



Courage and Heart

Holly Koteen-Soule

Many cultures mark the changing mood of the year following the autumn equinox with rituals and celebrations. Waldorf schools around the world have introduced the festival of Michaelmas, based on Rudolf Steiner's characterization of Michael as the overlighting spiritual being of autumn and also as the guiding spirit of our modern times. Michael's task is to support the developing consciousness of humanity, and because individual freedom is a particular characteristic of our age, Michael responds when human beings take initiative. Understanding the special qualities of this cosmic being can help us find a clear path in even the darkest of times.

My favorite image of Michael is a reprint from an exhibit of Russian Orthodox icons. In this image the archangel holds a lance in the right hand and cradles the area of the heart with the open palm of the left hand. In order to meet the dragons of our culture and our own individual dragons, we need both courage and heart. We need to develop both strength of will to take on difficult tasks and deepened forces of compassion and empathy, so that what we do serves not only those close to us, but the whole of the human community.

One autumn, a grade school colleague and I led our school's Michaelmas celebration. We chose to focus on the theme of how we as human beings are able to harness our will to transform the gifts of nature for the benefit of the larger community. The local blacksmith was always a highly anticipated guest in Grade Four, but this year, every class participated in the creative process of transforming raw materials into useful articles for the rest of the community, from harvesting, cooking and baking to apple cider pressing, wood working, wet felting and clay tile making. These physical transformative processes are concrete experiences that help us gain capacities and learn how to transform ourselves and our communities. Engaging the will is a powerful force that allows us to connect to the future, to project our vision into the future.

Carrying on in the midst of the fears, uncertainty, and unpredictability of the last two years has required an extra measure of courage on the part of all of us, including the children and parents. Taking a firm step towards a difficulty, as we have all had to do, however, brings fresh courage. In picture language, we could say by taking hold of the lance, we feel the spirit light with which it is filled, and it strengthens our vision and hope for the future. We have also discovered in the course of the last months how much we need one another. This is why we need to cultivate a deepened and widened heart space. For the social challenges remain and our work continues.

I have heard several colleagues remark that the babies who are being born in this time must be full of courage for the tasks ahead. My Michaelmas wish is that we can meet their courage with our own and with the warmth of heart that can help us build trusting relationships and caring, inclusive, and resilient communities.