

Excerpt from *What is This Childhood?* by Carol Toole, soon to be published by SteinerBooks.

## **Revitalizing Home Arts: Finding our Place on Earth**

The early years are the time of sensory/motor development and primitive reflex integration. Both lay the foundation for further growth and efficient learning later on. Today's increases in the need for extra support in these areas match decreasing rhythmic, large motor movement in the modern child's environment. Sowing seed, threshing or grinding grain, chopping or sawing wood, churning butter or kneading dough are activities that have mostly vanished in communities. My grandmother, raised in an Italian country village, approached each household task with an embodied precision, measuring flour by weight in her cupped hands. Where's the satisfaction, even joy, in tasks now deemed drudgery? Could dusting become a gesture of lovingly stroking our jewel-like earth?

The architect Michael Murphy, in helping his ill father renovate a house, discovered that caring for a space helps us embody ourselves. The healing power of the dying father's handprint, joining his sons in an act of restoration, restored them both! *What's outside will later be inside.* Murphy muses, "Our spiritual connection to the place we live manifests in daily toil, making visible our collective aspirations." Older cultures once felt the presence of household spirits and sought to invite positive ones. In our time, could "participation in creating conditions for our families' wellness" be rituals for renewal? Could today's *spirit of the house* be the attention and intention we leave behind in our work?

The Swedish children's author Elsa Beskow's verse captures a time past:

### The Days of the Week

Tell me what you do all day?

Busy, I am, but listen pray!

Monday is my milking day.

Tuesday skimming off the cream.

Wednesday's when the butter's churned

And packed away each Thursday.

Friday's when I bake all day.

Saturday is market day.

On Sundays off to church I plod;

Thanks be to Thee, Almighty God.

Days thread through a healing fabric of certainty until the speaker's footsteps on firm ground cap the week, a beginning and an end!

In simple household chores, such as washing, dusting or sweeping, or a project like sanding wood, something is transformed, often through rhythmic movement. In the past, the rhythms of work songs lightened the labor:

This is the way we wash our clothes, wash our clothes, wash our clothes,

This is the way we wash the clothes so early in the morning.

This is the way we hang our clothes . . . iron our clothes . . . fold our clothes . . .

Processes over time foster the sense of well-being: *Effort* in tending the soil, planting the seed, watering; grinding grain, kneading and shaping dough. *Anticipation* in beholding the sprouting seed, and its flowering and bearing fruit; waiting for the bread to rise, smelling the aroma of its baking. Only then, true *Satisfaction*.

Presence found through an enlivening relationship to each task and how it serves our families' growth. In a workshop, I divided parents into small groups, each assigned to choose a simple household chore. Each group was asked to carefully observe and describe the following elements in that specific task:

\* Substance(s) worked with

\* Movements or gestures used

\* Qualities and mood of the task; the relationship of the substances and movements to the human being

\* Purpose: the way it serves the human being

Finally, each group created a prayer, wish, or hope for the recipients. One group chose folding laundry—these participants' least favorite task, that now took on new meaning.

**Folding Prayer:**

*A cottony mound sits before me. My hands touch the softness that smells fresh and clean. I pull one crumpled piece from the pile and pause for clues of the wearer's movements, activities, likes and dislikes, changes. I lay it down, smooth it flat with my palm and turn end over to end, making it small and compact—a package to tuck into a drawer. It is a gift for a new day of activity, a fresh start. May my attention be with the wearer through their day as they make choices, change, and grow.*