

East Coast Kindergarten Conference 1995
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Each February, early-childhood teachers in the Northeast welcome the opportunity to escape the winter's chill and bask in the warmth of their shared striving. Snows may be deep and skies gray, but at the East Coast Kindergarten Conference in Spring Valley, we are nurtured and renewed as we meet old friends, eat wonderful food, and attend lectures and workshops that provoke and inspire us.

A new spirit of openness characterized this year's conference. Where formerly we had perhaps been too aware of the "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" surrounding Waldorf kindergarten work, this year's questions and discussions were uninhibited and searching. It is clear that we need the courage to try new things and to value our experiences. Then, we must seek to validate those experiences in a concrete, objective way.

The conference theme was "The Development of the Senses in Early Childhood as a Foundation for Later Life." Joan Almon, of the Waldorf Kindergarten Association, and Dr. Gerald Karnow, a pediatrician and Waldorf school doctor, addressed the topic in three lectures.

Joan Almon noted how difficult it is for today's children to feel that "the world is good." Their fundamental needs are too often met with *things* rather than with basic human nurture. The assault on young children today has gone beyond the sensory bombardment they experience passively through the media, into direct attacks in the realm of movement through such phenomena as the "Discovery Zone" play centers appearing in cities around the country. Early childhood teachers notice that children today are thinner than formerly; they lose their baby fat by age 3 or 4. Children look nervous, and it is becoming more difficult to lead them into a mood of play -- and once achieved, such a mood is easily broken. The modern American child appears to be unprotected. Teachers today must work to help build a healthy organism in each child -- this is no longer simply there to be maintained.

Doctor Karnow challenged us, stating that we meet the children and their parents through our own inner work. It is not enough that we study and amass knowledge; the gold of wisdom must be transformed into light (Goethe), or death results. He contrasted insights that arise out of deep observation of the child's physicality with the results of what he called "the psychological trap," which only permits description. Our insight must lead us to *action*. We need to practice observation, so that we can learn to actually *see* the lawful connection between body and soul. A dogmatic mode of knowing asks what the phenomena means; a process mode, which we strive for, asks how the phenomena works. In the process mode, we try to slip into the child's being quietly, without seeking a direct answer. In our struggle to recognize the individuality in each child that wants to be born in spite of physical and social obstacles, the I-ness, the beingness of the child can direct us. Then we can help the children to create a home for their spirit.

We approach the being of young children through their physicality, through their senses. As human beings, we relate to the worlds of body, soul and spirit, through our will senses, feeling senses, and thinking senses. In childhood, the will senses provide the foundation for later life. The sense of *touch* gives us a sense for our own borders, our limits. If children's sense of touch is not nourished, they may have difficulty with auditory and visual perceptions in the second 7-year period of life. If the limit of my borders is transgressed, fear and anxiety may arise. We sense our etheric activity, the activity of the organ systems that maintain us, through the senses of life. Through their sense of self and the experience of well-being, children gain the foundation for understanding arithmetic. If children do not feel filled with life, they may experience fear and shame. The sense for our own movement brings liberation -- what joy when a child stands upright and walks! The sense for movement is what enables us to work with geometry, and is also an antidote to depression: "If you're depressed, start moving. Put your nose to the

grindstone of life and get busy!" The sense of balance belongs to the ego, and through it we experience independence. Balance in gesture leads to balance in speech. In the soul realm, balance is transformed into social independence, or else we tend to bump into one another as we interact. Balanced gesture leads to logical thinking, and ultimately, to the birth of the creative, spiritual being at age 35. If this birth cannot occur, the individual will experience exhaustion and depression.

Thus, we are reminded how all our work with young children -- at home and in our kindergartens and play groups -- bears very real fruit, or real consequences, for the child's development. Our use of music, movement, and language; our filling the environment with warmth, beauty, tastes and smells; our work toward our own etheric health through artistic activity and rhythmic inner work -- all have true shaping power, and affect our children deeply.

We ended the weekend asking: How do we find a context for working together? How can we build communities around our work? We came together with a real feeling of shared purpose, of oneness. This is a joyful, comfortable, satisfying feeling -- appropriate to a brief weekend together. Dr. Karnow pointed out that these feelings come from the past. We know that in sustained working relationships, we also have other experiences of our colleagues. Then, we must find our way through the bridge of the sun by working and creating something new together on earth. Our work together forms a chalice to hold the sun. We all hold the chalice on different sides, and thus see things differently from our vantage points. This can be painful. If we can come to the point where we are really interested in others' viewpoints, we can build a whole -- if we trust the building process. Then, we will come to see the strengths in our differences.