



Waldorf 100 International Waldorf Early Childhood Conference

— Nancy Blanning

In mid-April 2019, 1100 Waldorf early childhood educators from more than sixty countries met joyfully at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland for an international educators' gathering. It was a privilege to be a part of the first major event in a year-long series of large, international gatherings and local events celebrating 100 years of Waldorf education in school communities across the globe. Teachers were truly radiant as they encountered colleagues from around the world who work in dramatically different geographies, climates, cultures, religions, and economies. Each attendee could hardly believe the

good fortune of being one of the lucky teachers who got to participate in this gathering and feel this kinship.

The conference was not only a looking-back to acknowledge the accomplishments of 100 years. This anniversary is also seen as a threshold moment leading into the next century for our educational movement. Questions abound. What is essential to Waldorf education that calls to be carried forward? What has become custom and habit that needs re-evaluation and renewal? What are the universal threads that are applicable to every setting, culture, ethnicity, and religion? Where must there be acceptance of different



forms and flexibility to support and honor all of our global Waldorf communities?

At the forefront of all these questions, the major theme of the keynote presentations and discussion groups was building healthy social life within our communities. It is clear that the world has rifts of discord and strife between governments, nations, and racial and ethnic groups. In our schools, we are not immune to disagreements and differing points of view. It is normal and healthy to have affinities for certain people and ideas, but we want to be vigilant that we do not split into factions that cannot tolerate each other's thinking.

To find space within ourselves to tolerate and honor each other's differences takes conscious self-development. Here is where gratitude needs to be mentioned. In *The Child's Changing Consciousness*, lecture six, part of the preparatory reading for this conference, Rudolf Steiner mentions several fundamental virtues that "must be seen against the background of society in general." The first and foremost of these virtues is gratitude.

Feeling thankful to the natural world for its freshness, beauty, and renewing energies is relatively easy. This can be a first step toward building a

"thankfulness muscle" within ourselves to feel gratitude toward other people as well. Everyone is striving to contribute to life in different ways, but it can be challenging to look with enough warmed interest toward others to honor their contributions with our gratitude. Experiencing our gratitude toward the contributions of others is the foundation of a healthy social life in any community. This must occur first before steps toward more subtle virtues can be taken.

This theme was explored by collaborative teams of two speakers with each keynote, one a female Waldorf early childhood educator and the other a male speaker from Waldorf upper school teaching or a related anthroposophic vocation. They all presented different pictures of experiencing gratitude toward and honoring others for their contribution to our work with and on behalf of children.

Parents, the sun and moon of the children's lives, were brought to our attention in every presentation. Life is so busy, and we become so concentrated in our work with the children each day, that we can develop unintentional blinders that interfere with seeing the blessedness which surrounds the children through the care, sacrifice, and loving concern of their parents. Life-style differences encouraged by our fast-paced,

technological age can become points of contention if we are not conscious of the gratitude we owe to one another. Rather than contention, we should strive for conversation and openness to other points of view.

All children—and especially young children—learn through what they see and feel the adults around them do. They learn respect by seeing adults act with sincere respect toward others. They learn kindness by seeing acts of generosity bestowed on others. They learn gratitude by seeing and feeling appreciation bestowed toward what each person is contributing to the whole. Gratitude, as Steiner explains, is the first

step toward developing all the other virtues that build a healthy social life.

These thoughts were the gifts of this remarkable conference. It was expressed again and again—both by teachers for whom this was the first visit to the Goetheanum and by those fortunate enough to have made previous visits—that this conference felt particularly blessed. The sense of warmth, richness, and dedication to working with young children filled and surrounded the global community who had come together to unite “with single purpose” on behalf of the children of the world. ♦