

Striving to Deepen Our Understanding of the True Meaning of Festivals and the Nature that Surrounds Us

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Barbara Muller- Artwork

My colleagues and I live and work in the northern part of South Africa in Gauteng, Tswane and Limpopo. The surroundings are quite different from each other, bushveld, farming surrounds and built up urban areas and we have eleven official languages in South Africa.

How do we celebrate festivals with such diversity? By striving and deepening our understanding of the true meaning of festivals and nature that surrounds us. Nature not only challenges us, but also nourishes our imagination. Each season enlivens our senses and brings many gifts from nature. We just need to seek and we will find! And above all, the children are our inspiration.

During this difficult time of the pandemic, our teachers have striven to enliven our festivals, as these festivals properly celebrated feed the soul of not only the children but ourselves too. The responsibility of the teachers endeavoring to celebrate the festivals with understanding is vital and our surrounding nature is not only challenging, but also a gift. Every teacher needs to find their own true way of celebration – what speaks to us? What can we truly stand behind? – not just go through the motions and pack up and move onto the next. The festivals are the points from which we relate ourselves to the cosmos.

The rhythm and celebration of the seasons and festivals strengthens the will of the children, opens up their awareness of the earth's changes and allows them to find their own relationship to nature. We find in each season treasure boxes, filled with the treasure from the earth.

A glimpse.....



In summer, our rainy season, the children enjoy their time outside in nature. In a good rainy season, we sometimes have mighty storms, lightning and thunder, and usually within a short time they are over and we are met with the sweet smell of rain on the parched earth. The children love playing in mud and being outdoors. Celebrating Advent and Christmas mid-summer has not only challenges but offers many gifts too. In the streaming out in summer we are stimulated to use all our senses to the fullest but care needs to be taken not to lose ourselves in this summer season.

On the first Sunday of Advent, the teachers set up a spiral, using greenery and summer flowers rocks and crystals, and sometimes cloths. We try if possible to celebrate early in the morning or early evening when it is cooler. Parents are invited to share in this peaceful ceremony, not participating, but quietly observing. The children make their journey into the spiral to fetch their light and on their journey out place their light on the outward spiral, sharing the light with all.

The following day at school there is a calmness that prevails amongst the children. Candle lighting brings with it a peaceful focus, which is prevalent to balance the out streaming of our summer season.

The lighting of the Advent candle in our Advent wreath each day, one candle per week, draws us into a contemplative place. This usually happens just before story time around noon. The curtains are drawn, the bright sunshine is gently shrouded, and the candle is lit; one can feel the relief and appreciation the children feel during this ceremony, to be able to be quietly and gently held by a single flame. We end this summer term with a little Nativity Play with the children, to which parents are invited.



As Easter approaches in Autumn (Fall) the days are cooling, leaves are falling and the children busy themselves during outside play collecting leaves, making nests and baskets with grass, inviting the hens to lay eggs for Easter time. Outside mud play is still prevalent. The "Cosmos Flowers" start blooming, not indigenous, but have become a symbol of Easter Flowers, with beautiful white, purple and pink petals. The Celebration of Easter with little children is heart warming. Abstract intellectual explanations are not necessary. The joy and anticipation of "life potential" and the image of the humble Easter Hare as the messenger, is what warmly holds this Festival with the children. This festival culminates with a visit from the Easter Hare, and an Easter egg hunt. The teachers boil eggs and dye them red. Colouring the eggs using a red crayon whilst the egg is still warm is effective. This creates a rosy red colour. These are then hidden in the garden for the children to find. The children also paint eggs and take them home in a basket they have been helped to make and decorate with autumn leaves. Our circle time is filled with autumn songs, stories and verse, including Easter themed stories. Autumn does not linger too long before the cold sets in.



Winter lends itself to lantern making and St. John's festival; it is very cold in the mornings and evenings and frost can be seen covering our fields. Our daytime sky is brilliantly clear and blue; we take off our jackets around noon, but need to put them back on as early evening approaches. Our night time sky is clear and alight with sparkling stars. On the evening of the 24th June our St. John's festival is celebrated. In some schools, an evening festival is not always possible or safe.

In the days leading up to the festival in the Kindergarten we busy ourselves with lantern making, soup making and bread baking, interwoven with our winter songs, stories and verse. Parents, children and friends are invited on the evening of the festival, a large bonfire is awaiting us after our Lantern walk. Our field is lit up with glowing colourful lanterns as we go on our lantern procession. Parents are also invited to bring their own lantern and join in the procession. Thereafter, we gather around the fire, a special St John verse is said and the fire is lit by four high school pupils as we sing our St. John songs. The flames leap up high almost touching the stars in conversation. We all watch with great joy until the flames slowly die down. When the fire is safely small enough, the parents and children (with care) leap over the flames with great joy. Thereafter we eat soup and bread rolls enjoying the warmth of the fire

together on this very cold night. When the fire dies down parents and children make their way home.

On the 29th September our Michaelmas festival is celebrated together with the arrival of Spring. We plant seeds, vegetables and flowers in great anticipation of our first spring rain which is so very welcome after a dry winter. Circle time is filled with Spring Songs and verses of courage for the Knight to tame the dragon. The peach blossoms are starting to reveal themselves, they too showing courage to wake up from their long winter sleep. Spring crafts



and crowns are made, bread baked and butter made. The days are getting warmer and Spring picnics are in abundance. Even though Spring is short-lived before the sun shows its mighty strength and although not such a gentle waking up of nature, we are able to observe the new Spring shoots and new leaves bursting forth. Some schools further north have water shortages, and although spring is not so vibrant there, the children are the flowers bringing hope and joy into the classroom.

“Mankind must achieve an esoteric maturity in order to become again creative for festivals. Then mankind will again be able to relate the sequence of sense experience with the spiritual”

“The Cycle of the Year as a Breathing Process of the Earth and the Four Great Festivals”- Rudolf Steiner

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Illustrations by Barbara Muller who was a kindergarten and primary school teacher for over 30 years at Michael Mount Waldorf School, Johannesburg. Thereafter she started a kindergarten in the Eastern Cape for Xhosa speaking children, which is now run by two Xhosa teachers.