

Honoring Diversity: Images from Islam

• Lincoln Kinnicutt

It can often be a challenge to bring elements to the classroom which truly reflect and acknowledge the children in meaningful ways, especially if they come from diverse cultures. In the 2006-07 school year as the Advent season was approaching, I was preparing a circle by Nancy Blanning called “Searching for the Light”* in which the circle journeys, looking for light, and finds it in the realms of many cultures. It is a wonderful circle and easily adaptable to the children before you. Though several cultures are included in the journey, there was not a visit to the Islamic realm.

That year there was a boy in the class whose father was born into a Muslim family in Egypt and whose mother, an American Waldorf graduate, had converted to Islam. Islam was very important to this six year old who, though not required by his family, would do his best to fast during Ramadan and would talk with great affection of his own prayer rug which his father had brought for him from Egypt.

It seemed natural to create an insert to the circle with this boy and his tradition in mind. I did not really know where to start, so I phoned his mother. As a Waldorf graduate and a teacher of children herself, she was very in tune with Waldorf kindergarten. She told me she had been doing a circle at her mosque for the children there about the pilgrimage of *haji*, the journey each Muslim is charged to make at least once to Mecca. We talked about the festival, and she shared with me what she had been doing.

The circle insert which follows grew out of what she had written and notes I had taken from our conversation about the festival, trying to reach the universal gently yet directly. I was fortunate to be able to work with this mother to create images about the Islamic pilgrimage, which seemed to be meaningful to this child but not awakening. When the circle was presented, the child stopped and said, “I know this.” This was an important moment of acknowledgement and confirmation for this boy.

* from *Movement Journeys and Circle Adventures* by Nancy Blanning and Laurie Clark, available from WECAN.

Editor’s note: I was lucky to be able to speak with this mother, Alexa Clark Abdelatey, by phone. One obvious question for her was how she found a compatible interface between the family’s devoted commitment to their religious life and Waldorf education; the family’s four children are all in Waldorf schools after having spent some time with a Waldorf-oriented home schooling. She replied that every day in their Waldorf classes the children experience reverence, appreciation and understanding of creation and the Creator that is held in a beautiful way. The daily and yearly repetition of wonderment and joy in God and the beauty of creation gives her children the foundation upon which everything else can grow in their spiritual life.

For herself and the other Muslim families in the school, she stated that it means so much to have “our stories” represented. She also shares stories of the Islamic heritage when she is invited to her children’s Waldorf school twice a year to present stories for two major Islamic holidays. For Ramadan and Eid ul-Fitr, she presents the story of Muhammad in the Cave, when Angel Gabriel came to him with the first Quranic verses. For the Hajj, it is the story of Abraham.

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Hajj Circle Insert

Note: this is intended as an insert to the circle “Searching for the Light,” by Nancy Blanning, found on page 49 of the book Movement Journeys and Circle Adventures. From Nancy’s introduction to the circle: “This is a traditional circle meant to be built up over weeks. Four different images of light are offered: A Hanukkah celebration, a mother and child under the stars of Africa, a Native American mother dedicating her child to the sun, and the manger scene of the Nativity. The images can be presented in a different order—always ending, however, with the final manger scene—if that suits the needs of a particular class or the festival dates for a particular year.”

Many tents are gathered here
In a desert sacred and far.
This is the land of the
Crescent moon and star.

Before the sun rises
It’s dark and still.

The call from the minaret
Rolls over gentle hills.

Here in this tent

So quiet and still,
A family looks to the east,
Their hearts to fill.

They roll out their rugs
And look to the east.
Here we are all friends.
No one is the least.

As the sun rises
We journey together
Around and around.
Warmth and light we have found.

Thank you, thank you, dear friends all,
We are warmed now one and all.
May stars’ blessings shine on you
And on these friends good and true.

Arms spread out before you

**Hold heels of hands together stretched overhead,
forming a crescent with hands, then join pointer fingers
and thumbs to form diamond (star) still overhead**

**Raise arms up then lower palms down in slow motion,
coming to stillness**

“Roll” arms in forward gesture

**Form tent door with arms and look in,
bowing head to door**

**Bow; spread arms outward then
bring inward to heart.**

Hands rolling out, away from body

Inclusive gesture to all in circle

Raise arms as sun, then hold hands to form circle

**Stroke / rub / hug upper arms to gesture warmth
Hands raised, fingers “twinkling”
Hands slowly descending, dropping blessing on those below**