

From the Editor

— Nancy Blanning

When I look at our kindergartens, I wonder sometimes whether the children are losing interest in us adults because we actually are not very interesting. The regular domestic activities—washing our small, cloth napkins; wiping the cubbies clean with a wet, soapy cloth—are good examples of caring for our environment, but small in scope and do not take much real effort of body and strength. Cooking is more engaging. Peeling and chopping vegetables for our weekly soup calls for more skill and intention in cutting with a knife, and stirring our bread dough takes determination when the batter gets stiff and courage is called forth to let hands get sticky with kneading. The delicious loaf at the end confirms that we have really done something. With cooking we can experience process more easily and see the result of our efforts. But still these alone do not seem to quell a restlessness the children display. If this question about the children's interest in us has any validity, what can we do to extend a stronger invitation the children to come, out of their own will, toward what we do?

Freya Jaffke's practical, sensible approach to the kindergarten has always been a personal inspiration for my teaching. So taking my cue from her, when we teachers had this question in our classroom we moved from the periphery of the room during play time into the center with our work. And real work we did. Using big saws we cut sections of fence posts into pieces that became block stilts. We drilled holes through the blocks with a big brace and bit to thread lengths of rope through. We looped and tied the rope at waist height to become the "handles" by which we would pull each block and our foot up so we could take a step. The sawing created splinters that had to be sanded away before we could use our new stilts. All the children were interested, but the six-year-old boys especially came clambering forward. The children could not get enough of this.

This experience began a pedagogical journey of research and investigation regarding real, practical work in the kindergarten. We sensed that this kind of activity is what the children's restlessness is hungering for. If the kindergarten is an extension of "hearth and home," how can we bring more and more of real-life-based activities

to them in ways that suit the possibilities of our school environments? In a rural, farm setting, the opportunities are much wider. In urban schools, we may have to be very inventive in how we can bring aspects of practical human work to the children's experience.

That is one side of the question. A parallel question has to do with the incomplete physical and sensory development we see in rising numbers of children. Increasingly we see children who are nervous, sensitive, excitable, timid, and easily distressed and distracted. Others are insecure in body movement and posture, clumsy, and under-sensitive both physically and socially. Either extreme can be disruptive to the rhythmic calm we strive to create in the classroom. It used to be that we might have one or two such children in a kindergarten group. Now it can be one-third to one-half of the class who display such tendencies, in degrees from subtle to extreme. What has changed?

We all know that modern life becomes more and more technologically assisted. The electronic age makes many things so "instant" that we cannot perceive the process through which something was achieved. Pictures, music, information, and factual explanations are instantly and virtually at our fingertips. Even in our Waldorf communities, we know that children are exposed to technology in seeing their parents at the computer and possibly playing video games on the cell phone in a moment of weakness when mom or dad needs a few quiet minutes of concentration. Modern labor- and time-saving conveniences make archetypal human work unnecessary. We don't need to work in the old ways, so we do so less and less. The rich range of movements available to children has become more and more narrowed. But all of the movements of human work that we are rejecting hold a profound secret.

It used to be that life itself with daily, practical work and play guided children into healthy sensory and physical development. We can look at books on sensory integration and occupational therapy manuals and see lists of the movements that lead to healthy integration of all of these systems—getting oriented in spatial directions of right and left, front and back, above

and below; coordinating the two sides of the body in smooth movement; bringing eye and hand together as supportive partners; crossing the midlines of the body; and so on. And when we look at practical life activities, practice for each of these movements is wisely imbedded in the activity itself, with no human mind having cleverly planned it. Archetypal, healthy movements live in human work activities on their own. Children naturally found more comfortable entry into their bodies without anyone noticing that it was happening—until it began to stop with the encroachment of modern life into the lives of younger and younger children.

The effort that real work requires—the push and pull on limbs and muscles; adjusting balance and posture; lifting, carrying, spatially arranging; coordinating of limbs to dig with a shovel; experiencing sequence in process—educates, integrates, and harmonizes body, sensory systems, and mind. We see that children are *fascinated* and lured toward technology, but they are *not satisfied* by it. And so they are restless and looking for something they do not know how to identify until they experience it.

When we see children with interrupted and incomplete development, we can send them off for occupational therapy, which may sometimes be a proper, even essential, recommendation in some situations. But as a foundational backdrop to anything else that might be called for therapeutically, Rudolf Steiner gives us guidance for our classrooms and for children in general. Everything that is brought in Waldorf education should come from real life. And that leads us right into the practical life activities that are the foundation of the kindergarten “curriculum.” The wisdom and developmental support imbedded in the movements and sequence of practical human work and the increasing need our children have for authentic, real, human activity to help grow healthy bodies stream together as logical and compatible partners.

Out of these thoughts was born this issue of *Gateways*, featuring practical work in the kindergarten. Many colleagues responded to the request for ponderings about and examples of how they bring this into their own classrooms. Thanks to Annie Gross from Canada and to Steve Spitalny, *Gateways* editor emeritus, for their thoughts and examples of how the child is assisted into incarnation through imitation guided by the model of real human work. Su Rubinoff, Lyn Barton, and Anke Scheinfeld have described examples of work from their kindergartens—from the wilds of woods and farm to the sensory wilds of Manhattan. Some of our gentlemen teachers—Tim Bennett, Lincoln Kinnicutt,

and Joe Robertson—have also given glimpses into their settings.

Ideas for also enriching our classrooms with artistry and story come from Laurie Clark, who shares a May Day circle with fun, archetypal movements that guide children toward physical and sensory integration.

We owe special thanks to Louise deForest, WECAN board member and council member, along with Susan Howard, of the International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE). Louise conceived, collected, and edited the new WECAN publication, *For the Children of the World*, a collection of stories and recipes from IASWECE Council countries. Proceeds from the sale of this book will go to support Waldorf teacher training on the international level. A story and recipe from this collection await your delight and cooking adventurousness. Also reminding us of our international colleagues and their work is a report from Russia. Thank you to Mary Lee Plumb-Mentjes for this contribution.

Finally, we are also privileged to include a book review of Freya Jaffke’s recently translated book, *Celebrating Festivals with Children*. Reprinted from the British publications *New View* and *Kindling*, this review from Jill Taplin describes Freya Jaffke’s insight into the essential qualities of the Christian-derived festivals we mark in our kindergartens. Suggestions of how to celebrate these, remaining authentic to the archetypal gesture and mood of each festival in deeply simple ways, are offered.

You will find a new look in this issue, which we hope you will find more attractive and easier to read. By request, we have also added a list of the main contents to the back cover. In the fall we will be transitioning to a color cover, as the cost of color printing is no longer prohibitive with today’s technology. We hope for each issue to bear a different cover, featuring many different artists, and thus reflect the richness and diversity of the talents that fill our canvases and our classrooms. We invite submissions of cover art as well as written contributions of all kinds. Next fall’s issue will focus on the theme of the International Early Childhood Conference in Dornach, “the journey of the I into life.”

This was an exciting and satisfying issue to call into being. We hope you find inspiration, both practically and pedagogically, for work with the children. In ways both literal and metaphorical, the adult guide for the child is the “master craftsperson” and the child the “apprentice.” This becomes even more evident and obvious when we transform our early childhood settings into kitchens and workshops to experience authentic activities of human life through practical work. ♦