

Christmas Season in a Public School

James W. Petersen

James Peterson teaches a combined kindergarten/first grade in a small school district in northern California. From time to time he provides us with rich pictures of life inside his classroom, where he integrates Waldorf ideas into the school curriculum.

It's not easy to bring the mood of Waldorf Education into a public school setting. Recently, however, during the Advent and Christmas season, it seemed essential to me to try to bring something of the sacred to the children in my K-1 class. While other public school teachers gave their kids dittoed Santas to cut, color and paste, I tried to put into practice my twenty-five years of association with the Waldorf movement.

Instead of an Advent table, I had to content myself with a nature table based on winter and solstice themes. The earth was covered with snow, with only a few pine trees and bare deciduous trees interspersed. An opening in a clay hill revealed Mother Earth descending away from the surface. Under the nature table was a crystal cave, where hibernating animals lived side by side with an assortment of fairies and gnomes.

I knew the school board in my small district would be opposed to any Christian emphasis on Advent, St. Nicholas Day, etc. I therefore hit upon a scheme to do a simple, multi-cultural study of stories from six world religions. The board quickly approved this idea. This unit consisted of a simple and appropriate story from each sacred tradition, along with a form drawing exercise of each religion's "secret sign." We drew a Buddhist Wheel of Life, a Star of David and a Celtic Cross, to name a few. Of course the topic of religion opened the door for me to more fully approach Advent, St. Nicholas Day, Hanukkah and the Winter Solstice. Most importantly, however, I was able, through stories, music and poems, to create a very special mood or atmosphere in the class. The children knew that this was a very special time of year and our school-work was honoring the presence of the invisible worlds. Many of the children came from homes where materialism and the importance of technology were the "sacred." Bringing to these children a sense of mystery and awe concerning the Inner Life was as unique and special an experience for me as it was for them.

On the last day before vacation, I led the children in a Winter Solstice Celebration. The room was cleared, except for a red covered table arranged with a wreath of evergreen branches and mistletoe. A few sprigs of holly, with its red berries, completed the circle which surrounded an angel holding a lighted candle. A few crystals and some winter animals complemented the arrangement. The children each had a candle and we spiraled into the center, each lighting our candle. All the while we sang a simple solstice song that goes. "Down with Darkness, Up with Light." The simplicity and magic of the moment was very moving and powerful. Winter Solstice, with its obvious astronomical importance, is the easiest aspect of the Christmas season to emphasize in a public school. So, for a brief moment, we all felt like ancient Druids worshipping the sun. This celebration ended what was for this public school teacher a very special month.