

A Roadmap for a Renewed Festival Life

~ Stephen Spitalny

Festivals can be celebrations of the seasons of the year and serve to connect us to the world of nature and the invisible worlds around us. A festival celebrates the coming together of earthly and cosmic forces and processes. Festivals also create communities of human beings in the celebrating of this dynamic interaction of earth and cosmos, the relation of matter and spirit. These seasonal celebrations mark the changing of the light, the relation of the earth to the sun and other stars and planets, and the connection to what is universal in the cycle of the year. Festivals can be the bearers of the spirit within the earthly seasons. They are points where earth–spirit and cosmic–spirit meet. And the annual festival rhythm can be strengthening to the developing physical body of the young child.

The reality of the past 100 years of Waldorf/Steiner education is that a strong tradition has evolved in many places, particularly the UK and the USA, where school community festivals have obvious elements of Christian tradition. This semblance of Christianity, whether in content or in name only, has been a barrier, a wall, and can be the deciding factor that prevents families from sending their child to a Steiner school. This wall is not welcoming and does not create a culture

of true inclusiveness. I suggest it is time to change the names, but not just the names. It is time to change the content of the festivals to represent universal spirituality, and eliminate the religious overtones. We have to scrutinize the images, songs, stories, and poems we choose and be awake to how these might affect the diverse members of our community.

In the future, it will not matter much whether what Christ is will still be called by that name. However, a lot will depend on our finding in Christ the spiritual uniter of humanity and accepting that external diversity will increase more and more.

—Rudolf Steiner, *The Universal Human* –
Lecture 4

Rudolf Steiner sometimes mentioned what he named the “Christ Impulse,” something he described as standing behind our educational movement, or perhaps shining light into our movement. Here again, we have a choice of name for the Being of the Sun that can create unfortunate misunderstandings. Nonetheless, Steiner said we could know if that Being is connected to a particular endeavor if those activities

bring people together, if people are more united. Let us take up the work that is necessary to transform our schools so that all people are welcomed, included, and united!

During this time of COVID we have been isolated to varying degrees for many months, and our community festival life has been slumbering. This moment in world history is an opportunity to reinvent our festival life, both at individual Steiner/Waldorf schools as well as within the Waldorf movement. What an amazing opportunity to take hold of this moment and to remake our festival year and create something meaningful, and at the same time something new that is welcoming for all.

Cycle of the Year

Rudolf Steiner's ideas can guide our thinking about the greater cosmic forces at work in the four seasons and how it is possible to establish balance as a human being within those cycling seasons. These ideas can form the groundwork for new thinking about festivals.

Let us first consider the underlying gesture of the cycle of the year. In the depths of Winter, the Earth, in relation to the cosmos, is a being enclosed within itself. In Summer the Earth is given over to the cosmos, it engages with the cosmos. During Spring and Autumn there is balance and a transition between these polarities. Summer can be characterized as an exarnation experience, the earth is uniting with the cosmos. Winter can be described as an incarnated time, as a deeply inward situation for the earth. Winter and Summer could also be characterized as experiences of center and periphery. The gesture to finding balance in Winter is that we must remember to stay connected with the periphery while in Summertime we must strive to maintain our connection to our own center.

Steiner, in Lecture 5 of *The Cycle of the Year as a Breathing Process of the Earth*, described the cosmic tendencies that pull the human being in certain directions at different times of the year, and he suggested activities that then can help to bring the human being into balance. Through this struggle for balance and self-development, the human being can receive guidance from the cosmos. In the following, the words in **bold** are spoken by benevolent spiritual beings to aid the human being in finding balance throughout the cycle of the year:

Autumn—Look around thee

In Autumn we are called upon to be awake and attentive to what is happening in the world, to see in our fellow human beings the signature of the spirit and to awaken social conscience.

Winter—Be aware of the darkness

One must maintain a connection to Cosmic moral impulses. This is the human being's winter task in order to not be taken over by the tendency to dwell inwardly on one's own shortcomings and regrets.

Spring—Know thyself

In Spring, the human soul's tendency is to sink into the flood of uprising nature forces. The call to the human being is to "Know Thyself," to stay connected with yourself in this time of spring fever. The call is to truly look at oneself, to hold up the mirror, and see one's weaknesses and limitations and where one has fallen away from one's highest intentions.

Summer—Receive the light

In Summer, the human soul tends to give itself up to what is going on all around in nature. The tendency for the human being is to dream outside of oneself, to lose one's awareness of center, of self. To balance that tendency, the human is called upon to consciously receive the light that is streaming toward us from the cosmos. The divine spiritual world reveals itself as moral impulses, which the human receives as enlightenment.

This way of looking at the cycle of the year is connected to Steiner's Main Exercise which guides one into a practice of transforming the received light of the cosmos, the wisdom of the stars and planets, into human deeds of love.

New Ideas:

A task for our time, for right now, is to imbue festivals with this type of thinking, and at the same time make them welcoming and inclusive for all. The task is to create a community festival life that is inclusive and non-religious, and to imbue these celebrations with deep symbolism representing the realities of cosmic/earthly interaction and the activities of spiritual beings and forces.

Themes to emphasize within the flow of festival life:

1. Community—the living community of a school.

2. Ancestors and the Land—the ancient stewards of the land (who are still present), and those who have passed away and were connected to community members.
3. The Light—the wisdom streaming from the Cosmos.
4. The Earth—our one and only planetary home.
5. The Future—where we are going.

In the Fall/Autumn we can celebrate community, and honor the present moment we are in together. Later in Fall, we look to the past and honor with gratitude the ancestors and the land we are on. As Winter approaches, we can be aware of the possibility for egoism and of experiencing our own inner difficulties by kindling the light, the light that returns every year. In Spring, we celebrate the earth, and the growth and life forces—the uprising forces of nature—without losing connection to who we are as individuals, individuals who are striving to become better and better. And in Summer, we strive to remember to receive the wisdom that is encoded within the light that is streaming toward us to prepare us for the future.

What follows is a proposal for a new framework of the year. This is offered not as a rigid doctrine, but as an offering to stimulate thinking and to free us to create a more wonderful future together.

The following includes suggestions for early childhood festivals. For me, kindergarten festivals celebrate divinities and grand cosmic and earthly forces and activities in metaphoric/symbolic ways. Festivals for the older students (in the grade school) can celebrate developed human beings, those people who overcame themselves to become examples for others to strive toward.

A New Festival Cycle of the Year

The end of September:

For 100 years Waldorf/Steiner schools have celebrated *Michaelmas*. It is time to change the name and continue to celebrate the striving that is represented by that spiritual being and which that being is waiting to see in human beings. What shall we name this festival that will welcome all to community?

At this time of year in most of the northern hemisphere, we celebrate the annual return-to-school, and the diversity of the school community. We

focus on the present in this festival and we highlight activities and stories that help us evolve to become more truly human. We also can acknowledge that we are celebrating the *Spirit of our time* that is calling on us to develop social conscience and become courageous and intelligent. The call is to become less self-centered and develop the capacity to serve others. According to Steiner, the *Spirit of our time* is interested in humans becoming “cosmopolitan,” meaning the diversity of humanity living together in harmony. Questions arise, such as *what are the needs of our present time?*, and *who comprises our community?*

The Fall Festival; Re-Awakening to Community is the name the school which my kindergarten in the USA chose for this re-envisioned festival. *Fall* is one of the names used for the season between Summer and Winter, and has the added element of raising the question of what is it from which we have fallen. We have indeed fallen away from a connection with spiritual wisdom and true moral impulses, we have fallen away from a deep connection with the natural world, and—especially in this time of pandemic—we have fallen away from social community life. Our festival will still center the activities of working to overcome something that needs transformation, striving to become a better human being, and center the values of courage, intelligence and diversity of humanity. While the name may seem a bland naming of a festival for the season, it is in fact filled with rich possibilities for symbolic interpretation.

Our *Fall Festival* highlights a story presented as a play, in which something that is not right must be overcome or transformed, some evil must be redeemed. It may include a dragon as that which needs transforming, it may include a dragon that is a helpful, positive being, and it may not include a dragon at all. Each year we will celebrate with a different story representing the diversity of peoples on the earth in all ways and each year, each new story will create opportunity for conversation and community connection.

In our Festival Year, we now transition to a focus on the Light that is shining towards us from the cosmos.

Mid-November:

Lantern Walk—(not St. Martinmas) an intimate (small group) reminder to kindle our own light as the

days grow shorter and we head for the time of year when humans tend toward more inwardness. Lantern light radiates outward, just as our own light can shine on others. This is an evening, outdoor festival which each early childhood group celebrates separately to support the possibility for small-group intimacy.

Early-December:

The whole school community celebrates with a **Winter Faire** on a Saturday in December with fun, activities for children, crafts to do, music (again, not coming from a specific religion), vendors selling crafts, and food.

Mid-December:

The Garden of Light—On a Sunday evening in December (determined by various calendar considerations) each early childhood group has their own time with the Garden of Light so that the children are not sitting for too long of a time and the experience for children and parents is more intimate and not overwhelming.

The festival begins in darkness and ends brightly lit by the many candles. The central candle can be already lit when the children arrive, or someone can enter the dark spiral bearing a candle. He or she is not named nor referred to nor spoken about. It is left to the attendees to imagine for themselves what sort of being is lighting the candle. We have a moment to sit in silence together when all the children have had their turn and before the children are taken home to bed. Siblings can be included, both younger and older. Younger or less confident children are accompanied by one of their teachers. Consider holding this festival outdoors surrounded by trees, under the twinkling stars. Simply breathtaking!

We can carefully and consciously omit any songs or other symbolism that harkens back to any particular religions. If anything, this festival celebrates the Winter Solstice, when the days once again begin to lengthen. Perhaps it could even be scheduled on the day of Solstice, the shortest day of the year! Each year, the Light incarnates again, lengthening the days and offering joy to our souls. The Garden of Light is an imaginative experience of our individual spirit light

incarnating into life on Earth, and how our spirits shining together shed a mighty light.

April/May—Celebration of the Earth:

Earth Day—April 22. Earth Day is a worldwide festival of honoring our planetary mother, and we can highlight practices of sustainability as well as express gratitude to the very ground that supports us. Perhaps a celebration could include planting trees as a community. An important element for an Earth Day celebration can be the acknowledgement of our role as stewards of this our only planet with celebrated themes of conservation and reusing, recycling and reducing. Perhaps Earth Day could replace the May Faire, or somehow combine with elements of the May Faire.

Kindergarten End-of-Year Festival—The kindergarten teacher has shepherded the children during their life in the kindergarten garden of paradise, within the world of their comfortable home and garden. Now the older children are ready for a guide to help them explore the wider world.

Here in the USA, we gather on a warm morning in June, with blooming flowers all around. The sun is shining and the sky is blue. Birds are singing. There are many parents, grandparents and friends all watching with smiles and many tears of joy. In the center of the circle sit all the early childhood children and their teachers. The new first grade teacher is present and seated beside an empty vase. The children sing and then a story is told. The story tells of the fledglings who begin to wonder what lies beyond the forest, and that someone who sings a special song, a song of the future, would be waiting for them to lead them out into the wide world. The fledglings search for and then find that bird who will guide and support them along the way, into their future.

After the story, one by one, each child deemed ready for first grade is called by name, stands up, bids goodbye to their teacher and walks over to their new teacher to be welcomed, and the child offers a flower (from the kindergarten garden) for the empty vase. The new first grade class is led off for a short time

alone with their new teacher, and the younger children, who will remain in kindergarten, are acknowledged that they now will be the older and experienced kindergartners in the fall.

This kindergarten end-of-year festival (it is not named “Graduation”) is a rite of passage from one phase of development to the next. It is a type of initiation experience. It signifies the transition from a group soul experience to a more self-conscious state of being. The children for the first time are called on to stand up as individuals in front of all present. The new first graders are “handed over” by their kindergarten teacher to the teacher who will guide them through the next phase of life. In a simple yet profound way, all present witness this crossing of the bridge out of early childhood. This is a special rite of passage for all participants, including the parents.

The Young Child

With all these festival thoughts in mind, we must take into consideration the needs of the young child, the developmental stage of consciousness of the young child. One aspect to consider in creating a festival for young children is to keep it simple. So much can be done with gesture and mood that speaks more powerfully than elaborate choreographed events. It is important to avoid “festival indigestion,” especially for young children. By keeping our festival calendar simple, we support the child, and it creates less stress in the adults’ lives.

For all festivals, a mood of anticipation can be created through the planning and preparation. Including the children in the preparation allows them to experience and participate in the process of life, to more deeply root themselves into the yearly cycle. Though it can also be special for the children to arrive to the magic of an already created festival day, I include the children in the various aspects of preparation for most festivals with two notable exceptions, the *Garden of Light* and the *Kindergarten End-of-Year Festival*, which the teachers set up without the children.

Transforming Light into Love

A powerful guiding image for me is the light that streams toward us from the sun and stars, and the warmth and love into which we can transform that light. That is the essence of Steiner’s Main Exercise that I referred to above. Perhaps that is the central theme around which the variations of individual festivals can revolve. Perhaps this is the central theme of all spiritual traditions—turning wisdom into deeds of service and love. To me it is so important that our celebrations are so universal that no one feels excluded. I want all the families to inwardly experience the feeling that “this festival speaks to us.” I want to celebrate what is universally human and universally cosmic/spiritual. The spiritual can be celebrated without the specifically religious. In this way the community is united and can find strength and inspiration from each other in celebration of the Cycle of the Year. ♦

*The gift of light we thankfully take
But not shall it be alone for our sake
The more we give light
The one to the other
It shines and it glows and it spreads still further
Until every spark by friends set aflame
Until every heart with joy to proclaim
In the depths of our souls a shining sun glows.*

—M. Tittman

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