

## *Remembering Agnes Trepte* *Patricia Rubano*

Agnes Trepte passed from this earth on Saturday, September 9, 2000. She was on the little sofa in her living room, which had become home to her in the last months. Her daughters at one side, her sister on the other, and a few close friends reading and singing accompanied her as she departed. The room was filled with flowers, a mobile of hundreds of many-colored origami cranes that were made by some of her former students hung at the window, and the room was warmed by the soft glow of candles.

As I step outside this scene and picture it from a distance, I see how fitting it is: Agnes in her little house in the woods just past the pond. This cozy little cabin with a warm and gentle light radiating from the windows, a bit secluded but close to the water and the woods. A tiny house, but so full of beautiful and wondrous treasures there was never room to fit them all. This little house had truly become a haven for Agnes in the last year and a half of her life as she underwent treatment for cancer, just as her classroom and her lap (literally and figuratively) had been haven for so many children and parents over the years.

Agnes was 54 years old and had spent the past twenty years caring for and nurturing young children through her own nature, guided by anthroposophy and Waldorf education.

For many, the thought of Agnes evokes pictures out of a fairy tale. As one friend described, there is the image so familiar to anyone who frequented Green Meadow Waldorf School in Spring Valley, NY, where she taught for fourteen years: Agnes, round and rosy, wrapped in scarves and shawls, looking in her long skirts like Mother Holle herself, shepherding her small charges across the bridge to the fairy stream. Or, as one of the camp counselors who worked with her in the garden for years at the Nature Place Summer Camp said, "If ever there was a Mother Earth, it would be Mrs. Trepte." It is not difficult to imagine Agnes, with her auburn hair and Irish eyes, trading secrets with the wee folk. She always felt deeply connected with the earth through gardening, and she loved to explore the world of color through plant dyes.

I grew to understand that Agnes lived in the sense world more fully and deeply than I or anyone else I knew. She was one of those, I think, who retained some of the forces and faculties of early childhood. While most of us involved in Waldorf education study in order to learn how to create the environment that is most nurturing to the young child, Agnes' work was to study in order to understand consciously what she already did so naturally.

I loved to walk into her classroom. I always felt that I could taste the colors. The fragrance of fresh flowers, or lavender-scented salve that she put on each child's hand before eurythmy, or perhaps the smell of drying herbs always filled the air. In Mrs. Trepte's class, baking was an all-morning process. It may have looked a little messy with flour on the floor, maybe even a little chaotic, but she created a solid center that left no doubt that all would be tidied and finished in the end, and on time, even within the mood of timelessness that always surrounded her.

Was she always Mother Earth? Agnes grew up on tobacco farms in Kentucky, feeling the strong rhythm of the farm day, living the cycle of the seasons so evident on the farm. The youngest of four, she spent many happy hours playing alone in the natural world. The love of solitude and of silence never left her. She was comfortable in a crowd and was obviously quite popular as she was Homecoming Queen and captain of the cheer leading squad. (Many former students

remember her voice cheering the basketball teams to victory at Green Meadow.) Agnes was also captain of the debate team, and politics and law were fields she thought to pursue. The only early hint of what was to come was her membership in the Future Teachers of America, though she didn't see herself becoming a teacher.

Agnes was drawn toward teaching after she followed her heart to San Diego, California, where she married and became mother to two daughters. In her search for a nurturing school for her children, she discovered Waldorf education and anthroposophy. Agnes and I met and studied together, and eventually helped to start the San Diego Waldorf School.

One early object lesson is worth telling: There we were, an enthusiastic group trying to get the word out about this wonderful education. We secured a booth at a local Shakespeare festival, and Agnes was bringing all her treasures from home in her VW van to create a display. On the entrance ramp to the highway, the van backfired. Agnes saw flames in the mirror and had to get out to sit on the side of the road and watch silks, strands, shells, crystals, and dolls all went up in smoke! Many would have despaired, but for Agnes it was a moment of insight: Waldorf education is much more than the outer trappings, is far deeper and longer lasting. She eventually made it to the booth and stood for Waldorf education with nothing to show but her inner conviction.

In those early days in San Diego were very careful hire trained teachers. Agnes and I worked as assistants, but over time it became obvious that Agnes was the most authentic Waldorf teacher we could wish for — quietly caring and tending, always making things beautiful, studying seriously, and attending workshops and conferences.

Agnes finally became the kindergarten teacher in San Diego, but in a few years, after becoming a single mother, she decided to move to New York where her girls could both have a full school and a community around them. My path also led to New York and it was here that we matured in our teaching and where I would see Agnes with the children and think, "I want to be like that." I especially admired her lightness and humor. She so easily created pictures for the children: "When will we go in?" "Oh, in about three shakes of a lamb's tail." She could encounter every teacher's nightmare — blanking out on your story — and begin looking in her pockets and up her sleeve to find the story that had taken flight, perhaps because the room was a bit noisy. And of course the children would become silent, wondering what she was up to, till the story reappeared and resumed. She could put forth an irresistible invitation, "Come and join us," with a look in her eyes that said *don't you dare*, yet held a beacon to follow and a twinkle just below the surface.

Children were not the only recipients of "the look." It would appear as we Kindergarten faculty set up for a puppet show and disagreed on which color of silk to use. Upon receiving "the look," we would bow to the Queen of Color. But she could fool you too; just when you thought she was serious and you had done something to offend, the twinkle would surface and laughter would bubble forth.

Through the years, Agnes became increasingly involved in the larger life of the school, sitting on committees on everything from future planning and finance to grounds and athletics. Her influence reached still father when she began to take early childhood students into her classroom to show them the practical life of the kindergarten. Then about four years ago we began leading the "Introduction to the Waldorf Kindergarten" conference. Along with Denise Crane teaching eurythmy, we realized that the three of us had met each other and had our own beginnings in Waldorf education in San Diego and that now we were playing the role of those who had inspired us so long ago! This was a very humbling and rewarding experience.

Agnes was a folk tale character. Her wonderful sense for beauty and order were not to be found in her car, which functioned as her closet on wheels. Her procrastination consistently kept her up the night before a birthday finishing the gift. She could become frustrated with the inner workings (or non-workings) of a Waldorf school — and “the look” didn’t always work. She would have considered herself ordinary, I think. When I asked Agnes what she thought her life had been about, she said she thought she had come to taste life. She added that she was struck by the incredible range of individuals, or “real characters,” she had met. She thought she had not come to do any great task; however, as the community she had touched came forward from far and near to surround and support her in so many ways, I think even she could see it was no small deed she had done.

In recent years, when it was unclear which way her path would lead on this journey, she told me that if she continued to teach, something would have to change. I also know she felt more and more the needs of the children of the wider world. When the direction the road was taking became clear, she prepared calmly and peacefully for the next transition and blessed all who saw her with the light that shone from her eyes and blossomed around her.

Through her passing a great change has taken place. She continues to teach, but the boundaries have disappeared. The little house in the woods just past the pond with the warm glow of candlelight shining from the windows is still there, and I believe that the invitation is open to continue to work together.

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