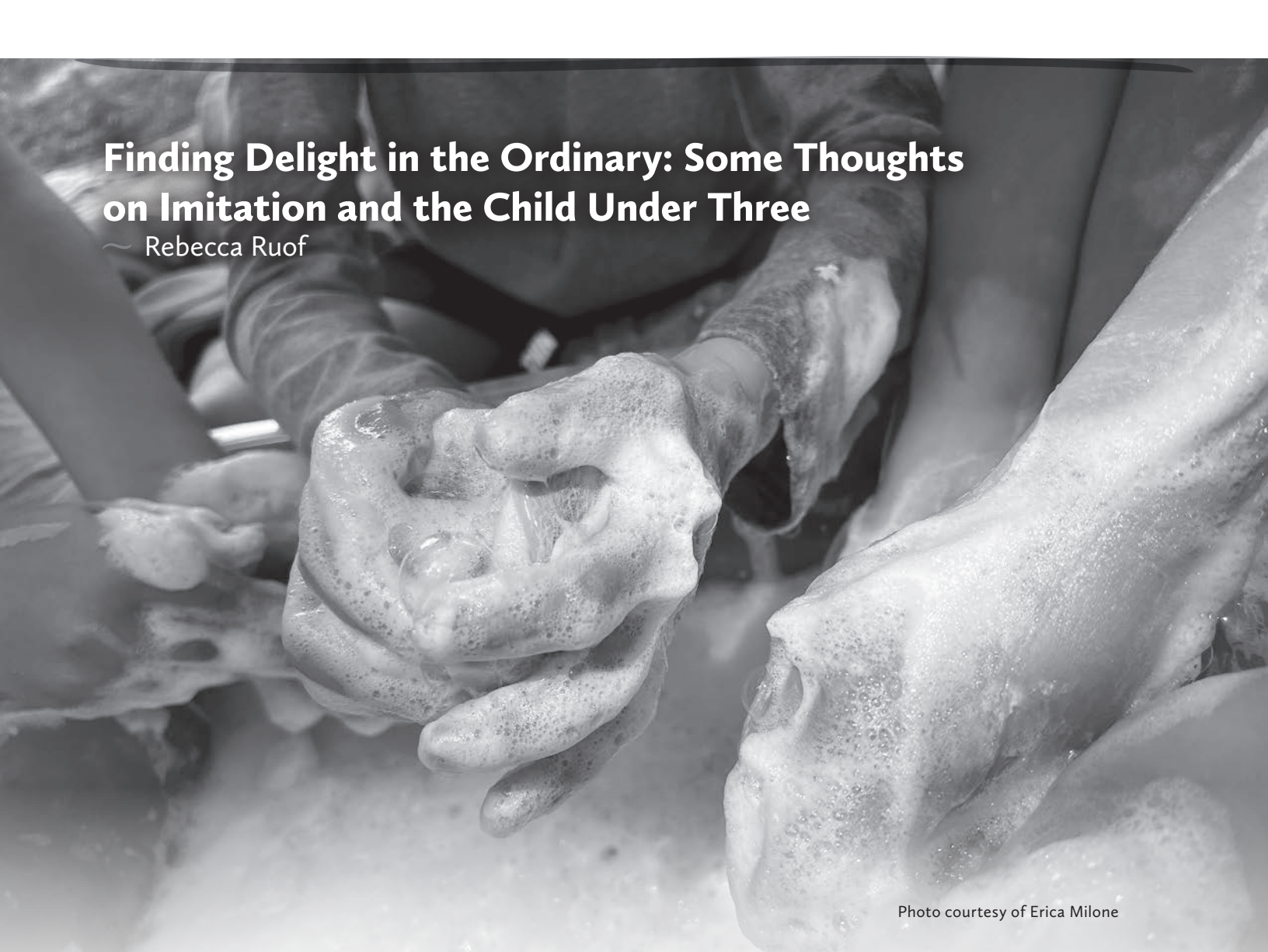




Finding Delight in the Ordinary: Some Thoughts on Imitation and the Child Under Three

~ Rebecca Ruof

Photo courtesy of Erica Milone

We had all made our way to the table, and there was a mood of reverence and anticipation as the children waited for the food to be passed out. We always start our snack time by lighting a candle and saying a blessing in gratitude for the food we are about to receive. While all eyes were on me, I gently started singing and struck the match. On that particular day, the match exploded like fireworks, sending sparks in every direction. My assistant teacher and I looked at each other in surprise and burst out laughing (we are usually quiet and composed around the table). It was not our proudest teaching moment, but it was genuine and filled with joy and wonder.

For the rest of the school year, every time we lit the candle before snack, the children would laugh. Every day!

This is such a clear example of how children imitate their environment. This includes the people around them and their outer and inner gestures. Young

children still feel themselves as one with the world and live into their environment with trust and complete surrender. This is especially true for the youngest ones, who don't refer to themselves as "I" in a conscious way yet. They give themselves over to the world because they believe that the world "is good and of a moral nature" (as Rudolf Steiner explained).

In *Education as a Force for Social Change*, Rudolf Steiner speaks about how before birth, we are one with our environment:

Children carry their prenatal experiences in the spiritual world into physical existence after birth. In the spiritual world, we human beings live in the beings of the higher hierarchies ... There, we are imitative to a much higher extent because we are united with those beings we imitate. Then we are being placed in the physical world, but we continue our habit of being at one with our surroundings.

The habit of being at one with the beings in our surroundings, of imitating them, continues.

There is a tendency in our time to pull children out of this “beingness,” this “oneness,” and into understanding things intellectually. We reason with them and try to make them understand life through thinking. We say things like “Be careful!” and “This is not safe.” These are subtle ways we convey that they need to stay alert and awake at all times. By doing so, children can lose their inborn trust in their environment. They pull back from giving themselves over to the world and stop imitating what is around them.

A simple way to bring children back to an experience of “all is well with the world” is to engage in meaningful tasks to take care of our environment and each other. Putting away our toys nicely so they are ready for the next day, tending to our outside spaces to make them welcoming for people and animals alike, and taking time for moments of self-care are just a few examples. As teachers we have to learn to return to experiencing the “sublime in the ordinary” as Daniel Udo de Haes puts it in *The Creative Word*. That is what these children who have just arrived from spiritual realms are interested in.

In my toddler nursery, Monday is rice day. The children delight in helping prepare our snack. One of them brings our shiny pot to the table, another the measuring cup. The children watch as I carefully pour the rice into the cup. They take turns putting the rice in the pot. Oh, what a delightful tinkling sound it

makes! Usually we need at least two cups so we have enough for everybody. Then we add the water. One, two, three cups, and one more. The water is clean and sparkly and we don’t want to spill it. It also makes a sound as we pour it into the pot! We give the rice one good stir, put on the lid and set it up to cook. Then we bring things back to the kitchen area: the spoon, the measuring cup, and the big jar of rice.

There is nothing too ordinary in this simple act of filling our pot with rice. It is so much more than a physical activity. Our gesture is one of gratitude, joy, and care. It grounds the children in an atmosphere of goodness, and they are able to experience life in a way that makes sense to them. This is where the magic happens.

Modeling love and care for the ordinary things welcomes children into participating in earthly life. They will recognize in our actions and our inner gesture that they have indeed arrived at a good place.



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