
Creating a World Family at Advent Time

— Holly Koteen-Soulé

Editor's Note:

Truer Than True, a new WECAN publication of multicultural stories collected and adapted by Holly Koteen-Soulé, is reviewed in this issue.

The “seed” of that book and expansive way of thinking was first publicly described in the Spring 1997 issue of Gateways in this brief article by Holly. Reconsideration of how we celebrate festivals is now under deep consideration in our schools, so some vocabulary from almost 25 years ago may call for reforming, such as “Winter Festival Time,” for example. The image of “the world family,” however, can serve as a practical and potent inspiration to bring into our classrooms at any time.

It is a particular pleasure to see a connecting thread from an impulse described in a past Gateways carried forward in deepened form to our current important considerations of diversity, equity, inclusivity, and social justice in our classrooms and schools.



For the last two years in our kindergarten, the children and I have created a new way to mark the days between Advent and Christmas, which I would like to share with you, my kindergarten colleagues. It began with a desire to re-enliven the journey for the whole class and to honor the diversity of the backgrounds of the children in our kindergarten. The image that kept recurring to me during the Fall was of a wreath on which there stood a circle of children representing all the different parts of the world.

While I realized that I could make the figures and dress them appropriately, what I really wanted were authentic dolls made out of a variety of materials and which carried something of the soul quality of the country where they were made. So, on the weekends in November I began scouring the ethnic shops and holiday markets in Seattle. (The most difficult

requirement was the size—between two and five inches). My first find was a pair of exquisitely sewn woolen dolls from Bolivia. The girl was carrying a black lamb in her arms and the boy was playing a wooden pipe. After that I looked for pairs of dolls, and they came made of woven straw, carved wood, handmade paper, cotton, and silk, from every continent, including North America.

Every day during Advent, one of the children opened a wooden box in which the new dolls were lying wrapped in a small piece of blue silk. We began with the oldest child. The youngest ones who had watched last year now had their turn to “bring out the dolls.” Even in this second year, the mood was incredibly reverent, more so than my experiences with the tissue paper Advent windows (as beautiful as they are). The new dolls sat next to the candle during morning verse. As we walked, singing, to the table, the opener of the box took the position at the end of the procession, so that he or she had a free hand to carry the dolls. Then they were placed (with a sewing pin or toothpick) on the straw wreath in the middle of the table. The family grew every day until the wreath was full.

This year the first two dolls were handmade paper angels with corn silk hair from India. They “flew” above the wreath on short branches stuck in the straw on either side of the wreath. The Advent candles stood in four star-shaped holders, which were set around the perimeter of the wreath along with a few sprigs of cedar and some tiny alder cones. I watched in particular the responses of the children whose other-than-American cultures or ethnic backgrounds were represented by the dolls. Although they did not say much, I had the impression that they felt met by this experience. Wonder at the “cosmic child” in every child was certainly there for all of us, as well as a picture which I believe our children also need.

Thank you and blessings on your Advent journey, whatever form it takes. ♦

Originally published in *Gateways*, Issue #32, Spring 1997