

Celebrating Festivals With Young Children

Notes from a Conference

Compiled by Nancy Foster

More than sixty early childhood teachers gathered in Spring Valley in February, 2004 for a meeting sponsored by the Pedagogical Section and organized by Susan Howard, Chair of WECAN. The purpose of this meeting, which preceded the annual East Coast Waldorf Early Childhood Conference, was to explore the nature of the festivals we celebrate with young children.

The meeting opened with a brief presentation by Nancy Foster, in which she delineated some qualities that she believes should characterize festivals for the young child. Following this talk, the participants took part in conversation groups facilitated by Susan Howard, Andrea Gambardella, Ann Pratt, and Nancy Foster; the session ended with reports from each conversation group.

Offered here is a somewhat informal, aphoristic summary of both the introductory presentation and the conversation reports, with the hope that this will stimulate and encourage teachers to continue renewing and enlivening their own work in this realm and perhaps to contribute other thoughts to share with *Gateways* readers.

The introductory remarks by Nancy are indicated throughout by italics. The rest of the summary is from notes of the conversation reports as they related to the points made in the talk.

1. A true festival arises out of the teacher as a reality.

Werner Glas (co-founder of Sunbridge College and initiator of the first US kindergarten training) said we can't rightly celebrate a festival with children unless we adults are celebrating it. Children are imitative, so we must offer something which is a reality to us; otherwise it is superficial or even false. Are the adults, in their work with the festival, just following tradition, or are they actively seeking to create something "modern" in the best sense—something that is alive and evolving? Teachers should offer to the children only what they themselves can penetrate or are striving to penetrate, not just what some other teacher is doing.

At one school, the full faculty held an in-service discussion about festivals, pondering the question, "What can we do to meet the incarnating child?" It took courage to do this, agreeing to live with the questions and forego immediate answers. They found it to be a very productive process.

At another school, the faculty celebrates the seasonal Christian festivals together, with small groups of the faculty taking turns in planning the festivals. Each festival is preceded, the week before, with faculty study of a festival lecture by Rudolf Steiner, to help deepen the relationship to the festival.

It is essential for the teacher to penetrate with consciousness what she is offering to the children. Traditions may have deep meaning behind them, but they need to be re-examined, not brought out of habit. Traditions can be "made new" through our conscious work—for example, the Advent Garden (given various names by various schools).

The teacher/adults need to be immersed in the experience, not intellectualize. We should make the festivals affirmations, not just adult creations. The teacher's inner work helps reduce questioning from the children.

2. A festival should support the incarnation process, helping the child experience the connection between his earthly and heavenly homes while becoming a citizen of the earth in this time and place.

The child has chosen this time and place to incarnate, according to the pre-birth intentions formed with the help of spiritual beings (the birthday story gives this picture). A festival should enliven this verticality (the connection of heaven and earth) and place it into the horizontal (the social realm in which the child has incarnated), as John Davy has written. The child's world gradually expands from the mother's eyes to the family circle and gradually outward to include the early childhood group. The young child does not yet experience the wider world in a conceptual way. The festival should belong to

the child's "here and now" in its connection with the heavenly realm. (For example, a Michaelmas festival for the younger children might include picking and polishing apples—the here and now—and a recognition that the child's courage to climb high for the apples comes from Michael—the heavenly realm. The star in the apple also represents the heavenly realm.)

Festivals are celebrations of the earth, but they also acknowledge that we are in the service of something higher. They can bring a universal experience of what it means to be human. They can involve meaningful work, done in service of something higher.

Multigenerational observances help the child to feel part of the social surroundings.

Festivals should fit into the climate of a particular place, taking into account the life of nature and human beings in that place.

In Advent, stories and activities can reflect the relationship of the elements to the heavenly world and the birth of the child. One classroom had a nature table with a "Forest Family" with archetypal beings (family members, "professions," etc.) who came to visit in preparation for the birth.

The image of the birth at Christmas is significant to the incarnating child. Some teachers call the child the "Child of Light," to indicate the heavenly connection.

3. A festival should take account of the "bodily religion of the child," and the fact that the child from birth to seven lives in the realm of the Father-God: ex Deo nascimur. (Reference: *Foundation Stone Meditation*)

These thoughts tell us the importance of wholeness for the young child. The healthy child, who lives so strongly in the will, in the limb system, feels at one with the surroundings—supported by the creative ground of the One, the Father-God. Thus a festival should offer an experience with which the child can unite itself fully, rather than a multiplicity of possibilities for experiencing the festival or the season. "Learning about" comes later in the child's development; "experiencing wholeness" belongs to the young child. Remember that devotion and reverence are experienced and expressed very differently in

early childhood and adulthood. Joy and satisfaction give a sense of wholeness, roundness. ("Lachen macht dick!"—Laughing makes one fat! —is an old saying quoted by Bronja Zahlingen.)

In Advent, a story of birth supports these ideas. Bringing in the four kingdoms and the four elements supports the child's feeling of being at one with the world of nature. There is the feeling of the whole cosmos coming together to prepare for and greet the Child, and later, to follow the star.

Too much explanation will interfere with the child's experience. The deepest educational experiences happen when we lead the children, but then stand by and silently witness.

Meaningful physical activity at a festival may be significant, expressing the bodily religion of the child. Real work (such as gardening, tending bees, or making maple syrup) might be considered festivals because they serve others and the work is for the good of the earth. A participatory experience, rather than a show, gets the will involved.

A festival acknowledges awareness of what the children haven't yet forgotten. The festivals may be the culmination of this acknowledgment. Festivals acknowledge the cycle of the year and are thus reassuring.

4. A festival for young children should be simple.

St. Exupery, in Wind, Land, & Stars, wrote: "In anything at all, perfection is finally attained not when there is no longer anything to add, but when there is no longer anything to take away. . ." We want to avoid Waldorf sensory overload!

In preparing the classroom for Advent, one should start simply and build up gradually. Try to determine what is *essential*; this is especially important for the younger children.

Simplicity along with joy should characterize a festival. Especially for Advent and Christmas, when there is so much awareness—music, the media, commercialism, etc.—a sense of quiet simplicity is important, along with awareness of what is behind what we do. Along with the simplicity, the adults need to be inwardly active.

Freya Jaffke spoke about a Michaelmas festival centered around simply polishing an apple, cutting it to reveal the star, wrapping it beautifully for the child

to take home.

“Less is more.” Nursery festivals should not be “watered-down” kindergarten festivals.

Two other general topics entered the conversations: the role of Christianity and meeting the needs of parents. Comments by Nancy from last year’s Pedagogical Section-sponsored meeting are in italics, as above, and notes from this year’s conversations follow.

1. What is the role of Christianity in the festival life of a Waldorf school?

At Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten and Nursery, our stated intention (always spoken at Information Evenings which are part of our admissions process) is to observe the Christian seasonal festivals in a way that speaks to the universal in the human being. We feel that “universal” means—not including everything, but reaching deeply to find the essence of the human experience of the cycle of the year. This striving is a process. As a school, we make certain school-wide agreements, within which individual teachers are free within the classroom. For example, we changed the name of the Advent Garden to Midwinter Garden, but individual teachers may use the word “Advent” in their classes if they feel it is right. In addition, individual teachers may choose to include certain non-Christian festivals if it seems appropriate for their particular group of children and parents. In our festivals we hope to create a mood of reverence, which can then be carried into each family’s particular celebrations, whatever their religion or culture.

Sometimes festival names have Christian connotations even though the actual festival observance may be universal in nature. It is good not to create barriers with names. In some schools, the child is called the “Child of Light.”

The Christ-Being has permeated the earth; thus celebration of the seasons and the world of nature is a recognition of the Christ, whether named or not. In nature, we can find the universal. What is important is that the teacher is working with the Christ-Being inwardly, and that parents know this. It is important to know what lies behind the outward symbols.

We would like to create new traditions, not everything mixed together; also, not Advent disguised underneath the winter festival.

2. What are the needs of parents in regard to festivals, and how can we meet those needs?

Parents need:

**nurturing of the soul life;*

**information in advance about our festivals—what to expect, explanations;*

**to perceive that we are not blindly following traditions, that we are in a process;*

**to be respected, yet met with firmness of integrity.*

Simple pictures can be very meaningful to parents, and we can model for the parents how to create festivals with/for young children. There will always be a creative tension between parent wishes and our practices; this is not something one can ever “get right.” Communication is the key.

Parents are hungry for spiritual observances. It is helpful to give parents in advance a written explanation of the meaning behind a festival observance and how it is geared to the young child. Let them know what picture you are bringing, especially at Advent.

One teacher offered parent evenings when parents could share with each other what they do at home with their families at festival times. She encouraged families to establish their own traditions, and encouraged simplicity to meet children at their level. Another teacher asked parents, “How do you celebrate festivals at

home?" before school started. It is important to respect the background and customs of families. If you honor other cultural celebrations, you see parallels within different religions.

A teacher has a parent evening the week before a festival. She tells the stories and sometimes makes lanterns before the Lantern Walk. So parents arrive at the festival already familiar with what will be happening.

We need to discern the balance between what the children need and the culture of the parents. How can we meet the parents, yet not compromise the children? Having the parents involved in the *doing* builds up community and anticipation and gives parents a way to be involved (an example was creating the Advent spiral.)

Nancy Foster has taught at Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten and Nursery for over thirty years.