



A scene from the puppet play "Twiggy" (see page 23)

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## From the Editor

— Nancy Blanning

Plans are funny things. Whenever we anticipate something—teaching in some capacity, going on a trip, attending a meeting, and so on—we create a plan based on our intentions and imagine the steps of how things will work out. Meanwhile, the people whom we will meet in the course of this event have their own plans, their own expectations and hopes.

Then we all come together. Often, if we are attentive to the whimsy of life and the intentions of the spiritual world, we then discover that there is THE PLAN whose edge our own thoughts have just glanced upon, that has been ripening and deepening somewhere in the cosmos and now comes to light. When THE PLAN has revealed itself, we always find that it is much better than what could have been brought by a single person.

In a sad, deep heart-and-soul moving, and inspiring way, this issue of *Gateways* has been formed by the life and passing of Joan Almon. This was not the original plan for this issue, but it is certainly the right one now. This issue is dedicated to Joan as one of the first and most dauntless, energetic, courageous, and challenging American initiators of Waldorf early childhood education in North America.

You will read about her professional life and biography from childhood in the next few pages, a story we think you will find tantalizing—even a bit outrageous in some places. This article is followed by a personal remembrance by Laurie Clark, who, as a young Waldorf teacher, first heard Joan speak at a conference decades ago.

Joan was fiercely devoted to protecting young children, to giving them a fair and healthy start into life. She fought to allow them the opportunities to discover and awaken to the world through imaginative, freely developed play and through doing real, practical work. She spoke and wrote about the developmental

dangers to healthy incarnation, to soul development, and to vitality of spirit from the press to impose early academics on younger and younger children. She explained why children should not be enrolled in the grade school until they showed consolidated signs of readiness. In so many ways, she urged us to “let the children be children” for as long as the developmental mandate from the spiritual world has intended.

We did not know that THE PLAN for this issue was to honor Joan’s life and work until the event of her crossing the threshold, just a couple of months before going to press. But when that became clear, many other connections began to show themselves. The wealth of articles submitted for this issue had seemed an odd potpourri of unrelated bits and pieces, challenging to fit together in some cohesive way. But in the light of Joan’s passing, the themes of the articles began to shine through. In one way or another, each piece touches upon aspects of education and human development that were especially dear to Joan in her work on behalf of children and families. As we read, we may feel the urgency of these topics for our times.

This feeling of urgency was not unique to Joan. But her fire and leadership was—and continues to be—unique. In this mood of her calling out, “The time is at hand!”<sup>1</sup> you are invited into the following pages.

First, we take on the topic of writing reports in the early childhood setting. Writing reports is standard practice in some schools, a WECAN survey revealed. In others it is thought to be inappropriate and intentionally avoided. In some areas local regulations require a written report for these young children. Should we? Should we not? And if a report is required, how do we find our way along this path? Ruth Ker has taken on the big task of considering different ways to look at this practice. She suggests that there are ways

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to honor the individuality of children without locking them into a static picture, and that an objective but warmly written report can build positive relationships with parents.

Movement, play, and practical work are the focus of the next three articles. Kathy Rinden became inspired to enrich the opportunities for movement in her classroom, to give support to healthy sensory development. Her journey of creating an inexpensive, highly versatile, compact indoor “gym” displays a resourcefulness that is impressive and exciting.

Next is a description by Bronwen David of how a “jungle gym” is created anew each day for the nursery class out of milk crates and planks. This has helped to awaken the children’s joy in their growing bodies and to build their confidence in the sensory-motor realm.

Barbara Klocek takes on the topic of work in the kindergarten. For children to incarnate well in healthy ways, they want and need to see real, purposeful work done with joy. But Barbara questions whether we may be using “work” as a hidden code word for punishment. Her description of how she cultivated the joy of work with her classes can help us to claim work as a satisfying, social activity that only human beings can do.

Storytelling provides another realm where the children’s imagination can work all the way into the physical world. Christy Field shares how her classes typically “act out” or dramatize a story in simple ways after it has been told numerous times. She tells one example of how the children imaginatively carried the inside classroom experience of “The Snowmaiden” out into the wintry forest of upstate New York.

***For the Classroom*** takes us into a topic of our very current times—gender diversity and inclusivity. The early childhood teachers of the Maine Coast

Waldorf School share with us an adaptation of the story “Twiggy.” They describe how they presented this story as a puppet play to honor a class family with same-sex parents and to step away from stereotyped gender representations—an example of how we each may use stories, with appropriate adaptation, to acknowledge and bless the diversity we are meeting in our classrooms.

We cannot have enough finger plays with engaging and ear-catching language to invite our children’s listening, especially in transition moments. We are delighted to share two original finger plays by Rachel Cruz that are notable for their playfulness and amusing little twists.

***The Signs of the Times*** begins with an apology to Astrid Lackner whose article in the last issue on literacy development in early childhood was misattributed to another author. We are republishing this article with the correct author credited in order to redeem this mistake, and because Astrid’s introduction to this topic is the anticipated focus of a future newsletter. Thank you, Astrid.

Another offering from Kathy Rinden concerns self-care for the teacher. This article would be important for us to read seriously and reflect upon earnestly no matter when it was published. But when read with Joan Almon in mind, it took on more potency. Joan’s motto was “Will Act.” Kathy’s consideration of self-care—which she pondered for two years before this article took form—speaks to that same enthusiastic resolve.

***International News*** takes us to Dornach, Switzerland and the International Early Childhood Conference held at the Goetheanum last spring. For those lucky enough to attend, this was a blessed and privileged time. In an effort to share a flavor of the mood, the interactions, and the inspiring content

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of the conference, four reminiscences are offered. We wish there were space to print many, many more impressions of this unique gathering. As more memories come toward *Gateways*, we will look for a way to share them.

**Book Reviews** features our most recent WECAN publications: *Beginning Well*, a beautiful addition to the birth-to-three resources and *Supporting the Sense of Life*, a compilation of three years of keynote addresses given at the 2014-16 WECAN East Coast February conferences. Also newly available are *Young Children's Drawings*, which offers an anthroposophic physician's insights as to how children's drawings mirror and reveal their development; and a new, revised edition of *Education—Health for Life*, the classic collection of materials shared in the 2006 world-wide Kolisko conferences.

*The Picture Language of Folktales* by Friedel Lenz, recently translated by Clopper Almon, is also reviewed. This is a very important addition to the English-language resources that help Waldorf teachers to deepen their understanding and appreciation of fairy tales.

Reviewing Clopper Almon's translation was planned long before most of us knew of Joan's serious illness, and this book would have found praise here no matter when it was shared. Fairy tales are pictures of human development in body, soul, and spirit, tales of journeying to unknown or forgotten destinations. They are stories of courage and challenge and of ultimately finding one's way to of the royal kingdom, providing pictures of transformation and metamorphosis. Every one of these fairy-tale motifs seems very poignant at this time. So it seems most fitting to end this fall *Gateways* on this note.

We offer thanks for the plans that have drawn us together into this community of Waldorf education, with especial gratitude to Joan Almon for inspiring us, encouraging us, and pushing us to realize her motto—"Will Act!" ♦

~ Nancy Blanning

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**Note:**

- 1 This phrase is prominently spoken in Goethe's fairy tale of "The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily," an important story to Joan Almon; she initiated a large-scale marionette presentation of this tale shown in nine different venues. For more details, see the article about Joan's biography.