

## ***Anna Keefe – Memories of a Friend***

### ***Carol Nasr, Halifax***

My dear friend Anna Keefe died on Sunday, November 28, 1999, in her own living room at about four o'clock in the afternoon. She was having tea with Mary, a high school friend she had known for thirty-seven years. She suddenly said that she felt faint. When she sat down and leaned back against the couch, she lost consciousness. All efforts to revive her were futile.

Anna's death came as a complete surprise to all who knew her. We had been together the day before with friends and colleagues at the Christmas Fair of the South Shore Waldorf School in Conquerall Mills. On that rainy day we had bought our wreaths for the next day's lighting of the first Advent candle. Anna had also bought a doll for her new grandson and had taken photographs of the festivities. She was in the midst of the animated conversation of a busy lunchtime crowd.

The next day was another normal day in Anna's life. She took an early walk near the ocean at Point Pleasant Park, spoke with her close friend Atilla on the telephone, and made lunch for her son David and her mother at her home. Later in the day, her friend Mary came for tea. An hour later, Anna died. Driving past her house shortly after, I saw the fire engine and the ambulance, and the paramedics rushing through the front door. I could only follow them to the hospital in disbelief.

Anna's life was interrupted unexpectedly and she strode across the threshold so quickly that it took our breath away. She was here one moment and gone the next. Looking back, it seems that Anna's death was accomplished in the same quiet, natural, and modest manner that characterized so many of her life's endeavors. Later we would find out that the cause of her death was a rupture in her aorta.

Anna and I met in the late 1970's through a mutual acquaintance. We entered into our friendship eagerly, sharing many of the same interests. We soon became neighbors, sharing meals and summer holidays and working together in early childhood education. At the time, she was teaching preschool in Halifax. She would continue to teach in various settings for the next seven years.

It was Anna who first introduced me to Waldorf education and then to Anthroposophy. Her dream was to see a Waldorf school established in Halifax. To this end, she went in 1985 to take the Waldorf kindergarten teacher training at the Rudolf Steiner Center in Toronto. In 1988, two years after her return, she became the founding teacher of the Ocean Wave Waldorf Kindergarten in Halifax. The kindergarten was housed in a portion of the historic St. George Round Church and was open for seven years. During this time, Anna made a connection with the Shambhala Buddhist community through many of the parents who enrolled their children in the kindergarten. They were drawn to the Waldorf pedagogy and to Anna's lively and generous spirit. She in turn respected their ideas and acknowledged their tradition.

Soon after I met Anna, she made a comment that stayed with me and continued to instruct me for years. As we walked past a small park, she said that she often thought of the enormous amount of thought, planning, and labor that went into creating a park — the setting aside of the land, the building of the paths, planting the shrubs and flowers, the benches, the water fountain, the lights, and above all, the gift it would become for generations to follow. Looking back, I now realize she was introducing me to Anthroposophy via the spiritual exercises and the practice of gratitude. I never pass a park without thinking of Anna.

Anna was a deep thinker and a life-long student. Every summer she attended courses at the Rudolf Steiner Institute in Waterville, Maine. Her interests were wide, ranging from watercolor painting and eurythmy, to astronomy and biodynamic agriculture. Her love of watercolor grew over the years and for some time she held a weekly painting group in her home. I can remember being at one of those sessions, the sunlight streaming through the window and lighting up one of the small islands of tranquility and beauty that Anna had created for painting. In recent years, Anna surprised some of us by learning to use a computer and becoming quite at home on the Internet.

For me, Anna embodied the virtue for January 21 – February 20, “Reticence becomes meditative strength.” When at times Anna seemed to be at a standstill, the eventual result would be a deepening of understanding as a perplexing issue or problem would transform. She was able to strike a delicate balance between a keen interest in new ideas and a reluctance to change, between stillness and action, between order and chaos. She had a gift for holding back when others wanted to plunge forward. In her reticence, she cultivated wisdom.

I loved talking with Anna. She could see matters from many points of view. She was an attentive listener and took a keen and gentle interest in people. She had a way of nodding and murmuring thoughtfully as we spoke that made me feel fully embraced and accompanied in my pondering. She had a light and mischievous sense of humor and an infectious laugh that lingers clearly in my memory. After a conversation with Anna, I would often find a book or an article at my doorstep on the topic we had discussed. She was also comfortable with silence. She seemed to be like a calm, deep pool of water with unseen treasures in its depths. Parts of her remained a mystery even to those who knew her well.

Anna was the center of the anthroposophical activity in Nova Scotia. She served as a connection point for people all over the province and throughout the Maritimes. In 1993, she and a group of six other individuals formed Stella Maris, the Nova Scotia branch of the Anthroposophical Society in Canada. After the Ocean Wave Kindergarten closed, she continued to encourage individuals and to support groups interested in Waldorf education. She was a strong supporter of the South Shore Waldorf School and stayed in close contact with its community over the years. She held study groups and meetings in her home and often hosted the seasonal gatherings of members and friends of the Anthroposophical Society. The extensive anthroposophical library left by the Castillez estate was housed in her living room. She always had a table full of brochures and catalogues of anthroposophical study programs and events, and she regularly ordered a variety of books from Tri-Fold that she offered for sale. She organized seminars and speakers and brought visiting teachers to our area. She served on the council of the Anthroposophical Society in Canada. She had colleagues and dear friends throughout Canada and the United States. Because Anna worked so quietly and gracefully, it will not be immediately apparent just how much she held together.

A vigil was held for Anna during the three days following her death. Friends in Nova Scotia and across Canada read for her around the clock. At that time her body lay in a funeral home here in Halifax where her family and friends were with her. Her adult sons, David and Patrick, carried out the many necessary tasks during this week with tremendous dignity and love. On the fourth day, the funeral was held in the Catholic church where her family felt at home. At Anna’s funeral, I was struck by the wide variety of people in attendance. She had spent her entire life in Halifax and her far-reaching interests had touched hundreds of friends.

Two days after Anna’s death, two of us were imagining how we might celebrate her work in early childhood. An Advent spiral came to mind! Many people warmly remembered Anna dressed in

white, leading the children into the spiral at the Ocean Wave Kindergarten. Quickly the excitement spread. In the midst of our sadness, we had something to celebrate and we shared the preparations joyfully. One brought apples and cut stars, another brought meters of blue cloth; another greenery, one baked star cookies, and others brought tangerines. We contacted musicians who had played at Anna's Advent spirals, and they were happy to join us. We decided to hold the spiral in the early evening of the day of Anna's funeral.

After the funeral and the graveside ceremony, there was a reception at her home where her family had spread a table with photographs of her life. Following the reception, the furniture was moved and the spiral began to take shape in Anna's living room. In the kitchen, the candles were placed into the apples. We found some items from Anna's past spirals, a candleholder, a starry cloth, some crystals and wooden animals. After our spiral preparations were complete, we attended a Buddhist service in her memory at the Shambhala Center. Several people stood to speak about their particular memory of Anna. Listening to her Buddhist friends, it was apparent from their comments how treasured and respected she was in their community.

At last we returned in the evening to Anna's to walk the spiral. While we had expected a few friends of Waldorf to attend, more and more people arrived until her living room and dining room were full to bursting. What a remarkable coming together it was of Anna's family and friends, the Buddhist community and the Anthroposophical group. I think Anna would have loved it. Children from the Ocean Wave Kindergarten, now nine to fourteen years old, were the first to carry their apples to the center and place them on the spiral. Then other children, her family, friends, and colleagues joined until the room was glowing with candlelight. The mood in the room was one of devotion, gratitude, and an overwhelming sense of peace. It had been a full day and truly a celebration of her life.