

Celebrating Festivals with Children

by Freya Jaffke (Floris Books, 2011)

In the foreword to this book Freya Jaffke writes of our attitudes to festivals: “Originally established in contexts of ritual worship, where they were considered to be profoundly significant, they have increasingly become mere tradition and routine.” I would go further than this and say that they have become, in many situations, little more than opportunities for making money and encouraging pleasure-seeking as a relief from the humdrum every-day world. But here, Freya Jaffke presents a lively picture of how the Christian cycle of festivals in the northern hemisphere can be reinvigorated and brought to consciousness in a rich and meaningful way. In four short chapters, at the start of each seasonal section, entitled “creating the mood,” she brings out in a marvelous way the essence, distilled from her anthroposophical knowledge, of the time of year and the festivals celebrated within it. An example from one paragraph reads,

The Christmas festival represents the fulfilment of a process that unfolds very quietly through many months. From the full light and warmth of high summer, the soul withdraws increasingly into itself as the light gradually diminishes. The moment of equilibrium between light and dark in autumn is like a threshold over which we pass; and at the darkest time of the year an inner light can be kindled.

Already, I find there is a great depth of meaning that can be drawn out of this passage, or even out of just the first sentence.

In these “creating the mood” chapters, there is material enough to encourage thoughtful study for those interested in the cycle of the year, but Freya Jaffke’s gift is as a kindergarten teacher with a special knowledge of child development focusing on the first seven years. This is an immensely practical book that shows us what we might make of these worn-out festivals when celebrating them with young children. Her genius is in bringing together clear pictures of the inner work of the adult with the practical details of life with young children. This is not another book about seasonal crafts and traditions that might be fun to do, but more about—for example—how cleaning and tidying create the Advent mood, how children can enjoy and find deeply meaningful the simplest of activities, such as polishing apples or planting a few seeds, and what you are really saying

to a child if you use sticky tape to wrap parcels.

There are some wonderful poems and verses for adults to contemplate, but I would like to have seen some colored photos. The photos in previous books from this author published by Floris have been an important part of the effectiveness of those books and festival celebrations certainly would have lent themselves to lovely photos.

An early short chapter on the nature table, that simple way of bringing a little of the outdoors in with a seasonal display in the house, shows how to bring the seasons and the festivals together in a home or a kindergarten, and immediately brings the opportunity to emphasize how imitation is the key to young children’s learning. Caring for the nature table together is a significant activity for adults and children. There is plenty in this book for parents about celebrating festivals at home, as well as the general comments on just what is appropriate for children under seven that appear throughout the book. We are reminded that there is so much that can better be left until the children are older, both in the experiences that we offer and in the way we communicate with them.

Time and again Freya Jaffke reminds us that it is our actions that speak to the children and that our outer actions are imbued by our inner work. We are “providing an important foundation for their mature relationship with these festivals, when they can consider their underlying meaning” (p. 89). Writing of the Easter festival she gives us the following:

The mighty transformational event that occurred, uniquely, 2,000 years ago at Golgotha, on behalf of humanity, is not easily assessable to us today. We have to make conscious efforts if we are to absorb the mystery of the resurrected God. . . . We can try to take these great events into our soul and deepen them year on year, which will strengthen the relationship to our work with children during Easter and also for all other Christian festivals. For young children who connect with everything through their senses, it’s important that we succeed in imbuing our actions and gestures with what lives in our thoughts and feelings, leading children to an experience, rather than just an explanation, of natural processes. This creates a sound foundation which can later help them to consciously grasp the greatest mysteries and interconnections.

She goes on to give a full description of planting seeds

with young children and how children at different stages of development will respond to the activity. It is the simple symbol, the seed, the decorated egg or the Whitsun dove, that show how nature (the season) and culture (the festival) are brought together through our activity. It is the way in which the adult treats such symbols that really speaks to the child and the activity usually needs few words to accompany it.

I found it enlightening to read her descriptions, in connection with Advent secrets, of the child's journey in developing consciousness from wondering to guessing. This is a very helpful section reflecting her knowledge and understanding of the changing needs of the young child. At the end of the book there is a lovely section on birthdays, including the "heavenly birthday" when we leave this earth and are born again for our life between death and re-birth. Parents and teachers will find her simple explanations of the child's developing understanding of death very helpful. She points out how certainty of the pre-birth picture, which we can build on at every birthday celebration, will lead to a secure certainty, in the child's eyes, of the after-death picture, justifying loss and transforming mourning. And, of course, she reminds us how simple a meaningful birthday celebration for a young child can be. She writes about the support that children find when we offer them "true images" and when these images are met with again each year:

In a quite natural way we can help young children who have recently left the heavenly realms and are awakening more each day within the sensory world, to preserve their connection with the spiritual world. We can tell them about their origins and journey to the earth, thus strengthening what already lives in them. When we clothe these stories in true images, they can echo children's pre-birth experiences, and give them a sense of security here on earth.

This is an extremely useful handbook for kindergarten teachers, giving full descriptions and explanations of all the festivals that she celebrated with her kindergarten children and their parents. I only wish that I had read many things here, such as what she has to say about when to add the Child to the crib scene at Christmas, while I was still working in a kindergarten. In her long experience of working with young children, she has worked out in detail what makes for a successful celebration of a kindergarten festival and, although from time to time she does say that there are different ways of doing things that may suit different circumstances (particularly in the case of the still-

evolving festival of Michaelmas) she is not afraid to tell us exactly what to do. This approach has the blessing of clarity but also the danger that some parents and teachers might find it too dogmatic or, alternatively, might just do it and stop thinking for themselves about how to develop a festival.

This is a wonderful book in the sphere that it addresses. Apart from the sections on Halloween and Thanksgiving (introduced for an American audience, I imagine) all the festivals are part of the Christian cycle and in the seasonal context of central Europe. Indeed, they are often based on the central European traditions, and readers in Britain, for example, may not find a connection to the ways of celebrating "St Nicholas" or "Carnival" in the ways described in the book; and some British readers may miss any reference to the quintessentially English May festival (while finding interesting connections to the "altered consciousness" brought about by midsummer dances mentioned in this book).

Although newly published in English, this book was first published in German in the mid-1990s. I found it interesting to compare it with the recent WECAN publication (2010), *The Seasonal Festivals in Early Childhood: Seeking the universally human*, edited by Nancy Foster. This is a compilation of articles reflecting the struggle to resolve difficult issues between anthroposophy's picture of the Christ impulse as a unique turning point for the whole of mankind, with the needs of early childhood settings catering for families from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, and in regions with other seasonal experiences.

In *Celebrating the Festivals with Children*, on the other hand, the emphasis is only on Christian festivals. For example, the Easter hare is discussed as a symbol of self-sacrifice, but the connections to Buddha hare legends are not made. It is possible that this focus could lead some to reject this book and all its valuable insights into child development. However, I hope that it will be widely read with an awareness and understanding of its limitations because it has so much to offer both parents and those working with young children. ♦

—Jill Tina Taplin

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