

Experiencing Kindergarten: A Walk Through the Woods of Waldorf

Sheila Weidendorf, Enrollment Director

I recently had the great joy of accompanying my daughter, Ada Rose, on her daily morning hike with her Kindergarten. She had been begging me to do this since we landed on the island and joined this school community. Having the best of intentions, but also a lot of work to do each day, I simply hadn't managed to schedule it in. On our last Friday morning before flying off to Minneapolis to witness my 5th-grade daughter Aurora's Circus and Pentathlon (the City of Lakes/Midwest version of the Olympiad), I managed to set aside the time.

And what a time! It's easy, I suppose, to surmise how wonderful it would be to begin each and every day out in the woods, wrapped up in the blessings of Mother Nature. (I have certainly spoken to this benefit of WIWS to prospective parents!) There is a great difference, however, between surmising and experiencing. And isn't direct experience and engagement one of the hallmarks of a Waldorf Education?

The morning began, as usual, with outdoor play time during gathering and then the morning circle, which I have joined as often as possible since bringing Ada here. Having the rhythm of song and circle and verse begin our every day has been just as therapeutic in the transition for me as for little Ada. Then, when I would usually wave good-bye at the appointed moment in the song and head to the tower to work, I instead joined hands with my daughter and her hiking buddy and we set off through the lush, verdant woods.

The birds greeted us with their myriad songs of welcome, the forest understory reached out to child, parent and teacher alike, and the trees, stretched upward to the heavens, provided a lovely and dramatic backdrop for the many occasions for awe and wonder we would encounter. It couldn't have been any clearer that there is no better way to nurture the human "becoming" than by placing the evolving, embodied Soul within the loving embrace of the natural world. The trees seemed to say, "Here you are safe; explore our terrain with freedom and joy, just as you may explore your interior landscape."

What a blessing for Ada and her little friends to begin each school day with such an invitation! What a blessing, too, to be guided on the path by teachers so committed to their well-being. I never cease to marvel at the level of connection and care the Waldorf teacher brings to each child, knowing always when to let the child wander--whether in woods or in the life of the classroom--and when to bring them back to the structures that frame their experience, the gathering circle, the hiking line, the seat at table or the re-alignment of a challenging relational moment.

After 23 years of parenting, eight as a Waldorf parent, I am ever only more convinced that this path, this education, is the "truest" in terms of the understanding of what it means to be, and become, fully human. No other education I have experienced--and there have been many explorations!--so graciously and effectively reaches into the heart of child, takes them by the hand and leads them homeward, to their own unfolding Selves.

Now, I wonder if Kim and Dyanne are willing to add in a slightly bigger chair at the table, so that I might start over, still, as a Waldorf child...