

# *Celebrating Festivals*

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What festivals do we choose to celebrate with young children in our Waldorf schools, and how do these festivals relate to the surrounding culture? What is our purpose in observing these festivals with young children? Is it possible to retain much-loved traditions, while ensuring that we continue to deepen and re-enliven our festivals? How can we decide whether new approaches or elements are appropriate? What is the role of parents in the school's festival life? These, and many related questions, are very much alive among Waldorf early childhood educators.

Accompanying the current working theme of the Pedagogical Section Council—the role of Christianity in Waldorf education—members of the Pedagogical Section and other early childhood educators gathered before the East Coast Early Childhood Conference (February 2002) to discuss this topic. In the brief time available to us, we focused our discussion by first exchanging thoughts about the content of verses and graces for young children, and how we as teachers can try to build bridges of understanding with parents concerning the ways in which we nurture the divine spark in each child. We decided to focus next year's meeting on the celebration of festivals in our multicultural society. It was very hard to restrain ourselves from launching into this rich and many-faceted topic right away!

As one way of looking forward to the discussion in February, I would like to share some work that we did at Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten and Nursery. For reasons that I will explain, our project was not altogether a “success,” yet I still believe the approach had merit. I offer it in hopes that it might stimulate others to explore ways of renewing and deepening the celebration of festivals.

Acorn Hill has long celebrated with the children the seasonal festivals of Michaelmas/Harvest, Advent/Christmas, Spring (not explicitly Easter), and sometimes Whitsun or St. John's (again, usually not by name). We have also observed these festivals in our faculty, feeling that we cannot rightly bring festivals to the children if we are not celebrating them ourselves. In introducing our school to prospective parents, we say that we celebrate the Christian seasonal festivals, but in a non-dogmatic way that speaks to the universal in the human being. We explain that in observing festivals we hope to nurture the sense of reverence, which can be carried into family traditions and observances, of whatever faith or cultural background these may be.

For a number of years Acorn Hill has had an active Diversity Circle, composed of parents along with two faculty representatives and a Board representative. As a result of numerous questions and discussions, the Committee organized a two-part “Diversity Forum” in the early fall of 2000, facilitated by two professionals in this field. The forum focused on ways of working as a group with potentially tense topics, rather than entering into specific pedagogical issues. Participants found it an intense experience, and most felt it was positive and inspiring.

We (teachers, parents, and Board members) emerged with a new sense of trust in our mutual good will, and an impetus to continue to work together on issues of diversity at Acorn Hill. As a result, the faculty invited all forum participants to join us in our monthly Teacher Development sessions—normally devoted to pedagogical topics—to explore issues on the basis of attitudes and techniques practiced in the forum. As Pedagogical Chair, it was my responsibility to plan and facilitate these sessions, which took place from January through May of that year, preceded by a preliminary planning meeting in November. We agreed to focus on an exploration of festivals, with the understanding that we would be seeking to share ideas and experiences and to understand each other, not to make decisions.

Here I will outline basic aspects of the approach we followed; I will then end with an evaluation of the experience. My hope is that this description may stimulate others to explore ways of working toward a deepened understanding of festivals in our multicultural society.

1. A preliminary letter was sent out to participants in the Diversity Forum, inviting them to attend the Teacher Development sessions, reviewing key aspects of our experiences in the Forum, and suggesting that we agree to base

our work on the “community guidelines” offered there:

- a) Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- b) Be sensitive to others’ needs.
- c) Honor your own and others’ sharing as gifts.
- d) Speak and listen with open heart and mind.
- e) Keep confidentiality: share your own experiences rather than speaking about others.

2. Participants were asked to set aside preconceived ideas about festivals—expectations, opinions, desires, definitions. (I did remind participants, however, that our school information states that we celebrate seasonal festivals, including Advent, in a way that seeks to address the universal in human beings. I asked that we save the “why” of seasonal festivals till later.)

3. I explained that we would try to work with *experiences* rather than discussing theory on the one hand, or actual classroom practices on the other. My idea was that if we looked deeply into, and became more conscious of, our own *personal experiences* of the seasons, we might begin to discern what sorts of experiences were common to all or most of us. I hoped that this might serve to inspire the development of truly *universal* celebrations (as opposed to celebrations belonging to a particular religion or tradition). This was intended to benefit teachers in our work, as much as the parents.

4. Here are some exercises carried out over the five sessions, each one hour and fifteen minutes long.

- a) All were asked to offer three words to describe their experience in a classroom festival (as a parent). Words were written on blackboard (examples: wonder, joy, exclusion, etc.)
- b) All were asked to mention other events they had attended that they felt were festivals, and/or were called festivals. This showed that on some level everyone has an idea of what a festival is.
- c) Going around the circle, each person stated his or her favorite season as an adult. (In this group, most people named spring or summer!)
- d) We counted off into small groups. Each person shared a childhood memory of or association with the season they had picked. Then the group was asked to see if there was a common thread in these memories. Returning to report to the large group, it became clear that the common thread was that all the memories involved sensory experiences and the feelings they aroused (as opposed to ideas).
- e) As an assignment, all wrote down their very earliest—perhaps even just fragmentary—memory of a special time: a religious observance, family celebration, any special occasion. When these were shared, we noticed that some memories were of spontaneous events, some planned. Some included adults, some did not. *All* involved sensory experiences.
- f) Another assignment was to bring a poem or verse that expresses the essence of a particular season. The group listened to each poem and was asked to identify the season. Then we divided into groups of like seasons to look at our poems and find common factors, (e.g. mood, themes, structure), which helped to identify the season. Reports were given to the large group.
- g) Dividing into four groups, each group was assigned a season and was asked to do a group crayoning on large paper to depict some aspect(s) of the season. (Note: Black and brown crayons were available.) The completed crayonings were placed in the center. Someone from each group was asked to state how their group had decided how to depict the season. Then the group as a whole was asked how they could identify which season is represented in each drawing. The following key factors were mentioned: colors chosen; movement, especially of the elements; activity of plants, animals, humans; mood. This led to a comparison of characteristics of the seasons *in our area* (preceded by an explanation that we want the children to live in their experiences of the “here and now,” that learning about other geographical areas is appropriate for older children). Each season was briefly described according to the following categories:

what is happening in nature (example: summer—growth; fall—fruiting/harvest, animals prepare for winter/migrate; winter—sleeping, hibernation, barren; spring—growing, birth, flowering)

what people do

the temperature/weather

the human soul moods

festival/holiday observances

color

h) The group was asked to consider the polarities of in–and out–breathing in regard to the seasons. Then the group created a blackboard drawing/diagram of the seasons, which gave a picture of the characteristics of the seasons and how they relate to each other in terms of polarities. The group concluded that summer and winter are more stable, while fall and spring are more changeable.

This was as far as we got in the time available. The hope had been to begin working with festivals on the basis of these shared experiences and understandings of the seasons. We hoped to talk about the purpose of a festival, what elements are essential to a festival for children and to discuss how we might create new forms based on inner substance rather than relying on tradition, etc.

During the time of this work, I offered an evening talk to participants on “what it means to be a Waldorf early childhood teacher,” with the purpose of trying to help parents understand how we decide what to do in the classroom. This talk focused on our view of the human being, and the young child in particular, and how we see our “mission.” I spoke about becoming a Waldorf teacher: about how we are “trained,” our continuing education, our relation to new ideas. I discussed how we strive to find a middle way between doing what we feel comfortable with (tradition—our own or society’s) and how we innovate (which may involve stretching ourselves, trying something we have not yet thoroughly made our own). There were plenty of questions, including a number relating to racial identity and experience.

***Evaluation:***

On the whole, the teachers who attended (most of our faculty) found the sessions more interesting and helpful than did the five parents. The two Board members (both former Acorn Hill parents) were not able to attend after the first session or two. The parents attended irregularly—problems of illness, childcare, forgetting, and possibly a growing frustration with the process. They found the approach frustrating. They found it moved too slowly; they were more goal-oriented and wanted to get right away to how we might change classroom festivals to be “more inclusive,” or how we might add festivals representative of other religions or cultures. I think they felt forced into a form that didn’t meet their need.

I think the frustration might have been lessened if we could have met more frequently and for a longer time each session. Meeting only once a month for a short session meant that the process was dragged out over a long period, with little perceptible “progress.” The parents did not seem able or willing to “go with” the experience and see where it might lead. And, in fact, it never did lead anywhere in particular, since we ran out of time.

We did not continue the following year because the faculty felt we had devoted enough time to trying to work with parents in this way, and they wished to move on to other topics in our Teacher Development sessions. I hope some seeds of understanding may have been sown for the parents, as well as teachers, in spite of the frustrations.

I remain committed to the idea of seeking an approach to discovering what are universal human experiences of the seasons, to exploring the qualities of, and relationships among, the seasons, and how these experiences are Christian in the deepest, most cosmic sense. I continue to feel that such efforts are essential to our aim in regard to festivals: not to create a variety of festivals representing different traditions, bringing elements of different religions and

worldviews into the early childhood classroom, but rather to offer the simple, archetypal experiences needed for the young child in support of the bodily religion which belongs to this period of life and which is universal.

This was my purpose in choosing the activities for our Teacher Development sessions. I think this approach has real possibilities, but it needs further work in order to be more successful.

A related, different, and very important challenge is to help parents understand how our festivals, and our choice of festivals, are right for

*young children*. Many parents look to the kindergarten/early childhood center for their own spiritual inspiration and sustenance. It can be very difficult for them to separate their own needs from those of the children. We do not want to leave them “empty-handed;” yet our first priority must be the children. This is a real question.