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# Like a Butterfly: Acknowledging a Child's Death

— Allison Reznick

Our school community is grieving. A young boy, not even three years old, returned to the angels. “How could this be?” a parent from the kindergarten asks me. It was unexpected and there were no health concerns of which we were aware.

Apple Blossom School is an early childhood Waldorf school, serving babies to six-year-olds and their families. Benjamin\* and his mother attended our parent and child classes for a year. Then, dedication to our school, despite a 23-mile drive, brought Benjamin to my three-and-under Nursery class in the fall.

Many questions from parents rolled into my inbox when we had learned of Benjamin's passing.

“When will we see them again?” a father asked us.

“How will you explain this to the children?” another parent inquired.

During my communications to our community during that first tear-filled weekend, I wanted to be supportive and helpful to the parents as we grieved together. Since Benjamin attended the nursery just two days a week and his classmates are three years old and under, the faculty was clear on its decision not to bring this to the children. The kindergartners did not see him regularly, either, so his continued absence was not directly questioned.

We guided the parents not to burden their children with information, unless they initiated a question. This is always a challenge in our information-driven society. This was not to be insensitive to the loss we were all feeling, but to protect early childhood. To the parents, I wrote, “Respond to your child's questions as they come. Often they are asking a concrete question. Give as brief and clear an answer as possible. Refrain from elaborating. Let any questions unfold from the child; otherwise we may give them more than they can handle at their developmental stage.” If their child were to ask, a simple response such as, “Benjamin has gone to play with the angels,” would be enough for the young child.

Communicating to the parents and staff while experiencing sorrow myself was no easy task. Yet, knowing it was what our parents needed, our small community's love strengthened me. The expansiveness of the weekend was a gift as I gathered my thoughts. Sunday evening brought awareness to the upcoming school week, and once again, I reached out to the

parents. “Tomorrow morning at school, be fully present around the children. Keep your mood light and filled with love as usual around your child at drop off. The teachers will be doing the same.”

How could we honor this young child, even if for some of us our contact with him was limited? Some staff and parents gathered one morning in our community room to light candles and express their responses to this loss. As feelings were shared, an idea arose. Toward the path of healing, a few days later tea lights and a note were placed in parents' mailboxes. Parents were given the suggestion, “On Friday at 9 pm, from the comfort of your home, cultivate quiet within and light a candle for Benjamin, visualizing his soul rising up and holding strength and love in your hearts for his family.”

Rudolf Steiner gave a verse (December 31, 1905) to read in a quiet moment and again before sleep to send love to the departed soul. We shared it with the community:

*May my love be woven as a sacrifice*

*Into the sheaths*

*Which now surround you,*

*Cooling all warmth,*

*Warming all cold,*

*Live, upward carried by love,*

*Endowed with light!*

Dark and bare days support our inner reflection. We can bring forth our soul's light into the life of everyone we engage with. Life gives us many cycles and death is a part of life—like the caterpillar who has to die to become the beautiful butterfly, who flies off even more beautiful than before. ♦

*\*Names have been changed for privacy.*

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