

This is an excerpt from the article, Festivals, by Stephen Spitalny

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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 Diwali. 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.