

## **Balance in Living**

### Saying Goodbye to the Martyr in Us

By Rosa Barocio

As I was coming home from school one day, my son greeted me and asked me how I was doing. I answered with my usual exhausted expression, “Tired “Yeah, you’re always tired, mom.” This had probably happened before, but this time something struck me on the head: This is how I will go into posterity, this is how I will be remembered—as a tired person! And what do tired people offer those around them? Irritation, exasperation, impatience, intolerance, moodiness, anger.

I could read the epitaph on my grave: “Herein lies an exhausted, insufferable Waldorf teacher, may she finally rest in peace!”

These reflections moved me to look for a change in my lifestyle.

As teachers we have ennobled struggle and suffering. The bigger the rings under your eyes, the larger the halo over your head. The more exhausted you feel, the better teacher you must be. Complaining becomes the underlying tone of every conversation between teachers: “It’s this time of the year, you know, never enough time to finish reports, to do evaluations, and we didn’t come out of the meeting until midnight!” Sounds like we should be giving Oscars to the most impressive martyrs in Waldorf education!

But I have to say I was once one of these teachers. I was always exhausted, feeling overburdened, constantly complaining, and sighing was becoming my way of breathing. I was inwardly very proud of my stress.

One day I heard a talk on “The Martyr in Us.” The speaker said, “Martyrs love to suffer and struggle. They compete to be the most stressed. They take on extra work only to exhaust themselves and blame others when they can’t deliver. They feel overtaxed with unbelievable demands, and if you do not commiserate with them, they will feel misunderstood and unappreciated and this will feed their reservoir of resentment. They are righteous and have a sense of self-importance that makes them feel better than others because of all the sacrifices they have made. They punish those around them by making them feel guilty if they’re happy or lighthearted. There is only room for work and their lives are joyless.”

“Oh, my God, that sounds very much like me!” I remember spending hours at home preparing a wonderful lesson, only to offer it to my students the next day with the lifelessness of a weary person. The hours at school seemed endless, and I could not wait for the day to be over. If only these children would realize how tired I was, they would behave!

I would not let myself hear my family’s complaints; it just wasn’t convenient. They had to be sacrificed for the sake of Waldorf, and that was all there was to it. My sons were at that time members of the Club of Abandoned Children of Waldorf Teachers. I was on a special mission, but they didn’t understand it.

Does this sound familiar? We have been conditioned for centuries to believe there is no other way. You cannot be a good teacher if you don’t sacrifice yourself and your family. For if we observe, teacher’s children seem to be the neediest of all. They’re demanding what is rightfully theirs, “Please give me some of the attention you give your students!” But their parents will proudly tell them, “Sorry, no time, I’m a teacher!”

But there is another way of growing and being a teacher. When I recognized the martyr in me, and the effect it was having on my life, I decided to change. I could grow through stress, struggle, and suffering or I could choose to strive, stretch, and soar—the old way through suffering versus the new way through joy.

How did I start changing this in myself? I first became acquainted with my martyr. I found him to be big and fat, and a real complainer. No one ever gives him enough attention or recognition. He is always ready to pick up an insult or a sneer and ready to remind me who has offended me and why. He tells me how great I am but how this is being overlooked. He encourages me to offer to do more than I can cope with and then feeds my self-pity. He loves endless teacher's meetings so I can have permission to be miserable the next day. I discovered that my martyr fed on lack of rest, no fun, and a lot of work.

In becoming familiar with him I found striving to have a different connotation from struggling: striving flies while struggle crawls. Striving is a relative of stretching, of trying to be more, of trying to discover who I really am. It is joyful, charismatic, and uplifting. Struggle on the other hand, is heavy and pulls you down to the ground as it fills you with weariness and boredom. It has no sense of humor and sees life as a burden.

I always liked the title "Balance in Teaching," so I wondered: How about "Balance in Living"? I started looking for a new balance in my life so my martyr would stop taking over. I thought of exchanging him, the mastiff that walks in front of me, pulling me by the reins, for a French poodle that I pull behind me. Martyrs never really leave, but if we recognize them, we can put them in their rightful place and keep them small and undernourished. Mine at that time was definitely a heavyweight.

I found that to keep this balance I had to tend four different things in my life:

**I had to take care of my body** through exercise, nutrition, enough rest and yes, trying to be beautiful. I still remember what a pleasure it was to have René Querido as a teacher, impeccably dressed, giving us an example of the dignity of being a teacher. I remember an anecdote he told us about a teacher who was always coming to school in a skirt with the hem undone, until a student wrote her a note saying, "I refuse to listen to anything you have to teach us until you have fixed your skirt!"

Being spiritual doesn't mean losing respect for our bodies. Why do we put such effort into beautifying our classrooms and show such little interest in looking beautiful for ourselves and others? I see spectacular blackboards contrasting with sloppy looking teachers. Maybe we are afraid of falling into making a cult of vanity like we see in society today, but we have certainly gone to the other extreme! A Mexican Waldorf teacher said to me once while seated at a teacher's conference, "Don't you feel like you're taking a trip back to the past? I feel like I'm back at the 60s!" The sad thing about such neglect is that besides giving our children a terrible example, we also separate ourselves from the rest of the society.

And have you ever wondered why so many teachers get sick? I have visited Waldorf schools to find over a quarter of their teachers ill. Is this a curse that comes with commitment and dedication, or is it the result of stress and losing our balance in living? Martyrs love illness, by the way, it makes them feel special and gets them a lot of attention.

**I have to foster my spiritual growth** by meditating—not just talking about the spiritual world, but really making a space every day to allow for this connection, to take in the wisdom, ask for the help, and review with honesty what I need to work on in myself.

**In my work**, I seek to expand my creativity and imagination, and try to inspire those around me. I have ceased to feel proud of being tired; instead I take it as a warning sign to STOP! so I don't get sick

and burn out.

“Burn out” is such an interesting American expression. There is no such term in Spanish. Why do people burn out? Lack of balance in their lives. How does it happen? Simple, it’s the workings of the martyr. They see you do a good job, you get more work, and the martyr says: See how great you are? They’re giving you more work, you’re the best, no one can do it like you, you’re indispensable. Take it! Take it! Say yes! And like a rubber band we begin to pull and pull and pull until we snap.

Burn out. I have seen wonderful teachers leave because of this. Couldn’t stop, couldn’t say no to the martyr, and now everyone at school is sorry, but it’s too late, the damage is done and they’re gone.

**Fourthly, I have consciously created fun.** Perhaps you are thinking fun is for superficial people who have nothing better to do. Are we forgetting life is meant to be lived joyfully? We talk about giving joy and hope to our students when we ourselves are always too tired to enjoy life. We start feeling too good to meddle outside our Waldorf circle, and our seriousness becomes like a heavy cloak that covers us and makes us inaccessible to others.

“Life is wonderful,” we tell our students. “Oh yeah, then why are you dragging your feet?” What a lack of congruence between what we preach and what we live! René Querido did not talk about enthusiasm he exuded enthusiasm!

Where is the fun in our lives? Each of us has to create it consciously because it gets crowded out by the never-ending demands of being a Waldorf teacher. I asked a friend, “What do you like to do for fun?” “Oh, I love to go camping.” But when I asked her how long had it been since her last camping trip, she said, “Geez, I can’t really remember, it’s been a while, was it three years ago?”

We invest all our time trying to be perfect Waldorf teachers and forget that what our students receive from us is our inner striving; they never expect perfection. When we consciously create fun we restore our balance and connect to joy and to the outside world instead of separating ourselves through our myopic thinking, believing we are superior.

I am no longer working as a Waldorf teacher. For the past four years I have lectured to parents and teachers in all kinds of schools in Mexico and the U.S.A. I find people everywhere very eager, receptive, and ready to open up and share. I have been enormously rewarded with their gratitude, and I feel very lucky or the opportunity they offer me to grow.

So am I rid of the martyr in me? Let me put it this way, my life has definitely changed. The martyr is still a visitor that every so often comes in disguise, but I am getting better and quicker at recognizing him and shoving him out the back door: “It has been a real displeasure seeing you, I hope you never come back!”

If we balance our lives and seek to rid ourselves of stress, struggle, and suffering, and instead choose to strive, stretch, and soar, and then spice our lives with joy and hope, we may be able to offer our children and students a true example for experiencing the fullness of life so they can grow with the vision of a better world.

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