

Festivals

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Festivals are a celebration of the seasons of the year and connect us to the world around us. They fall in an annual rhythm that can be strengthening to the physical body of the young child. For me, a festival celebrates the coming together of earthly and cosmic forces. Festivals create communities of human beings by celebrating the harmony of earth and cosmos, of matter and spirit. These seasonal celebrations mark the changing of light, the relation of the earth to the sun, and the connection to what is universal in the cycle of the year. Festivals can be the bearers of the spirit within the earthly seasons. They are points where earth–spirit and world/cosmic–spirit meet.

I find certain ideas from Rudolf Steiner helpful in considering how to create a festival in the classroom. These ideas guide my thinking about the greater cosmic forces at work in the four seasons. They form the groundwork for the manifestation of a given festival. Steiner, in Lecture 5 of *The Cycle of the Year as a Breathing Process of the Earth*, described cosmic tendencies that pull the human being in certain directions at different times of the year. He spoke of the activities that then can help bring the human being into balance. Through this struggle for balance and self–development, the human being can receive guidance from the cosmos.

In the summer, the human soul tends to give itself up passively to world–happenings. The tendency is to dream out beyond the human being. To balance that tendency, the human is called upon to “Receive the Light,” to consciously receive the light that is streaming toward us from the cosmos. The divine spiritual world reveals itself as moral impulses, which the human receives as enlightenment. The light is streaming spiritual wisdom down into the “I.” The intellect evaporates and this wisdom-filled, moral element from outside streams in.

In the autumn, as the earth is going to sleep, the urge of the soul is to return to its inner life, to go inward. The call to the human soul is to “*Look Around Thee*,” to be awake and attentive to what is happening in the world. At this time we must strive for the knowledge to perceive the world of nature and the spiritual activity that lies behind it. We need soul courage for this striving.

In the winter, the Earth has completed her in–breathing, and the human soul is thrown back to itself and threatened with inner contraction and paralysis. The tendency is for the human being to sink into itself, to dream within one’s own being. “*Beware of Evil*,” calls the cosmos. Be aware and behold the evil; contemplate evil and the temptation of evil. Perhaps we could say that we draw back from the earth’s darkness, or “beware of darkness.” This mood is a polarity to “Receive the Light” of summertime. One experiences a consolidation of the intellect that had evaporated in summer. At this time, one needs temperance to guard oneself against evil, to guard against a deviation from cosmic moral impulses. Can we find a balance, the middle way? Steiner described this as “*besonnenheit*,” as ruling one’s impulses through reflective thinking, feeling and perceiving, through consciousness. This is the human being’s winter task.

In the spring, the human soul’s tendency is to sink into the flood of uprising nature forces. The call to the human being is to “Know Thyself,” to stay connected with yourself in this spring fevering. We can strive for knowledge of true human nature and a reconnection to our own higher nature—a connection with true morality. The call is to truly look at oneself, to hold up the mirror, and see one’s weaknesses and limitations and where one has fallen away from one’s highest intentions.

With these thoughts in mind, I take into consideration the needs of the young child. One aspect to consider in creating a festival for kindergarten is to keep it simple. So much can be done with gesture and mood that speaks more powerfully than elaborate choreographed events. It seems important to avoid festival indigestion, especially for young child. Not only do we support the child, but one finds it creates less stress in the adults’ lives as well.

For all festivals, a mood of anticipation can be created through the planning and preparations. Including the children in the preparation allows them to experience and participate in the process of life, of the yearly cycle. Though it can also be special for the children to arrive to the magic of an already created festival day, I mostly include the children in the room set up and other aspects of preparation. Preparing the food and making decorations is a warming and enlivening activity for all involved. And food usually plays a part of any celebration, especially for the children. Traditions can be created that live and thrive over years especially if we have children who are in our groups for more than one year. This also creates a sense of true anticipation in the children.

I focus on celebrating the divine spark that lives in each of us. A powerful guiding image for me is the light that streams toward us from the sun and stars, and the warmth and love into which we can transform that light. Perhaps that is the central theme around which the variations of individual festivals revolve. To me it is so important that our celebrations are so universal that no one feels excluded. I want all the families to inwardly experience that “this festival speaks to us.” I want to celebrate what is universally human and universally cosmic/spiritual. The spiritual is celebrated, but not the specifically religious.

For me, kindergarten festivals celebrate divinities. Festivals for the older children often celebrate developed human beings such as saints. I leave saints for the grade school years. I celebrate only a few major festivals in my kindergarten. They include Michaelmas, Lantern Walk (not St. Martinmas), Advent Garden and an end-of-year Bridge Festival. I also celebrate each child's birthday. These are the festivals to which I invite the parents, but of course, in a sense, every day is a festival in kindergarten.

Thoughts about an Advent Festival

As winter approaches in the Northern Hemisphere, there is a growing mood of the outer sleepiness of the world. Through the stories, poems and songs we bring, and their own observation of nature, the children can experience a settling down, a feeling of being blanketed for a winter's nap. The fallen leaves, the animals in hibernation, the shorter daylight hours which bring us inside much earlier (even in California) than at other times of the year all contribute to this experience. Advent balances the darkness and sleepiness with expectation and anticipation. It is a time of moving through the darkness toward the yearly rebirth of the light, when the days begin to grow longer. Advent is really a four-week festival, the four weeks leading up to Christmas and Solstice, starting on a Sunday evening. Many religions celebrate festivals of the returning of the light. Among those festivals are Solstice, Chanukah, Christmas and Divali. The mood of Advent reminds me of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—so much preparation for the choral climax that reminds me of the light beginning to grow stronger again.

During Advent, we can deepen our relationship to the world around us through recognizing the strength and beauty in all the four kingdoms of the natural world. The first week is related to the mineral kingdom, the physical foundation for life. The mineral world gives us a fixed stage, a basis for our ever-changing existence. Without the mineral world we would have no ground to stand on. The second week focuses on the plant kingdom from which we receive nourishment from living forces. Earth, rain, light and warmth create a balance of growth and decay. The plant world has life that distinguishes it from the mineral world. It is life itself which human beings share with the plants. The third week focuses on the kingdom of beasts. We share our capacity for movement and feelings with the animal kingdom. In this week of Advent we are reminded of our relationship with the birds, beasts and other members of the animal kingdom and how they reflect our most basic soul states. The fourth week of Advent speaks of the human being. All the kingdoms of nature contribute to our existence. We all have mineral, plant and animal aspects surrounding and supporting the flame of our individual human spirit, this flame that is the essence of what it is to be human. Advent can move us toward a deeper understanding of our place in the universe, of all that supports us and all that we aspire to, as well as all that needs our protection and support. There are so many levels that one could consider. The weeks can also be connected with the four bodies of the human being, with the four major organs, and so on.

In kindergarten, Advent can be celebrated very simply. On the first day, I put one gold star above the nature table on the wall. And each successive day I add another star. Additionally, I set four candles on the nature table. The first week, I light just one of them for a verse at the end of Ring Time. The second week, two candles and so on. The verse I use follows:

*The gift of light we thankfully take
But not shall it be alone for our sake
The more we give light
The one to the other
It shines and it spreads and it glows still further
Until every spark by friends set aflame
Until every heart with joy to proclaim
In the depths of our souls a shining sun glows.*

I also add something of the particular kingdom of nature addressed to the advent nature table. Perhaps a crystal or shell is added each day of that week, then the next week, a rose bud each day, then a small wooden animal or feather. There are so many possibilities. On a Sunday evening in December (determined by various calendar considerations) the kindergarten families come to celebrate the Advent Garden which brings the mood of Advent and the experience of moving from darkness to light to the children in a simple way. This is one festival I set up (with adult helpers) without the children. They arrive to a fully prepared festival space. They walk to the center of the spiral path of evergreens, a path not lighted. One needs to determine which direction the spiral curves, counter- or clock-wise. There are reasons one could have for either. The important thing is to consciously choose the direction. The children bring with them a red apple with a candle in that they light from the burning candle in the center of the spiral. They then place their candle carefully down on the path as they walk back out. The festival begins in darkness and ends brightly lit by the many candles. We have a moment to sit in silence together before the children are taken home to bed with their apple candle.

For our celebration, someone enters the dark spiral bearing a candle. He or she is clad in flowing veils, and is not named nor referred to nor spoken about. We try to get someone not generally recognized by the children. It is left to each to imagine for oneself what sort of being it is. I invite siblings, both younger and older to take on this role. Younger or less confident children are accompanied by their parents. We have always had this spiral path indoors. This year I have been thinking a lot about doing it in a redwood grove on our school property, under the twinkling stars.

The garden of evergreens is a symbol of life everlasting. Arranged in a spiral, the path represents the path to birth and the process of incarnating. The apple is a picture of the body, the house that we live in. The red symbolizes our blood and our forces of will. The flame of the candle is the flame of our individual human spirit. The Advent Garden is an imaginative experience of our individual spirit light incarnating into life on Earth, and how it is able to dispel the darkness around us. In community, our spirits shining together shed a mighty light.

The Bridge Festival

Picture this: a garden with flowers all around. It is a warm morning, the sun is shining and the sky is blue. Birds are singing. A stream flows down a gentle hill and there is a small bridge across it. There are many parents, grandparents and friends sitting in a large circle, all looking on with smiles and tears. In the center of the circle sit all the kindergarten children and teachers. Across the stream is the new first grade teacher. The children sing and then a story is told. The story tells of an oldest child who begins to wonder what lies outside the palace walls. The wise king and queen

suggest that several important items be gathered for the journey, and that a guide would be waiting outside the gate to lead the way into the world.

Then, one by one, each child ready for first grade is called by name, stands up, bids goodbye to her teacher and steps across the bridge to be welcomed by her new teacher. The kindergarten teacher has shepherded her for her life in the garden of paradise, within the world of home and garden. Now she is ready for a guide to help her explore the wider world. The new first graders are led off for a short time alone with their new teacher, and the younger children who will remain in kindergarten are acknowledged as they will now be the older and experienced kindergartners in the fall. Sometimes the new first grade teacher is unable to attend the ceremony so a symbolic stand-in participates. And some children will move on to other schools, yet they also are part of our ceremony.

This is our kindergarten end-of-year festival. It is a rite of passage from one phase of development to the next. Perhaps it can be called the *Bridge Ceremony*, but please do not name it "Kindergarten Graduation" especially since all participate yet not all move on to first grade. Rituals celebrating transition between phases of development are not well attended to in our culture. At the Santa Cruz Waldorf School, the transition from kindergarten to the grade school is made into a ritual rite of passage. It signifies the transition from a sort of Garden of Eden to an exploration of the world around. It signifies the transition from a group soul experience to a more self-conscious individual. The children for the first time are called on to stand up and be named in front of all present as part of the ceremony. The new first graders are "handed over" by their kindergarten teacher to the teacher who will guide them through the next phase of life.

This beautiful and heartwarming festival is the culmination of the kindergarten year. In a simple yet profound way, all present witness this crossing of the bridge out of early childhood. This is a special rite of passage for all participants. Special thanks must be given to the Acorn Hill Center for a short description of a similar ceremony that I read many years ago. We have taken an idea and made it our own. It is a part of our festival traditions.