

Nurturing Our Work

Cultivating Spaciousness: Working with the Child from Birth to Age Three

~ Magdalena Toran

When I am asked to lead a conversation or write an article or teach a class about working with children before the birth of the “I” consciousness, I decline. How do you talk about holiness? How do you teach in the physical what is mostly non-physical? I am a small person in so many ways—how do I speak about infiniteness?

A recent unexpected shift in my teaching load gave me fewer parent-child classes than usual. I found myself feeling spacious in my teaching in a way that I had not felt for a long, long while. Those of us in schools or with the bustle of a modern life often have every last nook and cranny of our beings filled-up. We have things to remember and things to do, places to go and people and projects to tend to. Our inner space is filled with doing. This is so very different from the nature of the very young child. The young child’s inner space is filled with being-ness.

This inner space of being-ness is perhaps best described in pictures. Imagine a cathedral or place of worship just before the members come, or a meadow on a still summer morning, or a well-loved and well-tended home when the family has gone out for the day. Each of these place-images is filled with human-spiritual activity, but they are still and spacious. This is my sense of the nature of very young children. They are cathedral-like. We often feel a holiness and heavenliness around young children. We sense that they have not yet come into their physical bodies. The largeness that they are hovers about them. It is a moment for us as adults to perceive the vastness of who they are, before it enters more deeply into the physical with the first birth of the “I.” They are bringing the divine to earth. How do we cultivate our own inner gesture of spaciousness so as to receive them?

This cultivation of spaciousness is a deeply individual path. I believe the child’s inner space of being-ness is a place that lives inside of each of us. It is the nature of our own being, as proven to us by the

children in our care. Each of us possesses the capacities to cultivate spaciousness again. We only need to go looking for that place within ourselves again, and once we discover it we should grow it, cultivate it and protect it. Once we remember what the young child’s spaciousness feels like, we can access it in our work with them.

Now there are many things that support us in this profound activity and many are the foundations of Waldorf early childhood education, such as the appropriate cultivation of our physical environment and daily rhythm, gifts to the children of elevated speech and song, ample time in nature, gentle, patient care-giving and a quality of timelessness. If we keep our physical spaces well tended and tidy, both the children and we find restfulness. If our daily rhythm is consistent and well-paced; if our speech is loving, clear and joyful; if our artistic offerings are simple, beautiful and slow; if we have unhurried time in the woods, gardens, fields, by the stream, in our familiar places in nature; if we offer our open hands to the children; then they have the resources they need to grow, to build strong bodies and to welcome the heavenliness that they are into those developing physical homes.

All of these things support us in our tending to and caring for young children. But above all it is our spacious being-ness that allows them their deepest rest and greatest comfort. When I encounter a child, I notice that I instinctually slow my movements, soften my tone, and drop a little deeper into myself. When a child who has been restless comes to sit with me for dressing or for circle, I drop even deeper into that space of stillness and being-ness, coming the closest I can to the origin of who they are. Most often, the breathing of the child slows, her gaze softens and she rests. Then I can move slowly and tenderly as I help her dress or wash her hands or just sit quietly and gaze out into the world.

To be with young children in this way is my greatest joy because it feels the most true. Cultivating the inner space of beingness feels true to who they are and true to what they are asking of us. It is worth going on our own inner journey and practice to find and cultivate this space within us so as to support our children in their profound act of becoming. ◆

Magdalena Toran—

Magdalena is parent-and-child teacher at the Hartsbrook School. She is active in birth-to-three work and serves on the WECAN board.