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## *Re-inventing Spindlewood*

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For many years, the morning kindergarten, nestled between the woods and the family farmstead, seemed all that the children needed. But increasingly, parents are seeking out afternoon programs and looking for a place for three-year-olds, as well. How could we provide continuity of care in a way that could be nourishing to both children and teachers? How could a teacher carry the child through the “grades” of early childhood? How could afternoons provide, as closely as possible, the best elements of care found in a healthy family?

Something new (or was it ancient?) was being called for. I embarked upon a journey to find a way of life that could carry a wider age range of children over an extended day. I found myself experiencing a shift in focus to relationship-based care with the adult as curriculum, as well as an appreciation of ordinary life including the living arts of nurturing, domestic, and social arts, with the creative arts revolving around the seasonal festivals. The shift was a re-visioning of the “morning program” to an 8:30 a.m.–3:00 p.m. day that allows time for the nurturing physical care of the children and includes children in the daily work and play of life. Rather than the fairly intense three-and-a-half hour program of structured, organized activities for children, framed with hours of adult-only preparation, clean-up, parent contacts and seemingly endless faculty meetings, the door was now opened to living with and around children, weaving in stories, games and verses throughout the

day. I found an inner door opening to the LifeWays Training.

There seemed to be time to breathe. I was reminded that my colleagues in remedial training have for some time recognized the need for remedial work for today’s children, and although I had participated in a number of courses and seminars, there had never seemed time in the course of a kindergarten morning for some of the individual care and attention needed by children. Afternoons now provide time for the nurturing arts of hair brushing, lavender face cloths and warm lavender foot baths that allow the possibility of close observation of the child, and the bodily care that meets two of the lower senses identified by Rudolf Steiner as the sense of life and the sense of touch.

The afternoons also allow a “siesta time,” when my assistant and I frame a row of mats with colored cloths, so that each child has a little house somewhat like the ones that they build for themselves during imaginative play time. Although this custom flies in the face of our hectic “on to the next activity” culture, and has been met with some resistance by some older or more wide awake children, in the course of time, as their parents have grown more comfortable with the value of this quiet time, the afternoons have become a time for a true “out-breath” from the morning, with younger and sometimes older children crooning the day’s songs to themselves and often falling into a sound sleep. The ones who don’t sleep will rest very quietly as they

wait for others to sleep so that we can then sit on the couch and hear the next episode of their “chapter book.” The rosy cheeks of the sleepyheads as they arise testify to their sense of life and well-being.

Even a welcome change can mean the loss of the familiar, and so also with this transition. Like a caterpillar in a newly formed chrysalis, I found my regular morning dissolving into a bit of chaos until new rhythms and forms could emerge and hold a wider range of daily life. I felt challenged as I stepped out from my teacher role and closer to the parental realm. I even missed the familiar excitement of the often-painful interminable group process of faculty meetings.

But what has been gained? The slightly more relaxed rhythms have allowed the assistant teacher to emerge as a person in her own right, and she has discovered a deep well within herself of stories and vignettes that amuse and delight the children, and sometimes meet them in a curative moment. We rejoice to see the children who were quiet and withdrawn last year becoming more playful.

I sense a new feeling quality with the parents. If perhaps I have been a warm teacher, I now stand in the place of a caring person in the lives of their children. Parents seem a bit more relaxed as well, and I now notice them holding, nurturing and playing with their children when they greet them. Because there are now two pick-up times (after lunch *or* after siesta) there is no longer one grand dismissal time. When parents arrive to pick up their children, there is a now bit of a “tidal pool” effect. At the end of the morning, one child might invite a parent in to see his puppet play. At the end of the afternoon, someone might arrive a few minutes early and offer to help us tidy up. I have at times felt defensive of our kindergarten mood, but now want to cultivate an atmosphere of hospitality. Life abounds at these moments, and I find that parents are grateful and respectful.

What else is gained? In spite of my own resistance to being still for a while during siesta, I am learning to have a full twenty-minute out-breath myself after the back rubs and lullabies, a moment of meditation or handwork that provides rest for my soul, even while staying in-tune with the children. During the quiet time that follows, I can sometimes weave in a few other activities that I would have done ordinarily in the afternoon anyway: folding a

basket of laundry, having a conversation with a parent, or setting up for the next day.

Also gained are several children who could not have been accommodated in a more formal kindergarten morning. Some are young; others require a bit more adult interaction to find their way through the day. The other children, some of whom have no siblings at home, gain the opportunity to observe a younger child being cared for. The simple acts of assisting a child in dressing and undressing for outdoor play nourish the sense of touch and can be a nurturing activity if not rushed and perhaps accompanied by a song. A child who has difficulty entering into social play in the morning becomes quiet and observant as I brush his hair before he enters the room. This nurturing touch seems to bring him into his own body and allows a smoother transition to the group.

One of the many gifts of Rudolf Steiner to our search for wholeness in the lives of young children is his recognition of the twelve senses of the human being. In addition to the familiar ones of touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing, he describes four lower senses as paramount for child development. These include touch as well as a sense of life, movement and balance.

Together, the lower senses foster the development that in later life will be able to support the human faculties of the higher senses of hearing/tone, speech/language, thought/concept and the sense of the unique individuality of another human being. Without the necessary grounding of the lower senses, the higher ones may not be able to develop in a truly human way. I feel that I am better able to cultivate all of the four lower senses of life, touch, movement and balance (as well as the fifth one of warmth) in the course of the full kindergarten day that allows more time and a quiet afternoon. The sense of life and touch are especially addressed by the nurturing arts. Brushing the children’s hair, such a simple act of care after taking off wool caps or waking up from siesta, was an innovative reclaiming of an ancient practice. (I found small wooden brushes intended for cats that were affordable enough to provide one for each child.) A warm lavender footbath provides a soothing and warming transition from a goodly portion of outdoor play to a restful afternoon. After lunch, warm lavender

washcloths become wet napkins for face and hands, nourishing the senses.

Much has also remained the same in the life of our kindergarten that vitalizes the two other lower senses of movement and balance: sledding down the old woods road during several snowy months, collecting maple sap buckets and sledding them to the sugar shed, swinging on the swings that parents have hung from the peeled log that they lifted up and pinned to two trees during a family work party, hoisting buckets of water from the well for the sheep and chickens. Our woodland paths are irregular and “rooty,” and occasionally a city-dwelling child will trip upon one as he makes his way along in the beginning of the year. But during the subsequent weeks, the children learn to feel their way over the surface of the woods, letting their feet reach out as sensors to maintain their balance as they move. The little frog pond is a touchstone of changing life. In the fall, the children are engaged body and soul in the joy of catching frogs; throughout the winter they observe and test the ever changing frost and ice; in the spring, the children pump the hand pump to create a waterfall over the flow forms to freshen the water that is now teeming with frog eggs and tadpoles.

Even indoors, there is opportunity for movement and balance. Parents who advised me that their active boy could not live without a “four-wheeler” are amazed to see him create one out of a plank and four short logs. In fact, his wooden board can do almost anything—become a slide, a seesaw or a boat (and he now takes a board to bed with him, as well). A small “rock-a-boat” holds four children at a time, or, when turned over, allows toddlers a safe climbing structure, so important for development. The senses of life and touch are nourished by the natural fibers of the play cloths and toys, as well as by the hot water bottles for cold days.

I am still learning to breathe into these new, lighter rhythms and the nurturing arts. There are still things that I want to hold onto and find a place for, like fairy tales for the older children. But most of all, I have the satisfaction of cultivating a place in the world where children can grow, learn and thrive that feels more like a neighborhood than an institution. I still refer to this as “kindergarten,” but whenever Elliot, who is four-years-olds, hears me, he

exclaims mightily, “This isn’t kindergarten, this is SPINDLEWOOD!” Indeed, he is right; beyond all categories and models of education, it is the living experience that is real and creates a foundation for a meaningful future.

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