

Whitsun, Multi-culturalism, and International Working
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Festivals come and festivals go, but how one permeates the very essence of the festival determines the depth of our relationship with it. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association. The work has been going on much longer, but the organization was established in that year. Each year, at Whitsun time, the International Conference for Waldorf Kindergartens takes place with teachers, parents, board members, physicians, and curative workers, from all over the world. This year, in Hannover, Germany, there were 739 participants from 28 different countries! But Whitsun, why Whitsun time? Is this mere coincidence?

Dr. Helmut von Kügelgen, head of the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association, and Dr. Heinz Zimmermann, leader of the Pedagogical Section of the Goetheanum, both referred to Whitsun and its relationship to the conference. In the Book of Acts, one has the picture of the Disciples and Mary gathered together with flames of fire over their heads. Each began speaking “in tongues,” in their own language, but through their heart forces, they understood one another. This is the Whitsun experience: to be enkindled with spirit and working with the Christ impulse, and through this, to have an understanding of one another. What exhilaration and what wonder and awe to be one of three (the only one presently teaching in Kindergarten) from the United States, and to understand and be understood by those from halfway around the world.

We have spoken also in our movement about multi-culturalism. This conference expressed and worked with this goal beautifully. The lectures were presented both in German and English, with discussion classes in French, German, English, Dutch, Russian, Swedish, and Spanish, with craft classes in German and English. But what made the experience truly multi-cultural was the possibility for dialogue with people from the many countries represented. There was one discussion, for instance, about the “difficult child.” Is a difficult child in Peru, in Holland, in the U.S.A., or in Germany the same? “Can I,” mused Herr Maxfield, a curative educator, “sitting in middle Europe, accurately research and make generalizations based on my limited work here?” We even said good-bye to one another in the manner in which our folk-soul dictated -- there was the handshake, the kiss on one cheek, the kiss on both cheeks, the hearty hug, and the gentle formal hug with the kiss going off into the air.

The lecture aspect of the conference brought much ponderous thought... a feather from a bird does not represent the beauty of that being just as the synopsis does not represent the life of the presentation, but the feather and the thought can offer us one aspect of the whole. Dr. Wolfgang Sassmannshausen, of a Waldorf kindergarten in Dartmund, stated that today, *everyone* feels they are “right,” and that we have to live into their “rightness.” Dr. Sassmannshausen and Dr. Zimmermann spoke of the challenges of working with one another today. Dr. Zimmermann also reminded us that Steiner wrote into the by-laws of the Society that dogmatism and sectarianism were to be excluded. He also mentioned the importance of bringing together freedom and individuality, the impulse to build up the social with love, and the transformation of matter with the spirit. Peter Lang, of the kindergarten training seminar in Stuttgart, spoke of modern day “icons.” When some of us grew up, it was Mickey Mouse, then maybe Superman. What did these figures embody? And, today, what does the Power Ranger doll hold for children? He also mentioned that they were given to the child from an adult who loved them, so the doll must be “good.”

Dr. Michaela Glöckler, head of the Medical Section at the Goetheanum, spoke to the issue of group size at one point, mentioning that instead of a group of, say, 22 children, we have instead 22 individual children coming to us. Children of today are less and less carried by that “group consciousness.” This brings challenges that keep changing as the individuality comes sooner and stronger. Dr. Glöckler also

addressed the working of the angels within us, and of the mystery of human encounter. In reference to the child who is going through a difficult time, we need to help find the right path in the light of freedom. "I will stand by you and help you because I have helped with this before and I wish to do it!" We need to honor this longing for a real encounter by fostering a Christian desire to carry the other.

Joan Almon, the last lecturer of the conference, spoke of the social sheath which needs to surround the child. She said that we could say no to parents who need day care earlier in the child's life, for a longer part of his/her day, but that would be like "standing on the beach and saying to the sea, 'no, don't come in!'" She spoke also of our need to understand the yearnings, the pains and desires of the parents, and to support them in their spiritual and educational growth as well.

Dr. von Kügelgen ended the conference with these words: "Where is spirit? First it appears as smoke, but when it comes closer, we see it is not smoke, but beings, not mosquitoes. They are the spirits of our Whitsun Conference. We need to take these spirits home with us! Each community needs to be permeated by us with the spiritual beings which bless our kindergartens and bless us here at this conference. Take this longing for the spirit into your work. Don't forget to take back to your community, 'I was in Hannover.'"

As a kindergarten teacher, pictures are constantly streaming in and out. Last year, the picture of this conference was of oysters opening and revealing their pearls of wisdom to me, whereas, this year, I often felt the presence of a flock of white doves hovering here and there. The kindergarten is the etheric foundation of the school. These Whitsun Conferences weave a rich tapestry which could enkindle all of our working -- grade teachers, curative workers, parents, physicians alike. We came together from Sri Lanka, Hungary, Brazil, Japan, Russia, Germany, U.S.A., and on and on, carrying different folk-souls, and yet, finding a language we could all speak and understand.

A special thank you to the three Berlin schools who made it possible for me to attend this conference for the past three years. Also, to Joan Almon for sharing her superb gift of translation and depth of understanding with so many, and to Jurgen Flinspach, for his work in expanding this multi-cultural experience as much as he has. Maybe not, "next year in Hannover," but there will be a Michaelmas conference in September at Michael Hall, and one in July/August on the East Coast of the United States.