



*This book is dedicated to my wife, Susan, with whom, since September, 1963, I have enjoyed all kinds and colors of Celebrations and Festivals; the best being our wedding day, April 10, 1965.*

# CREATIVE FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS

**A Guide to Celebrating the Cycle of the Year for  
Communities, Schools and Families**

ALAN WHITEHEAD

## PROLOGUE

In large part, life for human beings throughout the eons has been one of drudgery at best, sustained misery at worst. To cast a light of hope into this perennial gloom man invented festivals and celebrations. From the spirit-torrid, to the soul-temperate, to the body-frigid regions of planet Earth, individuals and communities have eagerly looked forward to these events which ever so reliably sectioned their year into manageable slices of the monotony cake - the icing being the various festivals.

Oppressed workers could toil away in field, forest, or factory for months on end, in some extreme cases for seven days a week, knowing that, for perhaps only one day of the year, they could down tools, dress up, and join their fellows in festive mood of one kind or another.

Though sometimes the events were not necessarily imbued with merriment, maybe they were more funerary in character, or what some Aboriginal societies call "sorry business". Even these melancholy assemblies had, as an underlying principle, the Spirit of Celebration, often with an abundance of singing and dancing. The major festivals of the Far East, especially China, are also of this ilk, usually centered round ancestor worship.

And yes, even otherwise hedonistic modern Australia has its memorial festival - Anzac Day. This is arguably the most revered date in our Special Events calendar.

Probably the most ubiquitous excuse for cultures world-wide to create a festival has been provided by the Cosmos, with its immutable cycle of the seasons, moon phases, astrological events - and even the weather, like the coming of the rains.

Here the approach of the beloved celebrations, perhaps a harvest festival, was removed from the mere abstract, by the clear evidence seen in the path of sun and stars.

In relation to the stars, Rudolf Steiner spoke of Event as a soul *quality*; one he relegated to the sign of Aries. (He also nominated "qualities" to the other eleven zodiacal houses.) Therefore, the spirit of Event (always capitalized to acknowledge its proper noun status) is a fundamental necessity for the psychological and even the spiritual health of the human being.

Events throughout the year give everyone something to look forward to - it gives hope of a higher life from the mundanity of everyday existence. In fact, the most important Event of a person's personal calendar might be merely one's birthday. This is obviously the case with many if not most children.

However, the favorite event of my own childhood was not so much my birthday, which was always great, but "cracker night", or Empire Day, to use its official title. "24th of May is Empire Day" we would gratefully yell in chorus as we ran home from school for our half-day holiday!

Obviously I did not give a hoot about the British Empire, but rather looked forward with feverish excitement to a night of bonfire-centered pagan fire festivities, sometimes involving penny hungers as big as small sticks of dynamite!

This celebration later degenerated into the Queen's Birthday, which was a bit of a squib: and with the still later banning of over-the-counter sales of fireworks, all the nocturnal fun was finally extinguished.

The festival pinnacle for others may not have the spirit-bankrupt Empire Day, but something more aspirational or elevated, such as a religious festival. This could again be a birthday, but this time of a loftier being than oneself, such as Jesus, or Buddha.

This cyclical Events soul health is taken very seriously in Rudolf Steiner Education, where the year is punctuated by festivals of varying kinds. Of course, the aforementioned child's birthday is always an excuse for a class to enjoy an impromptu celebration, usually including a cake!

Many schools also have a "Monatsfeier", or Monthly Festival. Here classes delight in sharing small performances of poems, plays or music, mostly based on classroom activities during the previous couple of weeks. The biggest Events -in Steiner Schools, however, are the four seasonal festivals, detailed in the pages to follow. In the hearts of many children, these are the most enjoyable Events of the year, being fondly remembered right into adulthood. For these the teachers often create appropriate season-specific content, largely based on the performing arts, including Rudolf Steiner's new movement art of Eurythmy. These make the four solstice and equinox festivals memorable indeed.

However, the cardinal principle of these school festivals must always be *fun* - but fun underpinned with spiritual (rather than religious) significance of some kind.

The spirit of these four-season festivals, with almost all peoples over all time, is encapsulated in the Four Hs.

Spring is the season of the *Harbinger*, where, in the spirit of resurrection, all is new and pregnant with promise. Summer follows with its *Holiday* adventures of various kinds – a sort of body-and-soul liberation. Autumn is of course the season of the *Harvest*, generically speaking. Here the Spring promise is realized in the bounty of the good earth.

Finally, Winter, where time and place appropriate, communities gather round the *Hearth* (h-eart, h-earth!). This too is a counterpoint, but to the expansion of Summer this time. How reassuring it is to exist in the annual certainty of this Harbinger, Holiday, Harvest, Hearth cycle.

Even though many of the two dozen or so festivals and celebrations described in this book may not be appropriate to celebrate in schools, at least attention can be drawn to them when they arrive. Perhaps Senior's Week could be one of these. In this case the children may not celebrate the Event as such, but at least have their attention drawn to the esteemed place our Elders have in our community. A visit where an aged person talks about days of yore can be an unforgettable experience for children, who otherwise might have no access to an older person, and their wisdom. As such, an Events Calendar based largely on the contents of this book, is a valuable addition to every classroom noticeboard.

The cycle of the year, in the world generally, and Australia in particular, is a luminous odyssey enjoyed annually by, potentially at least, every individual in society. It can be merely a journey of special days interspersing the monotony of the more prevalent 'un-special days'. For most people, however, there is a laminate of higher meaning, or indeed spiritual significance, in this remarkable Events phenomenon. This book is an attempt to heighten the consciousness of these annual light shafts into the number of everyday human existence.

Alan Whitehead, January 2013

# **MARCH 21**

## **Autumn Equinox**

## **Harvest Festival**

### **<This is September 23 in the Western Hemisphere>**

When I was a young man, my only associations of Homebush were of riding in a train to work, and passing lines of filthy, barred rail cars stuffed with sheep; the forlorn survivors trampling the dead. The smell was equally offensive, exposed as we commutes were in those old, open, red carriages. Homebush was famous for nothing but its killing houses, the abattoirs.

How ironic, then, that it is this same Homebush which is today vying with its CBD rival to lay claim to being the very heart of Sydney itself. As a sporting center, this is certainly the case post-Olympics. But as a cultural one?

Perhaps - but only if the Royal Agricultural Show, moved from its old Moore Park home to Homebush can be called a cultural event. In any case, proudly paraded merino rams have mercifully replaced their tortured fellows of yesteryear.

The Show has always been one of the biggest and brightest dates on the events calendar. Here the city and bush are braided together into a single human yam as at no other time of the year. It is also one of the singular occasions where we cultural outcasts in the Southern Hemisphere actually celebrate a seasonal festival in the correct season - well, partly at least.

The vernacular for the RAS is the RES, with 'Easter' replacing 'Agricultural'. In this seemingly innocent acronym-change lies a serious seed of error.

Easter is named after the Teutonic goddess of spring, Eastre ... What? Easter is not a Christian festival?! Alas, no; this old earth-fertility festival (meaning 'to feast') long pre-dates the Crucifixion-Resurrection. Easter is a synonym for spring, with kin words like oestrous, Astarte, Asherah, Esther confirming its rebirth provenance. Some religious extremists regard North-South Hemisphere swapping as spiritual sedition - "Easter in September, indeed!"

Farmers get the seasons the right way round because they can't choose otherwise. Generally speaking, they must plant in the Spring and harvest in Autumn. This is so in spite of blanket propaganda from religious revelers who insist on continuing to celebrate a Northern Hemisphere Spring rebirth ('resurrection') festival in Autumn.

In truth, the seasons only ideally manifest at 45° north and south on the globe, halfway between the endless summer at 0° on the Equator, and 90° eternal winter at the two Poles. Northern Europe, Japan, Canada - and Tasmania in the south - all enjoying a 45-degree line of latitude have high-precision seasonal changes. These are three months each, on time every time.

In places like Bali there are no seasonal festivals, with every day being opportunistically designated a different festival day of one kind or other. In fact the Malay languages do not even have a word for Autumn. Northern Australia, at around 20° south, has two named seasons, wet and dry.

Naturally, pagan Easter imagery of chicks, eggs and bunnies pervade the Sydney Royal (another anachronism) Show; especially in the show-bag glitz gauntlet. This is mercifully eclipsed by the true essence of this biggest of all Harvest Festivals in the beautiful bestiary of the Grand Parade - and the unforgettable Agricultural Districts Exhibition Hall.

This stunning display of Mother Earth's bounty is a cyclic re-affirmation of Oz as the 'lucky country'. How can one modest sovereign state such as New South Wales produce such a cornucopia of primary products; the chilly south and dry west (Monaro and Western Plains) rivalling those of the steamy north and wet slopes (North Coast and Northern Tablelands).

Adults as well as children delight in these grand artistic tableaux of abundance, made from colored grains, ambered honeys, vegetables, wools, and glossy fruits. Pumpkins as big as carioles are proudly displayed beside working honeycomb. Without The Show, many city children would never experience the wealth of the land; that which so generously sustains them - this important event is even a cultural imperative, perhaps? A universal celebration such as Sydney's Autumn Harvest Festival is ideally suited to a multicultural country like Australia. Religious festivals, like the Christian 'Easter', are by definition exclusionist.

Nothing wrong with that, of course; that is unless the whole community is expected to celebrate them, as in Christmas. In fact, Harvest Festivals are replacing those of Easter in many schools as a response to their ethnic and/or indigenous community sensitivities. A recent parent revolt in one Victorian primary school failed to move the recalcitrant principal. He insisted that the traditional Christian rituals proceed. As a concession, the conscientiously objecting pupils were not compelled to participate. Well, it's a step, I suppose. A better step, however, is taken by more enlightened pedagogues, who have their children celebrate an old-time Harvest Festival. Here they bring in sheaves of grain, home-grown veggies, and bottled preserves to decorate classroom or school hall. Children can create traditional 'com dollies' from various parts of cereal plants. These dance charmingly from curtain rail and rafter. The most memorable impact of a room full of newly harvested produce is the all-pervading musky-sweet scent. Some schools plan pleasant Autumn excursions into mountain retreats. Kids love to gambol among piles of fallen leaves and marvel at the fire-toned beauty of elm and elder, persimmon and prunus, beech, and birch.

Some years ago, one school celebrated the Autumn Festival by planting their own Color Forest. Parents were asked to provide their child with a deciduous tree seedling to plant in the playground. This mass planting was in a little-used patch of ground. Today it has canopied, providing a shady recreation area; one which bursts into blazing color each Autumn. This is a living tribute to its planners; and to the good earth, by whatever name she goes by: Gaea, Tellus, Demeter, Proserpine...

The Swedish word for Autumn is *host*, this has warm connotations for the annual fruition of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. If each year's Sydney Show (and legion others around the

country) is any guide, Homebush will again play 'host' to one of the most spiritually significant events in the state's cultural, yes, and even religious, calendar when the world's biggest Harvest Festival takes place next Autumn. But to more technical considerations: why in the world don't television weather reports provide regular updates on the movement of the heavenly bodies? If they did, scads of people would be out in their backyards to watch, for instance - "A spectacular setting of the moon and Jupiter, look north-west to ... " or inform us that – "Today is the Autumn Equinox, when there is equal day and night all over the world."

So what is this 'equinox', whether autumnal or vernal (spring)? The word has a Latin origin meaning 'equal night'. Did the Roman cosmos-watchers choose the negative night over the more positive equal day to frighten the plebeians?

On this day in the Southern Hemisphere, March 21 (approx.), the sun rises due east, and sets exactly twelve hours later due west - everywhere in the world! This is difficult to time, as the rising is out of sync. with the time zones. These are a 15 ° for one hour (24 hours round the globe) longitude expediency humanity has created to give apparent order to an omni kinetic universe.

According to the clocks, time seems to stop for the one hour the sun crosses through a 15° time zone. Our Eastern Standard zone begins at 160°E, in the middle of the Tasman Sea. Sydney is about half-way - or 7° - west of this. When the clock says noon in Sydney, it really is noon, with the sun due north. In, say Byron Bay, 3.5° longitude east of Sydney, when the sun is due north, the clock says 11.45am - clock and sun noon do not coincide.

In Sydney, the equinoctial sun will rise due east on the equinox, then arc northwards about 27° below the perpendicular, and set due west 12 hours later. This arcane information may seem irrelevant, but it can have a big impact on quality of life.

If your home faces (assuming it to be a rectangular, front-back design) due east, it receives equal advantages and disadvantages of sunrises and sunsets. If it faces north-east, it maximizes the warming winter morning sun, and minimizes the overheating of summer mornings. A south-east facing house is the opposite.

There is a useful formula for determining these 'solstice points', the position of sunrise (or sunset) at winter and summer solstices. Where exactly does the -sun rise (or set) at these two all-important times of the year - anywhere on the globe?

At Sydney the sun will travel 27 degrees south and north either side of due east between the two solstices. This is a 54-degree variant throughout the year; a big influence in building, agriculture, drying clothes, et al! The angle increases the further south one travels; and decreases the further north. Of course, it is easy to calculate the sun risings and settings on the two equinoxes.

They do this due east and west anywhere in the world, but what about the two solstices? Their risings and setting suns change in relation to latitude. The only two places on earth the sun rises and sets due east and west on the solstices is on the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn on June and December 21 respectively.

So how do we calculate these solstice sun risings and settings? The following is a guide to work out the correct angles for the four (two in the morning and two in the afternoon) solstitial risings and settings: first add the angles of the two tropics,  $23.5$  and  $23.5 - 47^\circ$ . Take your own latitude; for instance, in Byron Bay's case this is approximately  $28.5^\circ$  - subtract  $23.5$  from this number -  $5^\circ$ . Add this to the original  $47 - 52^\circ$  and divide by two -  $26^\circ$  ... simple! At Byron Bay, the sun rises and sets  $26^\circ$  north and south of due east and west in the summer and winter solstices.

It is curious how this equal day/night manifests in latitudes other than our own. First there is the Equatorial Equinox, a kind of tautology. As the sun is directly over the Equator on this day, twice a year, it not only rises and sets due east and west but passes overhead in a perfect perpendicular semicircle. If we stand at the South Pole, however, the sun would rise due north - all directions are due north from the South Pole (as south is the only direction from the North Pole) - and literally 'roll 'round heaven all day'. The 'day' in this case being 24 hours. So whence the half day, half night? Well, the sun only rises halfway. For the whole day we only see a golden hemisphere rather than the full orb. This is Mother Nature taking equinoctial half-light, half-dark to extremes!

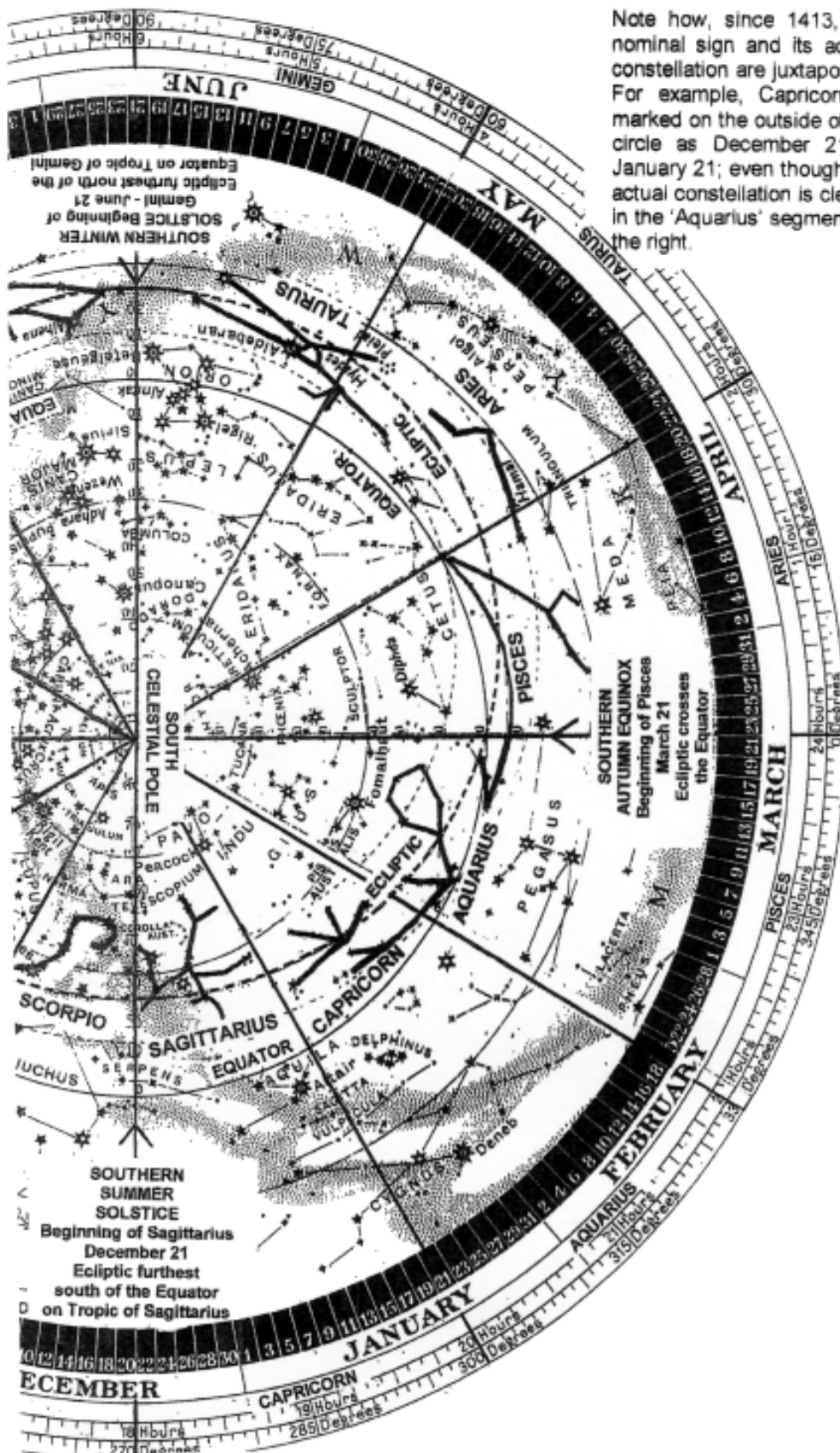
Ancient folk marked the equinoxes (and solstices) with extraordinary energy; unlike ourselves where they rate barely a mention! These people built massive stone circles and other megalithic structures to register not just the celestial events but assure their astronomical accuracy - be it for agriculture or just culture. It is still popularly believed that the so-called equinoctial storms are triggered by this solar phenomenon. These range from North Atlantic gales to savage Mississippi twisters.

The equinoxes are thought to be transition times, ones of turbulence and climatic uncertainty. There is not only ubiquitous anecdotal, but considerable meteorological evidence to support this long-lived and puzzling contention. Rural myths inevitably extend into the psychic.

The light-dark becomes good-evil. Many of the old autumn equinox festivals included rituals to placate the good harvest gods. They were also employed to protect against the malevolent, whether physical or psychic. In respect of the latter, folk feared going mad in Autumn. Again, some statistics, being the selective wretches that they are, seem to confirm a rise in psychiatric referrals at this time of year. An aspect of the Vernal Equinox; that of the Southern Hemisphere being September 21, is oddly related to the moon. The full moon following the Equinox rises in the exact opposite side of the Animal Circle. In the Southern Hemisphere, the Autumn equinox occurs when the sun is rising in Pisces. Therefore, the first full moon after the equinox will be in Virgo. In fact, this sun-moon complement is the same with all 12 full moons of the year. In the Northern Hemisphere it is of course the opposite - a Pisces vernal rising on March 21 followed by a Virgo full moon. Many great paintings portray this virgin-fish dichotomy, like Raphael's *Madonna detta del Pesce*.

The metaphysical reality is that our spiritual life is influenced by the monthly Sun sign, our soul life rather by the full Moon sign. In scriptural terms it is known as The Mystery of the Loaves and Fishes - Virgo is always associated with the Virgin, whose symbol is often an ear of grain. Many crucifixion scenes also contain this sun-moon duality, which is why Easter is both a solar and lunar festival - held as it is on the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Rudolf Steiner's statement on this mystery is both revealing and reassuring: *"By the combination of the forces of*





Note how, since 1413, the nominal sign and its actual constellation are juxtaposed. For example, Capricorn is marked on the outside of the circle as December 21 to January 21; even though the actual constellation is clearly in the 'Aquarius' segment, to the right.

*Pisces and Virgo, nothing that is wrong can be created."* March 21 is not only the nominal Autumn Equinox, but the change from one astrological sign to the next - Pisces to Aries. Astronomers however beg to differ; since 1413, the constellations have been subject to the timeless 'precession of the equinoxes', which occurs every 2160 years. This means that they have all slipped back one sign - in relation to the time of the year, that is. Astronomically March 21 actually signals the move from Aquarius to Pisces. This of course, according to the timeless authority of the actual star risings, moves everyone's birth sign back one on the zodiacal circle. Your author is an astrological, Cancer, but an astronomical Gemini.

Heretics who support the post-1413 ordering of the universe say that one ignores the evidence of the physical constellations at one's peril - or one's confusion, at least.

This birth sign controversy has certainly created a few 'equinoctial storms' of its own among magazine star oracles, pseudo-occultists and other believers.

The following are the lyrics to a song I wrote for my Class 1 and 2 for our Autumn Festival in 1972. It was revived (with a slight word change) for an Autumn Festival in Osaka, Japan, in 1998.

## **SAYONARA**

*Swallows sing sayonara,  
They all know it's time to go.  
They can hear Lady Autumn's whisper,  
Smell the wind blown off the snow.*

*Summer colors softly fade,  
Breathing in with Autumn shades.  
We can find new will to work,  
When the chimneys smoke again.*

*Morning mist, silent and waiting,  
Chill and grey, surrounding me.  
Spiders' nets on every branch/et,  
Hang in dewey geometry.*

*Plants asleep, the earth awakens,  
Light and dark. the balance held.  
Sunset hues, red, gold and violet,  
Lady Autumn 's magic spell.*

### **Craft - Lighting the Celebration Way**

\* Why not celebrate Mid-Winter with the class remaining back at school on the longest night of the year (June 21 or thereabouts), putting on a concert of Winter poems, songs and even a short play for their parents and friends, who come along later.

\* The highlight can be a Lantern Walk; how like little gnomes the children look as they trudge around the local park, bush track, headland or even a suburban footpath with their glowing lanterns. These are simply made in class, but you might ask each child to bring in a hurricane lamp from home - take out the glass and have them paint designs on with transparent glass paint (available at craft stores). This creates beautiful colored light.

\* Candles are a part of so many festivals, traditional and modern - and decorative candles are so easy to make. Again at the craft store, buy wicks, blocks of clear paraffin wax, and coloring; melt the wax and coloring in prune tins (one for each color) on the stove - dip the wick in the now-colored liquid wax – immediately dip in a tin of cold water standing close by - back in the wax (probably a different color for a laminate effect) - back in the water and so on, till a quite large and lovely candle is made - usually carrot shaped. This can then be carved with a table knife to reveal the layers of color within.

\* Stained glass windows are popular for transforming the everyday classroom to a celebratory atmosphere of one kind or another. Using black cardboard, have the class draw on simple geometric, large-figure designs. These can be pictorial, like a sun or flower shape. Using small cutting knives on pads of Lino or old cardboard, cut these out leaving linking strips (leads, as in leadlights) to separate the various colors. In this case created from cellophane or tissue paper, which is cut out with scissors and glued to the reverse side. The finished pictures are then attached to windows with bluetac, and presto - the classroom becomes a cathedral!

\* Leaf rubbings are fun in Autumn (or any season). The children can collect the fallen leaves in the park, or from home - or on the way to school. The rubbings can be over-rubbed in different colors to create quite sophisticated designs - the beauty being in the form of the leaf itself. Press flowers in a thick book for a Spring equivalent. From both these can be made cards or book covers or be hung en masse on a line across the room. Toe rubbings can be done on both sides, depending on the display method.

### **Practical Celebrations in Garden and Kitchen**

No year should go by without children planting trees; this has always been part of celebratory life. The Georgians (of southern Russia), noted for their longevity, plant an apricot tree at the birth of a child. The apricot has an approximate life span of a century - in so doing, they hope that the tree and babe would grow up, live their lives, and even die together - and in Georgia this was often enough the case!

\* Have the class plant a Color Forest - ask them to bring in deciduous or Autumn-tone tree seedlings, like liquidambar and elms. Twist the local nurseryman's arm to sponsor the event – or subsidize it at least. Mass-plant the trees in a bare corner of the school, or along a fence-line. In a few short years, the children will see the beauty of an Autumn display, the product of their

collective effort. The same can be done with a Spring Color Forest, choosing appropriate trees like Ornamental Plum, Crepe Myrtle, and the like.

\* While we have our hands in the soil, how about a Season Garden? This can be based on flowers, vegetables, or both; your local council Parks and Gardens people can help with info (and perhaps spare seedlings). Here we deliberately plant one bed for Spring, another for Autumn flowering or fruiting - the same for Winter. After all, the word season means 'to sow'. There is no celebration to equal staggering in with a basket full of seasonal produce. But don't .be too ambitious, small garden patches with lots of variety work best, and are easier to protect against after-school marauders, like rabbits and dogs.

\* Cooking and eating at 'feast-ivals' (as the word festival means) has appealed to celebrating mankind through the ages. The children can prepare simple but fitting celebratory 'feasts' to mark the march of time. Of course, nutrition is a vital element in school cooking and presentation classes.

However, the spirit of carnival (A word meaning 'Oh flesh, farewell'!) must be considered. So don't be afraid of a little sugar and bright color in drinks, cakes, and confections - it *is* a party. The essence of these banquets the children help prepare is simplicity, with as little cooking at school as possible.

The central aim of a Celebrations Education is the enhancing of *event* in the child's life. Special Days, in all their variety, lift peoples and persons above the hum-drum of everyday life – the icing on the birthday cake so to speak - especially where these events express aspects. of the social life. So in all respects, the celebratory Cycle of the Year is the *Community Year*, celebrating local, national, global; religious, and even political events. An equally important objective is to engage the children's interest in the *Natural Year* as part of the annual cycle - a cycle without end, in which each child is a living element. This nature year brings rebirth to the earth through the yearly journey of the sun, moon, and stars through the heavens, and in the slow, rhythmic dance of the seasons.

The main aim, underlying all others, is *enjoyment*. Many down-trodden peoples, burdened by their daily toil, live for their one-day-of-the-year; however, they choose to celebrate it. We can have as many festive days as we like, as long as they don't lose their 'specialness' - so have fun!

The following pages provide some practical activities for children to create their own festival fun.

*Black cardboard cut-out  
"stained glass window"*

