

From the Editor

— Nancy Blanning

2025 has ushered in astonishing events. To begin with, devastating fires destroyed campuses of the Pasadena and Westside Waldorf Schools in Southern California. Not only the school buildings were lost but the children's work, books, teachers' libraries accumulated over years, furnishing, play things, and other material teaching resources are also gone. School families, teachers, and other community members lost their homes and all possessions. The magnitude of what has been experienced and of what they are now confronting physically, soulfully, and spiritually to re-found their communities is immense. As this issue of *Gateways* opens, we pause to hold them in heart and mind as they give birth to new stages in their growth. We also extend our holding thoughts to Asheville Waldorf School in North Carolina whose school community was hit by destructive flooding in the aftermath of tropical storm Helene in September 2024. Many thanks to the Emergency Pedagogy teams who visited these schools to bring support in these traumatic times through play, games, artistic activities, and counseling.

On the theme of birth, a verse by Rudolf Steiner meant to be spoken to a very young child by a loving caregiver keeps coming to mind. The language is adjusted to offer it as a communal intention to support these births from afar (perhaps as distant midwives):

May light flow into you that can take hold of you.

We follow its rays with the warmth of our love.

We think with the best glad thoughts of our thinking on the leaping of your hearts.

They are to strengthen you, they are to bear you up, they are to keep you pure.

We would fain gather our glad thoughts into your steps on the paths of life,

That they link themselves to your own will of life,

Finding strength in all the world, ever more through its own self.

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The challenges of this new year are not only connected to our schools' losses. Change to cultural attitudes, policies, and practices confront us with dizzying speed with the change in governmental administration. Pandemic-deprived children continue to carry their distress into our classrooms to teachers who report their own depletion.

All of the above stand in stark contrast to the upcoming celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the first official Waldorf kindergarten in Germany in 1926. There is truly much to celebrate. Waldorf early childhood education strives to provide a protected space in which children can unfold their developmental plan through imitation, play, movement, real-life activities, and rich cultural exposure of language, story, verse, and song. We wish for the children to have time and space to not be hurried or intruded upon by external societal expectations and pressures. We say these things. But some voices question whether these are appropriate goals for our times?

This anniversary invites, even insists, that we take a deep look to identify the essential experiences and qualities that will support healthy incarnation for our children in the 100 years to come. With this issue, *Gateways* offers articles that point us back to the sources out of which Waldorf education has grown. These articles conduct us to statements and indications from Rudolf Steiner that we are asked to live with and sincerely ponder. We must have an inner knowing, certainty, and conviction that what we are doing truly serves children.

The first two articles are classic reprints, offered by founding Waldorf teachers who have left their legacy of understanding and encouragement to help us on our way. Dr. Helmut von Kùgelgen shares "The Laws of Childhood," which calls us to consider these foundational intentions around which we create our classroom curriculum. Do these continue to hold true? How are we manifesting them in our classrooms?

Play was the primary focus of Joan Almon's work within Waldorf early childhood education and the wider world through Alliance for Childhood. Her article, "The Healing Power of Play," demonstrates

how vital play is as a force to support healthy physical, emotional, and social development.

The next cluster of articles weave a thread between imitation and play. Eniko Reeder describes her experience of how she had to throw out all of her expectations and usual practices to help a group of disorganized young children find their way into imitation, play, and social awareness. The way she describes how she took tiny, sequential steps in rhythmic, repetitive ways can stand as a model for teachers to consider.

Wendalyn von Meyenfeldt shares valuable insights about imitation and play from her perspective as a eurythmist. She suggests that free play is a pathway to future freedom. She ends with a verse that may become a new favorite when we understand the qualities that stand behind the sounds emphasized—A (*Ah*), E (*Ay*), I (*Ee*).

Ryan Rayniak introduces us into the realm of “adventure playgrounds” and “loose parts.” He gives suggestions as to how we might appropriately embrace more of this spirit in our play environments.

Jane Swain has a new book forthcoming in two volumes titled *Free Movement from the Very Start*. Her article is a small excerpt from a chapter on imitation. Her research takes us deep into a more profound understanding of what imitation is and how children under seven imitate within their body.

The next article continues to look at original descriptions from Rudolf Steiner on imitation and play. Nancy Blanning spent many evenings reading and re-reading these fundamental statements until they began to speak more profoundly, and here shares these thoughts with readers.

Laurie Clark’s piece on “Learning to Learn through Play” takes us on a journey from how the idea of academic push-down into kindergarten arose in the late 1950s with the “space race.” The value of play became obscured and undervalued. Laurie’s discussion readjusts this picture to show how play is actually the road ahead to future academic accomplishment and development of executive functioning. Timing is everything.

Throughout this section, brief vignettes offered by teachers and observers give a glimpse of the limitless potential of play and imitation to enliven our daily activities. When we make space for them, they will surprise and delight us in the most varied ways.

Our next section, News and Updates, starts with an article profiling a generous, good friend to Waldorf

education: Mercurius USA and Canada. Mercurius is a prominent supplier of the materials—wood, wax, and wool—we depend upon to offer Waldorf education. What is not so well known is that it continues to operate in the way it began, as a modest home-based enterprise which models itself on the ideals of the healthy social life. Their story is interesting and one *Gateways* is happy to share.

Emergency Pedagogy Crisis Intervention was mentioned at the beginning of this editorial. Christine Burke shares an article to describe this trauma intervention that was shared with the Ashville, Pasadena, and Palisades West Side Waldorf schools this school year. Shock and trauma are filling the world. It is important for all teachers to know of this work and resource.

For the Classroom brings some suggestions from Keiko Rothfield on how she brings her sometimes wild and boisterous young home group to calm and quiet. These may remind us of effective practices and inspire new ideas as well.

Aaron Joseph and Justine Franco share a new rendering of “Mother Holle” as a circle play. The article describes their process of finding important wisdom pictures in this story and their work to find new vocabulary that removes the painful sting of what we now see as excluding, judgmental language.

Games are fun and powerful opportunities to invite imitation through movement. Some strongly imitative games from Ruth Ker’s *Please, Can We Play Games?* are included. “The King and Queen” and “Old King Cole” are offered—along with suggestions for changes in word choice to make these more inclusive. “Tom Tiddling” and “Brow, Brow, Brinty” are delicious in sounds and a fun way of sequencing body geography.

We always need good stories, and “Flame” by Sasha Etzel is poignant given the recent consciousness of fire.

This section concludes with a short piece meant as support for adults. Whenever we find it hard to catch our breath and breathe rhythmically, an imagination of “Seven Angel Breaths,” written down by Nancy Blanning, arises from Dr. von Kügelgen’s advice about connecting with our angels.

In our Book section are featured two new publications—*The Little Book of Parenting* by Chinyelu Kunz and the first volume of Jane Swain’s *Free Movement from the Very Start*. Each is a valuable new resource for our work. We also want to call your attention to *Mentoring and Professional Review*, edited

by Diane David, a new, combined and updated edition of two essential resources.

Some older titles are also recommended, going back to the sources that Waldorf education has arisen from. Three collections—*From Kindergarten into the Grades*, *On the Play of the Child*, and *Understanding Child Development*—have gathered together statements about imitation, play, birth of the etheric, and school readiness. In our year leading to the one-hundredth anniversary of the first Waldorf kindergarten, these

provide material to read and ponder upon. Another classic resource, Renate Long-Breipohl's *Supporting Self-Directed Play*, describes how children find their way into life through imitation in play.

We are being offered a year to review and understand where we have come from, where we are now, and where the children are calling us to follow them into the future. This is a challenging, noble, and exciting journey to travel together. ♦

—Nancy Blanning