

# Blinking, Feeling, and Willing

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*Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2005)

The relationship between the developmental psychology that underlies Waldorf education, the curriculum that informs it, and the day-to-day classroom experience that brings it to life may be compared to a set of maps. The developmental foundation given by Rudolf Steiner may be seen as a physical globe of the earth that provides a broad overview, changing over the course of millennia. The Waldorf school curriculum, laid out in its broad outlines by Steiner but elaborated and intensified by others, may be compared to a political map, a picture whose boundaries and borders, cities, and nations change frequently through the course of a century. The daily experience of the teacher may, in turn, be likened to a Google road map in which detours, washed-out bridges, renamed exit ramps, and congested intersections must be delineated anew every day.

Waldorf teachers, who work with the road map, finding their way daily through the myriad changes and unpredictable conditions of the present moment, will find Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* to be a helpful and encouraging study. In this book, as well as the many articles that he has written for *The New Yorker* in the past decade (some of which were excerpted from this book), Gladwell has shown himself to be an insightful witness to the accelerated, globalizing, unsettling—in short, Michaelic—times in which we live.

In *Blink*, Gladwell examines a phenomenon that he describes as “the power of thinking without thinking,” the epistemological domain first charted over a century ago in Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of Freedom*. Steiner examined thinking

as the modern person's path to freedom. For him, the practice of a “free thinking” that united percepts and concepts would lead to actions that were in harmony with natural laws and were therefore moral. Gladwell treads a more phenomenological path, drawing on the experiences of people as diverse as art critics, family therapists, inner city policemen, and athletic coaches to examine the ways in which a thinking capacity that rapidly melds percepts and concepts leads to actions that are correct and effective. Although *Blink* sets out to be nothing more than a popular synthesis of the findings of contemporary psychologists, it is replete with insights that support and update Steiner's exploration of morality and freedom.

As an example, the “case study” with which Gladwell begins his book may be illuminating to teachers who struggle to understand a difficult child. Before it purchased a rare kouros statue, the J. Paul Getty Museum commissioned a number of scientists to study and evaluate the statue's provenance and antiquity. After lengthy and exhaustive scientific research they determined that the statue was, indeed, a sixth century B.C. artifact. Three art historians who simply looked at the statue—in each case, for a matter of seconds—were convinced, however, that the statue was a fake, which, indeed, it was (pp. 3–8).

Thomas Hoving, one of the art historians involved with the kouros, described “the act of getting at the truth of a work of art as an extraordinarily imprecise process” (p. 50). Hoving quoted the eminent art historian and authenticator Bernard Berenson, in a court case, as recognizing

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a forgery only because “his stomach felt wrong... Or he felt woozy and off balance...” (p. 51). Such descriptions point to the likelihood that these invariably correct judgments are not being formed in the brain, or even in the generalized nerve/sense system, but rather are metabolic in nature; Berenson’s “off balance” feeling indicates that the clarity characteristic of his sensory system had been overwhelmed by the inchoate chemistry of his metabolism.

Rudolf Steiner indicated that lodged in our solar plexus we possess a powerful organ for perceiving destiny. In our present stage of consciousness, this organ slumbers, awakened only when momentous destiny events require its guidance or corroboration (as the Cowboy Junkies tell us, “...Sometimes/You meet someone/And your guts just burn”). In the case of an art historian, it may well be, for example, that he or she was present at the time of the authentic art work’s genesis and has a destiny-connection with the work and its creator.

Could we extend this experience to the relationship of the teacher and the “difficult child”? Too often today classroom teachers are pressured by parents and colleagues to have the child tested and assessed by “experts” so that the proper educational plan may be fitted to the child’s needs. If an art historian has such a karmic connection with a work of art that he can follow it from lifetime to lifetime, we can imagine that a Waldorf teacher might have at least as strong a link with some of the children in her class, and at least as reliable a capacity to perceive the “authenticity” of the child’s problems and strengths.

The atmosphere of today’s Waldorf school, however, may be so filled with anxiety or fear of litigation that the “still small voice” within cannot be heard, or, if heard, will not be heeded. The clear and often correct judgment that the teacher may have made within the first seconds of meeting the child, or during the course of an intense classroom conversation with the child, or upon awakening in the morning after an evening’s contemplation of the child’s nature—all of these potential moral intuitions may be ignored or rejected as “vague.” (Recall Hoving’s description of the importance of the “extraordinarily imprecise process.”) A great many—perhaps a majority of—Waldorf students who are subjected to such

tests are likely to be asked to leave their class and enter a mainstream school, whereas in most situations where the teacher’s “gut reaction” is accepted, such a child will remain. Which course of action would appear to be closer to moral intuition?

Yet another dilemma of Waldorf school life is echoed in “Paul van Riper’s Big Victory,” one of the most stirring chapters in the book. In a crucial series of war games held by the United States Joint Forces Command at the turn of this century, Paul van Riper commanded forces that had far less firepower and far fewer intelligence-gathering resources than their opponents—but he nonetheless scored a rapid and surprising victory. The information that his opponents possessed—and the time and energy it took to analyze it and determine its value—was hardly advantageous.

A parent in my old Waldorf school was a trader who worked on Wall Street. He was famous in the financial district for a presence of mind that allowed him to make split-second decisions amid the wild gyrations of the currency market. His financial acumen and his love of Waldorf education led to his being invited to join a number of important committees in his children’s school. He told me of one meeting in which he sat for over an hour while the faculty and parents on the school’s Finance Committee debated an expenditure of \$250. Everyone had an opinion, and, despite a great deal of careful research, their course of action was not clear.

Halfway through the meeting the trader’s beeper sounded, and he left the building to use his car phone. One of his bank’s Asian offices needed him to approve a trade; he made his decision in five seconds and within another ten seconds his bank had gained over two million dollars on the deal. He then returned to the meeting. “And you know what, Eugene?” he said wistfully, “They were still talking about that wretched \$250!”

As Gladwell describes it in the book’s “Afterword”:

We live in a world saturated with information. We have virtually unlimited amounts of data at our fingertips at all times, and we’re well versed in the arguments about the dangers of not knowing enough and not doing our homework. But

what I have sensed is an enormous frustration with the unexpected costs of knowing too much, of being inundated with information. We have come to confuse information with understanding. (p. 264)

It is interesting to observe that, as the meetings of Waldorf school faculties, Colleges of Teachers, and school committees have become more information-based and more severe in their demands that participants “do their homework” and process the quantitative consequences of their decisions, the same demands are being made on Waldorf students.

Waldorf education was brought into the world as a practical manifestation of Steiner’s method of “soul economy,” the idea that less is more, and the sense that “sleeping and forgetting” were no less important than assimilating a great deal of information. Yet the endless copying from the board that fills main lesson books to bursting, the homework and textbooks that

appear earlier and earlier in the grades, and the block tests, quizzes, and graded reports that are slowly becoming the rule rather than the exception indicate that Waldorf schools are coming to value information more than transformation.

Again and again, Gladwell describes how often too much information leads to bad decisions, while trust in our own capacity for judgment can lead to astonishingly good decisions. The Waldorf school approach was meant to teach children how to trust themselves, to develop character, poise, and confidence that would allow them to think and act decisively. The “approach” cannot do this by itself, of course; it helps to have teachers who practice it. Although Gladwell would not put it this way, we can say that blinking is a micro-sleep, a momentary cessation of sensory input that reunites us with the spiritual world, if we have trust in that world. The clear and enthusiastic look at today’s consciousness that *Blink* affords us can be a tonic for all who practice Waldorf education.

## Formation of Ethical and Moral Values

The ability to develop attachments, reliability, social competence—these are among the most important fundamental values of humanity. We become socially competent when we have a healthy measure of self-confidence and security.

If children know that they are accepted in their existence and their abilities, then creativity, courage, self-trust, initiative, and daring grow in them; the children can meaningfully meet demands and master difficulties. Such children can also yield in conflict situations and forgive others; they know how to wait their turn and are able to do without, to lose, and to understand.

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