

Building Community through the Advent Garden

Joyce Gallardo

The following is an account of two women's experiences of the Advent garden, one indoors and the other outdoors.

An Indoor Garden

On November 6, 2004, my mother crossed the threshold. She would have been eighty-five on November 24. My mother lived a long life of devotion and dedication to her family, as did many women of her generation. During the weeks before Advent, I remembered how Mother had been so touched the first time she attended the Advent garden and saw my children walk the spiral at the Waldorf school they attended. "How special this is, how beautiful is this garden of light," she commented. Upon awakening one morning, I knew we should make an Advent garden in our home for the little children who attend Los Amiguitos, the nursery-kindergarten that takes place in my home, and for Mother to help light the pathway for her.

As I began the preparations, three days before the first Sunday of Advent, I was delighted by the offer of help from my nineteen-year-old daughter, Ana Lucia, who had recently

graduated from high school. Now she was ready to give back what had been given to her for so many years, and help to create a magical spiral of evergreens, flowers and crystals in our dining room for the children and their families who were invited to attend, and for Grandma.

I struggled with the idea of sharing a simple potluck meal after the garden. Several of the parents had never been to an Advent garden. Would staying for a meal too drastically change the mood of reverence with which the children would walk the spiral? After each of the Advent gardens I've attended, children, parents and siblings would file quietly out of the room and meet their child's teachers at the door outside where they would be handed their apple with the lit candle to take home. Then we would all go to our own homes to have a quiet dinner and lighting of our Advent wreath. The idea was to hold the mood of the spiral that the children had just walked.

But it felt as though something new needed to be created here, a different social impulse, something as sacred as the mood of the Advent garden with the space in between, the space for

meeting the other. I decided that the sharing of a meal and providing the families with a space to meet and commune with each other after the garden would be important components of this Advent garden experience.

I asked two parents who are musicians to play Christmas music for us. Vicky led us in singing traditional Christmas carols with guitar, and Juan Basilio, her husband, who is from Nicaragua, played and sang Christmas songs in Spanish. The older sister of one of the kindergarten children, who is a fourth grader, was our Advent angel.

The evening of the Advent garden flowed beautifully from the quiet mood of the dark room as I lit the candle and told the story of *Mary's Journey through the Stars*, to the children's mood of reverence as each one placed his apple with lit candle into the spiral, into their joy of receiving their apples with the burning candles outdoors in the cold winter darkness, and then finally into the festive mood of sharing a simple meal together with parents and friends in the light and warmth of the house. A community of twenty-five parents and children ate, talked with each other, played, and sang together on that first Sunday of Advent. Our home was truly blessed by their presence and I could feel Mother smiling.

The parent whose daughter was the Advent angel thanked me the next day. "As I watched Benjamin walk the spiral, I knew he was just where he should be. And it was so good to socialize later with each other. . . it made me realize that we are a community."

Another mother told me later, "It was great to be able to meet and talk with all of the parents. Since I am the last one to pick up my child each day, I have not met several of the parents. This was the perfect opportunity to get to know each other. Thank you for doing this!"

And a third parent, whose son has "graduated" from Los Amiguitos and is now in first grade said, "How important this was for us to come back and reconnect with old friends. It gives us a real sense of continuity, a sense of community."

An Outdoor Garden

A few days later, I shared this experience with my friend and colleague, Susan Weber, and she told me of her experience of the Advent garden of the past few years.

Susan had had little external festival life since she left kindergarten teaching and felt the need to create something in her home for Advent. The garden behind her home became the space she chose to enliven and use as the place for creating an Advent spiral. She and her husband made a spiral of stones with a candle in the center for the first Sunday of Advent, and they invited their neighbors and the neighbors' young child to come to the garden at dusk. Susan told the story of *Mary's Journey Through the Stars*, they sang songs, and walked the spiral with candlelit lanterns in hand. They placed the lanterns in the spiral of stones and said, "Goodnight."

Susan told me how comforting it was to look out of her window just before going to bed and see the candles still glowing in the stone spiral. This spiral has become a living part of her garden and adorns it year round.

The second week, she and her husband brought evergreen branches to the spiral and celebrated the second Sunday of Advent in the same way, with their neighbors. The third week they brought animals of wood and clay and, the fourth week, apples with candles, one for each child and adult. Each week, the children also hung golden stars in the trees.

Susan told me that they have celebrated Advent in this outdoor garden for the past six years with the same family. The group has grown to four neighborhood families and six children. As the children have grown bigger, they have begun to make the spiral of stones and evergreens and to bring new life to the garden each year as Advent approaches. Susan emphasized simplicity and continuity as two essential aspects of the beauty of the outdoor garden. The simple representation of the four kingdoms of nature, one for each week of Advent—the mineral kingdom, the plant kingdom, the animal kingdom and the kingdom of man—creates an atmosphere of growth and life as the time of the Birth of the Light at

Christmas draws near. She tells the same story each week of the four Sundays.

“Experiencing the weather each Sunday outdoors, sometimes under a canopy of sparkling stars and bright moonlight, sometimes under a starless sky, and sometimes under flakes of falling snow, has kept us connected to the beauty and power of nature at this special time of the year,” Susan added.

Last year, a potluck supper at Susan’s neighbor’s house was added to their Advent celebration. A space for meeting each other in a new way was created. This festive gathering of children and adults around a big table lit by candles and laden with warm, nourishing food to share on a cold Sunday in Advent helped to keep the light of community alive in the hearts of all who were there throughout the coming weeks of

the darkest time of the year, in anticipation of the Birth of the Light.

The creative potential of Advent (which means *the coming*—the coming of the Christ Child) for building and strengthening community is palpable, “Wherever two or more are gathered together in my name, there am I.”

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