



## Fearing Freedom

by Stephanie Sarantos, *staff member and parent*

So many adults, when hearing about Clearwater for the first time, find the idea of freedom interesting, but doubt whether their own children could wisely use freedom to determine how to spend their time.

"My child would just play all day long," are the spoken words.

"If my child could play all day long, for weeks on end, he (or she) might never learn to write well or make time to study math. My child would reach adulthood lacking several essential skills," are the unspoken fears.

As a Clearwater staff member of six years, I hear these concerns frequently. I confess I entertain my own set of fears. As parents we are destined to fear for our children: Will they survive the falls associated with learning to walk? Will they find happiness? Will they chip another tooth? Will they make it through the many challenges they encounter in their evolving world?

One thing I don't worry about is whether my children, or other Clearwater students, will be able to use freedom wisely. I am reassured each day I spend at Clearwater, because I see how students use their freedom. As I write this article in the office, I am listening to a group of boys in the other room. I can only hear the rhythm and timbre of their voices. These are the sounds of engaged, intelligent, thinking people. The boys range in age from 10 to 17 years. There's an occasional staff voice thrown in. I hear lots of questioning back and forth—the sounds of people solving problems together. These voices could be heard in a workplace filled with creative professionals. These are the voices of young people who are excited about what they are doing, are finding a way to do it together and are solving problems of some kind. Although I still do not know what they are doing or talking about, their voices assure me that they know how to spend their time wisely.

Now enough of the words are carrying through so I know the boys are playing Magic, The Gathering, a card game based on strategy and fantasy. I can identify the voices—some of the boys have been playing Magic intently for the past three months, other boys have not played Magic for over a year. For some reason today they are all compelled to play.

This game could be the centerpiece of a progressive curriculum at a different school, introduced by a teacher to promote reading, vocabulary, algebra and the development of logical thinking skills. The Clearwater students are learning those skills—and other things. One of the players is improving his reading; another is learning about the social order in his world of friends; a pair of students are playing against each other for the first time—getting to know how each other's mind works. All of these boys are engaged in a strategic and challenging task. They will apply the range of skills gained today to other intellectual and social tasks. The game of Magic is a fun way to acquire academic and work-related thinking skills, but that is not why it is played at Clearwater. At Clearwater Magic is played for the sake of playing.

Play is one of the most compelling ways that human beings learn. Most of us, given the freedom to do whatever we want with our time, would choose to play. We would choose the kind of play that sustains, engages and stretches us. Gardening, reading, debating with friends, sewing, sketching—these are the domains of play. Today several students

chose to play Magic. Another time they will choose something else. Their interests and activities include reading novels, discussing politics, programming "mods" on the computer, snowboarding, hockey, writing, math and playing video games.

Through playing, studying and talking, Clearwater students are learning about themselves, gaining skills and becoming more capable individuals. Parents still worry. We fear that some kinds of play are good but others are harmful. For example, reading and sewing are great, but computer and video games are a problem. This is understandable, because we fear those things we do not understand. Most parents lack direct experience with video games and do not grasp why their children are compelled to play. Many parents fear that video games may be addictive, unhealthy or hold some other danger that is not yet known. And that may be true. In reality children will face dangerous situations and influences throughout their lives. We don't know what will happen to our children when they grow up—we don't really know what may happen to our children (or the world they live in) next week, or tomorrow.

My fears for children growing up in our times are what lead me toward Clearwater and not away. As a staff person I see students use freedom wisely. They use freedom to learn about themselves, their friends and the world they live in. They use freedom to learn how to make choices that support their healthy development. I hear students debate with each other about whether it is healthy or productive to play video games. I talk with students about what they want to do in their life after Clearwater—listening to their fears and exploring opportunities. I watch students solve problems and resolve conflicts with their friends. I observe and support them as they master new skills like Magic, reading, biking, sharing, math and communication. I continually renew my trust in their capacity to use freedom wisely as they direct their education and their lives.

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