

*Shooting Stars 1997, Michael Kenna
(Monique's Kindergarten)*

The Kindergarten

The Waldorf kindergarten centers on the sanctity of childhood. The classroom is a sanctuary. Within this space, the kindergarten teachers' devotion to the children's development is reflected in the inspired play of young children, in their enthusiasm for the everyday life of imagination, activity, and the world still new. Their reality has about it wonder, reverence,

love, and true innocence. The children feel at home in this reality; they feel its rightness. They experience the devotion as warmth that surrounds them. One can see it in their faces and in the glow of their health. One can hear it in the joyous sound of their working. A kindergarten teacher lives with the children's reality, understands it, and helps them form it. Such

an approach to teaching is a profoundly moral, life-sustaining responsibility. Deeply embedded in each child's formation – physical, psychological, and spiritual – the experience of the kindergarten unfolds over a lifetime. The teacher knows this potential impact and works very consciously to make sure that he or she is worthy to be with the children, to be an imaginative

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role model that inspires healthy imitation – not just of outward action but also of inner attitude. The children have an innate sense for what is truthful, and each child is met as who he or she is. Acknowledged in this way, the children respond to their teachers and to each other in a truly social way, out of trust and a sense of responsibility. These are the conditions in which Waldorf education unfolds and in which the children grow into their own capacities and freedom.

If this picture of the kindergarten seems idealistic, rest assured it is very real on a daily basis. Children often arrive unprepared to play, sometimes without having eaten breakfast. They may hurt each other's feelings. Sharing is not always automatic. Children will bring the anxiety of a less than harmonious home life to the classroom or act out because of overstimulation outside of school. There is no wish to deny the children's

experiences. What happens in the sanctuary is that these experiences are acknowledged and transformed through play. Waldorf education is not only healthy, it is also healing.

The children are busy as they engage each other and play with the toys. In essence, they are playing out of themselves.

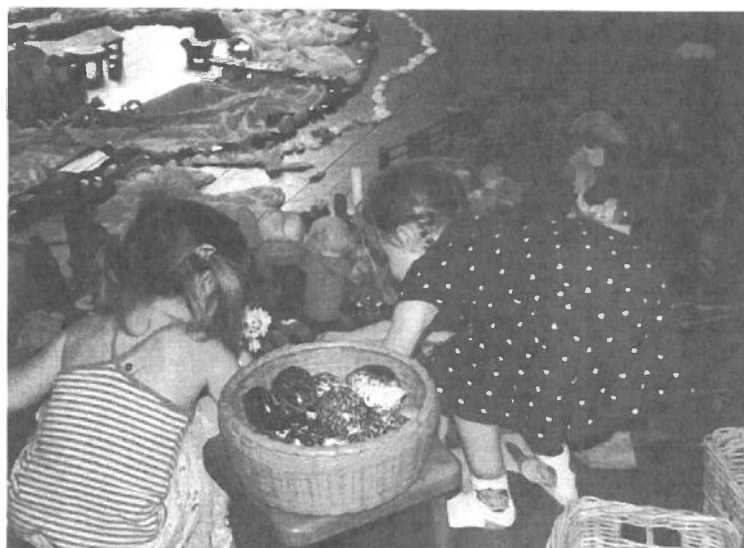
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However, as they listen to the stories told by the kindergarten teacher, one sees a very different picture, that of outer tranquility and inner activity. There is never the passivity induced by the experience of television and other electronic media. At first, it is difficult to accept that a pine cone or stone is a more

meaningful toy for a young child than any of the sophisticated building systems on the market. But the stone can be anything when a child brings to it his or her imaginative capacity. The child is left free to be in touch with authentic experience, that which comes from within the child to meet the outer world,

rather than the programmed one they would have with the systems toy.

What happens through play, stories, puppet shows, painting, and all the other wonderful activities in the kindergarten, is actually the formation of the child – the physical body and the nerve-sense system. This growth is really the work of the kindergarten child. He or she is like a living sculpture growing and being formed by the simultaneous play of inner and outer forces. The Waldorf kindergarten teacher makes sure the environment is beautiful, that all the activities are purposeful and practical, and, further, that they nourish, nurture, and protect the developing senses. ★



Photography by Paulene Hanna

By John Bloom

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