.

That is why knowing who truly loves us and that we are worthy of love no matter what is elemental. Hang out with supportive loving folk.

Joan of Arc, who broke all kinds of rules, looked her abusers in the eye asserting, “I am not afraid. I was born to do this.” We were all born with the promise of leaving our world better than when we were born into it.

Fear-based actions are rarely actions coming from love. Fear shoves us face-down into the mud; love lifts our eyes to the skies. If you feel ashamed of or embarrassed by tooting your own horn, thank you for being human. There is no shame in loving on yourself for the risks you take to make life better. Take heart from Marianne Williamson: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we will be powerful beyond measure.”

For your promise to be fulfilled and your dreams realized, invite BOLDness to be your friend.

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