

Summer 2011 July 4–July 22
Early Childhood Summer Institute and Teacher Training

Mark your calendar! Planning for summer 2011 is underway and will include a new cycle of our 13-month part-time training course beginning July 11, "The Child and Family in the First Three Years," for early childhood teachers, parent-infant and parent-toddler group leaders, and childcare providers. The Summer Institute will offer several courses as well.

July 4–8 Creating Programs for Parents with Infants and Toddlers—Nancy Macalaster and Kim Snyder-Vine

July 4–8 Arts for the Early Childhood Teacher: Puppetry, Speech, and Music

July 11–15 The Young Child's Conversation with Nature —Carol Nasr

July 11–15 and 17–21 Nurturing the Young Child from Birth to Three—Susan Weber and Jane Swain

**Full descriptions of all courses and biographies of faculty will be posted on our website shortly.
 Call or write for our complete print brochure, available in early 2011.**

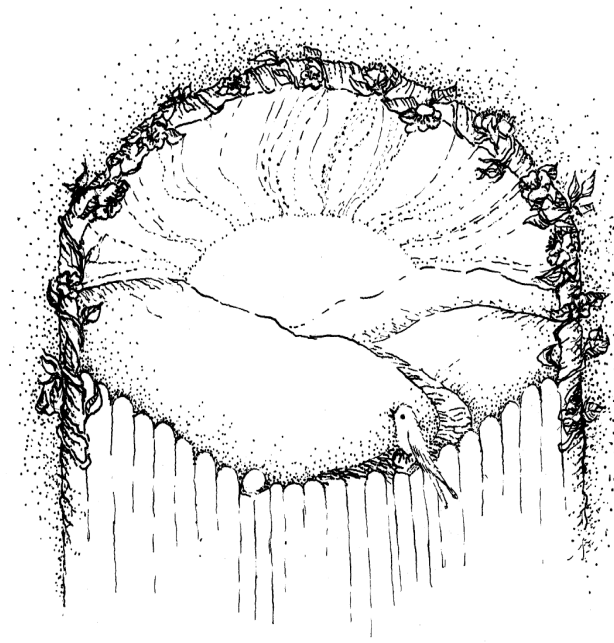


Join us in beautiful southern New Hampshire, land of lakes and mountains, as part of a joyous learning community that will inspire and transform your work! More details on our website, or call us to register at 603-357-3755.

Sophia's Hearth Family Center
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 To receive updates about coming events and articles of interest.

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SOPHIA'S
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the *Garden Gate*

FALL 2010

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the journal of Sophia's Hearth Family Center

Sophia's Hearth Family Center educates and nurtures families and professionals in their care of the young child, out of the resources of Waldorf education. Our vision is that every family be supported to create healthy family life so children develop and flourish with joy, strength, and confidence.

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A letter from Susan Weber

November 2010

Dear friends,

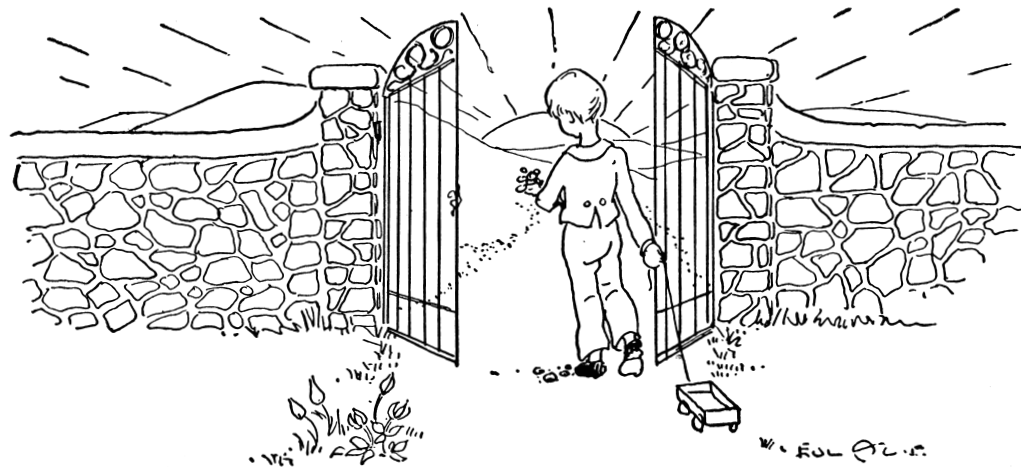
It has been a full two years since the previous *Garden Gate* came your way. Instead of our journal, over this time we have birthed a new home. We are entering into the final season that brings around a full cycle of the year here, and plans are already in place for our second summer of professional course work. We are grateful that we can turn to the *Garden Gate* once again and share with you the thoughts and experiences of our work. Over these months, we have birthed another publication, our periodic, not-quite-monthly online newsletter. If you wish to receive it and are not on our communications list, please let us know.

The world has changed greatly in these two years: electronic communication has nearly eclipsed print for many. But we steadfastly believe in the experience of paper held in the hand—its beauty and permanence. I also recall Joseph Chilton Pearce's remark that we retain only 15% of what we read on the screen, in contrast to 85% in print. So let us turn (back) to print!

In this issue, we invite you to enter for a little while into the world of young children and take a look at what nurtures and sustains them. These first three years form a sacred time in our human journeys, as evidenced in the descriptions of our writers.

Come to visit: join us to experience our health bringing, energy-wise building specially designed to welcome young children, their families, and their teachers.

Susan Weber, Director



Hand Gesture Games: Magic and Power for Young Children

Elizabeth Gollan was a 2010 graduate of our training course, "The Child and Family in the First Three Years," and as a poet and writer deeply inspired by language and its arts, took up the work of Wilma Ellersiek as her course project. Wilma Ellersiek has become greatly beloved by early childhood teachers who have brought her hand gesture games to children. Elizabeth began an important journey as she took up Ellersiek's work. Here we share with you an abridged version of her written project. Elizabeth teaches at the Philadelphia Waldorf School.

I began my research into the rhyme games of Wilma Ellersiek out of a concern for and wonder about words. I felt that there was something important in rhymes, especially in Wilma Ellersiek's. I had only the slightest acquaintance with the Ellersiek games, so there was work ahead of me. What could I understand about words and children by living with these games for a while?

I decided to learn some Ellersiek rhymes well and practice them with children, both in parent-toddler class and at home with my sons. I would make note of what I observed. I hoped thus to better understand rhythm and language, but what shifted most was my understanding of very young children and how we may stand in relation to them.

I found that there is a bestowing of the physical being of the child to the child that comes with these. It is like a benediction, to participate together with a child in these games, just as proper caregiving is. It isn't just the words, although they carry power, and that they rhyme, which creates a sense of natural order. It is not only the gestures, which are simple and gentle. It is something mysterious that streams through.

I came to view the games as an invitation to children to "come into" their bodies and, thus, the world; as an important way for a parent or caregiver to stand beside the very young; and as a vehicle for love. They are beautiful aids to incarnation! This is a function not only of the words and rhymes but of the gestures and the spirit behind them. The games contain nothing extraneous. They are unsentimental. They seamlessly wed speech and touch. They unite the child not only with the caregiver but with those aspects of life suitable for young children. And as with the caregiving work of Emmi Pikler, the caregiver, too, is nourished and refreshed.

I sat with my six-and-a-half-year-old. It was as if he were two again, in the sense that we inhabited what felt like a secret space together, of rhythm and warmth, as if there were a single heartbeat between the two of us. Three beats often



predominate: bind-a bind a band . . . ma ma mee, ma ma moh . . . What is the cadence of breath? Of a beating heart? Of digestion? Respiration, digestion, and language seem deeply connected, coming from the same source and linked in their rhythms. I think this is at least partly why a rhyme ("Bind-a bind a band/All around your hand") is so deeply satisfying. If language is a kind of cosmos where the soul lives, sentences like constellations, then rhyme schemes are home.

Although the rhyme games are simple, I found them difficult to learn. Choosing a few and learning them from the book *Giving Love—Bringing Joy* became a will exercise. I sat with the book and its diagrams and tried. But my attempts were awkward and the children felt this. I started to worry. What sort of an experiment was this going to be, if step one—learning a few games—wasn't going well? But at a conference last year, I was fortunate to meet Kundry Willwerth. Practicing with her brought the games into my reach.

I learned that the body becomes known to itself through the games. When my foot was held, it was as if I was being given my foot and it was now properly mine. I felt cradled in the sound and rhythm of the words and accompanying gestures. There was a feeling of harmony, balance, and nourishment. I imagined what it might be like to be a baby in the same position, to feel these things. It felt like an invitation into this world and into life: sounds, animals, falling rain. I realized later that Mrs. Willwerth's work with me was an initiation. From that moment on, it was with ease and joy that I worked with the Ellersiek games.

At this point, I began to bring the Ellersiek games to children. Below are excerpts from my journal:

Breakthrough! I have spontaneously done an [Ellersiek game] with Eben and he asked over and over for more. He opened up his palm and, although he was shy, looked up at me expectantly and with joy. I felt a huge connection between us, as if we had truly met.

Another breakthrough! Putting the boys to bed, I worked with the games, and the children couldn't have enough of them. They kept holding out their other hands and asking for one more. They loved Bind-a Bind a Band.

I am very excited and feel I have only scratched the surface. I myself feel different, too: more organized and centered. I can't wait to learn more. Both boys went right to sleep afterwards and I noticed that Ezra looked especially restful.

There were many other similar instances. One in particular stood out. One day in the kindergarten, a boy's behavior became more and more chaotic. He is apt to bite the other children, screaming and kicking and so on. These fits last a long time. Since I am not his regular teacher and don't know him well, I had nothing in particular up my sleeve when his behavior started to fall apart. Without thinking, I took his hand and worked with him with an Ellersiek game for several minutes. His demeanor became subdued and tender. He was docile and calm as he handed me his other hand (I don't think I asked for it!) so we could continue. After that, he walked over to put napkins out for snack. Some of the other children had lined up with their hands out in the meantime!

It was brought home to me by this incident what so struck me working with Mrs. Willwerth: that there is a kind of paradox at play. Whereas the games seem and in fact are as simple as one can imagine, they penetrate and move at a very deep level.

The Ellersiek games are effective because a task of the young child is to orient herself in her body so that later she may orient herself in the world. These games seem to offer the message that coming into the waking world, we are separate but we are held. We have an enormous task to do, but we are a natural part of life and order. The rhythmic, unsentimental words and gestures help this come through on a physical level.

As regards my original question about language, I learned that simplicity and rhyme, with accompanying gestures and nothing extraneous—including sentiment—have the greatest power and that soul nourishment for babies can look like this. 🍄

Creating Programs for Parents and Infants, Thoughts From a Participant

Lindsay Evermore came to Sophia's Hearth Family Center's Summer Institute in 2010 as her very first step into preparing herself to create and lead a parent-child group in her home in Connecticut. This autumn brought the first sessions in her group, Song and Season.

As the mother of a toddler and organizer of a community of families working to bring Waldorf into their homes, I'm on a perpetual search for inspiration and resources that align with our values. We live in an area with no nearby Waldorf schools, and my goal was to offer a program for children and parents using a Waldorf parent-child class model. My serendipitous discovery of "Creating Programs for Parents and Infants," a 3-day summer course at Sophia's Hearth, presented a perfect opportunity to learn how to best present a program like this in my community.

I arrived at Manadnock Waldorf School early Monday morning for the first of three movement sessions led by Jane Swain. Any shyness I may have felt dissolved quickly as we playfully learned songs and movement games. After each morning's movement session, I had a skip in my step as we made our way to Sophia's Hearth to continue our day.

Arriving at Sophia's Hearth was an experience full of warmth . . . I had a powerful sense that I was in the right place at the right time. Nancy Macalaster gently and wisely guided our group, offering a number of exercises and activities that profoundly impacted my understanding of the development of very young children. After each exercise, we spent a great deal of time discussing our respective experiences and perspectives. That opportunity to process our own thoughts and learn from one another was incredibly valuable. A bond was forged among the women in the room, and I felt fortunate to learn not only from Nancy but also from others doing the immensely important work of caring for young children.

Although we explored many themes and topics, each segment of the program was deeply experiential and, to me, transformational. Indeed, I was there to learn principles and methods that would help me lead a parent-child group, but I was also there as a parent of a 1-year-old. My understanding of myself as a mother and the needs and development of my daughter, Marlowe, was greatly enhanced.

Kim Snyder-Vine spent time with us each morning sharing her expertise in creative speech, and our work was energetic and eye-opening. Having been unfamiliar with the discipline of creative speech, I didn't know what to expect

at the outset. The exercises Kim presented and the lively discussions that followed left me prepared to change the way I speak to young children and excited to learn more.

Afternoons held a unique experience—we returned from lunch to a room set up as it would be for a parent-child class, each day for a different age group. In its various incarnations, the room offered a welcoming space that seemed perfect for the children and parents it would hold. For the youngest children and their carers, soft lambskins and warm tea created a cozy and reverent mood. For older children, equipment and materials were introduced that encouraged energetic exploration. Nancy walked us through her framework for each age group, which gave us some great, practical ideas to bring home to our work with the little ones in our lives.

On the last day of our program, Michelle Brooks—a fellow student in the program and a nursery/parent-child class teacher at Manadnock Waldorf School—led a group of us on an impromptu tour of the school's nursery/kindergarten building. I think we were all humbled by our surroundings and the breathtaking setting! We also had the opportunity to tour the childcare space at Sophia's Hearth. My evenings were spent reading the books I'd borrowed from the extensive lending library and reflecting on the day's experiences.

I left Sophia's Hearth Wednesday evening excited to return to my family, but with a tinge of melancholy. I was leaving a space where I felt very much at home, although I'd been there only a short time. I was leaving people I felt very connected to and understood by, although I'd only met them three days prior. I was leaving an experience that transformed me as a parent and as a person dedicated to young children, and I was filled with gratitude. 🍄

Dad's Corner

The Dad's Corner is a long-standing part of the Garden Gate, and in this issue we welcome Chris Hayhurst to the column. Chris's son Kaleb participated in our playgroup program from just weeks after his birth, and Kaleb now is cared for in our childcare program. Chris is an organic farmer in Westmoreland, NH, as well as a writer.

Thanks to the rainless summer, our pond, normally deep and teeming with frogs, is nearly dry. Still, the puddle of murk and mud that remains is the perfect place for a kid to play, and Kaleb loves standing at its edge, toeing the cracks and tossing pebbles into the sludge. He'll throw in one stone at a time, watch it sink, and then turn around and trudge back up the bank to the streambed, where he knows there are piles of rocks to be found. I wait, squatting on my heels, tired, watching him, thinking about nothing and everything at once.

Last spring, the pond was full when a late frost—the last of the season—left a thin skim of ice across the water's surface. It must have happened in the middle of the night. That morning, after Jen left for work, Kaleb and I went for a walk: behind our house, deep into the woods, trudging hand in hand or with him in the lead, over and through the bushes and sticks, around downed trees, up big rocks. We have our regular loop and Kaleb knows it well, and eventually we popped back out on our driveway, just a few yards away from the pond. Kaleb, understandably exhausted, his breath visible in puffs in the chilly air, refused to take another step, and so I picked him up high and dropped him onto my shoulders. "Ready?" I asked, grabbing his legs with both hands. "Yeah!"

"Up, up, up the driveway . . ." "Up, up, uppa driveway . . ."



It's one of our rhythms, and so we chanted it together as we turned up the hill and I locked my steps to the beat. We headed for the house. "Up, up . . ." and out of the corner of my eye I saw something brown, maybe orange, beneath the ice, in the pond. A piece of wood? I paused just long enough to lose my stride. "What's that, Papa?" He saw it. "I don't know," I said, although now I did know, and yet for some reason I still left the gravel and moved toward it, all the way to the edge of the ice. We stood for a moment, and I knew immediately I'd done something I'd regret. I heard the words from above my head. "What's Pabo doing?" Pablo, our cat. "I don't know," I said stupidly, my eyes watering as I stared at his shape, his straight legs and his wide-open eyes. "Pabo's wet." He was three feet from the grass, floating, pressed against the ice. "Yes, Pablo's wet."

I spun around, turned him away. "Why?" he asked. "Why?" I had no answer. It was cold. I was cold. He must be cold. Pablo's dead. The cat is dead. Up the hill, back to the house. "What Pabo doing Papa?" I thought for a moment. "I think Pablo fell through the ice, Kaleb. Let's take off your boots. Can you sit down?"

There's an art to rearing a child, or so I've been told. And we have the books. Sears, *What to Expect, Healthy Sleep Habits*, books on cooking and eating and simplifying. On and on. Guides, really, as if raising our boy was somehow similar to taking a trek through the Australian Outback. I can't say I've read any of them. Skimmed, maybe. Checked the index for the subject at hand, like "vomiting" or "vaccinations." Usually it's after Kaleb has gone to bed, and we're sitting at the dinner table wondering whether we're doing things the way we should. Typically, we find, we are. Because really, it's simple. Just be. But death and loss and dead pets, they're not simple. Not for me, and definitely not for a two-year-old.

Unlike me, Jen knew what to say the next time the topic of Pablo came up. I don't recall exactly what it was. Something along the lines of "Pablo's gone away, Kaleb. But he's OK."

"Pablo's Pond" is still a favorite stopping place when Kaleb and I go for walks through the woods. We rarely talk about Pablo, but when we do, I see in Kaleb a boy who cares about the world and all the things he's discovered in it. I see him wonder, and I want to wonder, too.

Kaleb, in his love for song and books and bouncing and play, has led me to a new place, a place where the pace of life is slower, where walking through the woods happens one step at a time. He sees things and helps me to see them, too. He hears things that I haven't heard in years. He leads me. Through dark thickets, into messy puddles, into the places I left behind way too long ago.



At the pond, it's pebble time again, and I watch as Kaleb pushes out through the brush, the stones he's selected clenched tightly in his hands. He's proud and determined, and down the bank he comes until he's standing at my side. He leans into me, slips slightly in the mud, holds out one hand. "Papa do it." I take his offering, a single tiny rock, and he starts the countdown. "Ready . . . set . . . go!" I flip his stone way out, and it hits the surface and spins as it sinks. Barely a ripple.

Then Kaleb. His stone is much bigger and heavier. "Whoa," he says, looking me in the eye and holding out the rock. "Whoa," I answer, and I mean it. He digs his shoes into the mud, steadies himself, takes aim. "Ready . . . set . . . go!" He changes his mind, decides to go underhand, shifts his weight. "Oh!" He stops midswing and points at the muck. "What is?" I look. "I don't know, Kaleb, what is it?" "A froggy!" I look closely and see it there, hovering at the surface, just its eyes and the tip of its head above the water. Kaleb moves and the frog goes under. "Oh!" We stare. "Where'd it go?" Kaleb asks. He turns up one palm, keeps his rock in the other. "I don't know," I answer. "I think he swam away." "Oh."

Back to the rock. Kaleb holds out his hand and looks at it. "That's a big one!" he says. "It sure is," I answer. I'm squatting, slipping slightly, noticing the cracks and how if I were a bird they might be dark canyons, deep and long and mysterious, something you'd find in the Australian desert. A few feet away, I can see the spot, now perfectly dry, where Pablo died last spring.

Kaleb pivots, decides to go overhand, raises the stone above his head, looks out at his target. He throws, and the rock, so heavy, just makes the water. The splash is awesome. 🐸

The Child in the Garden

Sophia's Hearth Family Center has long brought the power of the nature world for young children as a strongly held ideal. Its importance for the young child in his journey into childhood speaks strongly to us as a sacred theme. Now that we spend every day in this new home, the care of the earth and the children's relationship to it can become ever more central to our daily thoughts and tasks. Director Susan Weber shares her thoughts on the importance of nature in the development of the young child.

When children are born, it is as if they re-experience the creation of heaven and earth. From the constancy of the womb, life becomes two-fold: night and day, warmth and cold, quiet and sound. All the varieties and polarities of earthly experience can now be theirs.

And where is the 'home' that enables the young child to take hold of her life most fully, most truthfully, in the very best way? It is within the garden, for here is the possibility to experience all of the world's archetypes: those 'models' for all that the child will want to understand of qualities, properties, and relationships for her entire life. All learning can emerge out of this foundation—that the world is made of qualities and processes and that I, the human being, can find my way toward understanding them.

Sarah sits in the sand, leaning against a post, scooping sand, filling a cup, pouring it into a large, shiny galvanized pot. Over and over, never looking up, noticing nothing of the activity of other children nearby, her attention is upon this process and this single archetype: the vessel that contains, the possibility of changing what it contains, emptying and filling, lost and regained. For days, this is her primary activity. And then, one day, her activity changes. She is up on her feet, pushing a small wheelbarrow. It is not carrying anything at all, for first she must master its three-point balance: one wheel and her two arms creating stability as she travels the garden. Up the hill, down again,

along the path. Again, she is solo. At a year and a half, she is not yet interested in joining the social play of the other children but all the while drinks in their activity. She wheels her wheelbarrow where the others have wheeled theirs, finding her own rhythm and balance out of her freely initiated movement.

For Sarah, the broad contours stand out. She has not yet discovered the plants as individual friends, as has Marcus. For Marcus and for others, each day necessitates visits to the scarlet runner beans. They come to examine, to touch, and perhaps most likely to pick the brilliant red blossoms. No beans will ever grow in the company of these young two-year-olds, for they are gatherers, collecting the lovely flowers before any fruit can form.

The cycles of nature, so evident to us as adults, are as yet invisible to the children. Teachers learn to let go of their own expectations for a ripe tomato or melon, a mature bean pod. For only gradually does the child come into relationship with the cycles of nature. For the two-year-old, all at present is in the moment. Thinking and memory have not emerged yet, and these are necessary tools for recognizing that the flower will become the bean and the bean will yield the magical seeds, every time the same as before!

What stands out most strongly for the youngest children is their sensory experience in the garden. The *processes* of nature, the deeper pictures standing behind the phenomena of their senses, are still asleep. They receive the ultimate gift of presence, the sun shining on their faces and unconsciously imprinting the changing angles of light throughout the course of the day, the season, the year. The future architect—as an adult later analyzing the light falling on a building-in-design and how to illuminate and warm it—will build upon this foundational childhood experience with an inner knowing and certainty that is not abstract or textbook information, but *lived*. The engineer knows water's movement intuitively out of the childhood days spent navigating puddles and streams, the filling and emptying flow of a rain barrel.



The confidence that 'all things are possible to those who wait' arises out of time spent in the garden. The cycle of the seasons turns, what was seed becomes root and stem, becomes leaf and blossom and, ultimately, fruit. Nothing need be said, for the child observes all by himself. And over time, he recognizes that each plant has a pattern of its own. The archetype of root, stem, leaf, and fruit repeats itself in myriad variations. The child extracts the overarching principle out of daily life without instruction of any kind, for nature is her own teacher.

As we live in the garden with children, through our consciousness we can restore the archetypal meaning to what could remain only outer activities. Preparing the soil, planting, providing protection and care, and harvesting are each images of deeper spiritual aspects of human existence and of cosmic activity. No other sphere of activity with young children provides this link for them in such wholeness and fullness. They learn of the elements: what *is* wind, what *is* light, what *is* water? The still pond—even a bucket-pond or dish-pond or bowl—becomes a vessel of reflection and quiet depth. Poured water becomes a waterfall in miniature, endlessly falling and ever-changing. Stirred water creates a whirlpool, a vortex spinning round and round, in and out, just as does all of life.



The rain barrel has sat empty in this rainless summer ever since its installation, a giant green barrel under the roof's gutter. The children wonder, 'What is that big pot?' Finally, the rains come. In a matter of hours, the entire barrel fills. Rain droozles out of the downspout into the top of the barrel. Their caregiver opens the outflow spigot and invites them to bring their buckets. Water! Despite the overnight rain and the well-soaked earth, the children go immediately to the flower garden to water the plants, as they have done all summer long in the dry weeks. No matter the recent rain for them, the habit of watering is all. But the rain barrel shows them the sky's bounty, and they are filled with delight at this magical gift.

In the garden, mutability and constancy live side by side. The child learns of birth, of death, of renewal. The composting process shows us all that the castoff, so-called useless materials are transformed into a most precious substance, given time alone.

The garden is a practical teacher: the laws of gravity, of levity, of timeliness, of attention or neglect, of physical effort, of the need for observing and capturing the moment . . . mass, volume are all around in rock and soil, water and mulch. Nothing exists independent of the whole, although sometimes we cannot perceive this. The cycles and rhythm are given, the pace aligned with that of a little child.

The seed falls from the mature plant but does not germinate all the winter long. Is this not a miracle? The perennial dies back only to emerge again the following season larger than ever. The evergreen loses its needles not at all; the oak and maple turn color brilliantly but differently each year; the annuals spread their seeds with the birds or the wind, to return again but starting life anew. Is not all this the stuff of miracles? Of eternal trust, of hope, of patience? What larger lessons could we bring to the child in any other way?

Harvesting. Gathering. Storing. Young children know all of these activities. In autumn they become chickadees and squirrels, chipmunks and butterflies. Without knowing it, they instinctively prepare for winter with their collections of whatever can be found in the garden. A collection of little baskets with handles invites them to pursue these natural activities. Perhaps there is a specially designated shelf or little table on which to place the collections that reflects, indoors, the changing rhythm of nature outside. Or perhaps they find their homes in the sandbox. Or perhaps the adults might save some seeds for planting the following spring, carefully labeling packets of cosmos, of sunflowers, of calendula.

Another Side . . .

But what else emerges for the child in the garden? The garden is also a place where the child's physical body develops in an ideal way. He walks over uneven ground, steps over obstacles in the path, climbs on stumps, rocks, logs, everywhere practicing balance and judgment of distances both vertical and lateral. Each activity awakens and strengthens his sense of his own movement and the place of his body in space. He carries things—buckets, baskets, tools, rocks—and gains another aspect of balance as well as strength and judgment. How heavy is this? Can I manage it? Does it spill? He learns caution not out of fear, instruction, or warning from adults, but out of experience.

Nearly three-year-old Carmen fills up a wheelbarrow with water and tries to wheel it down the hill! But the water sloshes up over the edges with each step. She slows down, watching both the way forward and the sloshing water, trying to make her way without losing her precious cargo. What is at work here? No planned activity, no teacher-designed curriculum could improve upon her self-designed and self-initiated task. She practices judgment and balance, refines her movements, learns the qualities of water.

And Charlie's wheelbarrow is filled not with water but with stones! They clang against one another, rearranging themselves as he trundles along the garden path that twists and turns. He must adjust his movement to the form of the

path; he must lean just like a cyclist into the turns and yet keep the wheelbarrow upright as he does. What satisfaction! His smile tells the whole story. He wheels up the hill and down again, no destination in mind. The joy of the task (*if it is a task at all*) is all-satisfying. Amidst all the wheeling and barrowing sits Marcus, quietly contemplating the garden soil. He digs with a spoon, turns his wrist over to dump it out, digs further. He continues in this way for fully half an hour, fulfilled completely with the sighting of the rare worm or insect. His attention grows; his focused concentration satisfies him deeply.

Karla discovers that she can roll down the garden's hill. Upon this discovery, she cannot stop! The sensory information is so rich, the deep pressure of her body upon the hill so satisfying. Friends come to join her and they roll away, tramping back up only to do it all over again! Terry spends endless visits to the sandpit working the moist sand into muffins, over and over. Repetition without end, figuring out what happens with this sandy substance. And then, he goes on to the 'chocolate pot,' a specially named muddy spot, to explore the quality of that contrasting substance. Do pebbles splash in the sand as they do in the mud and water? Endless unasked questions are answered by the garden around them, day in and day out.

The garden can be so rich in diverse scenarios that the child will never tire and will find continual refreshment.



Nothing in which he engages is fixed; everything can be subject to modification, revision, adaptation. There is no failure. *Learning how to learn* fills each endeavor, whatever else is happening simultaneously.

If we hold this picture of all that the garden offers to the child, how can we not envision a day in which every child spends copious amounts of time outdoors in an intentionally designed environment that will stimulate all of these possibilities? Whether given a postage stamp yard or vast acres, the child will take what he needs, always beginning with what is closest at hand. Imagine a trip to the Grand Canyon, where I observed parents exhorting a three-year-old to join them in admiring the magnificent view. But what had captured the child's interest absolutely were the small stones of the parking area! Nothing could persuade him that there was anything grander than his self-discovered stones. We need far less than we may think. . . . What are the *archetypes* that we would hope to build into our garden designs? How can we do this within the resources available—land, space, climate, raw materials, human energy, and skills?

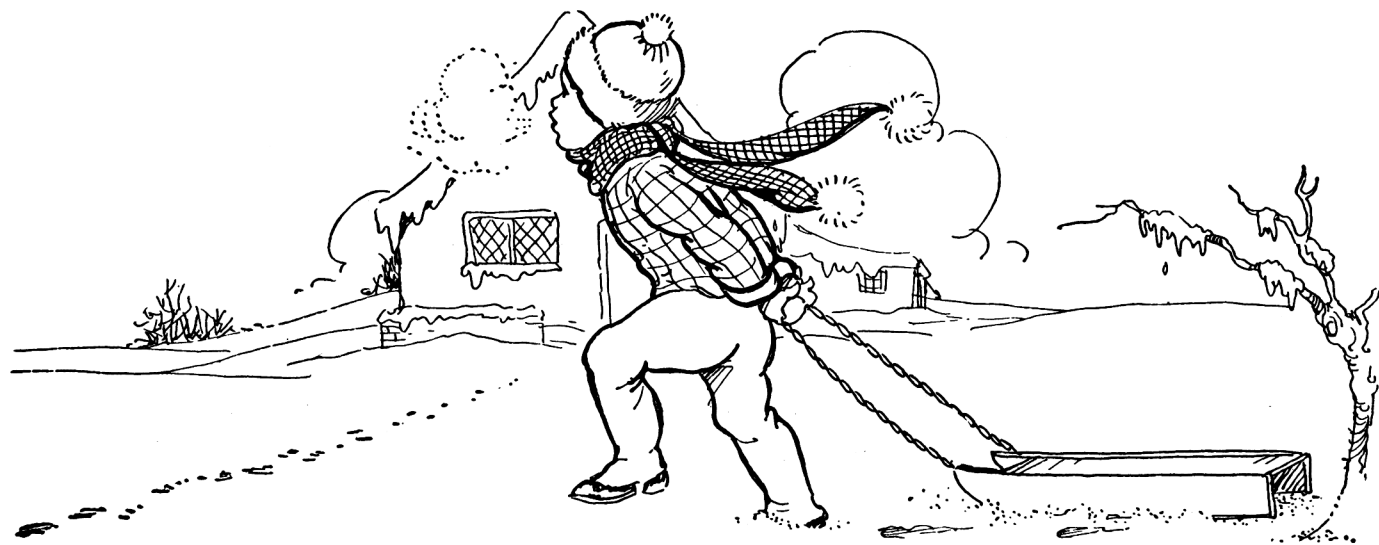
This is the invitation that nature brings to *our* creative gifts. Visit gardens. Read about gardens. Help a friend or neighbor garden. Garden. Dig in the dirt. Plant one single pot. Pour water for no reason. Sit quietly and see what comes. Feel the light on your face, feel the air on your skin. Become, for a few moments, a young child. You will know just what to do.

Berries, Bridges, and Snow Pants

Amy Fredland lives in Keene with her husband Nils and their 2 year old son August. With degrees in Wildlife Management and Waldorf Education, Amy brings a passion for the outdoors to all her work with children. A former teacher at the Monadnock Waldorf School, she is also student in the Sophia's Hearth training program for Early Childhood professionals.

I've just come in from a November morning walk with my two-year-old son, and our eyes are still adjusting from the bright day to the dim glow inside our house. We both let out a sigh and flop onto the ground, thankful for the fresh air and also for the warmth of our home. As we wiggle out of our boots, snow pants, hats, mittens, and wool sweaters, our cheeks seem to become even rosier. Our normally curly hair looks as if it has been pressed with an iron, leaving only static behind. It is lunchtime and our bellies are growling with hunger. After spending the morning wandering along a brookside path in a nearby forest glen, our meal seems to sate us more thoroughly than usual and the water quenches our thirst more deeply. We have been blessed with the gift of time spent outside.

I am reminded that this gift is offered to us each day. In our family, most days we gratefully unwrap its goodness, while on other days we don't because there doesn't seem to be enough time. Sometimes I walk right past it as I move from one daily task to the next, or because it somehow seems easier to stay inside.



Just a few months ago, when the sun seemed to shine all day, it was hard not to be outside. The ponds were full of cool water, and the garden was full of seedlings and wriggling earthworms. Even as the summer drew to a close and the autumn began, there were apples to pick, leaves to play in, and pumpkins to gather. But now it is cold. The leaves have all fallen, morning birdsong no longer entices me, and the autumn is giving way to frost and icicles. It is harder to find the enthusiasm for extended amounts of outdoor time, especially when I think about the number of layers that will be needed to keep out the cold. Dressing myself is one thing, but dressing a toddler, as parents know, is another.

As I have begun to explore this season with my son I have rediscovered some amazing and inspiring things. These are the things that get me over the hump of thinking "it's just easier to stay inside." One such thing is my pair of snow pants. Yes, my snow pants. I long ago upgraded to a sturdy pair and left the "bibs" of elementary school behind. Now I happily pull on these snow pants because, different from a brisk hike I might take by myself, a walk with a toddler tends to go slowly, meandering from one discovery to the next. With my snow pants on, I can join my son kneeling on the cold ground while we toss stones into the water. I can sit on an icy stone wall while we listen to the wind blow through the leafless trees. All the while, I stay warm. Snow pants. Priceless.

As I was lying side by side with my son on a footbridge today in said snow pants, the low November sun was shining over our heads, while a blanket of crunchy brown leaves lay below us. I pushed away some leaves and found a family of pointy green plants, snugly waiting for a blanket of snow. While I was wondering what kind of plants they were, I noticed that my son was more interested in the sound and feeling of kicking his boots on the wooden bridge. It was such a simple moment. We'd each made a discovery. I was grateful to have had the presence of mind to let him have his moment and to enjoy my own. It reminded me that being out in the woods with children has more to do with offering an experience than with giving names to trees and plants and explaining the "whys" of natural processes.

On the way back to our car, we walked past a bush with bright red berries. In an otherwise drab landscape, these berries seemed to be a natural mascot for the upcoming holiday season. I picked a few branches, which are now in a vase in our home and remind me of the day. I have found myself wondering what that same bush will look like with snow upon its branches and what its leaves will look like come spring. I look forward to walking past these same bushes throughout

the year to see how they do change and grow, and with me will be my son. I can't think of a more nourishing way for him to forge a relationship with the natural world than to offer him the chance to explore it, to observe it, and to watch it change.

Much attention is currently being given to the importance of nature in the life of a growing child. The scientific and educational communities are making it clear that being outside is a crucial element of childhood development. As psychologist Dr. Reggie Melrose writes in her article *Why Waldorf Works: From a Neuroscientific Perspective*: (available at <http://themagiconions.blogspot.com/2010/10/discovering-waldorf-waldorf-from.html>).

Nature is one critical antidote to the increases in stress, overwhelm, burnout, and dropout we are witnessing in the educational system today. Lack of exposure to nature causes such a detrimental state to the brain and is so pervasive today we have a name for it: "nature deficit disorder."

As parents, we know that we do whatever it takes to try to eliminate the stresses in our children's lives. Given the above suggestion, one of the simplest things we can do is to take our children outside. Regardless of where you live, you and the children in your life can experience the rewards of time outdoors. It is all at our front door. All we have to do is open it, take a step outside, and unwrap the gift of the outdoors. 🍄

