

From the Children

Helping children face death has been a recurring theme in conversations with kindergarten teachers in recent years. A number of schools have experienced deaths in their school communities, the deaths of children and of parents. Such moments bring grief and sadness, but in such times one also finds inner strength and the richness of community life. When Alison Sanders, a first grader at the Washington Waldorf School, died last fall in a car accident, it also became a time when many of her friends came to the realization that death was not an end, but a continuation of the life they know and love here.

Alison and my daughter, Puanani, were first acquainted as three year olds in Acorn Hill's two-day class. Alison went to the Waldorf School kindergarten for a couple of years. They were reacquainted again in September in the first grade. A few days into the school year, Alison was in a fatal car accident. She was on life support for a day or so, and after she crossed the threshold she was brought home to lie in her bedroom for three days. The children had so many questions, which were finally answered, it seemed, by Alison herself as she lay in her bedroom, surrounded by family, friends, food and a lot of children running around and playing. Although it was so very sad, the experience was so beautiful.

Earlier, the children in my carpool had asked so many questions. I told them that perhaps Alison had chosen her time to die when she was in the spiritual world and was choosing her mom and dad. This comforted me, I know. But all questions stopped after the children made the long trip up the stairs to Alison's room. They stood there in her room, full of flowers and incense. Someone was sitting vigil in prayer. The children looked at her from just inside the door with so much respect, and a little fear and nervousness. She was Alison but she looked so different that it was obvious that there was but an empty vessel there. The children turned, and reverently, wordlessly, left the room after about a minute.

Later that night, after story and prayers as I lay with Puanani, she looked at me with tears in her eyes. She asked me why Alison had to die. "She liked to sing the Michael song and to play her flute even when teacher said to put it away." I just looked at Puanani, so sad. Then Puanani said, very earnestly, "I know why Alison had to die... because I had a hard time to believe in God". She answered her own question and there were no more questions.

The next day we went to Alison's home again. The first graders would play, then troop up to Alison's room to "visit Alison". Soon they were sitting on her bed patting her cold hand into which they placed beeswax gifts and flowers. They would adjust the garland on her head and her clothes and just chat with each other, laughing too. I noticed the adult sitting vigil look at them in wonder.

There was such a spirit in the house, so many people, coming and going, and children everywhere, playing and running around, the table laden with food. The neighbors thought there was a party going on at first. Alison's mother was comforted by all the support of the Waldorf community and we were drawn to the house to be comforted too. At one point, I asked Puanani if she wanted to give Alison a small toy bird. Puanani said, "Mommy, she's dead. She can't play with it," and she looked at me as if asking, "Did you forget?" At the funeral I was crying, and my

ten year old also. She said, "I hardly knew Alison, and I can't stop crying." Her classmate, Alison's brother, wasn't very sad. He saw her in eurythmy class and asked the kids to make a space for her. Puanani looked at her sister and me crying. With a smile on her face she looked at us as if asking, "Did you forget?"
