

HOT AIR

Clean-Up

By Barbara Currier Bell

“C’mon kids. Time to clean up.” Oh-oh. Kids don’t like clean-up. But they can come to enjoy it, given the right conditions.

A story helps: a morality play. “Once a baby skunk found a stiff plastic Yoplait cup carelessly thrown on the street. He stuck his head in and licked up the yummy yogurt, but then he couldn’t get back out! The narrow end of the cup was caught around his neck. He tried to scrape it off on the grass. No one would help him, because he was a skunk! With the plastic cup choking him, he couldn’t eat or drink or defend himself. He almost died. Finally, a woman came along. She picked the little skunk up with a towel, and whirled him around like a lasso, holding tight to the plastic cup, until it came off in her hand and he flew through the air into a bush! He was free! The woman loved animals, but she didn’t love litterers, and she wasn’t scared of them, either. She would go right up to them and tell them littering is wrong. Sometimes it’s a matter of life or death. Everyone has to clean up.”

For kids to like clean-up, it can’t be too overwhelming. The fewer and more functional the materials, the easier to put away. Fairness, regularity, and local focus also keep the clean-up manageable.

It’s a plus if clean-up doesn’t automatically become throw-away. If the brightly-colored plastic tops of milk containers can be stored and later turned into art works; or if brown paper lunch bags with crayoned-on names can be re-used for weeks, then kids learn to be comfortable with change amid consistency.

Grown-ups should not only help the kids with clean-up, but also contribute kindness and flexibility. For instance, they can let a cherished cat warm itself on top of the stove, even though that's untidy; and they can offer kids rewards to make the jobs fun: perhaps a go-cart ride, or a sing-along with a guitar.

Finally, the instructions have to be as easy as a note on the fridge. "Don't be dirty and messy. Everything has a special place where it belongs. When you're finished using it, put it back the way you found it. If it's been worn out, find another use for it. But if it can't be used any more, put it where it can be disposed of properly."

Doesn't clean-up begin to sound like a metaphor for taking care of the planet? And don't we all—young and old alike—respond to the right conditions for chores? What would you call a person who made clean-up seem the best game in town? A person as bright-eyed, tough, and spunky as a terrier, hard-wired to protect the people and the territory she loved? Her name was Nancy Bruno, but what I'd call her is a born environmentalist.

Friend and teacher to many, Nancy died on February 1, 2005. She was 61.