

## ***Feeding the Child's Soul in Nature*** ***Su Rubinoff, Meadowbrook School, Rhode Island***

*We hear from a growing number of kindergarten teachers that they are helping their children spend more time outdoors to engage them in movement and to help them participate in nature more fully. We asked Su to describe her own experience with this, and we encourage other teachers to share their experiences as well. — Ed.*

*Good morning dear earth, good morning dear sun,  
Good morning dear stones and flowers, every one,  
Good morning dear buzzy bees and flowers in the trees,  
Good morning to you, friends, good morning to me.*

This is the verse that we begin our circle with. I chose it for its simplicity and its emphasis on the natural world, for I was working with Steiner's thought that, The child must not be sharply detached from nature, that his whole feeling must be that he is linked in a living way to the world around him.

At Meadowbrook School in Rhode Island, we are fortunate to be renting a school that sits on seventy acres of woods that include a pine forest and pond where beavers have built a large dam. Our daily rhythm (8:30 to noon) begins outside since so many children must drive at least thirty minutes to school. After forty-five minutes outside, we go inside and gather on the round rug for circle which is followed by inside play and the activity of the day. Clean-up, a short rest, snack, and story follow, and we end outside with dismissal. During our outside time, the children run, climb, jump rope, make large houses and boats out of bales of hay, sticks, and logs, "cook" a lot of mud cakes and cookies, and create little houses for the gnomes. Their imagination is so alive that they have been sewing the gnomes little shirts, pants, and mittens and placing them in the houses they are building for these little friends.

In the beginning of the year, a large load of sand was delivered to the school and purposely placed away from the area that would eventually become the sand area. For weeks, we were busy workers, digging and delivering the sand to its new home. Not all the sand was moved, and a month ago the children began to dig tunnels and rivers in this area. We have an outside faucet, and they would fill a five-gallon bucket with water to pour into their river. This was satisfactory for two weeks until too many tributaries developed and a lot of water was required. The children decided to build a trench over to the water faucet so they could just turn it on and a waterfall would pour right into their river. Su and Nancy (teachers) are the water fairies who turn the faucet off in order to conserve the well water for the rest of the school. All twelve children have been absorbed in this. It has been amazing to watch these first-grade-ready children share the limited number of tools (I deliberately did this) and work out their differences with their various construction ideas.

As part of our rhythm, we have Adventure Day on Friday. We spend most or all of this day outside and in the woods. On Adventure Day, we often have circle outside. Since the theme of circle corresponds with the cycle of the year, it feels appropriate to be outside with Father Sun and Brother Wind. After turns in the bathroom and gathering our bags, we are on our way. "Let us form a golden thread, see the needle at the head" and "Will you come and walk with me, both my hands I give to thee" are the songs that take us from the school to the path that leads us into the woods. As we enter this different world, I always say "Good morning" to the gnomes and ask them if we may enter their forest. They always say yes but remind us to keep our voices low since this is a home to many animals. We have seen a number of its inhabitants: Mr. Snake, Billy Beaver, Sammy Bluejay, Old Wise Owl, and more. The different trails that we take always lead us to the Pine Forest which is adjacent to the pond. It is here that we have our home for the morning. As soon as we arrive, the play begins. The children build houses against the

large pine trees. Sticks are gathered for fishing and the leaves in the pond are the fish. Sometimes I am the owner of the Spanish fish market and buy the fish and pay them with pine cones while only speaking Spanish. The children's love of water and their sense of wonder arise again, and they dig with their sticks near the pond, crying with delight as little streams are created.

We always bring popcorn, apples, a jug of water, and a jug of hot tea for snack. We lay down our picnic blanket and everyone comes. "We thank the earth for ripening glow, the wind and rain that makes things grow, to Mother Earth our thanks we give, for all her fruits whereby we live." This is the blessing we sing. Its meaning lives deep in the children as we are with Mother Earth herself. In the winter, we spend a shorter time outside, but we still follow this same rhythm. Instead of sitting on the cold ground for snack, we sit on felled trees, some of which were chewed by the beavers. Sometimes it begins to snow as we sit and drink our tea. During these cold days, the children see the ice on the pond, and they become curious about how strong it is. While standing on the land, they try to see if the ice will crack. One day, each of them had his own stick and tried in vain to break off a piece of the ice. A few of the boys went searching for a larger, heavier stick and emerged from behind one of their houses with the four of them carrying a huge fallen limb. They were successful in their endeavor and took the ice to their "house" to use as a window.

Before we leave our home in the woods, we have a story. Most of the time, we do a play from the fairy tale that I have been telling all week. It is a perfect setting since most of these tales take place near or in the forest. Our plays are informal but are very much enjoyed.

Our golden thread once again weaves its way back through the woods. We all thank the gnomes, sing our good-bye song, and then check each other's ears and necks for ticks. We want the ticks to stay in their home and not come home with us. Parents are waiting for us and the morning comes to a close.

I have taught in four different locations in Rhode Island, and I have been able to find a little nook in each of these places to go on weekly walks. One location was at the edge of town and on a main street. We were still able to find a small, public garden with a pond and trees close by. As we were walking, I would always bring a bag for litter. I never said anything to the children but quietly collected the garbage along our walk. One five-year-old child, at the end of the year, went home to his mother and told her that "Su is cleaning the earth."

Even if there are absolutely no places around, such as the ones I have mentioned, we still can bring nature and the four elements into the classroom. For children to experience the ancient elements of earth, air, fire, and water is crucial for their health. Children, as well as adults, are nourished by the natural world. As teachers, we try to create environments where there is ample opportunity for creative play and meaningful imitation. Being outside in every season supports this idea.

*The plant's bright blessings  
Spring forth  
From Earth's gentle being  
And human children rise up  
With grateful hearts  
To join the spirits of the world.*

— Rudolf Steiner