
For the Classroom

Rethinking Birthday Celebrations

— Jessi Lisell

Birthday celebrations are something I have wondered about for many years. While I have often experienced the magical beauty of these unique moments with families in the classroom, I have also noticed something else at work within these celebrations. In my school there has been a longstanding tradition of inviting each child's family into the classroom for a few hours to celebrate the child's birthday. But when I sat down to really think about what it was I wanted to offer to the children and their families, I found myself wanting to reimagine the whole experience.

I began by focusing in on the feelings I wanted to offer for the children to experience: a sense of community and togetherness and a celebratory joyfulness. The feelings I wanted to minimize were self-centeredness or greed and a sense of being "on display" or of performing. In this process I spoke with many former and current colleagues about what things they experienced in birthday celebrations, as well. It did not take long for me to decide that celebrating more than one child at a time could be a way of bringing more togetherness and simultaneously reducing the self-centered all-about-me attitude that occasionally appeared on a child's birthday. Because my classroom is smaller, I decided to aim for two to three children per celebration.

In deciding which children would share celebrations, I used observations about their personalities, as well as taking into consideration their family constellation (for example, not necessarily pairing an only child with a single parent with another child with a very large family). I also reviewed the Calendar of the Soul verses for the week each child was born and the week during which I hoped to celebrate. There were many times when the date for the celebration had been set in advance of these considerations, however. Then by some

miracle the verses would align in a very cohesive way!

The other soul activity I greatly enjoyed leading up to one of these birthday celebrations was creating the birthday book as a class activity. Birthday-book drawing days would often last much longer than regular drawing days. A feeling of calm settledness embraced the children at the table as they imitated my concentrated, loving work on a picture, and this became a treasured part of the process.

The week of the Birthday Feast there were many tasks that the birthday children would assist with. They would help prepare the flower vases (often helping to pick items from the garden outside our classroom), bake the cake together, and help carry the extra chairs needed for the celebration. On the morning of the celebration while their friends played outside, they would help to set the table, cut fruit, and whip cream to add to our cake. Including all of this work with the two or three birthday children helped build on the sense of togetherness and also helped create an atmosphere of gratitude from the other students. The feeling began to shift from "this celebration is for me and about me" towards "this celebration is a gift of myself to my friends."

The celebration itself, the portion including families, birthday story, and snack, went through a number of transformations during this process as well. In the past, I had told a birthday story and the parents added in an anecdote from each year of the child's life. This format was not conducive to a larger group, especially if the children were turning different ages. Additionally, I often noticed children either withdrawing under this amount of focused attention in the group or expanding in their discomfort with disruptive or silly behaviors. My question was how to engage the birthday children in a meaningful way.

I thought deeply on this question: what does it mean for a child of these ages to be engaged? What does it look like? My answer was that it looks like doing, like being active. It looks like telling the story through action. I began to imagine shifting the original birthday story into a people-play with me leading the birthday children on a journey. Again, wanting to avoid a very focused feeling of attention or “performance,” I decided to have this journey circle around the outside of our birthday story ring. I wrote three short songs in the mood of the fifth to sing as we traveled around the outside of the circle. Each journey around the circle ended with the birthday children in the center of the circle (with their backs to their friends, facing our birthday table) receiving a gift from each of the places we had traveled to.

We would “travel” to The House of the Sun while singing our sun song, and then receive a gift from the Sun at the central table. Their birthday candle, which their parents had made beforehand, was waiting for each child and then lit from a central candle. Next, we would journey to The House of the Moon, singing our moon song, and receive a Moon gift. Waiting on at the central table as a gift made by their teacher was a rainbow cape for a five-year old or an embroidered tooth pouch for six-year old children. Finally, singing our star song circled us back round to The House of the Many Stars where the birthday book classmates had made for them awaited as the Stars’ gift. In between each of these journeys, while the children were receiving and opening their gifts, a few words were spoken to link the birthday story together, about the little angels doing their heavenly work before they traveled to the earth. At last, the assisting teacher pulled out the rainbow silk from under the central table so the birthday children could walk across to

join their families. As the birthday children looked through their birthday books, the other students brought chairs to their table places while the cake was cut. The birthday children worked together to serve everyone, we’d sing our meal blessing, and all began to eat.

While we ate quietly, the birthday families would each take turns sharing anecdotes about their children. This often brought much laughter to our table and such a rich warmth of community that parents have often commented afterwards how tangible it felt. These stories also created many windows and mirrors of experience for the children to take in about their classmates. By speaking with parents before the celebration about what types of stories are best received, I’ve had the benefit of learning some interesting tid-bits about my students and their families that I might not have otherwise ever heard.

Throughout this process of reimagining how we celebrate birthdays in the kindergarten, my main focus was upon creating an experience for the children and their families that felt more authentic. In practice, I’ve found that the shared Birthday Feast has brought about a deeper sense of community in the classroom as well as among the families who have joined us. The children have readily taken up the generous work of creating this celebration as a gift for their friends, and I see them engaging more fully in the collaborative telling of the birthday story. There has been a marked shift from the sense of “this celebration is for me” towards something more like “this celebration is of me.” It has been a gift to bear witness to this transformation in the children. ♦

Songs

The “Sun Song” is sung to the tune of “In Heaven Shines a Golden Star” (found in *Let Us Form A Ring: An Acorn Hill Anthology*) and the words Jessi uses are adapted from a verse by Rudolf Steiner (original unknown):

The sun makes bright for me each day

Golden light to guide my way

So everything I say and do

Is filled with kindness warmth and truth

The “Moon Song” is adapted from a word-of-mouth, unknown source. Note name in bold italics indicates the second octave above middle C.

B A B A

Moon boat, moon boat

G-A B **D** B G E D

Sail-ing si-lent-ly a-float

B A B A

Moon boat moon boat

G E E G G

Sail me on the sea

The “Star Song” was also passed down from a forgotten source. Feel free to use a favorite tune or make up your own.

We bring you flowers of love and joy,

Oh, birthday children today.

We bring you flowers of love and joy,

To pass along your way.

Jessi Lisell was born and raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She’s a K-8 Waldorf graduate, outdoor enthusiast, freelance knitter, and single mom to a fourth grader. She’s been working in the realm of Waldorf Early Childhood for over ten years and currently teaches Kindergarten at her alma mater, City of Lakes Waldorf School.