

An Interview with Helle Heckmann at Nøkken in Copenhagen Roberta Ducharme, Viroqua, Wisconsin

The author is a Waldorf Kindergarten teacher on sabbatical this year from teaching at Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School in Viroqua, Wisconsin. She visited Helle at her Kindergarten in August of 1999.

This past summer I was fortunate to be able to take a class on “Care Giving the Young Child: Birth-Seven Years” with Helle Heckmann, offered by the Waldorf Teacher Development Association, Early Childhood Education Program in Detroit, under the direction of Lora Valsi. Margaret Rosenthaler, an anthroposophical nurse from Ghent, also presented. This was a long-awaited opportunity for me as I had been anxious for more information on Helle’s daycare/kindergarten called Nøkken ever since I heard Helle speak at Pine Hill Waldorf School during the International Waldorf Kindergarten Conference in 1996. A mixed age kindergarten, where the children were outdoors for most of their day, with an age range of 1 1/2 years to nearly 7, was intriguing to me.

In the school, where I have taught kindergarten for the last 11 years, we spend a good portion of our day outside -- on our morning walk, on our hour of outdoor play, and then at the end of the day. (Our Kindergarten is offered as half day or full day, 8:20-12:45 or till 3:20.) We also are able to walk down the block to our “wooded acre,” where we have just what the name describes, an acre of land, right in town, with lots of woods and bushes, an ideal place for young children to play. We have not yet offered a program for very young children, but the interest is there, and this is the direction we need to be facing. Witness the name change in the Kindergarten Association recently, and the beginning of “Lifeways” in East Troy, Wisconsin.

Right beside our school, Shannon Landis created a lovely Waldorf-inspired childcare for young children, called The Violet Garden, which fed our kindergarten programs until we took it under our wing as a mixed age kindergarten. So it felt like there was a connection between Nøkken and Pleasant Ridge ever since I first heard about it. When Helle’s book came out in English an adventure began that continues to this moment as I type this interview from Copenhagen, Denmark, in the dining room of Helle’s house.

How did you first come to this work with the young child?

I started out as a university student in geography and as an emancipated woman. Most of the students in my field were men. Then when I became pregnant and gave birth that changed me completely. Having a child gives you a chance to change your life. Giving birth re-opened my senses. I found that I was hearing, seeing, tasting differently and I felt love streaming from me after having this child. When I went to go back to school, to finish up my Master’s degree, I found out what the childcare situation was like. In Denmark, where nearly everyone works, childcare is very much needed. What I found was that a child can be in as many as 6 or 7 different childcare situations before they go to school. That is 6 or 7 different “I’s” who are deciding how the child should behave. Often there were good caretakers working in bad conditions or people thought, “You can always do this until you get something better.” My own child started out going on Monday, healthy and happy. By Tuesday she was starting to get weak. By Wednesday she was going down. And by Thursday or Friday she was sick. It took the weekend for her to recuperate and then start all over again on Monday. When I discovered the Waldorf Kindergarten, I found a place where there was no stress. My daughter was given plenty of time and was met as an individual. This inspired me to go for the three-year teacher training myself.

What is the philosophy behind Nøkken, the Waldorf Daycare/Kindergarten that you run from your own home?

I believe that the family is the best place in the world for the young child. I want to support the family and the woman's need to go out in the world. Women have so much power and so much ability and we need to use these strengths. I wanted to create a garden where the child still can have those first seven years protected. The children in my kindergarten have the same caregivers for six years. In this day and age where there are many divorces and many re-created families, with new siblings and parents, often the Kindergarten is the place where things remain the same. Siblings have priority for admission so there is also that familiarity for the children. The main idea is that we look at the needs of the child during his/her day, not just the needs of the adults. Children can grow in peace, at their own pace, in the world of nature and the outdoors, in a home environment. The Kindergarten is in the garden and buildings of my own home. There is a heartbeat holding the Kindergarten 24 hours a day.

Nøkken is a daycare/kindergarten but you limit the time the children are with you to six hours per day. Why is that?

I feel that parents need to spend time with their children so that they can understand them. If the child spends 6 hours at kindergarten he/she can spend 6 hours with his/her parents and 12 hours sleeping. This also gives parents time for each other and for themselves. This time limit keeps everyone happy and not stressed out. Parents have had to approach their workplaces and request that they only work six hours a day. It definitely can mean less money to live on and a different life style, but here the priority is, again the child, not the adults, and the parents want to be with their children. We have a long waiting list because parents appreciate that this is a good kindergarten for their children, with the same staff, the same children, clear ideas on limits and well thought out ideals. The teachers who are with the children can end their day still smiling because they are all with the children from the time they come at 8:30 until they leave at 2:30. For the teachers it is important so that they can be whole people, the same at home and at work. The work permeates their whole lives. In Denmark we work all year, with 5 weeks paid vacation. We take this time in the month of July and one week at Christmas; otherwise we are working five days a week all year round.

Why is so much of your day spent outside?

City children do not get to move very much. They are transported everywhere. In Copenhagen 70% of the people ride bikes, and the children are transported behind them. Architects create spaces that don't let children take risks and move their bodies. Children need "danger" in their lives in that they need to have physical challenges. They need to be aware of space and their bodies in space. If they are overprotected when they are young they seek out danger later in life. In Copenhagen it rains 60% of the time. I have built up my Kindergarten outdoors for the needs of the children, to move, to be outside and to experience our country's weather. If a child is dressed properly he/she can be outside playing in all kinds of weather. Sunlight is also important for the Danish people because in the winter months we have so little. Being outside helps the boys in particular because many of the activities that are typically done in a Waldorf kindergarten are more interesting to girls. Boys are not typically as talkative and they need physical challenges, (as do girls also). They need to carry firewood, saw wood, carve and play imaginatively with bows and arrows and swords. They need male role models who are strong and nurturing. Our boys play with swords and push baby carriages. We always try to have male and female teachers. This availability of wide, open spaces outside promotes better social interactions and creates fewer social problems.

What about the work that the adults are doing while the children are playing?

How can children build up their lives? By understanding their surroundings, for instance by seeing where food comes from, how it is processed, served, eaten, cleaned up after and disposed of. This cycle is important in everything. This is the need of young children, to create a view of what is life and how do I

fit in this life? For each activity there is a starting, a process and an end. The apples that grow in the garden are picked and made into applesauce, eaten and any not good enough to cook are returned to the earth through the compost. The wool is sheared from the sheep on our farm outside Copenhagen, and is then cleaned, teased, carded and spun or felted. Each day all of the teachers are working as the children arrive, and they continue their work throughout the day as the children play alongside. Their work actually starts before the children arrive in that they must prepare inwardly for their work and then go through with it outwardly. We may use vacuum cleaners at home but for the child to see the archetypical act of sweeping means that the adult must use a broom, with conscious movement while using it. We have to strengthen ourselves to do simple things. This is often the most difficult, to peel away the complicated.

An incident happened the other day at the park when a little 1 1/2 year old girl left her teacher and group and started walking towards the road. Two older girls soon ran after her to take care she did not go into the road, but because the adults had consciously established the physical boundaries in their minds the girl stopped at the road and turned around and came back. She had never been told “no”, she just knew it. The festivals are also weaving through the day in the activities. Now we are weaving wheat stalks and stringing rose hips, picking plums and apples. We will have the plums and apples in sauce with our porridge.

This brings us to the festivals. How are they celebrated at Nøkken?

For days and weeks before the festival we are preparing for it through the adult activities. The songs we sing as we wait for the younger ones to catch up as we are walking, or the nature decorations and tissue paper windows that we create inside the houses are things that lead up to the actual day of the festival. Just now we are preparing for the Harvest festival at the end of August. The children will bring their special clothes to school that day and fruit and vegetables from the harvest. We will have a puppet play with the harvest vegetables being the characters in the story itself. Parents can come and learn how to weave wheat stalks. At the end of September we celebrate Michaelmas in the park, on the stone steps, which is quite an impressive setting. The older children will get a sword, a blue cape, a crown and a daffodil bulb. It is quite a solemn ceremony. Back at the Kindergarten the adults have created a mountain of chairs, covered by a blue silk cloth, with gorgeous flowers and candles on it. I tell a story in this room about the dragon and courage and then there are snacks in the garden. The parents are allowed to see this. It makes a deep impression on them.

For Martinmas, we paint paper and make lanterns. There is a parent evening before the festival and the parents can make their own lanterns too. For the festival everyone meets and walks down to the park where the lantern lighter meets us with sun, moon and star cookies and then we walk back with our lanterns to the Kindergarten. Our Advent spiral is done outdoors right on our Kindergarten spiral in the garden. The children place candles in the snow. In December it's important not to stress out parents so the adults do the Nativity play for the children and in the Kindergarten we may make stables, bake cookies or make candles. In January the parents are given the fairytale, “Hans and the Twelve Months,” and they are asked to make a crown for their child to be one of the kings representing one of the months. In February the children act out a play for each other for the Winter Fest Carnival. For Easter parents are asked to send blown out eggs for decorating. We use flowers and gauze, and onion peels for dye. We go to the park and find eggs and have egg rolling down the hills. If they break, out comes the sun from the egg! We also dye wool with onion peels and make simple chicks. For Whitsun we all go to the Open Museum where we ride horses, blow bubbles and fly birds made out of pine cones and feathers. And then after summer vacation we come full circle to Harvest once again.

Can you describe the rhythm of your day?

The teachers meet outside before the children arrive. The children come between 8:30 and 9:00. I greet the parents and then the children with a handshake. The other teachers are working also, but as they are doing their work they greet the parents too. By 9:00 I sing to gather the children for circle and then we greet each other and the day with a few short songs and verses. I then sing to gather everyone at the gate and off we go to the park. It is a short walk up the road and through the cemetery, and then we play for an hour and a half. It is a wonderful huge place with lawns and old evergreen trees with many opportunities for creative play. The gardeners are our friends and let us play there. When we walk back the littlest ones go to their little house for lunch and the older ones to the Kindergarten house where they have their meal of hot cooked grains or vegetable soup and tea. After lunch the little ones sit on their potties while the teachers do fingerplays. One by one they are put down for sleep, in wool sleeping bags, outside in prams or sleeping boxes on the open porch. The older ones go for a puppet play in the other room and then back outside to the play yard to play in the sandbox, whittle sticks, or play with the dolls and carriages while the adults do their own work beside them. When the little ones awake everyone has a snack of bread and cheese at the picnic tables. Soon after it is time for everyone to go home. Play is the most important thing. This is how children learn about their world, nurture their imaginations and learn to socialize. Lessons and other activities are for the adult not for the child.

What is your work with the parents?

Parents are not a special race; we are parents too. We are all humans. The four most important skills a human can develop in herself/himself are: Openness, Love, Integrity and Modesty. We are like a lemniscate, with our inner life and our outer life. We go into ourselves and then we go out to meet the world. We can only separate ourselves from parents when we work as professionals, working on our self-education, as teachers/humans. Parents have their self-education in their own way. We interweave when we are working on our common interest--the children. I am not going to tell the parents how to live. At the same time I am working on what I want to give, clarifying what I want to do. I offer what I have thought out freely to the parents so they can, out of freedom, say "yes" or "no" to what I offer. If I can offer this to parents I can also know how to say "yes" or "no" to parents when they cross my border. This is how I work in my life. We have to make our meetings clear in the knowledge of the child.

After parents have inquired about Nøkken I give them a copy of my book* to read. Before I choose a child for the Kindergarten I assess what kind of child the Kindergarten needs. I want to create a picture of society so there needs to be a mix of all ages and peoples. When we say yes to a child and a family the family has to really say yes to us from their hearts. Then any problems with the child or the family will be looked upon as possibilities for development. We take four children from each age group from 1 _ to nearly 7. (The young ones have to be able to walk and not be dependent on breast-feeding. It is all right to still be in diapers.) We rarely take children who have already been in another program. Two weeks before the child starts, one of the other teachers and I make a home visit in the evening and we ask the parents to give us a picture of the child, about the pregnancy and birth and the child's development. We want both parents' viewpoints and support. During the year we send out a monthly newsletter and a list of what events are happening. They are notified three days before each festival. There are parent meetings for parents of each age group, and once a year parent consultations (parent-teacher conferences). I am available for phone conversations in the evenings and on Friday mornings when I do administrative work. And parents are always welcome to visit and spend the day with us if they want. We also have a shop in the basement of my house where we sell woolen underwear, silk caps, and biodynamic vegetables and other foods for families.

What about your work with colleagues?

The work with colleagues is very important. I can renew myself with them working together in a conscious spiritual way. We meet every morning before the children come for a verse and to see what is happening in each group or with individual children. Thursday nights we meet to discuss what is coming up. I also meet with other Kindergarten teachers from my area of the city and with the teacher training institute since I have student teachers working in my Kindergarten, often several at a time.

Is there anything else we should understand about Nøkken and your philosophy?

The work we do is work for the future. We are making future good parents of our children with our attitudes and our gestures, with the mixed age group of young ones and older ones. It is clear to me that this is working when I see an older child making the eurhythmy “B” gesture around a younger child who is crying or when I see a very young child helping another one up or patting him on the head after a fall. We are helping to foster sturdy, healthy, nurturing children who will become this way as adults.

A Word of Thanks from the Author

I would like to thank Helle Heckmann and her family for welcoming me (and my teenage son) to their home, and me to her Kindergarten. It was a wonderful experience that has inspired me to go home and really work on understanding the needs of the children in our community. Helle is not trying to encourage copies of what she has created in Nøkken, but rather trying to inspire others to really think about what their particular situation needs and to understand the needs of young children. I hope this interview helps others along that path.

** Helle's book, Nøkken, is published in English by the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of N.A. and can be ordered via our address and phone number printed on the inside front cover of this newsletter.*