

Leo

A Mother's Gift to a Waldorf Kindergarten Teacher

The story of Leo was sent to us by Margaret Meyerkort who lives in England. The kindergarten teacher and parents of Leo wish to remain anonymous. We thank them for their permission to publish Leo's story. The names of people and places are fictional but the story is a true one.

I will tell you how Leo came to us. We had moved to Sunrise House, our family with five children between three and eight years of age and a few adults in need of special care within our larger community setting. I felt after we had settled in that there would be room for one more child if there was one who needed us. This lived strongly in my husband and me; we did not look for it, but were open to the idea.

Leo came to us in a wonderful way. Pauline joined our house while she was expecting him. She had had meningitis as an infant, had developed convulsions and had not developed as children of her age did.

We had known Pauline as a young girl. Now, when she was expecting a child she looked beautiful, had no awareness of her condition and was hardly able to understand how she had come to conceive and carry a child. Throughout her pregnancy she had no convulsions and did not stutter. We knew we were meant to help and welcome this child.

Pauline worked in our household and was skillful at baking bread. I helped her to dress nicely. I also made sure I had a good relationship with her. I visited her regularly every evening to talk to her and massage her legs and to do breathing and relaxation exercises with her. Then I wished her a good night, leaving her with the Gospel reading of that week to take her into sleep.

Everyone in our household began to look forward to the baby's arrival and knitted or sewed a woolen garment. I had found a doctor and a midwife who were sympathetic and understanding towards our situation and were helping to prepare for the confinement at home.

All was well at the time of the birth. I was at Pauline's side, while the midwife saw to the delivery. My husband was with our children and the other adults that night - just before Easter.

The birth was peaceful. The young mother was like a vessel in receiving this delicate child, and we all welcomed him with all our hearts. He had our wooden family cradle with pink and blue curtains and our own children brought pictures they had colored or painted to put on the wall, and we sang lullabies.

The baby fitted into the rhythm of our home right from the beginning - only we soon discovered he could not digest his mother's milk. So we weaned him and put him on the bottle.

Gradually it became apparent that Pauline was reverting to the convulsions and the stammer. She could not face the responsibility for the child which showed, for instance, when the child cried for his feeding in the early morning. She then felt irritated and pulled the cover over her head in order not to hear him. After a while, when I demanded her involvement in the rhythmic daily care of the baby, she became almost aggressive towards me.

We prepared for the Christening and as we wanted the child to be called Leo, I discussed it with Pauline and taught her to embroider the name onto a cloth so that she would remember it. My husband and I agreed to be Godparents.

The Christening was a lovely occasion. We still hoped that between the three of us we could cope. It became clearer, however, that Pauline was not able to bring up her child. So we took steps towards adoption and spoke with Pauline.

When it came to giving her consent in the court she was asked whether she had any special wish concerning the future of the child. She became suddenly very excited and involved and said to the judge: "I want him to grow strong with the Gardeners." (our family).

Pauline moved to another community. It was now our task to bring up this lovely child. He had little sense for survival, had to be much encouraged to eat, was often seriously ill with high temperatures and could not be potty-trained for a long time. He walked early though. He had the measles very young, which helped him tremendously in that he picked up strength and has never been really ill since. Our own children loved him and cared for him. Christine, one of our adults in need of special care, loved him dearly and cared for him in an especially motherly way.

I often wondered when the time would come to tell him about his background, and at such moments my heart began to beat faster because I was unsure of the best way to do it. One day Leo and I were watching the sheep and their lambs, and he cuddled up in my lap and said, "Mummy, that's how I drank from you," and again there was my question, but I could not find it in my heart to tell him.

When he was four years old, he started in a Steiner/Waldorf kindergarten. As he was the youngest at home he needed to have other children around him as well, as liking to help me in the kitchen and the garden. He also helped me to care for the animals, especially the broody hens and their wooly chickens in Spring. The kindergarten brought him much joy.

When he began to change his teeth I felt it was time to speak with him before he started first grade. Otherwise, someone else might tell him in an unexpected moment, which could be harmful. So I made an arrangement with the kindergarten teacher in whom we had every confidence. I kept Leo at home one day to take him for an outing. The teacher was aware of my intention and this was a great support.

When Leo and I had walked to a beautiful spot we sat down and unpacked our picnic. I began to tell him a story - a true story - about himself: How we were allowed to have five children; I named his brothers and sisters. And then as we had all the children we were meant to have Pauline came to us. She was expecting a child and she and the child needed help. The story was painful for us both. Then came the moment when Leo said, with shining eyes: "And then she gave me to you." Yes, she did! We had some more to eat and when I had drunk from the bottle and offered it to him he said: "You are only allowed to drink from the same bottle or cup when you are from the same family." And then with a deep sigh he drank.

We packed up the picnic and went home. Life went on as usual and it seemed as if nothing special had happened. Nothing was said for a few years and sometimes we wondered whether Leo had really understood the situation in his own and in our lives.

But then he showed concern. At first slowly, but then towards the ninth year the search for identity became evident. He demanded: "Who is my mother, where is she?" He wanted to write to her and make her a present. Whenever it came up in different situations we had to deal with it. Then there was peace for a while and I thought he had fully recognized that he belonged to us, that I was his mother. On the contrary, as he grew up there were outbursts like: "You cannot tell me, you are not my mother," and he often behaved stubbornly, and I felt hurt and frustrated. Then I told myself: "This is absurd. Similar difficulties arise with any child when one insists on order and rhythm and necessary details. I shall not be hurt, I will just leave the room and wait till he comes round."

So, at about the age of twelve he had his rucksack permanently packed to leave in search of his natural mother. (The question of his father has never arisen). We continued to care for him and yet give him space. We made sure that difficulties were resolved and hurt feelings forgiven before night fell so that the mood could be harmonious next morning.

He does love me. He showed it clearly on various occasions. We all have our shortcomings. For him his real mother may have assumed the image of the Sistine Madonna by Raphael, a picture which has hung over his bed all these years.

Leo is a lovely child. He is responsive to nature in a wonderful and observant way. He seems to know every little plant and creature around him. In school he is slow and still finds it difficult to read and write and know his tables. But he can “think with his fingers” and create with his willing hands - in other words he is practical in many fields. He is fully accepted in school and in our home and community. Leo enjoys being with smaller children and they absolutely adore him.

We know that there will still be difficult times with Leo. Soon he will begin confirmation lessons. We trust these will also guide and help him. As parents we have a fundamental basis of confidence in each other and in life. This is what I wanted to share with you.