
From the Editor

— Nancy Blanning

Inviting children back into the fullness of life

We all want children to be healthy and happy, to find security and confidence in being in their physical bodies, and to experience goodness in life with optimism for the future. Fostering security, confidence, and optimism is now especially challenging, as we deal with the negative consequences the restricted pandemic years have inflicted upon everyone, and especially on young children.

At the World Teachers' Conference in Dornach last April, it was confirmed that these challenges are worldwide, as teachers from over sixty countries had similar stories. During the months of isolation, children were seriously deprived of chances for expectable physical and emotional growth, sensory strengthening, and socialization. Waldorf education is by its very nature nurturing and healing, yet many children now have needs that interfere with their ability to participate in our pre-pandemic curriculum and be nourished by it. A pediatrician at the conference said that children now need additional sensory movement support and soul enrichment during early childhood and beyond, up to third grade.

This sobering picture provided the impulse for this issue of *Gateways*, as the situation calls for us to offer children a kind of mini-emergency pedagogy to circle back to where the children were diverted from or halted on their usual developmental path, and escort them forward. This is not a replacement of our usual rich, wise pedagogy, but added enrichment. We can think of this as giving someone who has been ill and needs to rebuild their forces extra, nutritious snacks in addition to regular meals.

This issue shares several approaches to putting this nourishing, healing pedagogy into practice, largely centered around outdoor education. Many programs found satisfaction with an outdoor curriculum when they moved their early childhood classes outdoors during the pandemic, and have continued outside of classrooms. In our lead article, "The Healing Power of Nature," Vicki Kingsbury compiles research done for her teacher training, as she wished to not only describe the anxiety and dysregulation seen in children, but to offer strategies for actually reducing it. Vicki's thorough exploration of nature as healer speaks on behalf of what the other articles in this issue emphasize as well.

This is followed by "Hope, a Tonic for the Future" by Laurie Clark, which shines a light on how stories, arts, movement, and similar activities offer nourishment and healing to our children in all classroom settings, indoors and out. "Hope" will be included in an expanded form in a forthcoming book from the WECAN Research group, which will speak of practical healing gestures for the wounds and deprivations of the pandemic era.

In "Time in Nature," Lisa Miccio describes an outdoor-based program that has reached out to Head Start and public-school kindergartens in the area to bring children with little access to nature on weekly outings, and help them explore how they can bring more nature experiences to their own children. This is Waldorf reaching out to make the wonder and sense of connectedness to the wider world an accessible reality for more children.

Aimee de Ney has a beautifully fierce connection to the land and its indigenous history. Her early childhood work in the Pacific Northwest focuses upon healing the land from the many colonial injustices and exploitations that have occurred. "You are my other me," her picture of honoring the land, wherever we live, offers a reciprocal healing both to the land and to the people who offer care to the earth.

This section concludes with "Healing Presence," in which Jane Swain and Janene Ping discuss how screen time for young children can cause a disconnection with our sensory environment and with other people. Practical suggestions are given for how we can invite children back into the natural and social world.

For the Classroom responds to the question of "What can we do?" to bring reassurance, hope, comfort, and healing to children, through stories, circles, games, movement tidbits, and two helpful examples for calming anxious little souls.

A truly "star-filled" event of the the 2023 WECAN February Conference, which continued the commitment to creating healing dialogue and action toward Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Justice, was the puppet play of "Harriet and the Stars," written by Leslie Wetzonis-Woolverton. The story of Harriet Tubman's childhood is offered in two versions for use in our classrooms, so that this inspiring picture can live beyond the conference.

Suzanne Down's article on "sheltering stories" describes how we can create reassuring images of protection, soothing to the soul. Also included is a story of birdies in the nest to offer when spring awakens. Lisa Miccio shares a reassuring story of shelter she wrote for a child on the autism spectrum, "The Shepherd Boy." We are grateful for these reminders of the healing potency of stories. In addition, two short descriptions of calming and reassuring activities from the classroom are contributed by Marianne Bockli and Kate Lawes. Thank you for these reminders of simple but powerful remedies that are always accessible.

New circle time material is always welcome. Reassurance that the light really will come again after the long, dark winter comes from Diane Van Dommelen of Alaska, who created "Old Gnome's Candlemas Circle" to picture the light returning after a candle foretells this happy event. A different climate is pictured in "Shelter from the Rain," an adaptation by Holly Koteen-Soulé of a Russian folk tale in which a little community of animals shelters from the rain under the umbrella of a mushroom. The images and lively, playful speech are delightful.

Traditional circle games offer much to encourage social life—visibly interrupted by the months of isolation. Ruth Ker, author of *Please, Can We Play Games?*, reminds us of this heritage of movement games with rhythmic song and interesting, engaging

speech. In these games we have tried-and-true images in verse and song that have helped generations of children in their growing.

The hand gesture games created by Wilma Ellersiek are favorites with young children. The final WECAN volume of Ellersiek games, *Gnomes and Giants, Pixies and Elves*, currently in preparation, focuses on the elemental world. Lynn St. Pierre offers a preview with "What Scoot Does in Wintertime," which may become a new favorite.

A review of a new publication, *Raising Sound Sleepers*, by Dr. Adam Blanning, announces a valuable new resource of practical advice for parents. The rising difficulty in developing good sleep habits is a modern crisis. This book, available through the WECAN online bookstore, can help us understand how both children and adults can find a place of rest for sleep.

We must end this preview of the journal with a sad note. Marjorie Thatcher, a pioneering early childhood teacher in Victoria, BC, crossed the threshold on September 17, 2023, after many, many dedicated years of service to Waldorf early childhood. Marjorie Thatcher was an inspiration to so many students, faculty and WECAN Board members. The gratitude owed to her life and work will be expressed in the spring *Gateways*.

Wishing you warmth and light of heart and spirit,
—Nancy Blanning