

# *The Seasonal Festivals in Early Childhood*

## *Seeking the Universally Human*

• Nancy Foster

One of the wonderful, and wonderfully challenging, characteristics of Waldorf early childhood education is that there is no curriculum. Unlike the education for older children, there is no specific outline of subjects offered by Rudolf Steiner for these early years. Rather, it is sometimes said that “the curriculum is the teacher.” To that I might add two other elements, forming a threefold curriculum: the teacher or caregiver, the developing child, and the social and cultural community, including the parents, surrounding the school or program.

The teacher or caregiver, striving inwardly and outwardly to be worthy of imitation, creates an environment in which each child may feel recognized and held in a mood of dream-consciousness. The child, developing according to lawful, archetypal stages, yet a unique individuality, leads the deeply-observant teacher or caregiver to provide nourishing surroundings and activities. And the school community, offering its particular mix of culture, race, religion, ideals, and questions, all within a specific geographic location, provides a social context within which the teacher and children are

active together.

In the earlier years of Waldorf early childhood education in North America we looked to our European mentors and colleagues for guidance and inspiration out of their deeply-grounded experience. Many of us took up their offerings with gratitude and great joy. For me, as a new teacher, the whole concept of “festivals” was new, and I was awed by the richness of what I assumed were “Waldorf traditions” for celebrating these special times of the year. Especially abundant were the possibilities for observing Advent and Christmas.

Only later did we come to realize that many of these beautiful festival observances did not originate in Waldorf education but were European cultural and religious traditions. The European Waldorf schools were embedded in what was then a relatively homogeneous society, and it was natural that the traditions of that time and place found their way into the schools, where the teachers experienced them deeply, enriched them through their work with Rudolf Steiner’s insights, and brought them to the children in a living way.

Today in North America we live in a diverse society, in widely disparate geographical areas with correspondingly distinct climates, each school surrounded by its own mixture of natural and cultural conditions.

The inner and outer work of teachers and caregivers continues to be guided by our commitment to anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy; the growth and development of the children in our care still follow the archetypal laws revealed to us by Rudolf Steiner's research; but the realities of our school communities present us with a context that challenges and inspires us to re-examine some of our cherished festival traditions in order to welcome and include fully every child and family.

For many Waldorf early childhood teachers and caregivers, this is a matter for "research," a challenge to look ever more deeply into our own festival life as adults and how we bring this into our work with the children and families of our schools. We seek a growing understanding not only of the meaning and significance of the cardinal points of the year and their seasonal festivals— Michaelmas, Advent/Christmas, Easter/Spring, and Whitsun/St. John's/Summer—but also of the nature and task of early childhood.

Our question becomes: How can we penetrate to an experience of these seasonal festivals that will be meaningful and nourishing for families of every background, and how can we bring this experience into the life of the young child in a developmentally appropriate way? This is a path of inner and outer work; each teacher or caregiver and each school traveling the path will find helpful signposts, steep hills and deep valleys, accidental detours, and all the joys and challenges of any journey of importance.

Above all, we may strive to bear in mind the incarnating child in our care. How can we support and strengthen the child's pre-birth intention to be born in this particular body, at this particular time, in this particular place? How can we help the child to find firm ground from which to embark on his or her life's journey? In our early childhood work, we seek to bring archetypal life experiences to the children, and we might consider festivals in this light, choosing to bring each festival in its most archetypal form of uniting the human being with the earthly and the heavenly worlds—bringing a sense of the wholeness of humanity rather than a multiplicity of representations. We wish the young child to

*experience* rather than to *learn about*; that will come in later years, in the rich curriculum of the Waldorf lower school and high school.

Our new WECAN publication will include a collection of articles as a sampling of various teachers' journey on the "festival path." Within the variety, we hope readers will see evidence of the striving to work with the threefold curriculum mentioned above: the teacher or caregiver, the developing child, and the school community.

The book will begin with a selection of articles on festivals in general, to lay a basis for the sections on the seasonal festivals themselves. We hope it will offer encouragement and renewed inspiration for every teacher's and caregiver's festival work.

*This article was adapted from editor Nancy Foster's introduction to the forthcoming WECAN book, The Seasonal Festivals in Early Childhood. The following story by Joan Almon will also be included in the book, along with contributions from Freya Jaffke, Marjorie Thatcher, Ruth Ker, Helle Heckmann, Susan Silverio, Christof-Andreas Lindenberg, Holly Koteen-Soulé, Stephen Spitalny, and more. Publication is scheduled for September, 2010.*

