

Stirring the Bubbling Pot ***Leanne Moraes, Australia***

Leanne works with family playgroups and with a four-year-old kindergarten group at the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner School. This article was inspired by Joan Salter's new book, Mothering With Soul. The article first appeared in Star Weavings, Autumn/Winter 1999.

Stirring a pot of bubbling plum jam, I recall joyful summer days of freshly picked fruit, warm jars, cellophane tops, labels and a shelf ready to receive the delicious jams. My small legs got tired doing this work, but every jar of jam opened throughout the year was greatly appreciated.

Jam making is one of the many gifts I carry from my mother to my family. When my mother was growing up the only jam you would have eaten was homemade. Today everything sits waiting on the shelf, our consumer society has made it so easy, but at what cost to family life?

Growing up in suburban Melbourne in the sixties, a lot of my friends' mothers stayed at home or worked part-time. Today many women choose to work full-time. With the availability of a crèche on every corner, after school-care, the high cost of living, single parent families, and freedom to continue careers, many women have returned to the workplace out of necessity.

In Joan Salter's latest book, *Mothering with Soul*, she dedicates a chapter to "Deciding". In this chapter she discusses parents' issues surrounding work and home making, and finding the right way to balance the two. Joan emphasizes that breast-feeding should not be interrupted and to wait until breast-feeding has stopped before resuming work. Even so, she says, part-time work with suitable child-care, preferably in the home, can work very well for both parent and child.

As we stand before a new century, I look back over my shoulder at the life and times of my grandmother who raised four children during the Depression; at my mother who was at the threshold of women's emancipation and equality; and at my life where coeducation and career are held in higher esteem than raising the new generation in the home. Like many mothers today I have worked part-time while raising my children. I am fortunate to have a supportive partner and a community of people working with anthroposophy. Over twelve years of mothering I have built up a network of loving friends with whom I share babysitting and today these families form part of my extended family. The positive outcome of working and caring for children in my extended family is that we are working to create a higher community - a community where we love one another like brother and sister - but a relationship free from blood ties and created in freedom. These relationships will build a foundation for our children through puberty and into their adult life. This is the New Jerusalem. This is consciousness soul in its infancy.

My work as a kindergarten teacher is with parents and young children under four years of age. I see a melting pot of women. Some have just become mothers and are stepping into unknown territory; others are with a fourth child, more mature with experience but still treading a path sometimes smooth and undulating, and sometimes rough and rocky. Even in such a diverse group of women there is a common attribute amongst those at our school. They are all on a journey of self-development, on the way to becoming their true selves and reaching their potential.

When a new group of families come into my "family play group" I greet them as openly as possible, without any judgment. A Steiner group can be overwhelming for many - families can feel inadequate about many of their choices. As a facilitator, I must first gain their confidence so

that these people can make choices and changes out of themselves. Only when inner movement has occurred can change be truly effective.

All year I had a four-year-old boy in the group who rolled across the morning circle. His mother was embarrassed and unsure about how to handle her son. Then the child got sick and did not watch television for a week. The next week at circle time he stood still and participated. I asked the mother if anything had been different at home and she told me about his illness, and it also came up that there had been no television viewing. I did not say anything and I did not need to. A light went on for the mother. "It's the television. Now I understand," she said. She had heard me speak about the adverse effects of television, but had been afraid to turn it off because she feared rejection from her family. The same mother had feared rejection at playgroup because she did not wear the same clothing and her son had a brightly colored plastic lunch-box. I witnessed true inner movement with this woman and her anxiety transformed into an understanding that allowed her to become freer. Today, the little boy continues to flourish without television and he loves morning circle.

When the mothers feel more confident and familiar with each other and the children, they begin to open their homes to one another. A supportive network is developed with the possibility of continuing throughout the kindergarten years, primary school and on to adolescence. Mothers who would have been isolated in the suburbs are finding new ways to form community - a phenomenon that is occurring everywhere, not only in Steiner schools. All kindergartens in Victoria that are not in Child Care Centers have parent-run management committees, giving new parents the possibility of building bridges from their family back into the community.

One morning at playgroup I had begun to cream butter, ready to add sugar and egg. All my ingredients were neatly waiting in various bowls. A woman in her late twenties walked into the community house. There I stood - hair tied back, in clean white apron, with a mixing bowl and wooden spoon in hand. "What are you doing?" she asked. Did I really need to explain? This woman had never seen a cake being made; her mother only bought cakes. This has made me wonder what had been neglected in her biography as a consequence of a family life where there was not time to bake a cake! Was this a reflection of her childhood family experience?

Many of the home-making tasks have altered greatly over this century. The modern world has given us machines and packaged food to lighten our load. Do we have more leisure as mothers in the nineties? My experience is that we do not - as every gap is filled with something else. The need, therefore, is to find a balance between the essential and the non-essential, a breathing in towards the family heart and back out into the community. Motherhood is a role of sacrifice, of dedication and transformation. We cannot stand still in our inner development as mothers.

From the conception of our child we immediately experience profound changes. We need to transform fear - fear of the unknown and fear of the other. Our feeling life takes over our soul and love fills us up. This love comes out towards the world, towards our neighbor's child and towards nature as we take a fresh look through the eyes of our children. We find ways to be creative in the home, teaching ourselves new skills, things we otherwise would not learn: singing, gardening, cooking; in fact all things of life. We nurture imaginative thinking as we visualize the precious children in our care. We build a life where reverence and gratitude is simply a part of the family life.

A mother has the opportunity to work on herself, using her mothering experience as her guide by transforming daily tasks into deeds imbued with love and engaging her will in creating a rhythmic family life - a life where security sustains.

My jam making is one small activity which nurtures a reverence for life. Our family has watched the plum tree lose its leaves, stand erect in the cold dark winter burst forth into blossom with the spring sun, and lo, small green fruits which slowly ripen over summer from thousands of sun kisses. Heavy boughs are laden with fruit; boxes filled and jam made. While stirring the bubbling pot I ponder life - creating thoughts of my child beginning school, giving thanks for life and standing for a moment within myself. My breath is deep and slow, and a sense of peace fills me before I enter once more into the hustle and bustle of life as a mother.