

The Healing Power of Play

Joan Almon

When I began teaching young children in 1971, I was untrained and unsure of myself as a teacher, but I was convinced of two things: There was a spark of spirit in every human being and there had to be a way of keeping it alive in children; and there was a way for a classroom full of twenty three- to six-year-olds to play deeply and harmoniously with each other and not sink into chaos.

It took me some years to realize how closely related these two realities are—spirituality and play. It is hard to put into words, but there were many days in my kindergarten when I experienced the deep hum of children at play and think, this is as close to heaven as you are likely to get in this lifetime.

Over the years, I saw many individual and cultural differences in how children play, but I was especially struck by the universal quality of play. Play is one of the core experiences of life, and is intimately connected with children's growth, health and well-being.

I recently heard a well-respected early childhood educator, Gillian MacNamee of the Erickson Institute in Chicago, say that she sees play as one of the four essential indicators of a child's health, along with the ways they eat, sleep and handle toileting. Given this central role of play in children's development, we need to do everything we can to support it and encourage it, especially in these times when it is disappearing from many children's lives.

Another core aspect of early childhood that is closely related to play is the child's ability to imitate adults at work and translate that work into their own drive to play. Nowhere did I see this as vividly as on a visit to a Waldorf school in Tanzania some years ago. There were two kindergartens in the school. One of the teachers was new to Waldorf education. She had only started a month before and was not yet in a training course. She was very gifted in playing with children individually, but she did not know how to help a group of twenty-five children play. As I passed her room, I could hear the sounds of chaos, sounds I recognized from my own early days as a teacher.

On the morning I visited her kindergarten, I told the teacher that I liked to sew while visiting

a classroom and wondered if she had a doll to be sewn or a cloth to be mended. She looked very puzzled, and said: "Oh, I do all of that work at home, in the evening."

"No, no," I blurted out, not very tactfully. "In a Waldorf kindergarten, we do that work in front of the children to inspire their play."

There weren't many supplies in the kindergarten, but the children were making little pom poms with yarn and cardboard. There was a basket with a jumble of short yarn pieces in it. When the children came in, I was sitting at a table, making tiny little yarn balls, singing a song about winding the yarn, and putting each ball down in a circle when it was finished.

The children seemed spell-bound by the gestures, mood and music. The whole group gathered around and watched intently. When the last bit of yarn was rolled up and the circle was complete, the children turned like a flock of birds and flew into every part of the room to play. They made a bus out of chairs, built little shops where they sold all sorts of things, and created homes for their babies. The teacher was astonished, but it was a simple picture of how children are inspired by real work and transform it into creative play through the power of imitation.

Sometimes imitation is weak in a child, and the child has difficulty playing. Then it is good to involve the child with real work—baking, cleaning, woodworking or whatever needs to be done. Usually, after a short time of working, the child wants to play and has ideas for play. In the most extreme situation I faced, I brought a child to my worktable for ten minutes every day for six weeks. By the end of that period, he was playing beautifully.

The relationship between imitation and play puzzled me greatly when I was a new teacher. Rudolf Steiner speaks often of imitation, but I could not grasp it at first. It helped to observe imitation in very young children who are learning to speak. They imitate the language that surrounds them without anyone actually "teaching" them. But where does this capacity come from?

It was a great help to find Rudolf Steiner's

explanation of the origins of imitation in a passage that is now included in WECAN's book, *On the Play of the Child*. Rudolf Steiner gives a picture of how human beings interpenetrate with higher beings when we are in the spiritual world before birth and after death. We learn from them, not by standing apart from them while they lecture us but by entering deeply into their being. We breathe into them and learn directly from them. This gift of entering into the other we bring down to earth with us. We experience it strongly in the first seven years, and we call it imitation. It is much more profound than simply copying or aping another. It goes to the very heart and soul of who we are as human beings, uniquely individual yet capable of being at one with the world around us.

"Children carry their prenatal experiences in the spiritual world into physical existence after birth. In the spiritual world, we human beings live in the beings of the higher hierarchies; everything we do arises out of the nature of the higher hierarchies. There, we are imitative to a much greater extent because we are united with those beings we imitate. Then we are placed into the physical world, but we continue our habit of being at one with our surroundings. The habit of being at one with the beings in our surroundings, or imitating them, continues. We continue to imitate those who are responsible for our upbringing and who are to do and feel only what we should imitate. It is extremely healthy for children to be able to live not so much in their own souls, but in the souls of the people around them..."¹

In another set of lectures, Rudolf Steiner explains that this capacity to enter deeply into the hierarchies remains with us in early childhood and serves as the basis for a deeply held religious life in early childhood. This is not a religion children are "taught," but rather it is a foundation for their religious life on earth. It is then built upon, shaped and formed by their family and religious community. Rudolf Steiner describes this foundation of religious experience in this way:

Only on the basis of this knowledge can we correctly understand what expresses itself in the life and activities of children under seven. They simply continue in their earthly life a tendency of soul that was the most essential aspect of life before birth. In the spiritual realm, one

surrenders completely to the spirit all around, lives outside oneself, all the more individually, yet outside of one's self. One wants to continue this tendency toward devotion in earthly life – wants to continue in the body the activity of pre-earthly life in the spiritual worlds. This is why the whole life of a small child is naturally religious.²

In other places, Rudolf Steiner gives indications that kindergarten teachers are like priests in the kindergarten. But one can easily misunderstand this indication. Normally, the priest is at the altar, looking up to the spiritual world and guiding the congregation toward the divine. Young children, however, have just left the world of the divine and are finding their way to the earth. Our task is to help them find their way while recognizing that the divine world works strongly into the earthly. We stand not at the usual altar but at the worktable baking the bread of life, sewing, gardening and much more.

There is a difference for the children in whether we experience the earth merely in its most external, materialistic way or whether we recognize the hand of the divine in the creation of all that is earthly. It is not necessary to speak about these things with the children, although occasionally something about the angels or God can be said, and these good beings also appear in some of our verses and songs. For the young child, our inner mood and gesture speak much louder than our words. If we hold the divine in our heart, and if our own inner practices are directed toward the spiritual, then the children feel at home on the earth in a way they never can if they are surrounded by a purely materialistic view. Deep in their being they know there is a spiritual world and are seeking an earthly experience that mirrors it. They look to us to understand this reality and they grasp it through imitating our inner mood.

The importance of the inner mood of the teacher was brought home to me often in the kindergarten. There were days during playtime, for instance, when there was a nervous energy in the room. The children were playing, but in a superficial way. I would look around the room wondering who was disturbing their play. Usually, no one was upsetting anyone else, yet there was a

noticeable tension in the air. Finally I learned an important lesson — that when I experienced that nervousness I needed to first look at myself. Often I had become inwardly agitated and had lost my calm focus. When I took a deep breath and became centered again, the whole class settled down into their play.

Side by side with the child's capacity for imitation stands another important capacity: it is a deep wisdom that guides each step of their development. Every healthy infant knows when to turn over, when to sit up and when to walk. How does it know what to do? No one instructs it, nor does the child learn these things through imitation. Rather, there is a deep wisdom in each child that guides it along its path of physical growth and development. This same wisdom is at work when children play; it helps them choose the play scenarios they need for their next steps of development, including ones they need for healing. Children often use make-believe play to resolve problems that are troubling them. They may not be able to express the problem in rational language, but they can express it in play.

There was a little boy who came into my mixed-age kindergarten when he was about four years old, and the first thing I noticed was that he had an unusual voice. His use of language was well developed, but his voice was that of a very young child. It didn't fit his age of development. I watched his play, and everyday he played in the same way. He took seven or eight wooden stumps and built a small circular house. Then he'd go into the house, and cover it with a cloth roof and spend the whole play time in it. The house had no doors and no windows. I spoke with his mother to better understand what was happening in his life. She was very concerned, and said he had been fine up until age three. Then a baby sister was born, but at first he accepted her well. When the baby was about six months old, however, something changed in the little boy. The baby was at a very cute stage and everyone responded strongly to her and not so strongly to the older child. Then he began to regress. He developed baby speech and insisted on drinking from a baby bottle again.

One day when I looked into his play house. I saw that he was curled up in a tight little circle and realized he had made a womb for himself. He had

gone back as far as he could, as if he was still inside his mother. I was concerned, but at the same time had a sense that he knew what he needed and that our task was to protect him so he could have this experience. My assistant and I made sure no one disturbed him in his play. For about two months he played in the same way each day. The rest of the morning he participated in our kindergarten activities, and seemed quite fine, although the baby language continued.

Then, one day, he left a little opening in his house, not a very big one, but it proved important. A couple of days later, he made a bigger opening, and then he went out looking for a friend. He chose a lovely boy named Bill and brought him into his house with him. There they played for a few days, but the house was rather cramped. Then it began to grow with more stumps, cloths and other building materials. Over time it grew big enough for other children to come inside and play. Gradually, the little boy's voice came back to normal. He had worked something through with that remarkable wisdom children have that guides their play.

Sometimes, however, children get caught in patterns that are not so healthy and one sees this in their play as well. They may start out in a healthy direction, but then get stuck in certain patterns. This happened to two little boys, Brendan and James. They were good friends and had played together for several years. Now they were five and you could see their intellect waking up. They became very interested in arithmetic, for instance, and would throw arithmetic problems at each other over the snack table.

They entered a very intensive phase of play with each other. Each day they took a number of playstands and built a house for themselves. They would not let any other children in, and they used many ropes to weave a kind of spider web over their heads, back and forth from one playstand to the next. At first I marveled at their intensity, but after a few days I became uncomfortable. It seemed they were retreating into an ivory tower and cutting themselves off from others.

After four or five days, I made the difficult decision that I would put the ropes away. When they entered the room and looked for the ropes they came to me and asked where they were. I simply said the ropes were resting that day. I expected a

storm of protest and even tears, but instead they seemed relieved and did not argue with me. They continued to play with the play stands but in a much less intense way. They gradually let other children enter into their house. Their play became quite social again.

A few days later they again asked for the ropes. I wasn't sure what to do. I could see that something had changed, and they were in a new stage, but I was concerned that they might revert back to their old play. Yet I trusted their process of growth and decided to give them the ropes. Now a whole new play developed. Playing with other children, they took the ropes and used them as telephone wires, connecting all the play houses in the kindergarten, connecting all the children in a huge labyrinth of ropes. The ropes were still a picture of their mental activity, but now with a strong social impulse.

It is not always easy to discern what is healthy and what is not in children's play, but as Waldorf teachers we can cultivate discernment through our inner work, our schooling path as adults. There are many wonderful exercises that Rudolf Steiner has given us that help us develop our inner capacities. One that I especially love is the exercise of observing that which is blossoming and growing in the plant world and that which is fading and decaying. You can do this observation out in nature or with flowers in your room. You observe the tight form of the bud, so closed yet full of potential life. Then gradually it opens, and opens wider and wider. Then the petals begin to thin, to turn brown, perhaps, to curl back and fall off the flower. Over and over you do these observations and gradually you sense in a child: "This child is in a budding, opening process, or this child is drooping and not thriving. Or perhaps this child is fading, but it feels appropriate, as if it is shedding an old skin and making way for a new one." There are no recipes for these judgments, only an inner awareness that comes in part through experience but is heightened through inner exercise and study.

When one sees how powerful play is for children's normal development and how they use it to work through difficulties, one can only be grateful for this enormous gift that every child possesses. At the same time, one needs to be very concerned that so many children are not playing anymore.

There is not much research about the decline of play, although Sandra Hofferth at the University of Maryland is compiling some data at this time, but there are many anecdotal reports. A professor of early childhood education in Boston told me of a workshop she did at a NAEYC conference. It was a year after 9/11 and she was asking the teachers if they saw an increase in violent play in their kindergartens. There was an uncomfortable buzzing in the room as they began to speak with each other. She asked what was wrong, and one teacher spoke up and said: "The problem is not that we see more violent play, the problem is that we no longer see children playing at all." She asked if others had a similar experience and about 90% of the two hundred teachers put up their hands.

In the Alliance for Childhood, we followed up on this story with a small study in which experienced public school kindergarten teachers in Atlanta were asked about play in their kindergartens. They explained how play had disappeared over a ten year period – first the play centers became learning centers, but the children could still explore freely in them and play. Then each learning center had goals and objectives, and the children had to focus and work on the learning goals. Child-initiated play had disappeared, but the teachers said something else that was equally disturbing. Several remarked that if they gave their children time to play, the children did not know what to do. "They have no ideas of their own."

Having worked with five-year-olds for years, I found this astonishing. Fives are usually brimming over with ideas. Their mothers would tell me how the children woke up in the morning announcing what they would play that day in the kindergarten. How is it possible that they have no ideas of their own?

There are many factors that contribute to such a change: the huge amounts of screen time children have today; the over-abundance of organized after-school activities that rob them of free time to play; the fact that most early childhood programs are increasingly academic and take children away from the experience of play. It is also the case that many adults today did not play freely when they were young and do not appreciate play; they are even fearful of it.

Waldorf early childhood educators have rich

experience with children's play and are in a unique experience to share their insights—in workshops and courses, in the classroom with visitors observing, in play days organized for community children, in articles for local papers and magazines.

It is vital that play remain a central part of childhood. It contributes to all aspects of children's development—physical, social, emotional and cognitive. Also, there are physical and mental illnesses that result when play disappears, and they can be serious in nature. For the sake of the children today, their future and that of our society we need to do all we can to protect play and restore it.

Endnotes:

1 From Education as a Force for Social Change, August 9, 1919, pg. 11. Quoted in On the Play of the Child, WECAN (Spring Valley, 2004) pg 10.

2 From Roots of Education, April 16, 1924, pg. 60. Quoted in On the Play of the Child, WECAN (Spring Valley, 2004) pg 11.

Joan Almon is a co-founder and the U.S. Coordinator of the Alliance for Childhood. She is the Co-General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in America. Joan taught kindergarten for many years at Acorn Hill in Maryland. She was the co-founder and chairperson

of WECAN from 1983-2001, and is the previous editor of this newsletter.