
Living in Our Times

~ Louise deForest

Mary Oliver once wrote: “All things are inventions of holiness – some more rascally than others.” We are all, indeed, living in very rascally times! If the spiritual life is living the ordinary life extraordinarily well, as my friend Bill Coffen claims, how are we to live today? How are we to navigate the surplus of information, anxiety, demands and fear that surround us; how are we to find our footing when we are so buffeted by events that are out of our hands?

What we do everyday in the kindergarten is healing and strengthening. It is so wholesome that, if done rightly and with love, it is a healthy foundation for our physical lives for the whole time we are on earth. Imagine! This applies to us, the adults, as well as to the children. The rhythms, repetitions, the beauty, the gestures, the processes, can strengthen and ground us if we take them up as a genuine part of our lives and not just something we do for our job, between 8 in the morning and 3 in the afternoon.

Of course, all of this takes discipline and will; it doesn't just happen because we want or need it to. In the work with the children in our care, we know that only through our patience and deep trust in who they really are can we effect any change over time, and that every morning when we walk through the door of our classrooms, we are starting over. The training of the will that happens in our classrooms every day is also the training of our wills, as long as we are not asking the children to master something that we have not yet mastered. So always we are working on ourselves as we work with the children, and we know that when there is something out of balance in the class, we have only to look to ourselves, if we're honest, to find the source of the problem.

Our kindergarten classrooms are places where children feel safe and do not want to leave. After the isolation of the last year, and even after the weekend, they breathe a sigh of relief to be back in a space where life is cared for, predictable and the adult can be trusted. Do we feel safe when we are in the classroom? What do they get that we don't? How can we give ourselves what we give them?

Beauty

“We need beauty because it makes us ache to be worthy of it.”
—Mary Oliver

We are real artists when it comes to creating a space that breathes goodness and beauty, but often we forget that we can do this at home, too. One thing that helped me enormously when I had small children and juggled work, home and family, those “delightful struggling years,” as my friend Mrs Robb described them, was to every day create one small place of beauty. The laundry could be piling up, the sink full of dishes and the floor dirty, but there was one space in my house where I could rest my eyes and sink into peace. Perhaps it was a windowsill or a corner of my desk, fresh flowers in a vase or a beautiful postcard, a crystal and a lovely cloth, but it was something I did for myself and each time my eyes rested there I was nourished.

Nourishment

“Beware when the so-called sagely men come limping into sight.”
—Chuang-tsu

What are we feeding ourselves? What images do we carry around within us from day to day? Do those images nourish or deplete us? It's important that we are informed of current events, but how we inform ourselves is important and makes a difference. Instead of listening to the latest news, with its anguishing images, find a news source that is reliable and impartial and read what you need to read and create your own images and thoughts. There are some things that, once seen, cannot be unseen, and those are the images that paralyze us and drain us of our hope and trust in life.

When I was a child, I woke up every morning to the sound of the news on the radio. I didn't listen to what was being said, of course, but I objected to having the voice of a stranger in my cozy house and I didn't like it that my parents wanted to hear that voice rather than the voices of my brothers and me. Sometimes there was an urgency or tension in that radio voice and, while I didn't know what caused it, I often felt

slightly nauseated and ill at ease. Pay attention to how you wake up. Keep a book of your favorite poetry by your bed and read something that nourishes your soul. It might make you laugh or smile or just feel settled inside but it's something worthy that you can carry through your day.

Movement

"Our Father, which art in Heaven, Thy will be done. Our Mother, which art in Earth, Thy love be fulfilled and love and will made one." —Mopani

Get out into nature every day. If time in nature is healing for the children and a daily necessity, it is that for us as well. Take a walk, listen to the bird calls, look for the green shoots now coming up, and simply look around you. Nature will always remind us to breathe and the fear and anxiety so prevalent today are signs of not breathing consistently and deeply. Sink into the goodness and wisdom of nature, think of it as a nature bath. Actually, try not to think at all. Leave all that you know, all the information you carry around, the definitions and opinions, and just breathe. Even if you can only manage a few minutes a day, go outside and breathe deeply. But really, can't we all find time for a good walk?

Purposeful work

"Great peace is found in little busy-ness." —Chaucer

As early childhood educators we often cannot see our work. If we compare our children at the end of the school year to who they were when they started school in September, we can see a change and it is a substantial change, but on a day-to-day basis, that transformation is not visible. Do something physical as often as possible, something where your work is visible: stack wood, clean out a cupboard or an attic and stand back and see what you have done. Ahhh!

In a time when hopelessness is so palpable, making a difference somewhere, even if it is in a corner of your yard or house, is empowering. And as soon as we are living in our wills, our anxiety lessens, and our thinking becomes quiet. It is an honor and a privilege

to do work on earth, especially when we can work for the benefit of others and not just our own, so check in on a neighbor, or volunteer; the important thing is to use your time in a meaningful way. Many of us stay on our phones in our free time, filling ourselves with troubling images, platitudes, and a constant bombardment of disconnected information. Train yourself to not look at your phone each time a text or email announces itself, allowing you to be present and engaged and not distractible. This, too, gives us power and helps us put our lives and activities in the proper perspective.

Look for opportunities to be delighted

"It loved to happen." —Marcus Aurelius

There are wonderful things all around us, happening at all times. On a half-hour break from teaching once, I was watching an active anthill. There was a stream of ants removing grains of sand and dirt from the interior of the anthill and placing them at some distance from the entrance before returning to get more. A guard ant stayed at the opening as the ants streamed in and out. One ant came out and dropped the grain of sand on the edge of the entrance. The guard ant hurried over, tapped the worker on the head and would not let her back into the hill until she picked up the grain of sand and put it in its proper place. As the ant returned to the opening, the guard whacked her on the behind as she again entered the hill. How relatable it was, and suddenly how connected I was to those ants!

And the other day I was sitting in a class of three-year-olds as they had lunch. One little one asked, "What's a violin?" The child by her side said, with all authority, "It's a music talker." We may consider these things merely cute, but they are actually much, much more. These moments open the door to a world that is no longer our world; a world full of shining truths and delightful perspectives, where anything is possible. Children are always inviting us into their creative world where things are undefined and do not easily fit into the little boxes we have assigned them to, but rather burst forth, fresh and alive, truer than true, and for a moment we are back in the Garden of Eden.

Remember why you are here

"I must be willing to give up what I am to become what I will be."
—Albert Einstein

Each one of us is here on earth to try to accomplish certain tasks, both personal and generational. We have come to work on certain themes in our lives and to develop ourselves accordingly. For those of us working in Waldorf education, we have also come to earth to work practically with spiritual realities. One of our tasks in this is to look beyond physical appearances to discover the inner truth of things; who am I, really? And who are you? That is the question that underlies all our work. Every experience we have in life is offering us an opportunity to deepen, to learn and, hopefully, to grow. When life gets difficult, ask yourself, "What is this situation (or person) asking me to develop?" This question takes us out of the victim role and gives us power to act; the difficulty is not happening to us, it is inviting us to take another step in our own inner development, to grow beyond whatever the situation is.

Personal transformation is never an easy process; it takes courage and often comes out of pain and suffering. "Just push through it," a friend of mine would say when I complained about the resistance I felt when trying to meditate or study, and that is good advice. Just push through it. It is obvious that the future is bringing with it something new; we know that through the mysterious and marvelous children who are in our classes each year. These are our times; we came to earth to live these times, to be challenged by them and to, hopefully, push through them into what waits beyond.

In closing, I would like to share with you some thoughts and words from Howard Zinn:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history

will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory. ♦

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