

The Rhythm of Life  
By Helle Heckmann  
Translated by Jean-Paul Bardou

How do we bring to the child childhood's gifts of total acceptance, innocence, faith, and trust? For me, it has always been through life in Nature, its constant changes and transformations, never the same and yet recognizable. For me, the fact of being a human being in Nature, working with Nature with consideration and respect, has been a means to bring to present day children (and adults) an experience of forces that are far beyond our understanding, but that ask for our wondering. To be able to see and wonder is a driving force for life forces.

*Nature Celebrations and Cosmic Celebrations*

Regardless of where we are on the Earth, Nature is at the base of our culture and our survival. We must adjust our existence according to the natural forces, it is deeply ingrained in us. A calling for a religious force that goes beyond all religious denomination is also present in Nature. Nature's celebrations must always be an expression of the surroundings we live in.

For me, the cosmic celebrations are another element. They take place at specific times all over the Earth, because they express a realm beyond the plane of Nature.

Let's take Easter as an example. In Denmark, Easter joins with Spring. So we mix the two aspects of celebration. A Spring celebration expresses appreciation for the arrival of Spring after a very dark period. We paint (a heathen custom) and we let the Easter Bunny hide eggs that the children must find (the hare as a fertility symbol). Then we roll those eggs down a hill so that the hardboiled eggs split in two and the yolks roll out, a symbol for the release and the ascension of Jesus Christ as the being of the Sun. In that manner, we mix a celebration of Nature with a spiritual celebration. It works quite well, because we blend many cultural traditions with spiritual cosmic realities. What happens on the other side of the Earth? There it is Fall, that is the Lantern celebration as a Nature celebration, and Easter as a Cosmic celebration. It means that for me in that situation (Fall on the other side of the Earth), the raising of the Christ force must convey an inner enlightenment, while on the Northern hemisphere it must be an external experience, or how else can it be?

How can we practice our seasonal and cosmic celebrations so that they appear as parts of a whole instead of isolated celebrations?

I have first chosen to hold celebrations that I feel are relevant for our kindergarten—considering the cultural background of my children and the environment they come from. I have chosen a daily rhythm that builds on outdoors experience, because many of children are city children with limited movement possibilities—because of traffic, small apartments, and an indoor life based on sitting (computers, television, etc.). We have a delightful garden and beautiful surroundings (swamps, cemetery, and soccer field), although we are located only 15 minutes by bicycle from the center of Copenhagen. It is quite natural for us to include these areas in our daily life. Every day we spend the first two morning hours outside the kindergarten: we walk 20 minutes, spend one hour at a specific place, and walk home again—simply so that the children get moving (we have about 25 children from 1 to 7 years of age. See *Nøkken, a Garden for Children*.)

On our daily walk, we get an experience of the four elements: the whistling (or lack thereof) of the wind; the warmth of the Sun, when it hides or comes out; the drumming of the rain or the splashing of the puddles; the changing states of the earth, wet, dry, planted or not, and so forth.

At the same time, Nature makes frames around us, and it makes a big difference as to where we are in the course of the year. Each time has its own quality and each season makes us remember the previous one and look forward to the next one. Nature helps us remember prior experiences and

build joy for upcoming ones. That expresses itself quite naturally in the different age phases the children go through in the six years they spend in the kindergarten.

The seasons don't start and end, they are like a wheel constantly in motion. For instance, our children always start singing Christmas songs in the late Spring just before Summer. They dance around spruce trees (Christmas trees) that have sprung forth new shoots and look just as if they had decorated themselves the way we, in Denmark, decorate them and dance around them by Christmas.

The complementary celebrations take place to a large extent at the same time as the real seasonal celebrations, and that is where all our pedagogical work lies. The way we carry out the celebrations so that there is a context with the whole course of the year, a weaving in and out from one to the next, and yet some kind of an orderly sequence, so that the formative forces clearly shine through. The art is to understand Nature as a rhythmical breath instead of a beat that ticks separate events.

### *Harvest*

To start with harvesting time is like going directly to the end of a good book. At harvesting time we harvest our diligence! On the outside, we harvest the crops given to us by the Earth, depending on how well we have done at reading Nature, at sowing in a timely manner and at taking care of our crops.

For me, harvesting grains is an archetypal experience. I still ask myself whether it is not a bit artificial to bring my city children to the countryside and see a farmer harvest with a scythe and gather sheaves to bring them back to the kindergarten. Nowadays children know that all this is done with huge machines and they cannot connect a scythe with a grain field (if they have seen one in the first place). Anyway, I still stubbornly keep the farm visit for all families as a shared outing and a sensory experience because I see some archetypal movements in the sweeping of the scythe through the grain and in the sound of the meeting between scythe and grain. As we stand outside in the field, we hear the wind, the sky is high above and we can see far on every side. To have seen the farmers' genuine movements makes it also possible to make the right movements during song games. I think that it is very important to be able to imitate the proper movements.

After the farm visit, we take about 14 days to "harvest". The grain stands in sheaves in the garden to be seen and to be touched. We sing harvest songs, and after a couple of days, we thresh the grain. All children stand in a circle and as we sing the harvest songs we go around the small harvest sheaves. When we get to the part of the song that says: "Do you know how the farmer threshes...", we all bend down, take a sheaf and thresh the grain from the ears on the white sheet that lays in the middle. We repeat that threshing motion time after time, some children with great care, some with a lot of force, while others simply watch (the small ones are sleeping at that time). Seeing the grain jump out of the ears is magic that is commented on with excitement. When all the bundles have been threshed, two adults grab an end of the sheet, as the children stand off to the side; 1,2, 3, we throw grain and chaff in the air. The wind will blow the chaff away and the grain falls back, nice and clean into the sheet. To feel grain is a blissful experience — "Me too!" "Me too!"— all the children stream by and bury their hands in the heap of grain, a special moment.

After that the small hand-driven grain mills come out and the children take turn grinding (we have about 7 mills for 16 children). For days, they grind and grind to make flour during the afternoon hours. On our morning outings, we bring the straw, which we adults—helped or watched by the children—make into wreathes and various braided objects. We sing as we work. This is an industrious time.

Harvest work takes place all over the garden. Fruit, berries, and vegetables must be harvested—at different times, though—and they must be processed or dried. Flowers must be watered, animals must be fed, and rabbits must be shorn. It is a time with lots of work to do. We round it off with a harvest celebration to which the parents—who bring homemade cakes—are invited from 1PM to 2:30PM. We have baked bread and prepared elderflower juice (from before the Summer vacation) so

that we are reminded of the days before Summer, when all had a different color and the atmosphere was different. On the day of the celebration, we go to a special place where we churn cream into butter in jam jars and bring it back home. We then dress with festive clothes—all the children have brought special fine harvest clothes (with 'fine', I don't mean new or expensive, but clothes they connect with special times, celebration, and joy). We all comb our hair and admire each other under this transformation. We shed the old and renew ourselves.

In a long line, we go to the kindergarten's room, which has been decorated for the occasion with harvest sheaves, rosehips, wild flowers, etc. We sit by a long table and today the children get to 'butter' their own bread, decide themselves what they will have on their bread, and kindly ask to be handed this or that. There is abundance, many children get their fill just by looking. After that comes the harvest story. It is told out in the garden, among the fruit and vegetable the children have brought themselves the day before. One of the pedagogues has prepared a story on the theme: The king invites people to a harvest celebration, because the princess wants to get married... The children are as quiet as mice (see *King Carrot and Aaron Apple*, also in this issue -Ed.) After the story, it is time to play in the garden, where children can repeat the story or invent new ones, or simply play in peace and quiet. The adults are busy in the garden, preparing the tables for the parents' visit.

When the parents arrive, they wait in the garden by the entrance of the kindergarten (and deliver the cakes to the helpful pedagogues). When all have arrived, we go in a singing chain to the garden towards a pile of straw. There the parents sit and weave a light wreath or take up another task. It is important that the parents have something to do. During that time, the children play around in the garden, and the parents can catch a glimpse of children at play. After half an hour, all are invited to the tables and we sing our mealtime song. Then we eat and we chat. All get a beautiful wreath to take home, to be hung by the entrance door or on a wall; or to be laid on a table to be decorated again with various flowers. In any case, the wreath is kept until Advent Spiral time, at which time it is brought back to be transformed into an advent wreath with spruce branches from the spiral. In that manner, harvest time and the advent spiral time mesh with one another, with Michaelmas and the Lantern celebration in between.

*Helle Heckmann is the director of Nøkken, a child care, home-based center for 25 children in Copenhagen.*