

In A Nutshell

By Nancy Foster

Reviewed by Ann Stahl

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A fine light of clarity based on long experience and deep understanding shines through each of Nancy Foster's responses in this "Nutshell" to thirty-five questions most often asked by parents meeting Waldorf early childhood education for the first time.

The questions encompass three areas; classroom environment, work and play at school and children at home.

Some of my favorite questions include: "Could you address the question of musical instruments in the classroom? Many preschools have them, yet I have not seen them in the Waldorf kindergarten." Nancy replies; "The human voice could be said to be the first musical instrument, and for the early years of life it remains the most important instrument for the child both to hear and to 'play.' Another important 'musical instrument' is the human body—we clap, pat our legs, stamp our feet, or drum our fingertips on the floor to create sounds."

Another is: "Why do you provide play dishes and pots and pans, but no cars or trucks?" The reply; "A carved piece of wood may, for example, be used as a bridge, or as a telephone, a boat, a cradle, a delivery truck, a fish, a package, and so on. Cars and trucks are more specific in orientation because they have wheels. The wheels seem to speak so strongly of locomotion—particularly fast locomotion—that these vehicles are rarely used for other purposes by the children."

And; "Why are the Grimm's fairy tales with the 'good' associated with the 'beautiful' and the 'bad' with the 'ugly' in some of them told to the children?" Nancy's reply; "Some of these fairy tales are told because we believe they provide an important basis for human life. It is important, however, to choose carefully what fairy tales are told, according to the age of the child. Children who are ready for fairy tales sense that beauty and ugliness refer to inner qualities, not external appearance. If the story is told without the

‘baggage’ of adult feelings or intellectual interpretation, the child will be able to hear and digest it.”

Her answer to, “Is the world a good place?” is pertinent for adults who question the current state of the world and a sound reflection for the children of today.

Nancy embodies the quality of conscious striving, rather than absolute knowing, in the way she answers the questions parents have put to her over the years of her teaching life at the Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten and Nursery in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Her thinking about the topics will also help, in addition to parents, newer teachers who have not yet acquired the fullness of experience needed to answer questions in a non-dogmatic or prescribed way. I wish I had had these answers when I was brand new to Waldorf teaching in the 1970s!

The “sweetmeat” contained in this nutshell is juicy and full of flavor and will provide both nourishment and further questions for its readers. We thank Nancy for opening the “nut” and placing its contents in such an accessible form.