

Storytelling and Puppetry Festival Arts

~ Janene Ping

*Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner—what is it?
If not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Unique to the curriculum of a Waldorf School, festivals are a kind of homecoming—and an important aspect of cultural life for students, teachers, and parents. Festivals offer us an opportunity to create a “time out of time” where we seek connection with the eternal. In our hearts, we have the opportunity to create

a space for true encounter. Bridging the polarity between what may be uniquely diverse and that which is universally human, festival events are a threshold through which daily work and obligations can be left behind, allowing us to unite in remembrance of a larger reality. Traditions bring us to a place that connect us with our heritage and ancestors. When we create new celebrations, we plant the seeds of potential for humanity’s future.

It is important that, as we breathe through the cycle of the year, we understand that universal laws and spiritual archetypes reveal themselves throughout the etheric patterns and elemental forces in the world around us. All life is dependent on the rhythms and cycles of the cosmos. Our earth expresses

this through seasons of the year, dramatic in some parts of the world and subtle in others. These support, affirm, and transform us through growth and transformation within ourselves. Our physical bodies, and also our souls, living between the ebb and flow of the cycles of the seasons, grow and change. The earliest civilizations established meaningful connection to the life forces of the earth by honoring cosmic events—solstices and equinoxes. Through time, these transformed to holy days and months when people’s religious devotion moved them to commune in celebration within the church, mosque, or temple.

It is interesting that while festivals and holidays can hold moments of joyous celebration and an opportunity to connect with loved ones on a deep level, they are also often fraught with conflict. Many people suffer depression during intense holiday times. Family gatherings can be beautiful but also challenging in deeply complicated ways. The economic disparity of our society creates extremes of abundance or poverty; this intensifies when culture centers on materialistic consumerism. There is a hollowness that remains unsatisfied on an internal level if we miss the spiritual essence that is nourishment for the soul. If we attune to these experiences we can learn important truths about ourselves and our times. Our search for meaning within festival celebration can lead us back to an essence of our authentic origins and the divine within.

On an inner level, festival life is inspired through meditation, spiritual verse, and the arts. This is a needed to balance to the outer business of life. Especially now, as the world is in such conflict, it is important that we engage in this way. In recent pandemic years, our celebrations have held elements of caution; we are not sure how large a gathering is right, inclusive larger community festivals have been curtailed. But at the core of our shared year, it is



essential that we find ways to celebrate festivals. We are united when we strive to overcome challenge; the silver lining has been that our gatherings for community events have been beautifully held outdoors. It is wonderful to experience communion with nature, especially for the young child.

In working with festivals, we can strive to replace business with tenderness. If we feel overwhelmed, it is time to slow down and re-orient our festival experience. By bringing mindful care to the tasks we take up, we connect with gratitude for the essence of our traditions and the joy of creativity. Children should be an integral part in the creation of festivals. For children, time connecting with family and friends—being a part of the stories or puppet plays, being in nature, making, baking, feasting, singing, playing games—can be a time within which the magic of the unexpected, filled with love, can unfold.

The celebration story or puppet play always seems to hold a special joy for the children. I remember Margret Meyerkort, a master early childhood teacher who taught at Wynstones in England, saying once that the puppet stage is like an altar for the young child to witness wisdom tales of what it means to be human. Once, at a festival puppet play’s lifting of silk from the stage, a little boy who was watching shouted, “*This is*



the moment I have been waiting for!” The experience is one of entering a magical realm. The child’s soul is nourished by living pictures of universal truths, revealed in the meaningful context of the fairy tale.

What do we mean by universal truth? It lies within spiritual archetypes and capacities of the soul that are available to every individual. Like the stars in heaven that fill us all with wonder—if we can but find a clear night sky—universal truths bring us into communion. We are united in a common field where we are one. This communion is an essential aspect of community festival life.

An example of a universal truth lies in the stories of courage that mark the Michaelmas festival. As we enter into the preparation of such a festival, we experience how incarnational life forces of the etheric are strengthened when meaningful relationship to self, others, and the world is affirmed, and goodness emanates from our work. One of the ways this manifests is when the puppeteer models service—to the essence of the story that the puppets play out, to the weaving of loving respect that is felt through community relationships built in the offering of a play.

Within Michaelmas tales such as those from WECAN’s *Tell Me a Story* collection, we encounter the

child who takes courage to tame fear—in the form of a dragon. This courage, motivated by love, overcomes adversity and evil. This is a metaphor for how positive forces build immunity. How can we help children to meet their sorrows and fears? The modeling of courage and perseverance contributes to resiliency. Life forces are also strengthened when the wholeness of life journey/developmental process can be experienced through the unfolding story tableau; the integration of wholeness is healing. It is important that resolution to conflict is pictured and that the characters are able to come to rightful rulership of a kingdom where goodness reigns.

Dr. Michaela Glöckler spoke of how the gift of the etheric is eternal—it is reborn anew with each life. Insight into this eternal nature can be gleaned as we enter a timeless dimension where we begin with the question, “Once upon a time—when was it, when was it not?” We then come to the end of the story with such words as “And in the land of the tale, they live on still!” This leaves an open pathway to an intimation of a continuum beyond our material experience of daily life, that extends into the realm of soul and spirit.

It is essential that diversity and differentiation live in the story and puppetry images we share. This

is taken up through representation of our full world humanity. If we can enter into the living pictures of diverse characters who allow us to become “other”, we build capacities of compassion and empathy. Can we sense the transformational quality of these capacities? It is important that a *true* honoring of that which is diverse, in celebration of the people and cultures from which we have chosen stories from, lives in our offering. Unique difference is the signature of individual biography and children intimately connect to this. As pandemic parameters lift, I hope to be able to once again invite authentic relationship to this into our kindergartens. Extended community members, living diverse paths of devotion, can join with us to help bring appropriate stories and festivals to the Kindergarten. Our respect in honoring diversity is key—and the children take this in. Story telling and puppetry can bridge implicit and explicit modalities of learning that build familiarity with difference, so important for all of us.

As we work with cultural tales, ultimately, it is important to explore why we have chosen a certain story to bring to the light of performance. The task of the teacher is to pay attention to the phrasing and social references living within stories. Sometimes there are aspects of a text’s wording which are not appropriate for our 21st century—even though the essence of the story holds truth about our human journey. World wisdom tales live in every culture of the earth. In their former oral tradition, these stories evolved many times in the telling. How can we work with language so that the truth of the story shines through in a way that can be understood in our modern times? Study of a story, including its cultural roots, implicit and explicit messaging, language, and essential archetypes, helps us to develop insight in this process.

There is a great goodness and beauty within our human striving. Within all of the endeavors of preparation for a festival celebration, what is hoped for is to create a moment when a numinous presence is felt, as when we see the stars in the sky, and in wonder are united with them.

The young child, so open in sensory experience, lives closely within the spiritual forces of the earth, and the journey of learning through the year is healthiest when in relation to the context of the natural world surrounding the child. Healthy reverence lies in recognition of the beauty of the earth and an honoring of the wonder of life that unfolds within it.

The universal, basic foundation of festival life lies in renewal of:

- The spiritual essence that lives within us—that which is eternal—reflection—song and the arts
- Our connections to our family, community, humanity—social—communion—nourishment
- The cosmic rhythms of life forces surrounding us—nature in time and place can be experienced in a profound way
- Wisdom teachings inherent in festival origin—stories and puppet plays

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