

# Introduction

Stephen Spitalny, Editor

I've been thinking a lot about thresholds lately. I am reminded of something Michaela Glockler once said in a lecture, that, "The threshold is not somewhere out there, it is right here," (while gesturing toward her heart). Every day we all experience the thresholds of sleep and waking, of "inside time" and "outside time," of day waking consciousness and meditative consciousness, and many other thresholds.

Family thresholds: This week I became the uncle of twins, and recently Jennie Whitehill, my ninety-seven-year-old grandmother, passed on. Jennie was President and Chair of the Board at various times of an organization called the Child Study Association of America. In looking back, I have to say that she was key in my finding my destiny as an early childhood educator.

And last night I received word that Elvira Rychlak, a longtime kindergarten teacher from Kimberton, crossed over the threshold. Elvira was a wonderful kindergarten teacher and adult educator. I had the good fortune to be connected with her over the years and to be able to co-present courses on Waldorf kindergarten with her. Her thoughtfulness, warmth, and enthusiasm will be greatly missed by our movement!

So, as an early childhood educator, birth and life in the spiritual world are so often a polarity in my thinking. And of late, the threshold back to the spiritual world has become more prominent for me.

The following excerpt is from the Winter 1957/58 issue of *Child Study*, a journal that was published by the Child Study Association of America. It is from an article by Anna M. Wolf, who describes how in our time, death is more and more pushed away from our experience:

[Yet] we may have a vague sense of something lost: a feeling that, in being excluded from knowing death fully and directly, we are also deprived of our full share in life. For death is the very fabric of life—inexorable and as

certain as ever; each one of us must one day meet it and must make peace with it. And is it not true that how well we accomplish this will have much to do with whether our children shrink from this knowledge, as from something unmentionable and frightening, or whether they learn from the beginning, to see death as part of the whole life cycle—natural and, in spite of the pain, bearable? . . . Inevitably this raises the problem of how we ourselves, while living with the bitter reality of grief, may yet find strength to bear loss, to sustain loneliness, to face forward with courage, and finally to regain zest for living.

Over the years, *Mothering* magazine has been a resource and support for those involved with children on many levels. The latest issue (March/April 2004) has quite a long article entitled "The Wisdom of Waldorf; Education for the Future" by Rahima Baldwin-Dancy. Rahima's article is a celebration of seventy-five years of Waldorf education in North America and clearly articulates some essential aspects of the Waldorf approach. The article is filled with many wonderful pictures taken at the Baltimore Waldorf School. Her article ends with a quote from Dr. Gabriele Rico of California State University of San Jose:

Steiner was very ahead of his time. What he recognized about learning in the early 1900s is gradually being substantiated by new discoveries in brain research. . . It [Waldorf education] has been putting into effect what major brain researchers and educators are discovering about the human brain/mind. What Rudolf Steiner envisioned is only beginning to be part of the educational consciousness of the last two decades.

On page 14, we include a Steiner quote and a modern quote on play and human neurological development, such as what Dr. Rico was referring to. Coincidentally, in this issue we also include a

lecture by Peggy O'Mara, the editor and publisher of *Mothering*. She takes a hard-nosed look at some attacks on the young child in our time and their consequences.

It is rewarding to see some fruits of activity initiated by the WECAN Board in these pages. Both the work of the Older Child group and the Parent Child group were birthed and funded by WECAN. It is our hope that their working together, and their communicating to us all of their work, can fructify our own work in various realms and can inspire us all to create new ways of connecting with our colleagues.

This issue of *Gateways* includes a wide variety of articles addressing many themes. It is hoped that you, the reader, will have your needs met by this depth and breadth of thoughts and reports. As always, we welcome your comments, questions and thoughts, and, of course, your articles. For there to be a variety of content, this editor depends on you, the reader, as potential writer.

Finally, some words from a pamphlet entitled *Good Education for Young Children*, published in the 1950s jointly by New York State Association for Childhood Education and New York State Association for Nursery Education from my grandmother's early childhood book collection. Any relationship to ideas articulated in these pages is strictly intentional.

Kindergartens were first conceived as places where children could learn and develop their potentialities, free from exposure to and domination by school curriculums. This concept should be retained because it has an essential value in the growth experience of young children. Kindergartens must continue to give children an education which is devoted to their best four or five-year-old interests—not begin one year earlier and one year younger the restraints and pressures of the grades. Present day knowledge regarding child development leads us away from considering kindergarten as a pre-reading group or a sub-first grade, and to accept it as a year for vigorous mental, physical and social growth without recourse to “lessons.” It is a year when children should have their curiosity encouraged, not stunted. Their

horizons should broaden, not be restricted to what is told them on the printed page. Their courage and initiative should be guided and cultivated, not starved for experience or repressed.

The making of paper figures to paste on the windows, designs repeated and repeated again for use in decorating the room, and foolish little things made to take home are not suitable experience for five-year-olds. It is far better that every picture made be different from every other. . . It is better still if a few can work at the carpentry bench, each child making his self-initiated product, while several other children paint and still others build with blocks or are absorbed with dramatic play with housekeeping materials. Crafts, busywork and kindergarten “skills” are not suited to growth needs of fives. More active, more creative and more social experiences are essential.

Sitting in circles, walking in lines and endless grouping of children does not provide necessary opportunities for healthy growth. Children need to learn ways of getting on together. Rigidity precludes any such valuable natural human social interchange. It puts off till after school the sidewalk and the backyard, all relations of a child with his peers. It puts off social growth until no wise teacher is present to help or guide a child in his social development or help him get on in this world.