

The Importance of Singing

• Karen Lonsky

I have often found myself involved in a classroom activity wishing I knew a song to sing while grinding grain, or sewing, for example, that would gather the children to the task at hand. I would often improvise a simple song, but I wished for a resource where this type of songs could be gathered. I felt there must be other teachers who had the same thought, so I wrote *A Day Full Of Song* as my final project while in training at Sunbridge College three years ago. It is a book of songs in the mood of the fifth pertaining to work in the kindergarten and at home. There are songs for shoveling, raking, hammering, grinding, baking, washing, folding, and so on.

In earlier times, people sang to accompany their work much more than people do today. Not only can it help to pass the time while one works at the multitude of daily tasks which could, if one let them, become tedious and dull, but I believe there are also other benefits to singing while we work. It can definitely help one to bring more joy to any activity, and it may even facilitate the actual physical movements of the body. Moving in a rhythm while working is more efficient, and you may even get more done!

For young children in today's classroom who may not see real work of this sort being done at home, song is a way to gather them into the activity and is a bridge to the movement that is required. For example, during free play one day, several children began building a house with large blocks. After a short time the house was knocked down and the play began to deteriorate. One child returned to the pile with a stick and began to hammer one block to the next. I began singing a song while sitting in my rocking chair:

*The carpenter hammers nails all day long
to make a house that is sturdy and strong....*

The other children were again drawn to the play

and began to help the carpenter. When I stopped singing, one little girl said, "Keep singing. We're still working!"

In my parent/child classes I find that having work songs can gently bring the parents back to quiet observation when they start chitchatting a bit too much while we are baking or sewing. It has become clear to me that singing does not only focus one's attention on the task at hand, but it can also create form and movement, both within the body and within the physical space of the classroom.

When I began thinking this way, my focus widened and I became more interested in sound itself and how it affects the body and the physical experience of the room itself. How can I use sound to create a healthy space for the children? Could sound be just as harmful as beneficial?

I began to think back to when I first began to ponder these questions. I remembered walking down a residential street in New Jersey as a young mother. I was 22 years old, walking with my then three-year-old daughter. We were enjoying a sunny summer day when all of a sudden there was an angry exclamation from a house across the street. I felt as if I had been hit in the chest by an invisible, dark fist. In essence, I think I was. The form created by that sound shot out with such speed and strength, I felt it as a solid blow. It was a horrible feeling, one I have never forgotten. I actually felt a dark presence in the sound and was so affected by it that I still recall it clearly 26 years later. The other thing that shocked me about that sound was that I believe it was made by a child. This experience had a great impact on me. It was physical evidence for me that sound has form. This all began years before I was to find Waldorf Education and other people who were interested in these sorts of things.

More recently, I was waiting in line to be let into the room where a puppet show would be

performed at a Waldorf school. The hall was full of people and quite noisy. I was facing forward, waiting for the door to open, and several times I heard a child behind me screaming very loudly. I thought at first that the child was merely misbehaving and thought to myself, "Why aren't parents keeping her in line?" After one more yell, I turned around to see a small child of about five standing with her hands over her ears, with a distressed look on her face. Her mother finally stopped chatting and looked down at the child to ask her what was wrong. The little girl said, "The noise!" She was being physically bombarded by the noise of many people chatting in the hallway, and it was painful. I felt horrible that I hadn't recognized her pain earlier, for I knew what it felt like.

It is these kinds of experiences that keep pointing out to me a path of exploration. I believe sound has form and that one can work with these forms to balance and heal the environment, the body, and the soul. Many of us have children in our classrooms today who are in need of healing sound and who need protection from

harmful sound. I feel it is our task as Waldorf early childhood teachers to strive to bring healthy sound into our kindergartens. This is not to say that we should fill our classrooms with music all day long, but rather that we should aim to bring quality sound only into our environment.

Were we to see with our physical eyes the forms created by music in the mood of the fifth, I think we would see rounded, flowering forms with distinct and harmonious patterns. We are creating three-dimensional architectural forms around us, and we can become aware of these forms with our senses as we begin to work more closely with them. This is why it is so important that we sing the tones purely and on pitch and work out of the mood of the fifth in our classrooms.

We are building a true sound environment for the children to live and play in—we should pay attention to it! Conversely, by singing out of tune or changing the key during a song we are, in fact, creating weak and inconsistent forms around the children and within the room. In the same way that it is important to surround the children with an ordered and beautiful environment, it is just as

Each Little Grain
Karen Lonsky

Each lit-tle grain we grind to-day is full of sun and
wind and rain, So when we grind our flour fine and
with it make our bread, we fill our-selves with
light and rain from our toes up to our head.

important to surround them with an ordered and beautiful sound environment. Rudolf Steiner said, “The right introduction into the musical element is fundamental to a human being’s overcoming all hindrances that impede a sound and courage-filled development of the will in later life.” This is why it is so important for teachers to work on our singing.

Not all teachers are natural singers, but it is our responsibility as Waldorf educators to work with the intention of singing as clearly and as in tune as possible. This is a big task for some, and I applaud the efforts of those who recognize that singing may be a shortcoming of theirs and who work on improving their abilities. It can be done. In my training there were several teachers for whom singing was a challenge and who took it upon themselves to work on their singing outside of school with the help of a voice teacher, and their improvements were amazing. I believe that everyone can sing and that singing begins with listening. Training our ear to hear the tones correctly is the beginning of being able to reproduce them. Just as we incorporate the gentle,

quiet tones of the lyre to help the children learn to listen and hear pure tones, so too should we do the same: to learn to listen with that same ear, which transforms the tone in the air into our inner being.

We can begin to work with sound in our own classrooms with the intention of creating a space that is wholesome and health giving. It is like giving the children a bath, bathing them in the warmth and softness of pure tones everyday while they are at school. Giving them the gift of a human voice singing music in pure and gentle tones can have a healing effect on the children, and in turn this affects the whole world.

Karen Lonsky has been working in the Waldorf kindergarten for almost 23 years. She has a 29-year-old daughter and is expecting her first grandchild in February. She and her husband Joe are also professional musicians who have a nine-piece rhythm-and-blues band. Her book *A Day Full of Song: Work Songs from a Waldorf Kindergarten*, will be available from WECAN in November, 2009.