
*In the accompanying article, Marcia Marquis shares her reflections on lessons learned over twenty-three years in the classroom. Her article is included under **Reading the Signs of the Times** because it suggests how we can go toward the future. The essential lessons she describes from her years with the children point to ways we can proceed with humility, gratitude, and a renewed sense of wonder—even in these difficult times.*

A Handful of Feathers and a Stag at the Play Yard Gate

— Marcia Marquis

I taught nursery and kindergarten in Waldorf schools for twenty-three years. It taught me many things. I learned to take responsibility for the difficulties in my classroom. Instead of blaming a disruptive child or a difficult day on outer circumstances, I learned to ask myself, “What is it that I can do differently?” When a child was acting out I learned to ask, “What is this child asking of me?” I learned that the most challenging students were often the most rewarding. I learned to be open to inspiration to help guide my actions in the classroom. I realized that in the kindergarten there was no choice but to be in the moment. I learned to respect the struggle and the process and I learned that children respected those that struggled to do better and those who honored the process. I learned that love and compassion for children, parents, and colleagues could shift negative energy into positive energy. I worked to see everyone’s higher angels and learned that focusing on children’s strengths, rather than their weaknesses, lifted them up. I saw their shoulders straighten and I saw them walk with pride. I saw that the older ones craved healthy work and responsibility and challenges. All children crave love and warmth and humor.

The deepest lessons I learned were the ones I learned from the children themselves. I understood that children are living every moment fully. They are not in the past or future. Only that which is in front of them captures their attention. They are in a permanent state of wonder. They are not only keen observers but they are active participants in what they observe. In the rain they jump in puddles and get their boots stuck in the mud. They dig with shovels and with their hands. They pull the tarp so that the gathered rain falls down in torrents. They collect water from the rain barrel.

In the winter they know that the ground is frozen because their shovel chops the snow and ice. They feel the resistance at the end of the shovel, unlike the receptive soil they find when it is warm. They lie on the ground to make snow angels, they eat the snow, experiencing its softness and its cold by the feeling in their mouths. They lick icicles like ice cream cones and are surprised when their tongues get stuck momentarily.

They roll and jump in the leaves in the autumn. Their bodies absorb the crunch of the leaves in every pore. They smell the earth beneath the rotting leaves and collect acorns in buckets.

In spring they run faster and jump higher and get on all fours to gaze at budding shoots and dance around blossoming bushes collecting fallen petals.

The younger ones grab and pull and push, experiencing for the first time “the other” by their reactions. The older ones quarrel and stomp off, experiencing hurt feelings for the first time. Often the play yard was in sync, harmonious ... children doing the work of children. Then there were days when conflict seemed to invade the space. During this time it was important to remind myself that conflict is warming, like a fire when the flames crackle and pop and then settle into a warm glow of embers. After a day of conflict the children seemed more settled in their work and play and in their relationships.

So much about early education in my Waldorf kindergarten was about trusting and honoring children and getting out of their way so they could experience childhood in all its glory. They are given the tools they need to develop. What they need from their teachers is love and compassion and warmth and to be seen and heard. I was the keeper of the rhythm and my invisible arms always surrounded the

children. I was always vigilant and there were times when I was settling conflicts throughout the day. On the other hand, there were many days when the classroom would hum and the children would work out their differences and settle their own conflicts. On such days I proudly looked on as I did my work.

I learned to trust in their play, to trust that they were working things out and that they were learning things that needed to be learned. I understood that this was the period where their life was play and that giving them the time and freedom to fully experience this amazing state of being was the greatest gift of all.

I learned to teach by example and I saw that the gentleness and compassion and reverence I demonstrated was transformed into children who were gentle and compassionate with others. When someone was hurt they would sit by their side and put an arm around them. When the younger ones would stray from the circle the older ones would shepherd them gently back. When I closed my eyes during the blessing I would notice that many others closed their eyes.

I understood that gesture was more important than words in the earlier years and that it wasn't until the children were five, turning six, that the use of words in instruction began to play a stronger role. I understood that children did not react to cold authority. A request that came from a place of warmth and understanding or filled with humor and imagination would be readily received, whereas an order barked in anger, dry and humorless, would be ignored.

I learned the importance of my nighttime work. Simply visualizing a child as I drifted off to sleep would often transform something within my relationship with that child so that I was more able to offer her what she needed. Answers to questions in the classroom would come to me if I left myself open to the inspiration offered in the moment, rather than over-thinking a situation.

It was demonstrated to me over and over again how learning took place in early childhood. Learning came through activity, through doing things, through the lessons of play. Usually there were two or three children in the class that were eager to have me, their teacher, teach them something new. They would come sit by me and ask me to show them how I did whatever it was that I was doing ... They would ignore the others that were playing around them and

watch for a time before taking up the project at hand and trying it themselves again and again until they had learned how. They in turn would become teachers to the rest of the children. The other children would be impressed that their classmate had mastered the task at hand and would ask for their help. There were two six-year-olds who came early one day a week. One of them had mastered many string games and the other wanted to learn. They sat side by side, and the "teacher" patiently repeated the gesture over and over again until finally her "student" succeeded in mastering the game. Both of their faces shone with the joy of accomplishment, with the joy that the hard work of teaching and learning had brought them. There was the year that a group of six-year-olds decided that on handwork days they would teach the younger ones how to one-finger knit and then four- and five-finger knit. They formed the circle of chairs after snack with the stump in the middle with the large basket of yarn. They told the younger ones to get their handwork baskets and gather round. They then began to patiently instruct their "students." One year I had a highly imaginative student who was also very theatrical. She was a benevolent director of play and would organize the entire class so that all were playing together and acting out the scenes she would describe to them in the midst of their play. These descriptions were very poetic and their play was rich in drama.

I witnessed the importance of repetition and the stunning persistence that children used in order to learn. There was a child in my kindergarten class who lacked coordination in her body and found much physical activity to be a challenge. She was determined to learn to jump rope. She would wait patiently on the log for her turn and then courageously she would try over and over to jump the rope. Failing, she would return to the end of the line until her turn came again. The other children seemed to be silenced by her determination and understood her challenge. They did not laugh at her or make fun of her. One day she was able to jump over the rope twice. She smiled widely and her cheeks turned pink and her eyes twinkled.

I learned that sometimes the answers came slowly. Our cubby room at Apple Blossom was a space for transitions. Due to limited space, the cubbies were crowded together and there was no room to spare. This was the one space where pandemonium could

break out. After many years of enduring this it finally occurred to me that my attitude towards this transition could help to make a necessary shift. I realized that I had never truly honored this transition and that in order to honor it I needed to give it the time and space it deserved. I needed to give the transition its due importance, instead of treating it like a passage to get somewhere else. I would sit on my chair in the middle of the cubby room and change from outside clothes and put on my slippers. For those who had finished getting ready, there was a basket of books, a basket of yarn, and strings for string games. I would pick up a string and begin focusing on a string game or I would organize the yarn in the yarn basket. I was there to help those that needed help with pulling off their boots or untying their laces, but otherwise I was engaged in quiet activity. My change in attitude transformed this transition and made it an integral part of our kindergarten day. The children were happier and much more harmonious. I marvel at how long it took me to have this insight, but I was thankful that it finally came.

I observed the power of stories. The children would sit silent and transfixed, gathered around the candle in a circle for story time (it was only the children with disturbances and those with too much media in their lives that could not drink in the sweet elixir of story telling). One day I told the story of a bird with a broken wing that could not fly south for the winter. When the snow came the bird sought the shelter of many trees, but they all turned him away. It was the pine tree that finally offered some shelter. And so, when the winds began to blow all the trees lost their leaves except the pine trees. The next morning many children climbed the tree and asked me for some raffia that they knew was in the shed. They spent the entire playtime hanging the raffia from all the branches they could reach and told me that they were making a home for the wounded bird.

The story of the wounded bird reminds me of another incident revolving around birds. One day

in November one of the six-year-olds asked me if he could bring some Indian corn outside to plant (during this time of year a favorite activity of the children was to pop the kernels off the cob and grind the corn in the mortar). When we got to the play yard Christopher ran off to the garden, shovel in hand. He returned to my side a short time later and asked me for some feathers. I asked what he wanted the feathers for, and he replied that the Indians believed that the corn would grow best if planted with feathers. At that time there was not a bird in sight near the play yard and I told Christopher he would have to plant his corn without feathers. He headed back to the garden, and, as I watched him, suddenly a flock of birds surrounded him, beat their wings and down drifted feathers! He scooped a handful of feathers up and walked into the garden.

Another magical moment in the play yard happened one morning about the same time of year. The ground was frozen but there was not yet snow on the ground. It was a quiet morning, and all the children were spread about, deeply engaged in their play. I looked up from chopping vegetables and there at the garden gate stood a stag staring into the play yard. He could have been a statue or an apparition, so still and majestic with his antlers reaching toward the blue sky above. Some of the children looked up from their play and stared at him, but those that truly saw him stayed frozen where they were and said nothing, as if a spell had been cast. When the stag finally turned slowly and leapt off through the field the children returned to their play. None of us ever spoke about the stag at the play yard gate.

The many years spent in my Waldorf classroom were an immeasurable gift to me, quite as extraordinary as the handful of feathers or the stag at the play yard gate. ♦

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