

# Simplicity

By Cynthia Aldinger, Director, LifeWays North America

Recently, driving back from Chicago to Oklahoma, I had a chance to watch the moon set and the sun rise, although at times they were hidden by clouds. There was something so comforting about these celestial bodies, and I was filled with wonder and gratitude as we move toward that time of year with diminished daylight, knowing that even on the darkest days, the sun, moon and stars are always there (somewhere), even when not visible.

Lately, my inbox has been filled with various articles lamenting all the educational policies, technological wonders, limited play time and overwhelming schedules that seem to have conspired to squeeze childhood out of the natural progression of growing up. One article tells us picture books are disappearing while another states that I-phones are the favorite toy of toddlers now. If not careful, my heart can feel constricted and my mind laden with concern as I study the Western culture surrounding the children in our care.

Then I visit one of our LifeWays centers or perhaps a family home based on simplicity in living, and I hope that such havens, such oases of care, have an impact on the world that stretches beyond those families they directly serve. In the midst of cultural "darkness", I am learning to trust that goodness, beauty and truth will (and do) prevail. Our movement may be small; however, oak trees continue to grow from tiny acorns.

I am currently reading an abstract titled "*Learning 'From Nobody': the Limited Role of Teaching in Folk Models of Children's Development*" by David F. Lancy of Utah State University. What I have read so far points us toward awareness of the past (and of present cultures in "undeveloped" countries) where the necessities of life required the adults to spend most of their time tending to those things that made practical life work. The children absorbed skills by being surrounded by those who tended to life. I don't know yet if the abstract will address cultural/artistic life, but I suspect that the children learned such activities in a similar manner – by being around adults who valued and engaged in such experiences. In the end I don't think the case is made that the children actually "learned" from *nobody*. Clearly they learned from everyone surrounding them. What I think it is actually pointing to is that the children were not "formally" instructed or taught, yet they learned.

Last week, while visiting the Milwaukee LifeWays Center, I walked into Jaimmie's room just as she was putting away the children's cots and singing peacefully. Some children had clearly been helping and others were simply being bathed in her presence and activity while they played. In the kitchen Jane was busy baking while her children were in the community room playing. Soon thereafter she joined them for a little circle game. Earlier, Emily had been outside with the Forest Kindergarten children allowing them to discover the natural world. Upstairs Rhoda, another of their caregivers, was participating in the LifeWays training. At times her baby lay on the floor across the room, staring at and chatting with the swaying autumn leaves on the trees outside. My soul expanded with gratitude – to these devoted caregivers, to the children and their families for finding LifeWays, to Mary for cultivating and supporting the health and well-being of this center.

I also realized that, just as the celestial bodies are not always visible but are always there to support us, so it is true that "teaching" at LifeWays is not overtly visible as it might be in early childhood settings based on clever curricula and materials meant to evoke specific learning outcomes from children. Unfortunately, a growing number of these learning outcomes are nonsensical for young children and are things that could be learned and sustained by them much more efficiently a few years down the road!

When LifeWays was forming years ago, the highly regarded Hungarian philosopher Georg Kuhlewind was quite interested in how it was unfolding. He asked those of us who were involved to quietly imagine a desert, parched and bare. Then after a few moments, he suggested that we imagine a beautiful rose growing up right in the middle of the desert. A few more moments passed, and he asked us to open our eyes. "LifeWays," he said, "is meant to be like the rose in the desert."

The constancy of the celestial bodies and the fortitude of the desert rose – trustworthy images that help me to remember – goodness, beauty and truth are all around us – as long as we are looking for them.

Blessings on your work and play, Cynthia