



What Makes Waldorf, Waldorf?

Stephen Keith Sagarin

What is essential to the practices and understandings of Waldorf schools and Waldorf school teachers? If Rudolf Steiner's work on teaching and learning is not to be seen partially, inaccurately, or superficially, how can it be seen?

In writing previously that “there is no such thing as Waldorf education” (“No Such Thing,” *Research Bulletin*, Vol. VIII, no. 1), I was alluding to Donald Winnicott's famous statement that there is “no such thing as a baby,”¹ which has been followed through decades by other healthy attempts to overcome the fragmenting, objectifying tendencies of our modern minds. Winnicott was at pains to show, in England after World War II, that a child alone—without a mother, at least (or, to use more contemporary language, a caregiver)—cannot survive. His research into the necessary, life-giving, and life-sustaining relationship of child and parent added significantly to what we know about children and childhood. Clearly, he was not actually denying the existence of children in any but a rhetorical sense. In fact, he devoted much of his life and career to them.

I stand by my statements about Waldorf education and the context in which we necessarily understand it. To try to see Waldorf education as a thing-in-itself is necessarily to see it partially and inaccurately. To believe in things as entities separate from context and the rest of creation is to participate in exactly the fragmenting, objectifying consciousness against which Waldorf teachers wish to stand. Further, to identify Waldorf education by its trappings, practices, or functions is to see it only superficially. (See “Playing ‘Steiner Says,’” *Research Bulletin*, Vol. XII, no. 2.) So, can we see Waldorf education whole, and, if so, how?

It must be possible to practice education in a fruitful and health-giving way even if our school building is a tin shack and we have no money for supplies.

The Checklist Test

We could begin by creating a checklist of all the things Steiner said about teaching and learning. I suggest this as a thought experiment only, somewhat tongue-in-cheek. I hope not to see a future publication entitled, “The Waldorf Teacher's Checklist of Everything Rudolf Steiner Had to Say about Teaching and Learning.” The list would include items that deal with the mundane, the sublime, and everything in between—discipline and math teaching, destiny and temperament. If we create and examine such a list, I believe, we recognize that we are babes in the woods when it comes to actually doing Waldorf education. We are generally not seers. Our spiritual development may be strong in many ways but it is infantile in others.

It may be many years, many generations, before we can begin to approach Steiner as an equal and do more than begin to implement education the way he envisaged it. By way of analogy, consider Aristotle's work on gravity. This was accepted, unquestioned, for nearly 2000 years, until Galileo, avatar of a consciousness beyond Aristotle's, was able to meet gravity on new terms and demonstrate ways in which Aristotle's thinking was incorrect. Who today can do the same for Steiner? More important, who today can equal or even approach Steiner in insight and understanding?

Which items on our list are essential and which may be altered or dispensed with? Our rudimentary understanding of Waldorf education may fail us. One item looks much like another. How else may we proceed?

The Tin Shack Test

Another thought experiment by which to test what is essential in Steiner's view of teaching and

learning is what I call the Tin Shack Test. Clearly, Waldorf education is compromised if it exists solely for the benefit of the few wealthy families that can afford private school tuition. It must be possible to practice education in a fruitful and health-giving way even if our school building is a tin shack and we have no money for supplies. Any quality or characteristic or practice of teaching and learning that cannot find itself in the tin shack—or the shade of a tree, for example—is probably not essential.

By “wealthy,” I should say, I mean almost all of us. Half the world lives on the equivalent of a dollar or two per day. Those of us fortunate enough to have hot and cold running water, a refrigerator, and an automobile should consider ourselves to be among the wealthiest persons ever to walk the planet—in the ancient world, the number of servants or slaves necessary to maintain us in such luxury would have been in the hundreds.

The Essence of Essence

The word that Steiner most frequently used to describe what I am talking about is the German noun *Wesen*, which translates as “being,” as in “human being.” The German is less concrete than its English counterpart, however, and may also be translated as “nature,” as in Socrates’ “medicine has to define the nature of the body.” And it may further be translated as “essence,” as in Zoolander’s “moisture is the essence of wetness.” When Steiner uses the word *Wesen*, we mistake ourselves in English if our minds leap to a concept of corporeality, too often associated in English with the word “being.” The essence of being, we may say, is of an immaterial nature.

I am aware, however, of a large literature that limns the dangers of thinking that approaches essentials, giving rise to a new form of prejudice, “essentialism.”² I take the central argument here to be that so often in history what we have believed contained some essential quality—whiteness or maleness, for example—turned out later on or on careful inspection not to. Much of the world that seems so given and so real is, in fact,

contingent, or at least created, situational, and symbolic and is likely to change from time to time and context to context. So we must approach “Waldorfness” with great care, ready to find that it’s not what we thought it was and may not be anything at all.

As Samuel Taylor Coleridge said, however, and as so many have quoted, we can distinguish in the mind what we cannot divide in the world.³ My aim here is to distinguish what for Waldorf teachers is central to their understanding of what we do, recognizing that this may change over time or with changing contexts. I am not burrowing into the center of a planet to find its core; I am examining a box of artifacts, if you will, to discover—in my estimation—those that better reveal the unique qualities of the person to whom it belongs.

Imagining the Best

What, then, is essential to teaching and learning according to Steiner’s work, according to his images of human beings and the world? One method for approaching the question of the core of what we call Waldorf education is to imagine what we could not do without, in a broad and durable sense. Which aspects of our work, if we were forbidden to implement them, might lead us to close our doors or declare that we could no longer call ourselves Waldorf teachers or a Waldorf school?

I will posit, hesitantly, that there are five categories, each of which is taken to be essential to what we do in Waldorf schools. Readers will note that any teacher, any school, could adopt these practices and understandings. I will let others determine at what point, level, or degree of commitment a person becomes a Waldorf teacher, a school becomes a Waldorf school. My own view is that anyone courageous enough to want to work with Steiner’s ideas on education deserves our support and admiration, regardless of setting or circumstance.

I say hesitantly because I may well have the number wrong. Biologists who count species, for example, may be termed lumpers—those who

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overlook minor differences in favor of underlying sameness—or splitters—those who see relatively minor differences as significant. I attempt neither a lumpner nor a splitter to be, but I acknowledge that I may be overlooking something important, a sixth or seventh essential, or I may be including too many, separating characteristics that would better be combined. I welcome correction.

Fortunately, these five aspects of education may be seen as facets of one encompassing whole. While the myths of Waldorf education multiply beyond counting, the essentials tend toward one. I end by considering characteristics of this whole.

Five Gifts

One way to picture the five essentials is as gifts that Waldorf school teachers give their graduates, and by this I mean primarily high school graduates. Lower school parents and graduates will recognize these gifts, but they will also recognize that none comes fully to fruition by the end of eighth grade.

1. Ideas and Ideals

The first gift is a source of ideas and ideals. Waldorf education does not provide beliefs, ideology, culture, or worldview, although it necessarily manifests a collection of cultures and can devolve into ideology. (The “Waldorf worldview,” at least in its mundane expression, is an expression of time and place, and is not essential. Countercultural or alternative education only came into being in the 1960s, for example.) Belief, knowledge, and worldview may be “about” spiritual matters, but they should not be mistaken for them. An intellectual understanding of Waldorf education does not make a teacher, and highly gifted teachers may be poor at discussing what they do and how they do it.

What teachers provide, more important than any knowledge about a way of life or a worldview, is a pathway or method for discovering these ideas and ideals, should a student wish later in life to pursue them. Choosing this path, following it, and putting into practice the results of such a journey involve human freedom, moral imagination, ethical individualism, call it what you will.

All we can give of value as teachers with regard to spiritual realities is a path that can be followed or retraced. In geometry, I can show how

the steps of a proof lead to a logical conclusion, but you must take that final intuitive leap yourself. If you do not “see” that these steps constitute a proof, all I can do as a teacher is retrace the path, perhaps using different language or different symbols in order to help you again to the brink of intuitive understanding.

Anthroposophically-gained knowledge of the world, given to us in Steiner’s books and lectures, for example, can provide stepping stones akin to the statements in a geometric proof. They attain meaning, however, only as we use them to focus our attention, to trace and retrace a path to the spirit, to meaning, and to understanding.

This first point encompasses Steiner’s work in education and also the anthroposophical method and knowledge that underlie it—understandings of destiny, reincarnation, the place of human beings in the cosmos and in evolution, and so on. To treat these understandings as part of an ideology or worldview is to belittle them, to turn them into a religion. If they are true, they are true for all people and they are facts about the world; they are evidence of a science and a scientific method.

If the freedom to teach toward this path of understanding were denied, a teacher would have to feel that she could no longer teach as a “Waldorf” teacher. In this regard, I will add for more philosophical readers that I see Steiner’s work primarily as work in method, and that considerations of epistemology or ontology arise secondarily to this focus on method.

2. Development

In the future, all instruction must be built upon psychology developed from an anthroposophical understanding of the world. (p. 49)

What lives in human beings tends toward metamorphosis. If you can bring it about that the children have concepts of respect and honoring, concepts of all that we can call, in an all-encompassing sense, a prayerful attitude, then such thoughts will be living in children permeated with a prayerful attitude, and will remain into old age. In old age, these concepts will be transformed into a capacity to bless and to give others the results of a prayerful attitude. (p. 155)

You must be a good friend of natural development. (p. 180) ⁴

Second, teachers address their students as developing human beings, beings who transform themselves unconsciously in youth and later become uniquely capable of self-transformation. In nature, metamorphoses and transformations are primarily visible. We can see a plant grow from shoot to leaves to flower, each stage presenting unforeseen changes of form. No one looking at a caterpillar for the first time would guess that it would soon be a butterfly. In human life, especially after childhood, however, transformation and development are not so readily visible.

Waldorf teachers seek patterns in human development and they also seek to be sensitive to the unique development of each student. They may fruitfully seek a common language with developmental psychologists from Jean Piaget to the present (see, for example, “The Seer and the Scientist,” *Research Bulletin*, Vol. XI, no. 1). If a teacher in a Waldorf school were prohibited from addressing his students according to a developmentally appropriate model, he might well feel he could no longer call himself a Waldorf teacher.

3. Three Kinds of Knowing

Whenever you want to suitably consider the human being from any particular standpoint, you must always return to the three parts of the human soul—that is, to cognition that occurs in thinking, to feeling, and to willing. (p. 106) ⁵

Accumulating knowledge is like building a collection, right? Each piece in the collection is much like any other. A fact about astronomy is much like a fact about history or writing technique or piano playing or wine tasting or empathetic listening. A degree of certainty or truth adheres to it or is apparent in it, and we accept it for our—growing, we hope—stockpile of things that we know. It can be digitized and stored in a computer

and shared online.

Well, no. Knowledge is not singular. Knowing the names of stars is not like knowing how to play the piano or like knowing how to offer solace to someone in pain. Like intelligence, which we used to believe was one thing—measured on an IQ test, for example, but now seen as, at least, a multi-faceted collection of human faculties—knowledge comes in different forms. We can know in different ways. Waldorf and Steiner schools emphasize in particular three ways of knowing, the conscious development of each corresponding roughly with preschool, elementary school, and high school.

Michael Polanyi called a first kind of knowing “tacit knowing,” knowing “more than we can say.”⁶ Clearly, infants—those without voices, as

the term itself suggests—know more than they can say. We can know how to cut a carrot, or the taste of the soup it makes, or how to play the viola, or how to solve a problem in geometry. We can describe these things in language, but the value, meaning, and even the truth of these activities—cutting, tasting, playing, solving—does not translate into language. These become appar-

ent only when we learn to do these things ourselves. Without the experience of doing, often knowing has little meaning.

You could write a manual describing what you do—as nurse, stockbroker, or artist—but, if you had to train someone to replace you, would you rather hand off instructions or offer an apprenticeship, some doing? Read a book on building a stone wall, and then claim that you know how to build one. Your aches and calluses will tell you another story. We learn much and know much through doing, and, often, doing precedes and informs our knowing. Hence, in Waldorf schools, the importance of “doing” in preschool, before we emphasize other forms of knowing.

A second kind of knowing is aesthetic knowing. Its value is apparent in contrast to our concept of something that is anaesthetic, or numb-

At the center of any method of teaching must reside an image of the human being who is learning and being taught, the human being becoming ever more human.

ing. Aesthetic knowing is alive, awake, and sensitive. It is knowing in heart and gut (yes, the brain plays its role, but we experience our feelings in our hearts and lungs and guts). It is intuitive (“taught from within”). It is a form of knowing especially valuable for artists, musicians, clinical psychologists, theoretical physicists, and even advertising copywriters. It is a form of knowing that connects us powerfully to the world. And it develops in children most readily when they have separated from their parents and begun to comprehend the world around them for themselves. Hence, in Waldorf schools, the importance of beauty and feeling in the elementary school.

A third kind of knowing is knowing through thinking. By thinking, however, I mean a particular kind of thinking that attempts in Henri Bortoft’s phrase to “swim upstream,” reversing fragmentation, categorization, and specialization in order to recover wholeness.⁷ Thinking logically with given postulates, thinking algorithmically, is “downstream” thinking, the outcome determined by the input. It is powerful but dead, inherited from the creative insight of others. Recognizing the validity of postulates different from convention, however, involves insight of our own. This synthetic, living thinking can encompass or embrace analysis, logic, and critical thinking. But it seeks to go beyond them to recover or reach the origin of creative thought and imagination. And it develops in students who are wrestling not so much with the world around them as with their own identities in that world. Hence, in Waldorf schools, the importance in high school of the development of thinking.

These three ways of knowing are cumulative and integrative. We do not leave one for the next, but build on what comes before. As adults, our thinking is enriched if we also know how to do and to feel. All three forms of knowing are present earlier, too—small children learning to walk and talk (two of the most important forms of doing) can also feel and think. But by emphasizing one way of knowing at the appropriate time, allowing other ways to develop simultaneously but sleepily, we work in accordance with children’s growth away from their parents and into the world and themselves. We know in our hands, in our hearts, and in our heads. We know goodness, beauty, and truth. The more ways we know, the more

value we find in life, and the more value we bring to those around us and to whatever we are called to do.

Again, this third point may belong to a subset of the first. Anyone treading a path of understanding will recognize different modes of existence and ways of knowing.

4. Social Health

Fourth, a school can provide profound examples and guidelines for a healthy life with other people. If they choose to, Waldorf school graduates know how to live with others in brotherhood and sisterhood, in solidarity. They know how to be the appropriate equal of any man or any woman. And they know where their individual freedom lies, the sort of freedom that laws and conventions cannot touch. Steiner’s description of a healthy “threefold” social organism can be seen as a common-sense description of reality—not a utopian vision that does not and will not exist—by students who have lived through years in a Waldorf school.

This point, too, derives from the first. Who, on a spiritual path, would not strive to bring into existence an ever-healthier social world?

5. Reverence and the World

Fifth, students receive a reverence for life and for the world; a concern for the environment, however defined. I mention this last and say the least about it here because as a society we have probably embraced this gift more fully in the past fifty years than we have the others. Peace education, environmental and ecological education, outdoor action programs, and other forms of holistic education may find fellow travelers in Waldorf teachers here.

Only in Waldorf?

Waldorf school curricula and methods lend themselves to an education in all of these five points. Different schools may struggle at times with one or another. Different teachers evince strengths in particular directions. Taken together, however, these cover the ground, I believe, of what is essential to Waldorf education. Any school, any teachers can give these gifts. But the sad truth is that in our world today only in Waldorf schools can you find teachers united in

common purpose to strive to give their students fully and consistently what I have outlined here.

Not Alone

I am indebted to and have previously quoted Peter Curran, history teacher at the Waldorf School of Garden City, on Waldorf education (“No Such Thing,” *Research Bulletin*, Vol. VIII, no. 1). Curran wrote in the 1980s that there are four “essentials . . . without which no school (by whatever name) is a Waldorf school and with which any school is a Waldorf school.”

I. As each child’s consciousness matures, it recapitulates the cultural epochs of all Mankind. Waldorf education agrees with Emerson when he says that all children go through a Greek period and a Roman period, etc. There is, then, a proper time and method for particular subjects to be taught.

II. Since no one destroys what one loves, reverence, awe and respect for the Earth should be fostered. An inkling of the spirituality of the Earth then comes into being.

III. The qualitative, as well as the quantitative, in all things should be *equally* developed.

IV. Above all, Man is known as a spiritual as well as a physical being.⁸

These points accord with the first four gifts I describe above, I believe, and are noteworthy in omitting consideration of social health. I believe this omission is a symptom of Curran’s generation; it is really only in the last couple of decades, in the United States, at least, that a serious conversation about the “social mission” of Waldorf education has been reinvigorated. Talk of a social mission was somewhat forgotten, we may posit, during the tension of the Cold War. Consideration of this hypothesis here, however, would take us too far afield.

The Big One

While the trappings of Waldorf education multiply beyond counting, the essentials, few in number, perhaps five, perhaps more or fewer, cohere toward one. Another approach to the

essential nature of Waldorf education deserves mention. If my first five points present a chorus of gifts, this last image is a single, sounding gong. At the center of any method of teaching must reside an image of the human being who is learning and being taught, the human being becoming ever more human.

Previously, human beings were seen as born in original sin and, therefore, to be saved (Jonathan Edwards). Or they were seen as growing healthfully in a metaphorical garden, inadvertently damaged or corrupted by the unhealthy influence of imperfect civilization (Jean Jacques Rousseau). Or as “blank slates” on which society, civilization, and teachers could write (John Locke). Or as citizens to be educated for participation in a democratic government (Thomas Jefferson), amoral immigrants to be moralized (Horace Mann), future contributing members of a community (John Dewey), or, more recently, as biological systems that support brains that need to be programmed (Seymour Papert).

A more profound image of a human being arises if we consider that we are created in a creator’s image. I take this to mean not that God has ten fingers and ten toes, or a hairy chest, but that, like our creator, we are creative. An education that places creativity at its core, and that derives its methods from this understanding of imagination not as an accessory or enhancement to an academic education but as the ground from which all knowledge springs, may be called Waldorf education.

What Is Creativity?

The meaning of creativity, however, is not clear. What does it mean to be creative? Does it mean a practice of art—and not science—without standards, objectivity, or rigor? Pursued this way, creativity is seen as a healthful hiatus from more important pursuits, a necessary venting before returning to the real business of life. Or is creativity a heaven-opening moment of insight, bestowed on some and not on others, “eurekas” and “ah-hahs” as gifts of divine grace? Pursued this way, it is, like the works that creative persons produce, unavailable for scientific study or human understanding. Such views do not hold up to scrutiny.

History is replete with descriptions of moments of insight, from Archimedes on down, but we should not forget who the persons are who receive these insights. Mathematical truths may be raining down on you and me this moment, but, without rigorous training, hard work, a developed understanding of symbolic systems, and who knows what else, we are incapable of perceiving them.

Research in creativity by such eminent psychologists as Piaget's pupil, Howard Gruber, demonstrates creativity to be something else altogether. For Gruber, whose seminal work was a study of Charles Darwin (*Darwin on Man*), creativity is a capacity of scientists as much as of artists. It results in novelty, new creations, and is the result of unique, creative human efforts. To honor the uniqueness of creative acts, Gruber questioned even such thoughtful research as the "multiple intelligence" work of Howard Gardner, and championed the case study method, the study of creativity person by person. (Gruber was not opposed to multiple intelligence theory; he just didn't think it resulted in a description of creativity.)

This is not to say, however, that creativity cannot be studied scientifically. The lives of creative persons, as Gruber showed, have many points in common.⁹

- They undergo periods of apprenticeship.
- They work hard to achieve insight, and work hard after insight, expressing and testing it, putting it in a form that others may understand.
- They live lives in a "network of enterprise," mutually supporting endeavors and experiences that contribute to creative work. Without Darwin's avocational interest in geology, for instance, it is possible that he might not have achieved his insights into the evolution of living species.

Without this ongoing and recursive process—joyfully returning to the well from which our work springs—we risk not implementing creative, innovative, living teaching, but becoming an increasingly muddy copy of a copy of a copy.

- The work and lives of creative persons evolves, as well, demonstrating a (unique) pattern that may be understood and retraced by others.
- And, in order to make sense of their work, creative persons develop and employ "images of wide scope" or "ensembles of metaphor." Darwin wrestled with the image we now know as the "tree" that showed the evolution of life, working through several branching images, including a coral.¹⁰

Gruber wondered to the end whether or not everyone is creative.¹¹ He chose to study eminent artists and scientists, and sometimes expressed the view that only a few persons are actually creative; the rest of us simply live our lives. But he also believed in the unity of human experience, and wondered what it might mean to say that everyone is creative in some way.

Certainly the elements of his

studies may be applied to the review—or conduct—of any life.

Creativity, Morality, and Freedom

Gruber also recognized the connection between creativity and morality:

Our conceptions of creativity and morality are intertwined in a number of ways. ...At once we see that the indispensable middle term between creativity and morality is freedom. We can hardly speak of a moral act if the actor has no choice. Creative work also requires inner freedom. ...Creative work must be in some ways kindred to the world, if not the world as it is, then the world as it will or might be. It flows out of that world and it flows back into it. Thus the creative person, to carry out the responsibility to self, the responsibility for inner integrity, must also in some way be responsive to the world.¹²

Seen in this way, it seems clear that what Steiner called “ethical individualism”¹³ and “moral imagination” contribute to a conversation about creativity: “Freedom of action is thinkable only from the standpoint of ethical individualism.” And: “Free spirits need moral imagination to realize their ideas and make them effective. Moral imagination is the source of a free spirit’s actions. Therefore, only people who have moral imagination are really morally productive.”¹⁴

It’s Not All about Steiner

In arguing against one sort of fundamentalism—the sort that would mistake and assert superficial characteristics and techniques of Waldorf education for an essence—some readers may believe I am leaning toward another fundamentalism—if it’s not in Steiner’s work, it’s not Waldorf education. This is not the case. I am fully aware that many valuable characteristics of and practices in Waldorf schools today—including circle time, math gnomes, and walls of rainbow hue—have little relation to Steiner’s work. I believe, however, that, given our own limited insight, we must return again and again to Steiner’s work to check our progress, our understanding, and our interpretation against what he said. Without this ongoing and recursive process—joyfully returning to the well from which our work springs—we risk not implementing creative, innovative, living teaching, but becoming an increasingly muddy copy of a copy of a copy. And there’s little creative in that.

Endnotes

- 1 Winnicott, D. W., 1996.
- 2 See especially Fuchs, Stephen, 2001.
- 3 See, for example, Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. See also Barfield, Owen, 1971.
- 4 All quotations here from Steiner, Rudolf, 1996.
- 5 All quotations here from Steiner, Rudolf, 1996.
- 6 Polanyi, Michael, 1966.
- 7 Bortoft, Henri, 1996.
- 8 Personal communication.
- 9 References here to Gruber’s work are from the first two chapters of Gruber, H. and Doris Wallace, *Creative People at Work*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- 10 Gruber, Howard, 1981.
- 11 Personal communication.

12 Gruber, H. and Doris Wallace, 1989, pp. 280–281.

13 Steiner, Rudolf, 1995, p. 154.

14 Ibid, p. 182.

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