

*A look at
handwork, the will
and eurhythmy*

The Peridot

*A Journal
for Creative
Educational
Ideas*

R. Steiner Education Association

dba **The Peridot**

P. O. Box 97

Gainesville, FL 32602

Volume 9, Number 3
Fall/Winter 1997

Family festivals: coming full circle

Festivals are beacons of remembrance; they turn our thoughts and feelings to the past.... But thoughts of the future of humanity—that is, of our own soul's future—are also roused in us when we understand the content of these festivals.

—Rudolf Steiner, *The Festivals and Their Meaning*

Our cycle of seasonal festival celebrations began last fall with Michaelmas on September 29. Our study group of five mothers—two have children in a Waldorf school, one has a child in public school, one (myself) doing Waldorf homeschooling, and one preparing for Waldorf homeschooling—had begun in early summer of 1996. We began our meditative study with Rudolf Steiner's book, *The Education of the Child*. At the end of August we interrupted this work to read Steiner on Michaelmas and prepare for that festival. We wanted to work with esoteric Christianity and felt that the festivals were an important part of this work. Little did we know how important!

Michaelmas

Transforming evil into good

In the five families we have 11 children, ranging in age from two to ten at the time of the fall festival. Our challenge was to do a meditative study of some of Steiner's writing on the season and the festival and then to let inspiration come to us as to how we could celebrate. We read "Michael Meditation" and "The Michael Inspiration and the Creation of a Michael Festival out of the Spirit". The Michaelmas festival celebrates the Archangel Michael in his battle with and overcoming of the dragon of unspiritualized impulses and desires. Our work as human beings is to transform evil into good, which we can do as helpers of Michael.

To prepare for the festival we made kites at home as individual families and told two stories to our children, especially just before bed. The stories were "The Kite" from *Families, Festivals, and Food* and "The Princess in the Flaming Castle" from *Childhood*, Fall, 1989. We made kites because it is in the region of the air that our bodies and the earth live in the summer and fall, and because the wind is such a presence as the earth breathes back in preparing for winter. We used bamboo sticks and layers of tissue paper to make the kites. We decided in our planning that a "scene" in which the children, without speaking, act out battling and taming the dragon would be the culmination of the festival.

Preparations for the dragon scene engaged the older children as they imagined being in a "play" and fighting the dragon. They would be dressed in white; they would have a sword and shield; the dragon would be fierce! One homeschool day for my almost-six-year-

old daughter was given over to gathering with the other mothers and children, practicing songs, choosing places for events (the festival would take place at our house), and deciding on the order of events. We had a Michael story for two weeks in homeschool preceding the festival. My daughter is choleric and loves a challenge, so stories about courage never fail to inspire her.

On the day of the festival we gathered at our home in the late afternoon. The children played while we assembled and sang autumn songs—wind was the theme. We then went out into a field of golden dried wild grass and tried to fly the kites—there was no wind! Oh well, the

children did run! We came back in for dinner; potluck with foods containing iron such as Indian pudding with molasses and shredded cabbage with mashed potatoes. After dinner, we gathered on the deck, the older children in their knight costumes and the parents and younger children seated to watch the "play." By now it was dark, and we had low lights on. Up until assembling the children had been boisterous and joking, but as soon as they gathered for the play a serious mood settled over all. The dragon (a large father dressed in a dark green cloak with a raffia "spine") appeared and

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This is the first of a two-part series.

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Family Festivals

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stood opposite the children. To set the scene a mother read Bill Warnock's poem (in *Childhood*, Fall, 1989, p. 22):

*I ride on my horse with my sword
in my hand.*

*I ride through the wooded and
mountainous land.*

*I battle with dragons with giants I
fight
defending the weak and upholding
the right.*

*My sword is of iron, my helmet of
gold.*

*I dare all adventures my heart is so
bold.*

*My armor is shining as bright as
the light.*

*And I am a gallant and glorious
light.*

The dragon then raised his arms moving in a slow stylized manner, and the children "fought" him with their swords (they had been told ahead of time not to actually hit the dragon—the dragon is tamed, not

killed, and the father did not want to end up a mass of bruises). Finally the dragon went down on his knees. A mother said, "You have tamed the dragon. Tell him what to do." One child said "Get out of here." So he did! Then the oldest child read the Soul Calendar verse for that week from the children's version in the book, *The Light of the Year*. Finally we sang a Michaelmas song accompanied by recorder. We then quietly gathered our things and the other families went home. They all left quietly without talking to maintain the mood of reverence and seriousness that attends the Michael work. My feeling afterwards was of peace, fulfillment, and joy. Michael as the countenance of Christ leads the way for us into dark winter by strengthening our will to keep our own inner light alive.

Advent

Transforming our consciousness of outer to inner light

The next festival we worked on as a group was Advent. We were still reading *The Education of the Child*, which we continued. To prepare for Advent and Christmas we began reading the Christmas lectures. The first lecture was "The Christmas Festival: Herald of the Victory of the Sun." Advent is the time of waiting for the birth of the Jesus child, watched over and guided by the Christ being who appeared as the star leading the shepherds and kings to the baby. It is the beginning of winter and the time of deepening darkness on earth, and of increased consciousness for people and for the earth. The Advent festival traditionally includes a spiral walk which pictures the inward movement of our soul life at this time of year. We found a story of Mary and her blue cloak, chose a song that celebrated snow, and planned the festival to take place in the park where we meet for the study group.

We gathered evergreens (not an easy task in southern California) and met at the park in late afternoon, near dusk. While some parents played with the children in another area of the park, others laid out the evergreens to make a spiral path. In the center was a low table with a red cloth and white lace on which a large candle sat. As the light faded, we gathered the children at a table for warm apple cider, and we gave each of them a candle in a red apple holder. One mother was seated beside the spiral and all the others sat themselves around her holding the paper lanterns we had made at Martinmas. She told the story of Mary and her blue cloak. The children drank in the story, young, younger, and youngest, all. Then everyone stepped over to the spiral and while she played improvised chords and sequences on a pentatonic lyre, the children walked

one by one, the older going first, on the path to the center of the spiral. At the center they lighted their candle from the large one and then placed theirs somewhere along the path as they walked out. The very youngest children were led by their older siblings who felt the importance of their task. All were silent and focused. We then sang our snow song with recorder accompaniment. Afterwards we quietly gathered our things and left. As much as we could, we carried this quiet fullness into our homes.

Christmas

Transforming body and soul toward the spirit

To prepare for Christmas we read the second Christmas lecture, "Signs and Symbols of the Christmas Festival." Christmas and the Twelve Holy Nights are the time when conditions are especially supportive of our making a conscious connection with the Christ Being; and children may maintain their connection with the Christ Being, especially in sleep. For our group of families a new challenge presented itself. In the two previous festivals, Michaelmas and Advent, there were no family traditions in place, and, therefore, no conflicts in timing or activity with these festivals.

We decided to celebrate Christmas individually in our families, and that the group festival would precede Christmas. For our festival we went caroling in the neighborhood near one of our homes. In the vast sprawling suburbia of southern California, the people we sang for were very surprised and pleased at our gift. The children saw this and became so excited to knock on the doors and see smiling faces. As we progressed some people even came out into the night to see what we were doing. After the last house the older children, the six- to eight-year-olds, were sad that we weren't going to every house. They did not want to leave anyone out. We said we would do more next year and we sang a last carol on the way home.

At home we quietly gathered, lit candles, and sang Silent Night. Then one father read the story "The Shepherd Boy's Flute" from *Christmas Roses*, and a mother played recorder notes at appropriate places in the story, leaving us all with the picture of the power of the innocence of the Jesus baby to restore us to wholeness. Then we left without talking at all. All the way home we were silent, and everyone even whispered getting ready for bed. What a wonderful beginning to Christmas! 🕯️



PHOTO BY CHARLIE LUETKE

Here, Eli Luetke proudly displays his sword and shield, a common sight in many homes during Michaelmas.



The Advent Spiral can also be experienced through watercolor painting as illustrated by Miya Shitama, age 7.

