Cultivating a Festival Life—an And, Also Approach

~ Meagan Rose Wilson

"What does a non-Eurocentric spiritual science look like?" Cory Eichman posed this question in his course, "Questions of Diversity and Race in Rudolf Steiner's Spiritual Science," filled with anthroposophists, eurythmists, Waldorf teachers, biographers and biodynamic farmers. Still muted, I gave an audible sigh of relief that others in this movement are asking the same question I have been grappling with since I fell in love with Waldorf education twelve years ago.

The festivals I celebrated as a child were almost entirely commercial. Although my ancestral heritage is primarily Christian, the spiritual essence of our traditions was stripped away over a handful of generations until during my 1980s childhood, all that was left of Christmas, for example, was patent shoes, red bows, baked gingerbread cookies, and a whole lot of battery-operated toys.

When my son and I began attending our first Waldorf parent-and-child class in Sydney, Australia it was a revelation for me to consider the inner mood of a holiday, its spiritual relevance or how the outer world might give us clues to better connect with our inner world in any given season (Kovacs 2007, p. 19). I resonated with the idea that traditions and celebrations were created by human beings to express our connection to something bigger than ourselves. Festivals throughout the world often share these common features: storytelling, singing, dancing, feasting, service and ritual. More often than not they are found within the context of a seasonal or cyclical calendar following the movement of the Sun or the Moon.

And yet, the Christian festivals I had grown up with were born out of Europe in the Northern Hemisphere. Throughout Australia, Aboriginal communities have their own unique ways of relating to their particular environment, climate, flora and fauna, but this ancient wisdom was and still is widely ignored—a result of the genocidal and colonial history we in the west are devastatingly familiar with. Copying and pasting symbols of new life like painted Easter eggs onto autumnal Waldorf nature tables felt counterintuitive and clumsy at best, and at worst, ignorant and missing the mark entirely.

Sowing and growing my own family traditions with an almost blank slate was liberating **and also** overwhelming. What kind of family culture and rituals did I want to seed for my family? How would I model these new values for my young children? What might I choose to include and discard from my own spiritual heritage, especially occupying a land where these traditions were not born?

In the lectures collected in the book *The Festivals and their Meaning*, Steiner recognized that my childhood experience of a spiritless festival life was increasingly becoming the norm and challenged his listeners to find the "true meaning" of the festivals (Steiner 1981, p. 16). Throughout each lecture it is clear that Steiner believed meaning could be found through a person's experience and observations of the outer world: "...we see in Nature the outward expression, the countenance of the Divine Spirit of the Cosmos" (Steiner 1981, p. 26).

As early childhood educators, we know that "our task […] is to try to transform everything we do, to transform our knowledge into activities: to make visible that about which we have been thinking"(Jaffke 2011). We endow nature tables with treasures found in our gardens and under the earth; we craft, create, and bake with natural materials and seasonal ingredients. We use the breathing in and out of the Earth as we observe it as constant inspiration and as a result are being called to reconsider European archetypes, such as King Winter, and to explore how more truthful archetypes might enter our seasonally-inspired stories, songs and verses.

For decades, Waldorf schools in North America and beyond have centered their festival life around the Christian-European festivals Steiner named: Christmas, Easter, Whitsun, and Michaelmas. It is essential we continue to model for our children the deep inner experiences offered through festival work; **and also** that we become more awake to our responsibility as educators to create a sense of belonging for all families and students in our care; **and also** to identify where some traditions may have become hardened under a white gaze. The lands we occupy in the United States, Mexico, and Canada are

not the original birthplace of these Christian-based festivals and the children in our classrooms come from a diversity of spiritual heritages. As teachers we can open a dialogue with the class family constellation in front of us **and also** observe the natural world around us in order to find clues that will help us to celebrate in a more inclusive way that is authentic to the lands we inhabit.

My work as a parent coach is with families who are interested in incorporating Waldorf-inspired values into their family culture, daily rhythms, and parenting approach. When it comes to festival celebrations I am acutely aware there is never a one-size-fits-all approach for any family. I believe this to be true for schools and classrooms across the world too. The human impulse to celebrate the festivals was described by Steiner as the active work the Angels are doing in and through us. Coming together as families and communities promotes belonging and provides a conscious opportunity to see the divinity in each other (Steiner 2008). Festival work can be seen as one of the most important spiritual thresholds we cross between a child's home, school and broader community. It is an opportunity to build bridges and to foster connection.

> *[O]ne of the most important tasks for humankind today and in the future is that we should learn to live together and understand one another.*
>
> *—Rudolf Steiner*

Below I share a series of questions teachers might use to spark conversation and create meaningful dialogue within their classroom communities. Whether they are used in the initial interview process; as prompts at parent meetings, or within start-of-the-school-year intake forms is up to each teacher and their school. Invite parents to share **and also** make it clear there is no pressure for any answers at all. Be aware and awake to the fact that even though two families may identify as having the same faith, the way they celebrate together might be vastly different. Every family will have a different capacity, willingness or passion to share their family traditions. Some families may be still exploring many of these answers for themselves.

- What festival(s) do you celebrate at home?
- What are the symbols, values and virtues associated with the(se) festival(s)?
- Is this a lunar or a solar festival? How does this fact inspire or change the way you celebrate each year?
- Are there parallels between this festival and the natural world around you? Is there a connection between what is happening seasonally and what this festival symbolizes?
- How do you set the scene for the festival in your home? Is there anything you do in advance before the first day to mark or model that this time is coming?
- How do you prepare the day before the festival?
- How are children involved during the festival? What do they look forward to the most?

How the answers to these questions might be used in a meaningful and authentic way is also up to the individual teacher and their school. With the diversity of answers received a teacher can consider how they might create a festival life within their classrooms that

- attunes the children in their care to spiritual and cultural parallels and differences (**diversity**)
- regularly honors and acknowledges what community members, classmates and friends are celebrating (or not) at any given time each year (**inclusion**)
- consistently reflects and includes festivals and traditions other than the ones the children celebrate at home (**access**)
- disrupts cultural norms which center the importance of some holidays or festivals over others (**equity**)

Reflecting and working with these questions is a regular and recurring practice or striving. Answers may slightly change each year as classroom constellations change, teachers' connection with the school community expands, and their own personal connection with the festivals deepens. Incorporating a new story, craft, or recipe into the rhythm of the day should not feel like an act of tokenism but a gesture of active and meaningful relationship. New traditions should consider the difference between appropriation and appreciation.

We can hold space in our homes and classrooms for traditions that have been passed on to us personally, as well as traditions that are within our wider class constellation, and also create space for traditions that are waiting to be born out of our authentic connection with our unique communities and the natural world around us. ◆

References:

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