
In Memoriam—Ann Pratt

Remembering Ann Pratt

Contributors ~ Alice Pratt, Mark Birdsall, and Susan Weber

Ann was born in Manhattan into a spiritually striving family. Her mother studied biodynamics in Europe as a young woman. Rudolf Steiner gave what was to become known as the “American verse” to her uncle Ralph Courtney. They were part of a quickly growing circle in Manhattan that created what is said to be the first vegetarian restaurant in New York City, and the first branch of the Anthroposophical Society. The need for healthy vegetables for the restaurant led the group to purchase farm land in Spring Valley, just north of the city. Here not only did the gardens grow, but also the arts: music, eurythmy, and theater were all a part of a burgeoning spiritual life there. It was here that Ann spent her childhood summers with her parents and sister, Charlotte Courtney Dukich. In her teenage years, Ann waited tables at what was then called “The Threefold Farm” (now the home of Sunbridge Institute) during summer conferences.

Ann’s passion was eurythmy, and this started very young! Ann described her first eurythmy performance: she was only a little girl when she played the part of the mouse in the favorite nursery rhyme *Hickory Dickory Dock*, while Marjorie Spock was the clock. Imagine tiny Ann at the base of a very tall Marjorie clock! She carried this art form with her wherever she landed throughout her life. In every teaching situation, she brought eurythmy to those around her and her Antioch students remember those times vividly. Her own movement moved others!

Throughout her life, she planted herself in the service of anthroposophy, especially in Waldorf education. She was an initiator, one of those of whom Rudolf Steiner said that over her destiny in golden letters was written, “Be a person of initiative.”

Ann’s commitment to Waldorf early childhood education took root in Wilton, New Hampshire. Her husband Swain was a teacher at High Mowing



School, and Ann set out to create first a Waldorf kindergarten to then be followed by a full eight-grade Waldorf school. When Beulah Emmet, the founder of High Mowing, rejected Ann’s request to create a kindergarten there (especially for the children of the faculty—a future initiative at Sophia’s Hearth perhaps already expressing itself), Ann forged ahead to create it on her own. In 1972, the Pine Hill Waldorf School opened its doors in a small building in Wilton Center owned by local lawyer (and Pine Hill Board member), Charles Sullivan. Two years later the school, now growing rapidly and attracting dedicated young teachers from many areas, bought an old New England farmhouse at the end of the Bennington Battle Trail and soon extended from kindergarten to eighth grade.

Then land was purchased across from High Mowing on Abbot Hill with a loan from the Rudolf Steiner Foundation (Social Finance—spearheaded by Siegfried Finser). Thus, the current Pine Hill building was built in 1973/74. In 1974 Ann was the Faculty Chair, Kindergarten teacher, a Board member and taught eurythmy to the early childhood students. Of course, she was also a full-time mother to her two teenage daughters! In the early 1980s, Ann stepped back from active classroom teaching and spent a year teaching and consulting at the Kimberton Waldorf School in Pennsylvania. The Pine Hill faculty meanwhile, assisted by regular visits from Alan and Mary Howard, began to offer a teacher training program in conjunction with nearby Antioch College.

When Antioch New England's nascent Waldorf teacher education program needed its second director in the 1985 school year, Ann stepped in to continue to build up this young seedling. She remained until 1991, when a call from a friend and colleague, Betty Staley, led her to Milwaukee to be the program implementer for the Urban Waldorf School, the first public Waldorf school in the country. From 1991 to 1993, Ann oversaw the Waldorf training of the founding teachers who came from both the local public school district and from a few Waldorf schools. She oversaw as well the program development in the school, a 96% African-American student body in Milwaukee's poorest neighborhood. In 1993 a change in funding allocation left Ann a difficult choice: leave Milwaukee suddenly (she and Swain had recently bought a residence) or go back into the classroom. So she became a kindergarten teacher again at age 61. It was a very trying year even for her, and the stress began to affect her health.

When the task in Milwaukee was ready for its next phase with others carrying on that work, Ann returned to Antioch in 1994. By then, the fledgling program



was ready to welcome its second faculty member; and Ann joined Torin Finser, who had become the program director after Ann left for Milwaukee. It was during these second Antioch years that she became a founding Board member of the initiative that became Sophia's Hearth Family Center. Together with Rena Osmer, Susan Weber and others, a new impulse was seeded and that seed was germinating—first at Antioch through a new design of its early childhood teacher education program, and later on its own. It



was the (at the time revolutionary) recognition that Waldorf education had a tremendous contribution to offer to the education of the child in the first three years. It became the first teacher education endeavor in the United States to create a program to prepare teachers for this new work with parents and very, very young children.

When 1998 found Ann stepping back from her Antioch responsibilities, she and Swain traveled to Sedona, Arizona where they pondered the possibility of retiring. But work again called her and for the next two years, she helped found "Pine Hill West" when numerous former Pine Hill School teachers found their way to Sedona to support the fledgling school there. Then 2001 marked a move to help build up

the early childhood program at the Moraine Farm Waldorf School near Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Many moves were a signature of Ann's life, and this did not stop even when she entered her 70s. Moves to Spring Valley, Maine, and New Hampshire followed. In Ghent, New York she and Swain participated in the founding of the Camphill Ghent Community for older adults. And yet one more move took her to help the Housatonic Valley Waldorf School in Connecticut before she "retired" to the Fellowship Community in Spring Valley.

Her life was filled with eager responding to calls for adventure and to serve others always, perhaps underwritten by a feeling of restlessness. Her home seemed to be wherever she was called to come to work.

The death of her beloved husband, Swain, was still mourned in her later years. Ann ever continued to seek kindred souls in Anthroposophy with whom she could confide and share insights. In her eighty-second year, she returned to the Fellowship Community to live out the rest of her life. Though aging affected some aspects, her senses were even more astute, taking in everything around her in minute detail. Always perceptive and acutely aware of the inner life of others, she suffered or was lifted up by the thoughts of those around her. Her strong moral backbone seemed always to guide her to seek the very essence or kernel of truth in everything that she did in life.

Ann helped to outwardly build many Waldorf initiatives, but her inner life was ever actively seeking in the house of her spirit. She was a lover of the sun, basking in its warmth and light until her death. In the early years, wherever she lived, she created beautiful gardens full of color and scent. Her family and friends remember her excellent cooking and her love and enjoyment in being with friends and family.

She will live on in memory as truly one of the Waldorf "greats." ♦