

Simple Play

By Jane Danner-Sustar, Caregiver at Milwaukee LifeWays Center

My favorite memories of when I was still a young new mother are those of sitting in my sister's kitchen drinking coffee. She had an amazing backyard. It was all fenced in with a chain link fence. There was a huge black walnut tree at the side of the house which prevented anything but grass, dandelions, and Creeping Charlie to grow in the rest of the yard. In the far back corner were three beech trees. Nestled in those beeches was the best thing a mother could own...a platform. A two tiered platform.

Back in those days, Prairie Hill Waldorf School had a service auction each year as a community builder as well as a moneymaker. People offered their services to each other – cookie baking, singing, poetry reading, you name it – as auction items. (Ruth Zinnecker's rolls were always a hot item, commanding a handsome price for that service.) One year, my sister bid on and won "three men and a chain saw." After much thought and planning, she decided on a play house. And then after more thought and planning she came up with a very simple design. A two tiered platform which sort of wrapped itself around the beech trees. It was always shady and cool in the hot sun, but also provided shelter from the wind on the cool days as well. There was ample opportunity for transformation in the simplicity of its design. By stringing yarn through the branches, those platforms became the deck of a ship or a stage or a house or a school or a space ship, anything that was needed. Her two girls and my three children would play for hours. Barb and I would sit at the picture window of her kitchen, unobserved observers, and watch the dramas unfold. Usually we were only needed for snack and lunch. Occasionally, we would have to intervene when something became dangerous, but not often. We got a lot of the world's problems solved in those days.

It is the same now watching these children that are not my own. My favorite time of the day is outdoor playtime in the play yard. I love to watch Noni swing on her vine. I love to watch Isabel sit in the sand totally absorbed in her digging. I love to watch Giselle and Gwena and Eden play beauty parlor using sticks to comb each other's hair. Orion is usually using me as a baby jungle gym these days, and Otto is lying nearby talking to the trees and the sky. Anjuli and Abrianna are running and running around and around the sandbox getting away from the daddy long legs that are chasing them. Chaim and Phin will be by the rainbow bridge, Phin seeing how high he can jump and Chaim becoming part of the space ship or the junk yard that the other boys are building. Natalie, our newest child, has just been watching. She likes to breeze up to Miss Tammy and look at her, as if to reassure them both that they are familiar face to each other. It is time for free play and it is amazing to me all the things the children come up with in the same little yard with the same people and the same toys day after day.

To me this is the essence of simplicity, our theme for this newsletter, and the greatest gift I can offer busy and working parents. I am the watchful, but removed, caregiver to their children, a guardian of play, so to speak. As parents, how often do we get to stay home all day long and do nothing but watch our children play? Our tendency is to think they will get bored and that the children need more and more to stimulate them. It always surprises me how even my older charges pour into the play yard after KinderHouse or KinderForest and quickly reabsorb themselves in the play of the play yard. In his book, *Simplicity Parenting*, Kim John Payne describes a

condition he, as a school counselor, calls soul fever. It describes children who are fried out doing and going too much. One of his remedies is to establish "do nothing" times for our children, quieting ourselves and our children's activities (without the use of media) in much the same way that we quiet a child's activities during a physical fever.

I recently enjoyed one of those increasingly rare moments myself. My middle daughter and I struggle, to say the least. After much lecturing, I saw I wasn't making a dent in her armor. So we just got in the car one day, angry and frustrated, she and her brothers and I. Silently, we drove out to Lapham Peak. It was a blustery early fall day and golden with yellow leaves. We could barely talk to each other, but Lapham Peak is a park we all love. As we stomped through the familiar paths, Gustav challenged us to see who could catch the most falling leaves. You must try it sometime. The wind would shake the leaves into rainfalls and we would run this way and that trying to catch them. It was the first time I had seen my daughter laugh in days. It hasn't changed our contentious relationship, but it has given me a golden picture of who she really is. If there ever was a girl with soul fever, it is her, and here she was laughing and dancing in a golden shower of leaves. That is the picture of her I hold closest to my heart, my child at play.