

Joan Evelyn Wolfsheimer Almon

August 6, 1944 – July 14, 2019

Funeral Eulogy

Children were Joan Almon's life work. Her capacity for this work showed itself early in her mother's shop for women's and children's clothes. She charmed and delighted the children while their mothers shopped. Although she had no biological children, she had many, many children of the heart.

Joan was born in 1944 in Wilmington, Delaware to Karl and Frances Hirsch Wolfsheimer, Jewish immigrants who already had their exit visas when Karl, a merchant, was arrested on the morning after Kristallnacht and sent to Dachau in 1938. In a merciful stroke of destiny, it was the Nazi employee they were required to hire who told Frances exactly where to go and who to see so that Karl could be released, and they could leave. After settling in Wilmington, Joan and her older brother Philip were born. After some time, German reparations enabled them to open the aforementioned clothing shop. Unfortunately, the BRCA gene, that would later plague Joan, ran through Karl's family. He died of a brain tumor when Joan was 12. Her mother continued the business.

Joan attended public schools including Pierre Dupont High School, class of '62, where she edited the yearbook and was voted 'most intellectual'. At their 50th reunion she recalled that her favorite class had been German and, ironically, her least favorite public speaking. After graduating from the University of Michigan with a bachelor's in sociology, she worked in the non-profit sector for an anti-poverty organization and for two years as a secretary for the civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, where she took calls from such people as Martin Luther King.

Wanting to be even closer to life in the sixties, she took a job in San Francisco. The hippie scene appealed to her. Her cousin recalled the shocked silence of the adults at Passover when she regaled her cousins with her escapades.

She returned to the East Coast where she worked for the City of Baltimore. She joined the Savitria communal living center where at twenty-seven she picked up the threads of her life calling. She co-founded the New Morning School in 1971. Their focus was eclectic. Her co-founder attended a lecture by Werner Glas. They made connections with the Washington Waldorf School, where Clopper Almon and his wife Shirley were founders. As greeter for a lecture by Alan Howard, Clopper was approached by a bespectacled young woman -- namely Joan -- with a large tape recorder. When told that no recording was allowed, she protested. But, as Clopper says, she obeyed him for the first and last time.

Joan and her friend Martin were invited to dinner by Clopper and Shirley and they all became friends. Sadly, Shirley died of cancer in the fall of 1975. Meanwhile Joan took courses in education in Maryland and in Waldorf education in Detroit, and in Anthroposophy at the Rudolf Steiner summer institute.

Recognizing a mutual connection after Shirley's death, Joan and Clopper were married October 10, 1976. Joan was 32.

In 1978, Joan and her husband went to Austria for a year in connection with his work. Joan apprenticed herself to one of the great Waldorf early childhood teachers in Vienna and visited the kindergartens of others in Germany and Switzerland. What we think of as standard Waldorf early childhood practices – painting, stories, songs, play stands, puppetry – derive from inspirations Joan brought back from Europe.

When she returned in 1979, she taught kindergarten for the next ten years at Acorn Hill in Silver Spring, Maryland. Meanwhile, she who had been terrified of public speaking became sought after world-wide as a lecturer, adult educator, and consultant. Though soft-spoken, she had a gift for speaking in a way that held everyone's attention. She could explain anthroposophical ideas and ideals clearly and objectively in ordinary understandable language.

At thirty-nine (1983) she became a co-founder and chairperson of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association, now known as WECAN, and editor of its journal *Gateways*. She was chair or co-chair of this association for the next twenty years. In 1986 she joined the board of the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association. By 1989 she was in such demand that she gave up her teaching position.

But her influence was not limited to Waldorf circles. Through the editor of the Teachers College journal at Columbia, Douglas Sloan, she came into contact with professors of education and pediatricians who knew that what public schools offered was not what children needed. The outcome was the Alliance for Childhood, founded in 1999. It was a collaboration of professionals in education, health, business, child welfare and other areas to identify and work on the most important issues in the lives of children. Joan worked tirelessly to restore play and play-based learning for children and youth. She co-authored reports, organized conferences, wrote books. While others were promoting child safety, she pushed the envelope by opening the conversation on the value of risk in play. She was fighting for the future of humanity..

Joan was a big-picture person, a visionary. But her vision did not remain just ideas. She was, in terms familiar to Waldorf educators, the quintessential choleric. Her motto was 'will act'.

Her love of puppetry resulted in an ambitious production of Goethe's fairytale, "The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily", which played in nine cities, including New York. She expanded the repertory of Waldorf kindergarten stories to include world folk and wisdom tales so that North Americans could be a part of the global community. And on a more personal level, she and her husband also supported the university education of promising students from other countries, such as Karolina Syrovatkova from Prague and Yang Wang from Nanjing.

In 1993 she joined the Council of the United States Anthroposophical Society. In 2002 she became briefly General Secretary of the Society and then Co-General Secretary.

Joan was first and foremost a teacher. She loved to share and enable others in developing their own resources. She was compassionate and kind. She could see the best in others. Someone said they had never heard her say anything negative about another person. And Joan was a supportive friend, direct, objective, unsentimental. And

humorous – if you were looking for her at a big gathering, you could find her in the middle of the group that was laughing.

In 2002, at age 58, she began a battle with cancer that would last seventeen years. Breast cancer, ovarian cancer, metastatic breast cancer throughout her bones – she fought them all off. And all the while, few people knew, because she kept working continually. At the end of the summer of 2018, it looked like the breast cancer, which had spread to her bone marrow, was winning. Then a new drug, Lynparza, designed specifically for patients with the mutated BRCA gene worked another miracle, and she and her husband were able to visit her cousin Linda Millstone in Austin and to take a southern road trip including a conference of the Play Coalition in Clemson, visiting family and friends in Florida and Georgia, and then to their beloved Beersheba Springs where Joan had helped create a local history museum.

On the way home, she began to notice a pain in her upper abdomen. MRI and endoscopy showed it to be caused by pancreatic cancer. David Miller, son of Joan's cousin Carol and a physician in the Boston area, took a deep and devoted interest in Joan's medical situation. Through his concern and influence, she became a patient in the Johns Hopkins Hospital pancreatic cancer center. He visited Joan several times in the last weeks of her life. On the way to the hospital to have a port installed, something went wrong in her brain and her speech was affected. She spent a week in the hospital having tests to determine what was wrong.

The tests were not conclusive, and she came home with the intention of returning after a week to repeat the tests in hopes that the changes in the test results might reveal what was wrong. Despite the fact that further treatment had not been ruled out, she was accepted into hospice care. Linda Millstone came from Austin and was a source of comfort and help for this next part of Joan's journey. Many friends and relatives visited; beautiful flowers came, but Joan declined rapidly. With a tear in her eye, she made the hard but necessary decision not to return to Hopkins for more diagnostic testing.

By July 13, Joan was barely with us. At 3 a.m. on July 14, she was still breathing; when Clopper awoke at 6:25, she had quietly slipped away.

Hospice of the Chesapeake did a wonderful job making her comfortable and easing her care. Her friend Carol Petrash cut short her vacation in Maine to be with Joan. She, Birgit Meade, Beth Knox and others bathed and prepared her body, which then lay covered from the waist down by a white sheet and surrounded by red roses and rose petals. Her hands held a yellow rose. After a three day vigil, as Joan had desired, the funeral service of the Christian Community was performed by Cynthia Hindes, with servers Carol Petrash and Lark Berwin-Anderson. There were also Biblical readings from friends and family such as Edith Adams Allison, Julia Bartles Emahiser, and singing by Ingrid and Ole Hass, and the Hebrew blessing of children pronounced by Charles Spitulnik.

The body was taken to the Going Home Crematorium in Woodbine, Maryland, where her husband and seven friends stood around the body, said the 23rd psalm and bid the body good bye and soon saw it placed in the furnace. As the flames did their work, Joan's spirit was released from any concern for the body.

Joan was in the process of writing a book with the working title, "Learning with Children." Although unfinished, it will be published. And so in yet another way, her work, the effects of her lifework, and her tremendous legacy will continue to be available for the future.

The verse from Rudolf Steiner's *Calendar of the Soul* for the week Joan died is number 15 (14 – 20 July):

I feel the Spirit's weaving
As if enchanted by the world's phenomena;
And my true self has now been wrapped
In the dimness of the senses,
Giving to me at last the strength
Which I myself, confined and bound,
Lack the power to achieve alone!

Interestingly, this was the only verse Joan had reworked for herself from the German.

– Cynthia Hinds and Clopper Almon