

Do the Festivals Have a Future?

Eugene Schwartz

*A*s the Waldorf school movement continues to expand in North America, the risk grows that there will be some dilution of its basic principles. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the passionate and comprehensive celebration of the Christian Festivals that characterized the Waldorf school movement in its earlier years is fading. What follows are some thoughts on how this important change has come about and how the future of these Festivals may be understood.

Why have the Christian Festivals become less important to schools in the past few years? Several factors play into this:

- A decreasing interest in and commitment to the Christian basis of anthroposophy among teachers. Although Waldorf educators will generally agree that it is impossible to work with the Waldorf method without understanding its anthroposophical basis, many younger teachers do not see anthroposophy as their personal spiritual path. They will stage Festival celebrations “for the children,” but not necessarily feel an inner link to the pageantry and traditions.
- The expansion of Waldorf methods into charter schools, public schools, and home schools. Such expansion is undoubtedly necessary to bring even a modicum of the Waldorf experience to children whose social or economic circumstances prevent them from finding their way to independent Waldorf schools. Over the next decades, charter schools, public schools, and, above all, home schools are likely to be the points of most significant growth in the Waldorf school movement. At the same time, these schools are also the least likely to emphasize the Christian Festivals as a pillar of Waldorf education. Critics often focus on

precisely this gray area in the Waldorf movement, making individual teachers and even independent schools reluctant to do anything that would appear remotely religious. Myriad legal, religious, and personal issues stand as obstacles to the celebration of the Festivals in these settings, and there is little that independent Waldorf schools can do to ameliorate this situation.

- Because of their popularity, it is relatively painless to get families to engage in the celebration of such non-controversial holidays as Halloween, Thanksgiving, and May Day. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day has taken on the importance that Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday, which is no longer a national holiday, once held. I should note that I have never taught a Waldorf class fourth grade or older that didn’t demand that Rudolf Steiner’s birthday should be a school holiday, i.e. a day off, so perhaps this occasion, too, will one day be added to the list. The term “holiday” has itself drifted far from its “holy day” meaning to connote a more generalized time of celebration and vacation from school or work. American children are exposed to ceaseless advertising campaigns that emphasize the fun of consuming in celebration of many of these holidays, and it is difficult for the relatively obscure Festivals celebrated in Waldorf schools to compete with the consumerist drive of corporate America.
- The growing pluralism of the Waldorf school population. One mark of the success of independent Waldorf schools is the diversity of religions in their student bodies. For the past few years, more attempts have been made to incorporate non-Christian religious symbols

and stories into the Christian Festival celebrations, e.g., the lighting of a menorah at the Advent Garden. At the request of non-Christian families, some schools have given their Festival celebrations and pageants more generic names, so that Michaelmas becomes the Fall Festival and the Advent Garden is called the Spiral of Light. In situations where it is not possible to soften or eliminate the “Christian message,” e.g., a performance of the “Shepherds’ Play,” parents may keep children home on the day of its performance.

Any one of these bulleted points could serve as a field for future research into the viability of the Festivals, but I want to pay special attention to the fourth point, the watering down of Christian Festivals in independent Waldorf schools. This increasing tendency to smooth over differences by pretending they don’t exist is represented well by the answer to the frequently asked question (FAQ), “What are Michaelmas, St. John’s Day, etc.?” provided by one of the better-informed “Waldorf” web sites:

The four seasonal festivals are Michaelmas (fall), Christmas (winter), Easter (spring), and St. John (summer).

Michaelmas, September 29: St. Michael is known as the conqueror of the dragon, the heavenly hero with his starry sword (cosmic iron) who gives strength to people.

Christmas: An ancient festival; celebrated when the sun sends the least power to the earth, as a festival which awakens in the human being an inkling of the very wellsprings of existence, of an eternal reality. It is a time when the soul withdraws into the innermost depths to experience within itself the inner spiritual light.

Easter derives its name from pre-Christian goddess symbols of rebirth, fertility and spring. The renewal of man’s being is celebrated with that of the earth. Ancient symbols of the hare and egg are both known as signs of the return of life after winter’s sleep.

St. John - June 24 - Midsummer Day: Ancient peoples, watching the sun reach its high point at this time, lit bonfires to encourage it to shine and ripen their crops. It is a time when

the cosmos brings the spiritual to man - a time when the spiritual, which animates and weaves through everything in nature, is revealed.¹

It seems significant that the only time that the word “Christian” appears in these descriptions is in the phrase “pre-Christian.” Except for the Michaelmas paragraph, every description describes precisely those aspects of the ancient festivals that Rudolf Steiner emphasized the Christ Being had come to change or even completely transform. In order to make the Christian Festivals palatable to parents interested in Waldorf education, the author of the Waldorf Resources web page turns them back into pre-Christian Festivals.

The pluralistic student body that is served by independent Waldorf schools in North America should be a fructifying source of inspiration for the sort of renewal of the Christian Festivals that Steiner repeatedly described. In practice, however, faculties make few efforts to take up such an undoubtedly challenging task as creating Festival celebrations that speak to the “universally human”—Festivals that would be clear about differences while finding the ties that bind us all to one another. Instead—especially at Advent and Hanukkah time—many schools go out of their way to placate nervous parents by staging Festival celebrations that are the equivalent of milk that has been homogenized and pasteurized; no one will be harmed by the event, but little really nourishing remains.

The Waldorf school in which I taught for many years was distinguished by significant populations of observant Jewish families. The seemingly endless weeks of Advent preceding Christmas, that is, Winter Break, not to speak of the Three Kings’ celebration following the break, were often agonizing for them. As a proactive measure, I offered a lecture on “Religion in the Waldorf School” in November, followed by two more lectures on Steiner’s Christian perspective: “Cosmic Christianity” and “Christianity on Earth.” The audience grew in number every week, and, though no one was converted, parents appreciated the school’s willingness to be transparent about its philosophical foundations.

If the celebration of the Festivals was merely another line item on that nebulous list called the “Waldorf curriculum” there would not be too

much cause for concern about the present state of affairs; many aspects of the curriculum are being questioned and changed. In regard to the Christian Festivals, however, we have Rudolf Steiner's admonitions that the very relationship of the earth to the heavens is in the balance and that this relationship depends on the Festivals being rightly understood and rightly celebrated.

A phenomenon such as "global warming" reflects the kind of homogenization of the four seasons that in turn reflects the listless relationship that many Americans have to the turning points of the year and their enlivened celebration. Research conducted by the University of Illinois recently discovered that significantly less meteoric iron—a substance Steiner described as carrying powerful Michaelic forces—is reaching the earth:

Polar clouds are known to play a major role in the destruction of Earth's protective ozone layer, creating the springtime "ozone hole" above Antarctica. Now, scientists have found that polar clouds also play a significant role in removing meteoric iron from Earth's mesosphere. The discovery could help researchers refine their models of atmospheric chemistry and global warming.³

Which, we may ask, came first—our alienation from the cosmic significance of the seasons, or the atmospheric blurring of the clear boundaries between the seasons, with all of the consequences that may ensue for life on earth?

On a purely pedagogical level, there is growing concern about the newly-labeled phenomenon of "Nature-Deficit Disorder." Describing recent research that points to the benefits of immersion in natural settings for children with ADHD, Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, writes:

If a greener environment can play a role in curing ADHD, few if any studies have explicitly examined whether the converse is also true: that ADHD may be a set of symptoms initiated or aggravated by lack of exposure to nature. By this line of thinking, many children may benefit from medications, but the real disorder lies in the society that has disengaged children from nature and imposed on them an artificial environment for which they have not evolved. Viewed from this angle, children and adults

alike would suffer from what might be called nature-deficit disorder, not in a clinical sense, but as a condition caused by the cumulative human costs of alienation from nature, including diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses.⁴

On both the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels we ignore the world of nature at our peril. The Christian Festivals and their renewal and expansion, as described by Steiner, provide a vital and comforting space in which children and adults alike can renew and expand their relationship with the earth and its relationship with the sun, moon, and stars.

Endnotes

1. <http://www.waldorfresources.com>.
2. These lectures are available on CD at www.millennialchild.com.
3. <http://www.news.uiuc.edu/NEWS/04/0415/meteoriciron.html>.
4. <http://www.oriononline.org/pages/om/05-4om/Louv.html>.