

A Summer Festival in the Parent-child Class

Nancy Foster

Author's Note: In teaching parent-child classes, I discovered that one of the special joys and challenges of festival celebrations is the need to create a simple and meaningful observance for very young children, while being mindful of seeking the essential meaning of the festival. In addition, I felt it was important to address the adult need for a cognitive deepening of the festival experience. This seemed especially important since at Acorn Hill, which includes Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other families, we observe the Christian seasonal festivals in a way which seeks to address the universal in the human being.

*For me, Whitsun had always been a somewhat elusive festival, even though our faculty studied one of Rudolf Steiner's Whitsun lectures each year in preparation for our own observance. Last year – my last before retiring – our faculty's study for Easter was "Spiritual Bells of Easter II," found in *The Festivals and Their Meaning*, and this helped things fall into place for me, giving me the picture I needed for a meaningful Whitsun festival in our parent-child groups. At a parent evening we made felted wool balls of oranges and yellows, and during class attached streamers in those fiery colors. The actual festival took place at an outdoor circle time on the last day of school, as described in the following article.*

I offer this article, which was given out the week before the festival, as one example of how the thoughts behind a festival celebration can be shared with parents in a way that encourages them to experience the festival at whatever level is most meaningful to them, while offering them the opportunity to look beyond the activity itself.

As our parent-child class comes to a close, we will celebrate a Summer Festival. Although it is really still late spring, we feel the growing strength of the sunlight drawing us outward. We know that at Midsummer – the summer solstice – we will experience the longest day of the year, when the sun is at its height. That is truly the time to "dance with the flowers" and "sing with the sun," as our song goes! Then, along with the world of nature, we will begin the journey toward late summer and autumn, bringing us full circle to the point at which our school year began.

Looking back, we can recall our observances of

the role of light in the passing seasons. We honored the strength and light of courage on Michael's Day and were grateful for the gifts of the sun as we celebrated the harvest. As the autumn days grew shorter and the outer light decreased, we felt the need to kindle our own light within by creating lanterns to shelter one of the sun's sparks. The lanterns' light led us through the darkness, toward the time of our Midwinter Garden. In this quiet and beautiful space, we experienced the turning point when our inner light could begin to shine, bringing warmth and light into the world. Soon after Midwinter the days began to lengthen noticeably, and in spite of the cold, we could look ahead to spring as the sun's path crept further above the horizon and the sap began to rise in the trees.

Children feel this stirring much sooner than adults, but as spring arrives we too can feel, if we are attuned to such things, a loosening of our invisible protective winter cloaks. We feel drawn outward to the light. It is as if we no longer need to protect the sun's spark in our lantern, but can release it to meet the sun's growing light and reunite with it. Our own light begins to stream outward, like a flower opening to the sun. The sun, in return, sends its warmth and light down to us, bringing us joyful and healing messages from the heavenly worlds and inviting us to share this light through our words and deeds.

When we throw aloft our fiery balls with their streamers of flame, we can enjoy the sight, and the pleasure of catching them once again. This in itself can be a joyful experience for us, and for the watching children. But it can also take on a deeper meaning if we choose to imagine the balls' upward path as a picture of our inner light streaming outward, and their downward path as the gift of the sun's rays coming towards us.

It is interesting to consider that both the Christian and the Jewish faiths celebrate their festivals of Pentecost at this time of year (fifty days after Easter and after Passover, respectively). The Jewish Pentecost, more commonly known as Shavuot, commemorates the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai. In

the Book of Exodus, we read of that event that “Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire.” At the Christian Pentecost (often called Whitsun after the old tradition of wearing white on that Sunday) the disciples were together when, as we are told in the Book of Acts, “there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. . .” Whether or not we observe either of these festivals

ourselves, we may appreciate that the image of the flaming light of spirit belongs to human experience at this season.

And so, we join in our Summer Festival and say together:

*Flaming light, shine so bright;
Flaming light, give your might;
Make us strong and make us bold,
Turn our word to living gold. (M. Meyerkort)*