
Joan Almon: The Origin of My Inspiration

~ Laurie Clark

After four decades of teaching and five years of procrastinating, I recently resolved to sort through the huge stacks of papers that had accumulated. What treasures awaited me that had been buried for so long! Among the best finds were a few very old, yellowed papers in my handwriting, with the heading: "Children with Special Needs." I realized that these notes came from one of the very first conferences I attended as a new Waldorf teacher, with Joan Almon as presenter at Rudolf Steiner College. At the time of the conference, Joan was still teaching in the classroom, and as a brand-new teacher I was full of admiration for her. She was crystal clear in her speech and radiated strength and empathy. I wanted to be just like her! I don't have a date on my notes, but it was certainly a long time ago.

As I read these notes from Joan's presentation on two crumpled sheets, I realized that it was her inspiring words at this very conference that led me towards therapeutic research and the determination to create ways to approach the "profoundly interesting" children in my care. I would like to honor her and bless her in light of her recent passing on to the spiritual world, as I share a few of her profound thoughts.

Joan said that she always welcomed a few children with special needs into her classroom. These, she said, are the children who make teachers out of us. They test the core of our being, even though it sometimes feels as though this testing will be our undoing. These are the very children who carve out new areas of depth in us so that we can carry other children who will come our way. Though we might wish that there were some authority to tell us just what to do, there are no formulas that we can use in these situations. The response must come out of the teacher as she wrestles with questions of human destiny. Joan also said that if she was going to turn herself inside out for the child, she needed the full cooperation of the parents.

She felt that many children were being woken up too soon and that we, as teachers, needed to find ways to restore them to their dream world. She spoke about putting these "awakened" children back to sleep by "weaving a lullaby atmosphere around them, even singing many lullabies." This is a beautiful way to remind us to deepen our interactions with the children

through pictorial, "lullaby" language, through stories and, really, through everything we do. It is more important than ever now, to renew our efforts to accompany the children in our care and help "dream" them back into themselves so that they can experience a sense of well-being.

For the child who cannot imitate, Joan recommended that the teacher invite the child to join her in an activity for ten minutes every day, such as dishwashing, sweeping, or other daily work that needs to be done. What a brilliant idea; all children love to have the teacher to themselves. Through the activity, she was giving them an intimate "taste" of how to imitate, as she embraced the child with interest and attention.

As I reflected upon Joan's insights, I realized how fortunate I was to be in her presence at the very beginning of my lifelong work and how deeply these thoughts have penetrated my being as a Waldorf teacher. Somehow, even though these buried papers only recently resurfaced, I realized that the ideas Joan brought to birth became my motivation for creating therapeutic modalities to meet the children who have come to my classroom.

Joan has always lived in my heart as one of the great origins of my inspiration. The word "origin" comes from the Latin *originem* which means "to appear over the horizon, to set into motion, to become visible and to receive life." Joan helped the teacher inside of me to appear over the horizon, unfolding my destiny as it became more and more visible. This has set me into motion to receive the many children that have sanctified my life. Thank you, dearest Joan, for the blessings that you have bestowed upon countless teachers and for standing so courageously for children. ♦

Laurie Clark has been a Waldorf Kindergarten teacher for over forty years and is a lead teacher at The Denver Waldorf School. She is a WECAN Regional Rep and a member of the Early Childhood Teacher Training Committee. Laurie is a mentor to teachers across the country, conference presenter, and teacher trainer. She has co-authored two books with Nancy Blanning on therapeutic movement for children entitled *Movement Journeys* and *Circle Adventures*.