

Developing Our Thinking About Festivals

~ Jill Tina Taplin

Festivals are a part of all religions and of all healthy communities. They provide a structure for the year and could be described as the punctuation which helps the year to breathe and to make sense, as punctuation helps writing breathe and make sense. Festivals provide the opportunity for us to step out of our day-to-day life and stand for a moment fully in the present, with the opportunity to look backwards to past celebrations and forwards to future celebrations.

But traditional festivals come with baggage! They have religious connections which can contradict our aspirations to be truly inclusive. At a time when we are re-assessing habits and customs in our schools and settings, how can we move forward with our thinking about festivals? In this article I would like to consider how we might develop our thoughts about celebrating festivals with young children, becoming more inclusive without losing the richness of our traditions. In addition, how can we benefit each year from conscious engagement with festivals and their meaning?

Around the world, all cultures live with a seasonal cycle and a related agricultural cycle. Here in the northern hemisphere, the annual dance of earth and sun provides a seasonal round for the natural world and for traditional agriculture and horticulture. There is a clear progression through springtime birth and growth, summer nurture and blossoming, autumn nourishing and harvesting, fading into winter conservation and rest. In tropical areas, the summer heat may be the time when nature rests and conserves its strength, ready for the resurgence that cooler weather will bring. In equatorial regions, seasonal cycles may revolve around the arrival of rainy or dry times of the year rather than changes in

temperature. However, even at the equator there is a seasonal pattern to the ripening of fruits, for example. The Seasonal Cycle diagram summarizes the seasonal pattern in the northern hemisphere.

This natural cycle has an impact on human activity, on what we eat, what we wear, and our social activities, and of course, it affects our psyche. In the northern hemisphere, in winter, we want to “hibernate” in cosy places with hot soup and apple crumble. In summer we like to be outside with our friends eating salad and fresh fruit. Although in many ways we are able to free ourselves from the seasons, including central heating, air conditioning, frozen and imported food, nevertheless we do feel more settled and clearer at certain times of year and are inclined to be flighty and distracted at others.

The traditional pattern of the academic year in the northern hemisphere has a long summer break (starting earlier and lasting longer the further north you go) and a fresh starting point as the chill of autumn begins to make itself felt in the early mornings. This is no accident but an accurate reflection of our seasonal moods. We can all feel how focus flies out of the open school window as the days lengthen and returns as they shorten.

Rudolf Steiner suggests that we are beings of not only body and soul, but with a unique spiritual element that we can actively develop through our soul activities of thinking, feeling and willing. The whole of our earthly existence is an opportunity, through our soul development, for deepening our manifestation of our spiritual blueprint, for bringing out our higher self. The cycle of the year, wherever we live, can make a significant contribution to that opportunity. Behind the changing seasons, revolving and mutually cooperating spiritual forces, which are reflected in



nature, have the potential to support our development. When we celebrate festivals around the year with conscious intent, we take up that opportunity.

On this foundation, the Christian festivals of Europe have developed, and Rudolf Steiner connects these seasonal moods with the four archangels (see *The Four Seasons and the Archangels*) summarized in the diagram on this page.

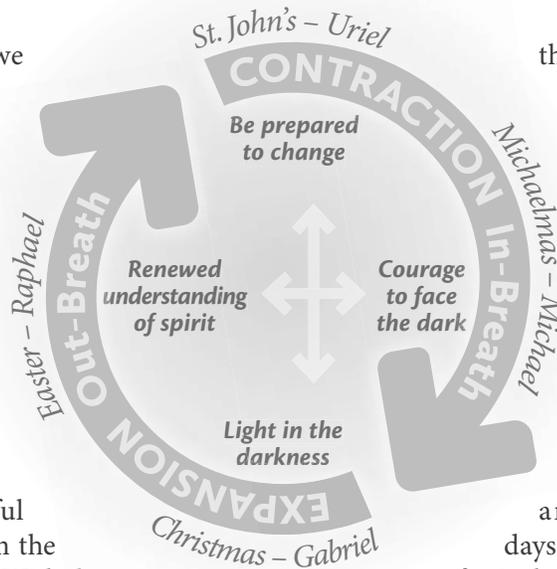
It is important that, as adults, we go beyond both accustomed traditional celebrations and the cycle of nature. Rather than a cycle repeated each year, we can access a spiral of human development. Starting in the winter, when the plants and animals appear least active, we human beings have the chance to connect with our inner light, as reflected in traditional festivals of Christmas, Hanukkah and Diwali. At the darkest time of the year, we can feel the potential of the year ahead of us, as the door is opened to hopeful possibilities for us to learn from the experiences coming towards us. With the lengthening days, the soul expands and rebirth in nature is echoed by rebirth in our awareness of the reality of the spirit. The year continues to turn towards the time when the sun is most powerful, and with the spiritual awareness gained comes the responsibility to take some action. The outer world of light and warmth tries to distract us from serious study, but we can gather the strength for changing ourselves for the better in how we act and speak. If we succeed, then with autumn comes a personal harvest. Unlike the plant and animal kingdoms, this is no time for us to rest. As human beings, we need to stay awake as the power of the sun recedes and the nights lengthen. If the fruits of our inner work are to remain nutritious, we must pay attention to them when threats and dangers come, dangers such as our own laziness, inflexibility, or susceptibility to distraction. Then, at midwinter, we search once more for the light of hope in the darkness which will enable us to continue our journey.

This soul journey, with its fruits for the spirit, is supported by festival celebrations. The festivals themselves can become the signposts along the way providing an emphasis which we return to each year. With this understanding of the place of festivals in our development, we have a firm foundation when we look at how to celebrate festivals with young children and their families in an inclusive way.

Children, even city children, live close to the natural world. I am reminded of this every year as I see again the surge of energy that erupts in early spring in the kindergarten. In early February, when the outer signs of spring are hardly visible, the peace of January dissolves into chaos just as the bulbs push up through the frosty ground and the birds seek their mates through song and courtship displays. By June, these children are butterflies, flitting about from one thing to another when the sun shines and cast down by dull damp days. Our festivals can all be nature festivals, from the gathering of harvest and courage to meet the dark in autumn, through finding the light of hope at the heart of midwinter, the re-birth of spring as the caterpillar becomes a butterfly, and the joyful cosmic rounds of midsummer dances.

The details of what we bring into those festivals come from our local community connections. We may be in a situation where the nativity story is appropriate as part of a midwinter celebration of light and hope in the darkness, or we may not. That will require sensitive conversations with our colleagues and parent communities. We may have to give up much-loved traditions, familiar stories, and old habits. That will create space for something fresh to come in. Rudolf Steiner was very clear that we would be creating new festivals (see *The Cycle of the Year*), and that words would need to change. Reference to Christ, he said, for example, might not be relevant in future times, but the spiritual meaning would be caught by other terms (see *The Universal Human*).

The Festival Cycle:
an annual opportunity for soul development



How can we think creatively and yet authentically about festivals? We can look back and be inspired by traditions. We can look around us and let our imagination be fired by what we see in our community and in nature, and we can look ahead and feel intuitions about spiritual directions for the future. Going through these steps will lighten up our festival path through the year.

In the busy practicalities of life in a Waldorf early childhood setting, giving time to planning festivals afresh in this way each year can seem daunting; just one more thing to add to the overflowing agenda. We must remind ourselves that this work is both for us and for the children and their families.

We must remember, as Nancy Foster writes in *The Seasonal Festivals in Early Childhood*, that the festival landscape should be a gentle one for the children where they see the festival approaching from the distance, by their involvement in the preparations, and then see it not disappear abruptly, but fading away gradually as the clearing up is done and stories/verses are repeated. Being involved in preparation can mean creating a clean space where something mysterious is going to happen and letting the festival fade away might be playing with the leftovers for a few weeks.

The watchwords for planning are to keep it short and sweet for the children, even if, in the case of community events, the adults would like to stay longer. The rhythm of the day is still your friend. Within it there needs to be a celebration in which there is at least one image or picture giving the essence of the festival's meaning, a symbol to which the children can form an attachment, and there needs to be a joyful ritual with which the festival is celebrated, something that is not part of the everyday.

The following planning document may be useful:

Festival Planning

Mood and essence?

How does this meet the child's nature consciousness?

How is this a festival of the universal human?

Images/picture/story for the child?

Joyful ritual to contain these?

Preparation:

- To agree
- To get
- To inform
- To do

Celebration:

- Introduction
- Timetable of events
- Individual responsibilities
- Conclusion
- Possible problems

Afterwards:

- Clear up
- Review
- Fading experience for the children

And the picture below suggests some symbols:



In a Steiner/Waldorf Early Years Group meeting, I remember a colleague with long experience as a kindergarten teacher, working in challenging circumstances, declaring that preparing and celebrating the festivals each year was a major element keeping her committed to her work. In the picture which Rudolf Steiner presented, we can see four major festivals at the cardinal points of the year, Christmas and St. John's marking midwinter and midsummer, Easter and Michaelmas marking the equinoxes. Between these, are traditional festivals which divide the year approximately into eighths: Martinmas, Candlemas, Whitsun and Lammass (which gets lost in our summer holidays). These have traditionally been celebrated in European Steiner schools and settings. They have Christian names, although they all have pagan histories before the arrival of Christianity. The names can change again to reflect our need to be more inclusive. They can all be celebrated with young children as nature festivals related to seasonal events. For the adults, an understanding of the soul's journey through the year and its potential for development can provide a foundation out of which images, stories and rituals for the children can be created, including contemporary inclusive transformations of traditional customs.

It is not easy to lay aside our comforting habits, when it comes to festivals, and to find the time and energy to develop fresh meaning and creative metamorphoses of those habits. Exploring new territory takes courage and can seem too much for early childhood staff already feeling overworked by day-to-day responsibilities. However, a conscious reappraisal of the festival year among colleagues will repay you, perhaps unexpectedly, by giving energy. Festivals with young children should be joyful events for everyone. When they are founded in a mood of spiritual endeavor, the joy is easier to find and, paradoxically for anything involving young children, a source of deep peace.

I wish you all a fulfilling festival year, and will finish with a list of resource texts, some of which I have referred to in this article. ♦

Jill Taplin is a prominent Steiner/Waldorf educator and teacher trainer in the UK. She is a prolific writer for the UK early childhood journal, *Kindling*, where this article was originally printed. She runs the Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood teacher training program in the north of England and works worldwide in teacher education.

References and Resources:

- Anderson, A. (1993) *Living the Spiritual Year; seasonal festivals in northern and southern hemispheres - an esoteric study*. This is hard to get hold of and I have not had access to it for some years, but it is a rich source of deep information
- Evelyn Francis Capel (1991) *The Christian Year*. Edinburgh: Floris Press. I have found this a helpful background book to understand the Christian pattern of the year more deeply. There are short pieces on traditional festivals and times of the year written by a Christian Community priest.
- Foster, N (ed.) (2010) *The Seasonal Festivals in Early Childhood: Seeking the universally human*. New York: WECAN. This is a series of articles developing thoughts of celebrating festivals with young children and families and looking at various festival times of the year.
- Jaffke, F. (2011) *Celebrating Festivals with Children*. Edinburgh: Floris Press. This is a wonderful classic account of celebrating European and Christian festivals with all the attention to detail in which this author excels. Despite the limited range of festivals discussed, the insights into child development and the spiritual essence of the festivals make it very valuable.
- Steiner, R. (1984) *The Cycle of the Year*. USA: Anthroposophic Press. This is the first occasion on which Rudolf Steiner spoke in a broader sense of the importance of celebrating Michaelmas as a new festival today.
- Steiner, R. (1984) *The Four Seasons and the Archangels*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press. This is a set of five poetic lectures describing images for each of the four seasons and how the archangels work together. The last lecture gives interesting ideas to consider regarding how seasons and festivals work together in other parts of the world.
- Steiner, R. (1990) *The Universal Human*. Anthroposophic Press. A set of 4 lectures. The first and the last are helpful for Steiner's picture of evolutionary Christianity – not a religion to follow but a central turning point in the evolution of humanity
- Steiner, R. (1996) *The Festivals and their Meaning*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press. A wonderful compilation that you can go back to through the years, with lectures on Michaelmas, Christmas, Easter and Whitsun.
- Steiner, R. (1999) *The Calendar of the Soul*. Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press. There is a verse for each week of the year, reflecting the soul's journey through the great in-breath and out-breath. There are so many alternative translations available and this is for life-long study.