

A Festival for a Threshold Crossing

Patricia Owens

The birthday celebration in the kindergarten is a rare and almost sacred event in the life of the child and his or her parents. Tears of joy well in many parents' eyes during the story as they are reminded of the spiritual journey that has brought their child to earth and into their arms. Each child, still so fresh from the spiritual world, savors the story of the Rainbow Bridge and beams with wisdom and delight. Reviewing the deeds of each year is a recognition of their intentions for this lifetime. Every birthday is a joyous and solemn occasion, which in its simplicity also has profound depth. I always sense their fascination and joy in one another's birthdays. It is as if they are remembering that their classmates have chosen to again be with them on the earth. Truly, the children are filled with the inner knowing of their connection to their spiritual home. This is one festival that adults can no longer experience in the same way as the children who may retain those "intimations of immortality." It is with this understanding and insight, I wish to share the following "festival" that was conceived and born during the Holy Nights.

On the morning of December 26 a beautiful blanket of snow graced the earth. With this Christmas gift from the heavens also came the shocking news that my colleague Peggy Burns had suddenly crossed the threshold. With stunned disbelief, calls to kindergarten parents were made and a substitute was chosen within hours. Later that evening, I carried a perfectly bloomed amaryllis (that had gloriously opened that morning) to Peggy's classroom to meet my colleagues. To our amazement, we found her room perfectly cleaned, arranged, and cleared of all Advent decorations. Peggy had hosted a potluck gathering for the parents and children of her class on the last day prior to vacation. As she was a new teacher at the school, and most of the families were new to the school, she encouraged a wonderful social bonding. She was the only teacher at Green

Meadow who celebrated with families on this day. This joyous holiday party was a labor of love attended by all of her children and parents. It was her final goodbye.

When I entered her room that day I felt eerily empty. I lit a candle and began with a Hallelujah in eurythmy as an offering to her soul. As the teachers performed the repetitive gestures together, we could sense her presence and our connection. We enlisted her help from the spiritual world and shared our thoughts. We read aloud from the St. Luke Gospel. Nothing more could be said. We carried Peggy, the children, and their parents into our sleep on this Holy Night.

The questions and concerns for the children were obvious. How could we make their transition as natural as possible? How could we help transform the grief of the devoted parents so visibly shaken by this shock? How could we ourselves face the daunting tasks that lay ahead? The comfort was in knowing that the spiritual world would guide us.

Inwardly, I carried the children and continued my nightly readings throughout the Holy Nights. I was in contact with another colleague as to our plans for Peggy's class. The kindergarten teachers and the parents agreed that a visit to the classroom, prior to the scheduled school day, would serve to ease the transition for the children. It would be short and simple, and most importantly, it was to be a celebration!

For one week prior to the festival the new teacher, Christiane Landowne, worked to ensoul the room with her own touches. Then, on Sunday, January 5, we held a very unique and memorable "festival" in the kindergarten classroom. All the kindergarten teachers arrived to ready the space and prepare refreshments, expectant yet tentative, putting emotions aside. An important task was at hand. How would it be for the children to enter their classroom and not be greeted by their beloved Mrs. Burns?

The teachers greeted the children and their parents with soft voices and welcoming smiles. As usual, they hung up their coats on their own hooks. Familiar faces surrounded them—faces that the children recognized from the playground and puppet shows. Silently they drifted about the room and slowly found seats on chairs, tables, and laps. Wide-eyed four- and five-year-olds appeared calmly reserved and thoughtful. Their parents were teary-eyed and uneasy, filled with anticipation of what was to come. A candle was lit and a story begun.

The story, *Birth into the Spiritual World* by Nancy Blanning, gave a beautiful picture of metamorphosis and homecoming. The story brought the image of a mother and child reunion, the most comforting of all archetypes. It was healing for us all. The shift of energy in the room was palpable. The tension seemed to melt away while the breathing of the children deepened as they entered the pictorial world. The story gave a glimpse into the invisible world of spirit. Through those words and images, the children could connect their experience, not in an abstract way, but as a living reality.

These same children, who together walked the Advent Spiral a month before, had experienced the light that can penetrate all darkness. The familiar birthday story now had another chapter that celebrated a joyous reunion. Two strengthening images were brought through the story. Two recent festivals had laid a foundation for this new Spiritual Birthday Festival!

After the candle was snuffed, the children sat down at the tables where sheets of beeswax had been laid. One teacher demonstrated the transformation of the flat sheet into a candle. They were quietly shown how to place the string (wick) at one end and begin rolling their very own candle to be taken home and light the way for their dear teacher. An array of rainbow colors accompanied sparkling eyes and bright smiles. They were then given more beeswax to decorate a large white candle for a centerpiece for the table. The children and their parents were eager to oblige and the room began to hum with chatter and giggles as they sculpted their offerings. Soon the large candle was proudly decorated with stars, butterflies, symbols, and rainbows. Here they were again, happily busy at their kindergarten table in lively company. And now, did it truly feel like a celebration! At this time Christiane Landowne entered into the

room as had been planned. When one child noticed her familiar presence, he ran with a hug, "And here's our new teacher!" The timing could not have been more perfect and she was greeted with enthusiasm. Refreshments were served, parents mingled, and the teachers all breathed a deep sigh of relief, as the room filled with warmth, love, and peace, just as it had been on that last December celebration. Our hearts were lightened!

Through this experience, I was able to witness how the young child was able to come to an understanding through a living experience. Having been given an age-appropriate pictorial story to which they could relate, they were able to come to peace with a harsh reality. Working out of their will, they were able to participate in an artistic activity that was meaningful.

In reflecting on this unique, relatively unformed festival, I can say that its success was rooted in the groundwork of spiritual study and trust in the ever-present help of the spiritual World. What had transpired lives in the hearts of those children.

A few days later we overheard, "We have two teachers now, because Mrs. Burns looks down on us from heaven". How I had experienced knowing Peggy in her relationship with the children was a precious gift. Her gifts continue.

Birth Into The Spiritual World Nancy Blanning

A woman who had planted a beautiful garden found a caterpillar in her garden one day. She took it home and placed it gently in a dish by her bedside. At night the caterpillar would sing to her and the singing caused her to dream. She dreamed of the meadow from which all children come. There, in her dream, she saw a woman she dimly remembered and finally recognized as the Mother of the Meadow, in whose lap she had rocked long ago. Each night she dreamed of the meadow and the Mother and dreamed that the woman was calling to her, asking her to return to her lap, as she had been away so long. When she awoke each morning the memory of her dream became stronger and stronger and she also felt herself grow more and more tired and less able to tend the garden she had so carefully planted and cared for. At last one night in her dream she said to the Mother that she would like to come to the meadow, but she

could not leave her garden for who would care for it? The Mother answered that she had been the only one who could have planted the garden, but there were other loving gardeners who would nurture her flowers and help them grow into beautiful strong plants. At last the woman said, "Yes, I will come, but how can I travel such a great distance when I am so tired and am no longer strong?" The Mother told her that the secret lay at her side, and she saw that the caterpillar had transformed itself into a beautiful butterfly with wings so vast they could carry her anywhere. She had one more question before she climbed onto the butterfly's back. "Can I never come back and visit my garden and beautiful flowers? How can I find my way back?" The Mother answered, "Yes, you may come back. Whenever those who have known you and loved you light a candle

and remember you, that light will shine across the vast distance and show you the way back. You can speak to them in your dreams and they will know that you have been nearby." So she mounted the back of the butterfly and flew up into the great, starry sky. When she reached the meadow the Mother wrapped her arms about the woman, who had again become small like a tiny baby. "Today is your birthday in the meadow and for that we celebrate."

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