

From the Editor

Stephen Spitalny

A colleague in Denmark, Christine Christiansen, sent along a short and noteworthy quote from *The Sense of Wonder*, by Rachel Carson, perfect for starting off this issue of *Gateways*. Carson writes, “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.” It reminds me of something Rudolf Steiner wrote (in *The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy*) that has appeared in these pages before. “Pleasure and delight are the forces that most properly enliven and call forth the organs’ physical forms. . . The joy of children in and with their environment, must therefore be counted among the forces that build and shape the physical organs. They need teachers that look and act with happiness and, most of all, with honest, unaffected love. Such a love that streams, as it were, with warmth through the physical environment of the children may be said to literally ‘hatch’ the forms of the physical organs.” Two different takes on how important it is for developing children to be surrounded by adults who live joyously.

In taking an overview of this issue, it seems there is almost a theme—the development of the senses, though, the senses taken from a very wide viewpoint. It has been described in various ways how the totality of the young child is like a sense organ. All that is experienced, on many levels, is taken deeply in and become the substance, as it were, for the building up of children’s physical bodies and their patterns of soul response to experience. These sense impressions, or images, come in a wide ranging variety and include what can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched, as well as the feelings and thoughts of the people around them, the images from stories

told to them, the screen media watched and the food ingested. From one angle, we can say it is important to make sure the child is experiencing healthy images, healthy sense impressions that will support her or his development. Through another lens, we can say that all sense impressions are a type of nutrition, not unlike food. And we could say it is important to make sure the child is given nutritious experiences that are full of healthy building material especially during their formative years, for the building up of soul capacities, life forces and the physical body. One could say that the central role of early childhood educators is to create a healthy environment for the children to develop within, as well as advise parents as to how they could create a healthy environment for their child’s developing as well. This issue of *Gateways* offers a variety of thoughts about the creation of that healthy environment, not merely the support of the lower senses, but also how the adult can be a healthier element of that environment, and even how the food the child eats, the food provided by the adults, is also an essential part of that environment.

The Alliance for Childhood has just released their latest research project report entitled *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*. Written by Joan Almon, former chair of WECAN, and Edward Miller, this report is a call to action to bring play back into programs for young children.

Didactic instruction and standardized testing have pushed play out of early childhood education. Meanwhile, other social and technological trends in children’s lives, such as increasing screen time and the linking of toys to TV shows, films, and commercial

web sites, also undermine creative play. "Adult life begins in a child's imagination," writes poet Dana Gioia, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, "and we've relinquished that imagination to the marketplace." The withering of imagination in childhood is a looming catastrophe with consequences as profound as global climate change, but much less widely recognized. The very attributes we most want to nurture in our children—creativity, initiative, collaboration, problem-solving, courage—are best developed through imaginative play. Just as decisive action is needed to reverse the process of climate change, we must change course now to restore child initiated play and learning to our schools and communities.

The Alliance for Childhood website (allianceforchildhood.org) has many articles, reports and fact sheets about play on their home page. Their earlier reports on children and technology are also available on the website.

Several days after receiving the Alliance report, I was at a bookstore and a book by Stuart Brown leaped off of the shelf and went home with me. *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination and invigorates the soul* was recently published (in March 2009) and is a wonderful book! Stuart Brown, MD is the founder of the National Institute for Play, and has devoted many years to thinking, researching and writing about play, in adults and in children. Dr. Brown offers a deep understanding of what true play is, and points to play as the most advanced process for developing the brain and supporting social integration, in all species, not only human beings. How is it humans have the most potential of all for play? This very readable book is filled with research and description of neurological response and development, and stories from Brown's many years of practice and research. He writes about his "concerns about play revolving around screens (television, computers, Game Boys, games on cell phones and iPods)...The intense visual stimuli that screens provide, along with a captivating narrative, can be very seductive playmates" (p. 183-184).

Brown describes qualities he thinks important in early childhood teachers: "It is a wonder to

watch someone who is really good at balancing children's simultaneous needs for supervision and freedom, for order and disorder. My friend Mindy Upton is one such wonderful teacher. She runs a preschool in Boulder, Colorado where the kids have a lot of structure, but they are free within that structure. Mindy, like the best teachers and caregivers, can make a game of anything. There is joy, evident even in the cleanup" (p. 98). This hearkens back to the quotes at the beginning of this letter.

The Alliance for Childhood report and Dr. Brown's book are excellent resources for standing firm in the work of Waldorf early childhood education where play plays a central role in the children's day, and for promoting the revival of play based programs for all young children.

As editor, I appreciate hearing from readers, whether it is a question, a quote (such as the one beginning this Letter from the Editor), comment, suggestion, disagreement, or request for a particular topic to be addressed. I am grateful for all the contributions of articles, whether we were able to use them or not. This enterprise depends on YOUR contributions for filling the pages.

This issue we have included an article by Maggie Reilly. She offers another wonderful quote from Steiner, this on the theme of the adult as part of the environment that is helping to shape the developing child, and a reminder about the importance of imitation.

Most people would ask how a child should behave, but anthroposophy comes along and says that adults should learn how to behave in front of children, even in words, attitudes, and thoughts. Children are much more receptive in their souls than people commonly think, and certainly more receptive than adults. . . What you do in detail is less important than the kind of person you try to be and the thoughts and ideas you carry. It is not enough to hide things from children while allowing yourself thoughts not intended for them. We must have and live the thoughts than we feel could and should live in the child. This is uncomfortable, but nevertheless true.