

A Trip to Africa

Joan Almon

In March, I spent three intense but wonderful weeks in Africa. My journeys took me first to Baobab Teacher Training Institute in Alexandra Township in Johannesburg. There I had the good fortune of working with Truus Geraets who helped found Baobab and who now lives in Los Angeles, as well as Jane Johannson, a kindergarten teacher and class teacher from the L.A. area. On the Baobab faculty are two of the long-standing kindergarten teachers, Fundie Mndende and Catherine Sefatsa, and new this year is Anna Marie Hernandez, a kindergarten teacher and eurythmist originally from Mexico. After a few difficult years, Baobab is struggling to build itself up again. The faculty is working very hard and is in need of much help.

My second stop was in Cape Town at the Centre for Creative Education where the township work has been growing rapidly. Block courses were taking place while I was in town, and it was wonderful to see the puppetry work led by Eldbjorg Paulsen, a visiting Norwegian kindergarten teacher. Together we performed “The Winning of Kwelanga,” and doing that beautiful Zulu story in Africa was a wonderful experience, as was giving talks to township parents and teachers.

In Nairobi, I worked with the existing school, now ten years old, and with a new initiative that has developed a large kindergarten in town and is going to start a second school. The large attendance at a public talk was testimony of the growing interest in Waldorf education in Kenya.

What I also loved on my visit to Kenya was the chance to see some of the wildlife. Imagine walking from your home to school and seeing a giraffe grazing on bushes outside the school fence. Or imagine going to a national park across the road from the school and visiting an orphanage for baby elephants. On the day I visited there were fourteen little elephants each a few months old. They stand about four feet high and I think I will always remember those wonderful babies. I was so glad they liked to be touched as did the baby rhino who was there. It would have been incredibly hard not to touch them. When they are a year old they will be reintroduced to the wild where they should be able to survive.

Another high point took place while I visited the Hekima Waldorf School in Tanzania. There was a wonderful kindergarten teacher from Austria who was new to the school and knew little about Waldorf education. The children tended to be quite chaotic during play time, yet they were also so imitative that when I began unraveling some twisted yarn, all twenty-five quickly gathered around to watch. When I finished the task, they turned as if on signal, spread throughout the room and began to play. Soon the wonderful hum of the kindergarten could be heard. The kindergarten teacher was stunned to see her class play so well, and I have to admit even I was amazed to see the classical relationship between the adult’s work and the child’s play demonstrated in such a pure and powerful way. It makes me eager to return to Africa which I hope to do next year.

Meanwhile if your kindergartens or schools have any materials to give away such as used crayons, used beeswax, or pieces of silk for puppets, please think of the African schools which have no money for such materials. Materials can be sent to me, and I will clean them up and take them on my next trip. The teachers are also very eager for books on Waldorf education and anthroposophy. The address is 7303 Dartmouth Avenue, College Park, MD 20740.