

A Healing Mood for us All

Part II: Supporting the Children and their Families

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At the end of Part I of “A Mood of Healing,” which summarized the conversation by the WECAN EC Research Group on how we can work on healing ourselves, we recognized that in this time of uncertainty and questioning, each of us is trying to find a personally authentic balance point on a continuum of two polarities. Some of the opposing values that we articulated included knowing and not knowing, stretching and standing firm, listening and acting.

The situation continues to unfold, and as we approach our future work with children and families, we may still need to adjust our positions to account for newly found perspectives. Three new polarities that come to view as we think about reopening are those of risk and safety, comfort and discomfort, and trauma and resilience.

One member of our group remarked that a sense of safety is more relative than absolute. In communities that face yearly risks of hurricanes, tornadoes, forest fires and earthquakes, people prepare as best they can, and then have to rely on the creativity and compassion of their human companions when these unpredictable events actually happen. This is a reality that is even more pronounced in communities where residents are already living on the edge of sustainability and whose lives are particularly vulnerable to disruption.

How can we be “a shelter in the storm” for the children and for their parents?” In Part I we discussed the need to recognize and work with our own inner weather- stormy or otherwise unpredictable- in order to be a calm presence for others. Because the children live in our soul moods, this is our first responsibility. A child’s sense of safety will arise, not only out of our own inner work, but also from the way we work with colleagues and parents. Mary Pipher wrote a book about the importance of family that was titled, “The Shelter of Each Other.” The title is reminiscent of Covid signs that remind us, “We are all in this together!”

We can find shelter and safety in our conscious caring for one another. We have heard from many teachers about how their spirits have been lifted from the intensive work they did with their colleagues to find creative solutions that allowed them to stay connected to their families. Teachers were also buoyed by the collaborative mood that resulted from having to utilize different ways of working with parents.

In this situation, while we may be required to let go of some of our cherished ideals, the essential aspect of Waldorf education- the quality of our human relationships- is what we need to preserve and protect above all. The focus of our second conversation was not on specific interventions, but on ways of being and doing that can be therapeutic and create the healing mood in which we can all continue to learn and grow. “Letting go is not abandonment,” one member of our group reminded us.

The responses of individual programs range from taking a year off and supporting their parents to find alternatives, to becoming an outdoor program or an essential worker care center, and to restructuring classrooms and schedules to accommodate requirements from state and local health departments. One colleague characterized the situation in an image: "If I opened my front door and there was a baby on the doorstep, what would I do?"

As early childhood educators, we know that everything we do in the Waldorf EC classroom has a therapeutic quality, but in this time, we need to pay particular attention to certain elements of our work. We have already underscored the fact that the young child lives in the surroundings and especially in the soul life of the adults around him or her. In addition to that, we discussed the potential importance of simplifying the physical environment and the daily schedule or rhythm as much as possible. One colleague shared that her new motto has become, "What CAN I do?"

Less stuff, more time; moving slowly and spending lots of time in nature; minimizing the number of transitions between activities; all of these things will support a child's free breathing! Being aware of our own breathing in all its aspects, not just our physical breathing, will also help. The more the children are able to work out of imitation, rather than instruction, the more they can stay in their dreamy selves. Ritualizing and taking lots of time with necessary activities, such as handwashing, and imbuing those activities with warmth and reverence will also allow the children to find those activities to be restful, rather than wakeful.

Imaginative pictures can ease children out of fear and into playful engagement, often quite magically. "Making soap soup" helped a child who was refusing to wash his hands, come along with alacrity. Imaginations that we live strongly into ourselves will draw in even the most reluctant children. We may have to work hard to find the right picture for a particular child. In this task, we will need to exercise our capacities for observing, listening, and carrying that child into sleep. What we do for an individual child ultimately supports the class as a whole.

Much of what is true for the children also holds true for the parents. The quality of our relationships is what matters the most and "one size does not fit all." Are we willing to tend to the specific needs of individual parents out of a genuine interest in their well-being? One of our colleagues shared how often she failed by overwhelming parents with too many expectations and too much advice. Offering one concrete suggestion and helping parents build upon their sense of success was much more effective.

During this hiatus, some teachers have found that being more available to parents for phone conversations has strengthened their relationships and the children have benefitted. Early childhood teachers feel their relationship with parents has grown because, on one hand, the teachers have had to share why and how they do what they do and, on the other hand, because they have listened more deeply and responded to the concerns and needs of the parents. While it is usually easier to practice non-judgment with the children, non-judgment is the key to being truly supportive to the parents.

In addition to the primary element of a loving relationship, suggestions that emerged from our conversation circled around three themes: simplification, ritualization and working with imagination. At the heart of our work with the children is the joyful sharing of everyday wonders- dewdrops on a leaf, a sky blue piece of shell falling from the nest of a just fledged bird, the sound of an owl in the distance, a black beetle crawling out from beneath a rock in the garden. Can we make space for these “less is more” moments? Can we affirm the children’s wish to be here on earth at this time in this place?

Week by week, it has become increasingly clear that we will not be returning to the old normal. What began as a health crisis has also become, in the United States, a full-blown racial and social justice crisis, that is echoing in cities around the globe. In our communities we are facing a trial of the soul as well as of the body. In Waldorf education, as in other realms of life, we are not able to rely on our old assumptions. We are being asked to dig deep into our individual and collective resources, watch and listen with new awareness to the phenomena that we are witnessing, and bring new impulses into our work and movement.

Part III will focus on Healing Images in Stories, Fairy Tales and Puppetry and their Role in Building Resilience in Ourselves, our Families and our Movement.