

An Archetypal Festival of Compassion and Brotherhood: Celebrating St. Martin's Day

Joyce Gallardo

We celebrate St. Martin's Day each year on November 11, when the days have grown short and the air is cold and damp. We carry our lanterns into the chill darkness, singing:

*St. Martin, St. Martin,
St. Martin rode through wind and snow.
On his strong horse, his heart aglow,
He rode so boldly through the storm.
His great cloak kept him well and warm.*

*By the roadside, by the roadside,
By the roadside a poor man arose.
Out of the snow in tattered clothes,
"I beg you help me in my plight,
Or else I'll die of cold tonight."*

*St. Martin, St. Martin,
St. Martin stopped his horse and drew
His sword and cut his great cloak through.
One half to the beggar man he gave,
And by this deed his life did save.*

For weeks we have been creating in our morning circle the archetypal pictures of St. Martin, who, as the song tells us, is courageous and compassionate, and of the beggar, who is helpless and in need. In Los Amiguitos Nursery/Kindergarten, the age range of the children is from twenty-two months to seven years. We also have our nine-year-old "graduate" who comes back once a week to bake bread with us. The children have been living in the process of the preparation for the festival and have a deep affinity to it. They all want to wear the red cloak of St. Martin and carry his sword, or to be the beggar shivering in the snow.

One day I invited a three-and-a-half-year-old boy to be the beggar. He drew back and said, "No!" His younger brother, twenty-two months old, who had not joined us in our circle but had been watching from the periphery each morning, piped up, "I be the beggar!" He sat down in the "snow" of a fluffy white sheepskin and became the beggar man in the

snow. The older brother was astounded and watched his younger brother intently as he sat in the "snow." As we sang, St. Martin came riding by, cut his cloak in two with his sword, and gave half to the beggar man. The beggar man went off into the shadows with the cloak wrapped around him and St. Martin rode away on his horse. The next morning the older brother was the first to volunteer to be the beggar in the circle.

When St. Martin's Day arrives, we assemble out of doors at 4:30 PM with parents and friends, our little lanterns glowing brightly in the approaching darkness. We wind our way through paths in the woods surrounding my home, singing our St. Martin and lantern songs. Suddenly, the sound of a horse's hooves are heard and over a hillock comes St. Martin (my husband, David), riding on his strong horse, his great red cloak flowing behind him. He appears as in a dream in the shadowy light.

There is a hush and then one child is heard exclaiming, "Look! It's St. Martin!" Then another, and another, "Yes, it's St. Martin on his great horse!" All eyes look up at the hillock and the beggar (our neighbor, Richard) appears from out of the shadow of a tall pine tree. St. Martin stops his horse, draws his sword, and cuts his great cloak through. He gently places one half of his cloak on the shoulders of the beggar man, who bows to him in gratitude and then disappears, barely visible, into the encroaching darkness. St. Martin gallops off on his horse and they are both gone, leaving us with a dreamlike, archetypal picture of compassion and brotherhood to carry in our hearts into the darkness of the months ahead.

The long line of lighted lanterns weaves its way in song back to the house through woods and garden paths, until we form a circle under the twinkling stars and sing a blessing for the meal that we will share together, provided by parents and friends. We place our lighted lanterns on a stone wall at the side of the house to light the way for any latecomers to the festival. Inside, everyone eats heartily of the delicious, warm food that awaits us. It

is a lovely social time. We revel in our camaraderie and friendship, in the community of children and adults sharing this festival together.

After the meal we go back outdoors. A fire is lit with great ceremony as we all gather around, and each child and adult offers a stick of wood to burn in the fire. From our own little flickering lantern light to the blazing, shared light of the bonfire, we experience the full circle from the solitary individual to the fullness of community.

Joyce Gallardo is the director of Los Amiguitos (Little Friends) Nursery/Kindergarten, a mixed-age Waldorf program in her home in Hillsdale, New York.