

The question of Saints in Early Childhood programs  
Stephen Spitalny

A question posted on an online Waldorf early childhood list sparked my thinking and inspired me to write the following.

I know many Waldorf early childhood programs and kindergartens celebrate festivals named for various saints, and tell stories about these saints. I would like to question that practice and offer some ideas.

What is a saint? A saint is a human being who others have come to consider as holy and in service of high ideals and divinity. Often, saints are human beings who usually started out not so nice, not very 'evolved,' and had radical transformations. The point is, a saint is a particular human being. What the young children need, what we can provide them with in our in early childhood programs, are archetypal images of the activity of becoming more human, such as those found in fairy and folk tales. Not specific humans, but archetypal images of human-ness.

To support the young children, festivals can be celebrations of the seasons, especially in relation to the sun. Festivals can help connect the children to the world around us. They fall in an annual rhythm that can be strengthening to the physical body of the young child. And they can be community building experiences for young and old.

A festival celebrates the coming together of earthly and cosmic forces. Communities of human beings come together in celebrating the harmony of earth and cosmos, of matter and spirit. These seasonal celebrations mark the changing of light, the relation of the earth to the sun, and the connection to what is universal in the cycle of the year. Festivals celebrate points in the year when earth–spirit and world/cosmic–spirit meet.

My focus is on celebrating the divine spark that lives in each of us, and the divine creator powers of the universe. 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 central theme around which the variations of individual festivals revolve. 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 that “this festival speaks to us.” I want to celebrate what is universally human and universally cosmic/spiritual. The spiritual is celebrated, but not the specifically religious.

Kindergarten festivals celebrate divinities. Festivals for the older children often celebrate developed human beings such as saints. I leave saints for the grade school years. I celebrated only a few major festivals in my kindergarten. They include Michaelmas, Lantern Walk (not St. Martinmas), Evergreen Spiral Garden and an end-of-year Bridge Festival. I did also celebrate each child's birthday. These are the festivals to which I invite the parents, but of course, in a sense, every day is a festival in kindergarten.

I often did celebrate a Lantern Walk evening with my kindergarten. We would make various types of lanterns from year to year, and then gather at some dark, outdoor spot and sing lantern songs and walk around with light only from our lanterns and the stars. I would hold it on a non-rainy night when the moon was not very bright sometime in November. I never mentioned anything about St. Martin - it was simply our "Lantern Walk." For me an integral part of a festival is a story, and here is one I told for our Lantern Walk that was published in a past issue of *Gateways*.

[http://www.waldorflibrary.org/images/stories/Journal\\_Articles/GW3808.pdf](http://www.waldorflibrary.org/images/stories/Journal_Articles/GW3808.pdf)

The Lantern Walk was part of a late fall celebration of the shortening of days and lengthening of nights that culminates at winter solstice. I tried to make festivals for the young children that reflect the human in relation to the cycles of seasons, without explaining to the children. We just experience, and let the images the children take in do all the 'talking.'

Why are saint stories and fables from various cultures told in Second Grade in a Waldorf curriculum? It is because the children in second grade are beginning to experience their own dark side and are given story images as a guide to overcoming their baser characteristics of which they themselves are beginning to be aware. Saint festivals can also wait until second grade. To me, Saints are not kindergarten content. Kindergarten is about the archetypal activity of becoming human

To put it bluntly, I don't think saints belong in kindergarten.

When considering a festival calendar, there are various possibilities. You can celebrate no festivals. You can do a mix of many religious traditions, a hodgepodge of festivals, trying to honor families from all religions. Or you can contemplatively and creatively get to the essence of a festival and present it's universal qualities in celebration of human becoming. The latter approach is by far the hardest. It requires us to be creative and awake and think for ourselves. And I vote for this hard road because the rewards are profound. Among the possible rewards are a greater sense of community and inclusion.

In closing, I would like to broach the subject of the "Christ Impulse" that people refer to as standing behind the Waldorf school movement. Some use it as justification for celebrating Festivals with a Christian tinge. Steiner called the 'Christ impulse' a unifying and connecting impulse that can be active among groups. He also explained, "In the future, it will not matter much whether what Christ is will still be called by that name." Here is how Dr. Steiner described this 'Christ Impulse.'

*The Universal Human* – Lecture 4, 1/9/1916, Bern (pps. 85 - end)

*This is one of the meanings of the Mystery of Golgotha: the attainment of the unity of humanity from within. Externally human beings are becoming more and more different. The result will not be sameness but differences all over the earth, and human beings must exert all the more force from within to attain unity...Such differences will always exist because human beings will only gradually be able to attain unity. At the same time, different groups will fight each other tooth and nail about everything concerning their*

*outer life. These are setbacks from earlier epochs that run counter to the Christ impulse, rather than in harmony with it.*

*Indeed, here we have a very profound meaning of this Christ impulse. Based on true knowledge, we can say it is Christ who keeps humankind from being fragmented into groups....*

*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...*

*We have to be able to face calmly and courageously the increasing diversity in human nature because we know that we can carry a word into all these diversities that is not merely a word of speech but one of power. Though there may be groups that fight against each other and though we may even belong to one of them, we know that we can bring something that will express: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" into every group. We know that this "Christ who lives in me" will not lead to the forming of groups; rather, it will bring about the spreading of the glory of the name "human being" over the whole earth....*

*You are called upon to help in this development, which will lead to something appearing to people in bright clarity, something we cannot yet express because we do not have words for it in our languages, yet something spiritual science works toward. When you feel you belong to such a spiritual stream, and feel at home in it, because you see that it is necessary for human evolution, then you have a right understanding of our spiritual movement – you belong to it in such a way that you rightly understand the greatest of its goals based on your increasing understanding of the contrast between Christ and Lucifer-Ahriman. You understand that this contrast is vital and had to exist...*

### *Inner Aspect of the Social Question*

*Lecture 2, February 11, 1919, Zurich*

*...If we expand our interest to embrace with inner tolerance, everything human, and say to ourselves: "Through the fact of my birth I am a prejudiced person; only through being reborn into an all-embracing feeling of fellowship for the thoughts of all men shall I find myself the impulse which is, in truth, the Christ Impulse. If I do not look on myself alone as the source of everything I think, but recognize myself, right down into the depths of my soul, as a member of the human community" – then, my dear friends, one way to the Christ lies open. This is the way, which must today be characterized as the way to the Christ through thinking.*

After taking these words to heart, and many long meetings and subsequent lengthy word-smithing, the Santa Cruz Waldorf School reached agreement on an inclusiveness policy. I offer it as a compass for your consideration towards a new culture of community, connecting and unity.

### **\*A Guiding Principle for an Inclusive (Waldorf) School Culture**

A core principle is the creation and maintenance of a school culture that is welcoming and inclusive to families and individuals from all religious traditions. We reflect a

balanced and universal spirituality of the human being and nature in our developmentally appropriate curriculum, classroom decoration and festival life. This worldview is based on the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, though anthroposophy is not taught to the students. By the end of 8th grade each student will have experienced the panorama of major world religions within the language arts and history curricula. The strength of this principle rests on the clear and open communicating and working together between teachers and parents.