
Transitions

Freya Jaffke—In Memoriam



Freya Jaffke, master Waldorf kindergarten teacher and teacher trainer from Germany, crossed the threshold into the spiritual world on June 1, 2021 at the age of 84. The author of many beloved books, she also lectured and offered workshops for educators and parents worldwide.

In the US, she was active primarily on the East Coast, offering courses and workshops in Spring Valley and at the Rudolf Steiner Institute. She was one of the European Waldorf “greats” who came to the first International Waldorf Early Childhood Conference held at High Mowing in Wilton, NH, in 1986. There she offered a workshop to initiate teachers into her beloved wood carving and offered the puppet play of “Pimpernel” to the whole conference alongside puppet performances by Margret Myerkort and Bronja

Zahlingen. She devoted thirty years to kindergarten teaching at the Freie Georgenschule in Reutlingen and was also a co-founder and teacher of the Waldorf Kindergarten Training Seminar in Stuttgart.

After founding the training seminar in the early 1970s, Freya realized that there was a dearth of teaching resource materials, including songs and circle games. She began to write and composed sixteen small books, through which she is likely best known in America. Her publications include *Work and Play in Early Childhood*, *Toymaking with Children*, *On the Play of the Child*, *Celebrating Festivals with Children*, *Magic Wool*, and *Let’s Dance and Sing*.

The following remembrance from Austrian colleague Brigitte Goldmann paints a picture of how influential Freya Jaffke was in contributing to the “Both / And”

form of the artistic kindergarten filled with practical work that we see in our schools today.

Brigitte shares:

To remember Freya Jaffke, I have to go back into the 70s when I started to work with Bronja Zahlingen in her kindergarten in Vienna. Bronja was a teacher living with art, bringing beautiful things into the surrounding of the children. She made wonderful puppets, dolls, wrote stories and plays and told us young teachers about the hierarchies in the spiritual world. When my colleagues and I wanted to go to Hannover to the international conference, Bronja warned us not to take the workshop of Freya Jaffke, which, of course, we then did. There we met a different world, because Freya knew how to understand and bring into the kindergarten practical work that Steiner had often just mentioned through short indications.

Bronja and Freya were two pioneers in a time where it was not clear how Waldorf kindergarten was to be lived and structured, how the rhythm of the day, the week and the year with the festivals should look. Freya told us to create a working atmosphere in the room through which the children could feel our will and then take it into their play. She made clear how to move in the room because the children are mainly imitating our movements and how our attention is directed toward the work we are doing in front of them. Freya was unique in the way she interpreted Steiner for us, pointing out the need for study and self-education.

Coming home, we strongly felt the task to unite these artistic and practical polarities. We made puppets but also started cooking in the kindergarten and working with wood. Freya had taught us to “bring daily life into the kindergarten.”

We learned poems, songs and fairytale-plays written by Bronja, and made puppets from silk for Bronja’s stories; but at the same time we learned from Freya to think about what and how to work and be with the children. Ironing is a holy deed if you know how to do it. We took up both impulses and still think that this is what the children need. “Learn to distinguish the essential from the non-essential and concentrate only on the necessary things.”

As a teacher trainer, some students found her quite strict, but others liked the clear words about the task of a teacher working with little children. These words still stay with me and I try to tell others about them as often as possible.

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Susan Perrow, workshop presenter and author of books on therapeutic storytelling, shares these memories from Freya’s time in Australia:

I first met Freya in 1993 when she was the keynote presenter at the Vital Years Conference in Lennox Head on the far north coast of NSW. As one of the coordinators responsible for many practical preparations, I was struck by a request from Freya to purchase 50 wood carving knives for one of her workshops. This immediately aroused my curiosity, and I was not disappointed in this experience with her.

Freya was a great advocate for teachers to have a woodworking bench in or nearby their kindergarten room and to know how to carve wood safely and productively. Over several workshop sessions she taught us how to use the knives to create little wooden spoons and other items for creative play.

This spoke deeply to me and a woodwork bench was added to my room within a few months of her visit. I later mentored teachers in East Africa to do the same. I still have my woodwork tools in a small leather bag. After each of my grandchildren was born, I carved a little spoon for their first porridge or mashed vegetables.

The woodwork bench was not just for the teachers. Freya had stools for children to stand on to do their own woodwork of rasping wood and sanding. Sometimes a large log was clamped to the bench for the busy little workers to shape and form.

A few years after this 1993 conference I visited Freya’s kindergarten in Germany and watched one of her teachers busy at the workbench in the middle of the room with woodchips falling to the floor all around her. Children were using the woodchips in their creative play as well as the different carved implements and toys. Such a wonderful example of active imitation! This woodworking impulse stands alongside Freya’s well-known wonderful craft and doll work from her little books. These have also been well-used resources for me as a teacher, parent, and a grandparent.

A lasting memory comes from when I took her for a walk at Cape Byron. We parked up near the lighthouse. Gale force winds were blowing and rain was lashing all around. I thought she would want to stay in the car, but no chance—she pulled her raincoat on tightly and headed into the rain and wind. She was quite a small person in physical size but lived with such tremendous will forces!

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From Rebecca Ruof, nursery teacher at Berkshire Waldorf School in Great Barrington, MA, who was a student in Freya Jaffke's kindergarten in Germany (the photos accompanying this article are courtesy of Rebecca):

Most of my memories of Freya Jaffke are feeling memories. I remember her most clearly from when she would come to our house to use our phone to call her brother. At the time my dad had a job that included free long-distance phone service. Freya lived in a little apartment down the street from us and she would come and sit at the desk in our living room to make her call. My sister and I were always very excited to know she was coming and tried to be quiet and stay in our room.

I was five when I was in her kindergarten and she truly created an environment and a mood that was not focused on her. "Dreamy memories" of that time are all that I recall. Freya kept herself out of the picture.

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Gratitude from Nancy Blanning:

Freya was my guide and self-embraced mentor in all of my teaching. Meeting her gave me encouragement that I actually could become a Waldorf/Steiner kindergarten teacher with love of practical, simple work as my main gift to the children.

I had entered the classroom as an "emergency hire" with no training at all. A workshop with Freya Jaffke in Spring Valley in the late 1980s was my first taste of professional training. It changed my life in teaching and living. I still refer to the extensive handwritten notes I took then as my first precious Waldorf resource. I was fortunate to be able to visit her kindergarten in Germany for one morning a few years later. I learned more in four hours of just watching (and not understanding a word of German) than in my years in the

kindergarten. Just watching Freya's movements and gestures with few words was a powerful experience of how focused intention into our actions and deeds give the children accessible models for healthy imitation.

Attending the International Early Childhood conference at High Mowing was another gift. Brigitte Goldmann, in her reminiscences of Freya earlier in this tribute, described the tension in the 70s between the polarities of Bronja Zahlingen's artistic impulse in early childhood and Freya's practical work and engagement of the will. Knowing nothing about this but just following my interests and pedagogical needs, the two workshops I took at this conference were silk marionette making with Bronja and woodcarving with Freya. Little did I know that I was getting the best of both worlds. How fortunate I was to experience both of these magnificent teachers and take both of their impulses into my teaching.

I wrote to Freya last year to express my gratitude for all I have learned from her. She replied with a short letter and photos of the beautiful silk marionette plays she and her retired colleagues created each year until the last year of her life. Her artistry radiated forth along with her practicality.

I mention her regularly in teacher training courses and workshops. And I will continue to keep passing her name along to new teachers so we can sustain appreciation for our heritage from these very special teachers. ♦

