

Developing Inner Eyes to See

— Carol St. John

Do you remember in the very beginning of your early childhood teacher training when you were asked to observe children in a kindergarten classroom and journal about what you noticed? When I was asked to do this, I remember thinking, “What am I looking for? What should I pick up on in children in these early stages of development?” Eighteen years later, as part of a year-long foundation course in Goethean method, *Encountering Nature and the Nature of Things*, I was again asked to record observations. This time it was to observe an object in nature in a very focused way. I wondered what observing children in a classroom and observing objects in nature would have in common.

After almost two decades as a Waldorf kindergarten teacher, I know that the ability to see developmental milestones in a child is an acquired skill. For me it has taken a lot of inner growth, training, and patience. However, even after all this time and study, I realized there is so much more to learn to see and understand about children.

The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe explained, “If we want to attain a living understanding of nature, we must become as living and flexible as nature herself.” I learned more about “the internal ecology of plants and animals and to better understand how structures and functions interrelate in forming creatures as a whole.” I thought about plants’ roots and I investigated the whole organism as part of the larger web of life. I expanded my thoughts about how we are all dynamic and integrated beings.

When I had completed my nature observations, I applied the Goethean observation methods through an independent, observation-based research project with the 3-to-5 year-old children in my aftercare program. I was focused on two phenomena at the same time: children at play and children interacting with nature. This research enabled me to experience the sense perceptible world of nature as one with the children. It had a profound effect upon my teaching. Like other Waldorf educators, I’d learned how to tap into children’s needs and find ways of bringing what they needed in that moment; but this experience was different.

In the fall with my new group of children, I set about establishing the rhythm that would provide ample opportunities for outdoor exploration in the

school’s six-acre wooded site. I included a weekly nature walk and provided each of the ten children with a lined burlap pouch with a strap for collecting mica, feathers, nuts, acorns, and other assorted findings from the forest floor. The only other weekly activity was baking. We mixed our ingredients outdoors at the picnic table, the same table we used for crayoning and sorting our nature collections. Seasonally we planted, weeded, watered, harvested, and then composted in our school’s Biodynamic garden. “Simple,” I thought, “keep it simple.”

As each week passed, the nature collections got more and more interesting. Children would approach me before class began and pull things from their pockets they had picked up that morning. I’d barely



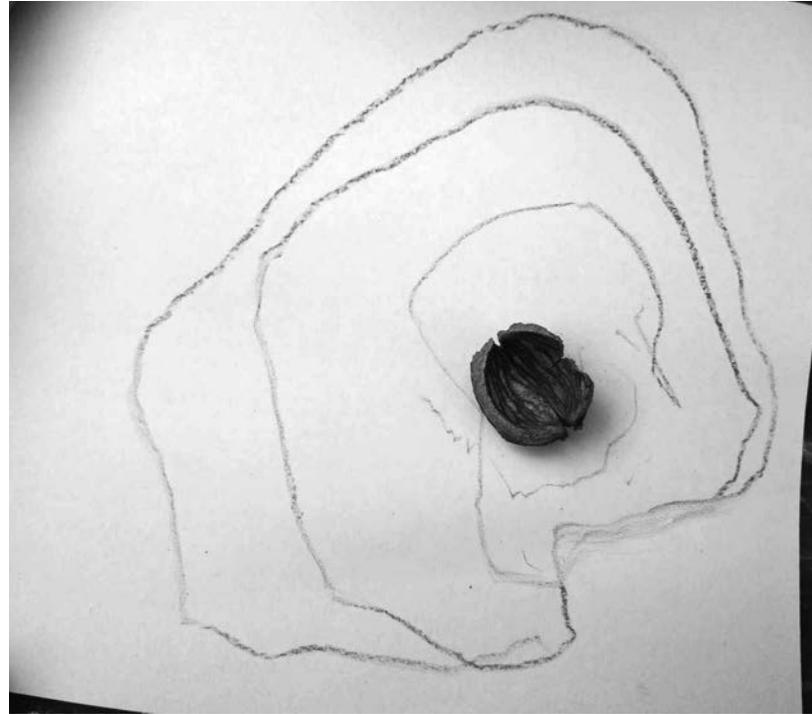
get the picnic table set with water bottles and children would flood me with their latest findings. As the school year progressed I needed to say less and less and soon we prepared for our nature walk without a word. Pouches were put on, and off we went to the grove where wild things live.

One day when we returned from our walk and we were organizing our nature collections onto the picnic table, I asked the children to pick one object and draw it. I didn't expect to recognize what they were drawing because most of these children were three or almost three years old; some were four years old and there was one five-year-old. One little boy, not yet three, took his stick crayon and looked into space as he was turning it round and round inside of half of a black walnut shell. Another girl who was three and a half years old chose an acorn, another child a rough white stone, and one little four-year-old chose a piece of mica.

I was astounded by the true-to-life depictions of their findings! The drawings looked like the item they had selected. They were younger than most of the kindergartners I had in classes years before. I didn't think children under five would be able to draw like this.

As the weeks turned into months, my journal was filling up with observations. The children started noticing all kinds of different things, including milkweed seeds and deer coming to our fence; bird song became more pronounced; and when the sun started to set, the children would sit to watch it. They wanted golden silence during snack (a term which I never used, and normally I would encourage conversation during this time) to hear the birds sing. I began to wonder what was happening. Why were the children so responsive and joining in with not a word from me? I was feeling something different afoot in myself as well.

I transcribed my journaled notes into a PowerPoint presentation along with some pictures of the children's drawings and sent it to my *Encountering Nature* course mentor, Jon McAlice. "Jon," I asked, "What is going on? The children are interacting with nature in new and profound ways. It's like I'm "in it" with them. They are bringing me items every day!" I waited with bated breath for his response. A few weeks later, he wrote back: "Sounds like Resonance Education to me." That was a term I had to read more about. Jon recommended a book, *Resonance*, by a German professor of sociology, Hartmut Rosa. Rosa explains, "The quality of a human life cannot be measured



simply in terms of resources, options, and moments of happiness; instead, we must consider our relationship to, or resonance with, the world."

As a sentient being with the capacity to feel, perceive, and experience subjectively, I was in a state of equanimity while in nature with the children. It was so easy to keep mental calmness, composure, and evenness of temper as I was experiencing a shared resonance with them. I felt as though I had stepped through the wardrobe into Narnia. Except, of course, I hadn't. I was completely grounded and even journaling about our shared experience. It turns out that a shared resonance is another way of portraying a shared "wave length" and is a concept applied to teaching where the teacher has reached a pinnacle of shared phenomena with the students.

This research with children in an outdoor program in the woods was deepening my inner development and understanding of the natural world through the eyes of Goethe.

Many, if not most of us, have experienced moments where we seem to transcend time and enter into a place of knowing with the children in our care. This is the artistry of taking pedagogical principles and lifting them to a higher realm while all the time being grounded in our training as Waldorf early childhood teachers. Over the years I have come to understand this as informed intuition or a systematic way of filling up

my decision-making process with a deep understanding of specific children. John Gouldthorpe of the Nature Institute explains that “informed intuition leads to intimacy and is expressive of a caring presence.”

I experienced at least three levels of observation and resulting perceptions that had an impact on my connection to the children.

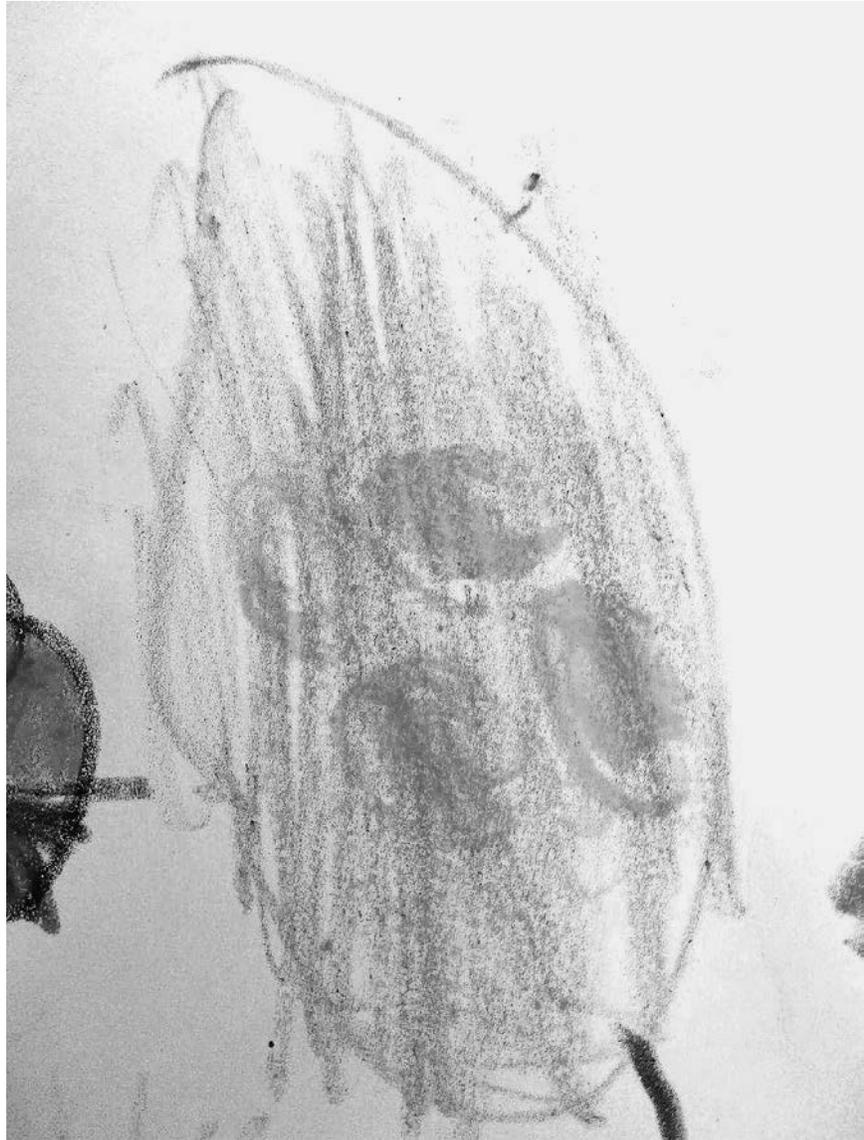
- ◆ **Heightened awareness of physical objects in our surroundings**
- ◆ **Subtle observations of children’s life senses** (i.e. mood, gesture, touch, movement, colors)
- ◆ **A deeper connected presence with the children (the other)**

At this point you may be thinking, “Isn’t this too scientific or clinical for an early childhood teacher’s observation skills?” If you desire to be more consciously perceptive and grounded in your child studies, I suggest it is worth exploring. Developing a practice of Goethean observation provides a foundation for developing eyes that can clearly see, and the ability to articulate, using neutral language, a portrayal of a child’s development.

Developing the Goethean skills of observing phenomena while perceiving the child’s interaction with the world around them was a gift to me as a teacher of young children. The course in Goethean Method allowed me to consciously intertwine the two simultaneously. As a result, I discovered a deeper resonance and was rewarded with a child’s perception of their unvarnished world within. ◆

Resources:

- Hartmut Rosa, translated by James Wagner, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2019)
- *Seeing Nature Whole—A Goethean Approach* <http://natureinstitute.org/nature/> (The Nature Institute, Ghent, New York)



Carol St John, MEd, was born on a dairy farm in Central NY. A graduate of Rudolf Steiner Centre Toronto, she has been a Waldorf early childhood teacher since 2004 at Acorn Hill and Potomac Crescent Waldorf School in the Washington DC area. She is passionate about biodynamic gardening and brings this into her teaching.