
From the Editor

— Nancy Blanning

What really matters?

Distilling the life stream of Waldorf early childhood education

What a collision of events the last three years have brought to us—an unbelievable trembling of the ground upon which we stand. Rudolf Steiner emphasized that we need to be attentive to “the signs of the times” as we plan how to act in response to the things facing us.

We see both obvious and subtle effects of these stresses and strains in the children who have joined us this fall in our early childhood classes. Along with joy in being together, children are showing “disregulation,” an unsettledness and agitation in their moods and behaviors. It is hard to find calm and a true state of safety and security into which they can relax. And we can likewise observe that this is true for ourselves as their teachers. We must forge a pathway that affirms for ourselves and the children that goodness, beauty, and truth still exist in our world and that we can make them happen through our intentions and our actions. How can we do that?

Creating a “new normal” is an opportunity and a huge responsibility. What makes this education truly Waldorf? Of the many changes the pandemic imposed upon us, what do we keep of the heritage we have received from the past? Diversity, equity, inclusivity? How can this be of utmost consciousness in our awareness and planning? How do we begin to organize our thinking about all of this *and* bring some comfort and healing to our scraped, bruised, and tattered selves? This issue of *Gateways* is dedicated to helping us find our way toward reassurance, soothing, and healing by distilling our practices down to what is essential.

Waldorf early childhood was given a gift by WECAN Coordinator Susan Howard in the form of her essay, “The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education.” Written fifteen years ago, this essay is as relevant today as when it was written, if not more so. (You can download a PDF from the Resources section

of waldorfearlychildhood.org, under “Early Childhood Educational Practice.”) It begins with asking what it is that makes our education “Waldorf”—bread baking, beeswax modeling, watercolor painting, Lazed walls, soft colors, natural materials, festivals? Rudolf Steiner never gave an outlined curriculum, but said the content is always founded upon the self-developing being of the teacher. The teacher’s relationships with the children, families, and colleagues also are fundamental. These lovely activities and environmental surroundings are means for conveying “inner qualities, attitudes, capacities, and intentions for the teacher—all of which can have a health-giving effect on the children, both in the moment and for the rest of their lives.”

These essential qualities are:

- Love and warmth
- Care for the environment and nourishment of the senses
- Creative, artistic experience
- Meaningful adult activity as an example for the children’s imitation
- Free, imaginative play
- Protection for the forces of childhood
- Gratitude, reverence, and wonder
- Joy, humor, and happiness
- Adult caregivers on a path of inner development

What really matters? Experience of these essential qualities is what we want to offer to the children and their families. The articles of this issue offer suggestions as we distill answers for our individual situations.

Leading this issue is a keynote address given by Philipp Reubke, Pedagogical Section co-chair at the Goetheanum, to the International Puppetry Conference held this past July. “Living Thinking for a Lifetime” suggests simplicity in our approach

to classroom presentations, puppetry in particular, supporting the inherently healing qualities of puppetry presentations.

Karen Imhof, kindergarten teacher at Rudolf Steiner School in NYC, describes the journey taken by children and teachers when a Ukrainian refugee child joined their class last year. The article takes us into a study of child trauma, a very important topic for our consideration. While not all may be traumatized in any clinical sense, all of our children are in shock from “displacement” in their lives due to the pandemic, and in need of healing reassurance.

Other people who have been displaced and traumatized are the Indigenous communities of the North American continent. Appropriately acknowledging and honoring these groups is sensitive. Dr. Joaquin Muñoz, professor and co-keynote speaker at the February 2022 conference, accepted an invitation to write about Appreciation vs. Appropriation. This thoughtful article poses hard questions for us. Finding the right indigenous story is not the simple answer to acknowledgement and appreciation. It is a much longer road toward which Dr. Muñoz offers us some beginning steps.

It is not only the children who are tattered and worn at the edges. We adults are so ourselves. It is necessary that we also find ways to refresh and renew ourselves. Louise deForest offers a compendium of ideas for realistic, doable self-care to help us carry on our work with good energy and joy. We need to bring the right inner mood to the children, for they imitate not only what we do but who we are and how we are interfacing with life.

We continue to explore how to develop and not give only lip-service to cultivating tolerance, resilience, true caring, empathy, and a sense for justice. The article “Movement toward Tolerance” has come out of the study of Henning Köhler and his book, *Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed Children* (available from AWSNA Publications). When the four senses of touch, well-being, self-movement, and balance are supported and well-developed, they literally provide a physical foundation upon which these social soul capacities can develop, a reassuring fact on which we can build much of our work.

Puppeteers Janene Ping and Aimee de Ney both had articles in the spring issue of *Gateways*. While

the articles discussed different ways of portraying the Michaelmas festival, the intent of both was to discuss the use of puppetry as a healing and community-building opportunity for collaboration. Janene presents a follow-up article, and Aimee shares her reflections on this community-collaboration opportunity in puppetry, emphasizing that their different perspectives have a common aim in view.

As we look to the future and to the essentials, we also have an opportunity to honor the past. Two prominent early childhood pioneers crossed the threshold this summer: Betty Peck and Dorothy Olsen. In both cases, their accomplishments were monumental and their legacy an honor to describe.

For the Classroom has practical treats. Suzanne Down offers a description of the “Protection Story,” giving healing and reassuring images of security, safety, and “being home,” along with her own story “Grandmother’s Hat.” Holly Koteen-Soulé and colleagues at Sound Circle Center training have been working with creating stories and imaginations that bring forth DEI messages implicitly. Holly offers a description of their process and a model story, “Blackberry Bunnies,” which pictures diversity and inclusivity in a gentle and artistic way. And eurythmist Wendalyn von Meyenfeldt from Canada contributes an autumn imagination that is lovely material for a circle time as well as a eurythmy lesson, offering more pictures of shelter, protection, shelter, and inclusivity.

In our Book Review section we present the new *Birth to Three in Education and Care—Rudolf Steiner, Emmi Pikler and the Very Young Child*. The four keynote presentations from the first-ever North American Birth-to-Three conference, held in 2019, form the content of this book. The material is rich, and the approach to this special care of the very young child is informative for all teachers, no matter what the age of the children we care for.

Since trauma is so heavily considered in our articles, we also want to briefly recommend the book *Educating Traumatized Children* by Bernd Ruf (available through SteinerBooks). And we are pleased to announce the forthcoming publication *Toward a Kinder, More Compassionate Society: Working Together Toward Change*, which will consist of workshop summaries compiled from the February 2022 online conference. These are expected to be available as



preparatory reading for the 2023 WECAN conference in Spring Valley, NY dedicated to “Finding Our Ways—Toward a Kinder, More Compassionate Society.”

What really matters? When we distill things down to essentials, we see “qualities, attitudes, capacities and intentions from the teacher.” In each of our programs we can look at these and ask how these are offered in digestible, accessible ways to these tender, little children in our care. Are love, warmth, and care coming through to soothe and reassure their disregulated selves? Does the play environment offer an opportunity to “play through” and digest recent stressful and confusing experiences? Do practical activities give the children a chance to actually be doers and see the results of their efforts in cooking,

cleaning, and caring for the environment indoors and out? Do they see process—rather than an emphasis on end product—and sequential order in how our work and circle imaginations are done? Are they carried by the rhythms of life that create a harmonious hum underneath and around each day in the class? Do they experience tolerance, inclusion, and appreciation for every individual, with all of our differences?

With these as our essential goals, this is the Waldorf early childhood education for the next one hundred years that I will be proud to tell the world about. So may it grow and be.

Be well and secure in feeling the blessings of care we share with one another. ♦