



Playing “Steiner Says”: Twenty Myths about Waldorf Education

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Because of his role as Editor of the *Research Bulletin*, we wish to state that the following article represents Dr. Sagarin’s research and opinions and not necessarily those of the Research Institute.

To begin, two stories.

During my first year or two of teaching, we enjoyed the presence of two eminent European Waldorf teachers at our faculty meeting. My recollection is that one came from the U.K. and one from Germany, but that doesn’t matter. One appeared in the fall and one in the spring. The first, answering a colleague’s question, said, “You should never use tongue-twisters; they trivialize language.”¹ Heads nodded. The second, also in response to a colleague’s question, replied, “Of course, the best possible thing for that is to recite tongue twisters with your class.” Heads nodded again. And there we were, back where we belonged, on our own recognition. Two experts, two apparently contradictory points of view. Presumably, both were based on considered interpretations of Steiner’s work.

Years later, just when I thought I would be moving on to university teaching, I found myself happily teaching a seventh grade. An otherwise bright girl, who later graduated high in her prep school class, could not multiply or divide fractions. I asked her why not. Her reply: “Because, whenever I try, I just see gnomes dancing and spinning on the page.” What? Somehow I had managed to teach in Waldorf schools for nearly twenty years without encountering “math

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gnomes,” and their relatives, including “King Plus” and “Queen Minus.” I had read Steiner and von Baravalle on teaching math, and had no recollection of these gnomes or anything like them. It occurred to me that a lot of what we do in Waldorf schools each day—and sometimes have to explain or defend to colleagues or parents—has little or no basis in Steiner’s work. I’ve since said, seriously, that gnomes have better work to do than to teach little boys and girls about arithmetic operations.

Understandably, but not necessarily happily, Waldorf education is known primarily by its external characteristics or trappings, characteristics about which, surprisingly often, Rudolf Steiner himself had little or nothing to say. Or, what he had to say about teaching and learning is not what we find in practice today. Or, what he had to say leaves open many more possibilities than are available in practice today.

Researching what someone—Steiner—did not say is difficult. All one can do is read everything available, using a process of elimination to discover, for example, that Steiner’s work contains no references to math gnomes or their ilk. The possibility remains that someone, somewhere, will discover a previously unknown reference that substantiates a previously unsubstantiated claim. At that point, the task becomes to assess the validity of the reference—was it written by Steiner? Recorded and transcribed? Revised by Steiner or not? Recorded verbatim or as a note? A diary entry? Part of an oral tradition? In what context does this reference sit? Was it given as a specific indication and then generalized beyond its original intent? Is it helpful or harmful that this has

1. Steiner advocated speech exercises that are, in fact, tongue twisters. I don’t know the context in which one expert opposed their use. Perhaps he or she had observed this particular teacher in action, or believed the rhymes in use were not doing the job Steiner intended. In any case, context is necessary to understand a recommendation without implementing it as a prescription, from which it is a small step to orthodoxy.

happened? On what merit may we adopt or shun this claim about teaching and learning?

Hermit crabs have no shells of their own, so they crawl into shells abandoned by other critters. Similarly, U.S. Waldorf schools, unable or unwilling to find a comfortable home in the plural cultures of the nation, have a tendency to crawl into the shell of a German or central European culture—or a partly remembered, partly imagined notion of that culture. Alternately, U.S. Waldorf schools sometimes crawl into an English shell, following the lead and model of Michael Hall and other established English Waldorf schools, or taking their lead from Anglophone translations of Steiner’s work. I call this process of embellishing a foundational orthodoxy the “Hermit Crab Theory of Institutional History,” because, although I am not concerned with them here, it applies also to institutions other than Waldorf schools.

An alternative to hermit crabbing, more challenging, is for Waldorf schools, as they grow and mature, to more consciously forge their own cultures. Each school would better serve its community. Schools would seem less superficially similar but could, in focusing on the essential, remain similar in ways that matter.

What follow are twenty myths about Waldorf education, beliefs and practices that we find in many, if not most, Waldorf schools in the United States. I have an even longer list—this is the sort of list that can never really end—but focus here on the most prevalent or most interesting items, or those that may be presented in a brief essay.

Such a critique of Waldorf school practices immediately begs a central question: If Waldorf education is not to be known by its trappings and myths, where is its core? What is essential to teaching and learning in Waldorf schools? I have given this a lot of thought over the past few years, and will address this question in the next issue of the *Research Bulletin*. In the meantime, an excellent approach to such a question may be found in Susan Howard’s “The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education.”² It concerns early childhood teachers, but much of the content applies to all teachers. Howard’s method, too, may be fruitful for all teachers.

2. Howard 2006.

1. Alternative Education

Steiner’s view was both narrower and broader than what exists in the U.S. today—a collection of small independent schools and an even smaller group of charter schools, serving in total probably no more than 25,000 students. (New York City public schools alone serve one million.) Steiner wanted to promote the development, on the one hand, of model schools that would demonstrate to the world the validity of his method. On the other hand, he wanted to make this method available to whoever wished to implement it.³ In the 1930s and 1940s, schools in the United States arose more according to this scheme, while today schools are seen largely as an alternative to mainstream or conventional education. The Rudolf Steiner School in New York City was, with the Dalton School and others, an active member of the Progressive Education Association (PEA) in the 1930s. These schools banded together, for example, to restrict the showing of violent newsreels prior to the start of movies in Upper East Side movie houses. The school also held a number of workshops and lectures, both in conjunction with the PEA and alone, to introduce Steiner’s educational ideas to a broader audience.⁴ The Waldorf School of Garden City was founded as a “demonstration school” on the campus of Adelphi University.⁵ Further, as late as the 1970s, the Waldorf School of Garden City was a member of the Washington, D.C., based “Council for Educational Freedom,” a group that advocated, among other planks, work toward the separation of school and state.⁶

In the absence of an association like the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA), and being low in numbers, it was more necessary for Waldorf schools in the early days to engage with other, non-anthroposophical educational institutions. Such engagement clarifies and strengthens mission and practice.

2. Artistic Teaching vs. Teaching Art

Too often, Steiner’s call for artistic teaching is misunderstood as a call for art teaching. Any subject

3. Steiner 1997, p.18.

4. Sagarin 2004.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.; also Gardner 1976.

may be taught and learned in a creative way. A teacher with a particular gift in an art may impart more to her students by offering a broad and deep experience of that art than she would by trying to be all things to all students. Little bits of too much produce dilettantes. Artistic teaching is required especially to teach math, science, and subjects that might otherwise easily lose their vitality.

By artistic teaching I mean teaching that approaches the creative core of any particular subject and that is truly educational and not merely instructive. A full treatment of what I mean by artistic teaching would include a full consideration of what Steiner describes in his work on teaching and learning, what is commonly called Waldorf education.

None of this is to say that teachers should not teach the arts, but that, in the rush to include everything, it is possible for teachers' gifts to be shortchanged. My daughter's teacher spent much time teaching her class to play folk music and perform folk dances. To do this, he necessarily reduced time given to the full spectrum of the different art activities normally found in Waldorf schools. My daughter may never play folk music again, or perform the dances she learned, but the experience of learning over several years from a master, of engaging in more than a cursory way in one art, strengthened her in a way for which I will always be grateful.

3. Black

Steiner's remarks about black, for example, in his color lectures, are not represented in his education lectures. The idea of a prohibition on the use of black, in drawing or in clothing, cannot be found in his education lectures. Steiner himself wore black nearly every day. Children still loved him.

This is not to dispute the quality of black as a color or the idea that it may not be an appropriate color for young children to use. When teachers remove black, however, leaving white, pink, and brown in the box of crayons, they create a circumstance in which children with pink skin and brown hair, for example, can draw themselves and their families, but children with black hair cannot. Thoughtful teachers may remove all "earth" colors to induce children to draw with the colors of the rainbow, introducing black at the same time that they introduce other such colors.

4. Circle Time

Rudolf Steiner never spoke about circle time, and his descriptions of "main lesson" do not include corresponding concepts. "Circle time" is an educational phenomenon of the late 1970s and 1980s, especially in the U.K., in public schools in particular, brought into Waldorf schools by an unknown route. The Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School library contains a book from 1983, *Everyday Circle Times* by Liz and Dick Wilmes.⁷ It's a fun book, with a faux Peter Max, feel-good cover, lots of pen and ink illustrations, and suggestions for dozens of circle time activities. The school has many other books on circle time, including one celebrating thirty-nine different religious festivals. Not one of these books has a connection to Rudolf Steiner's educational work. A Google search and a search on Amazon.com yield more than a hundred "circle time" titles going back to the early 1970s. Few of these references have anything to do with Waldorf education. Clearly, more schools that are not Waldorf schools have circle time than there are Waldorf schools. And it is likely that the form and content of circle time in a Waldorf school is different from elsewhere—like other practices, Waldorf schools adopt and adapt for their own purposes. There's nothing necessarily or inherently wrong with circle time, but to claim circle time as a unique or necessary part of Waldorf school early childhood and elementary schools is clearly incorrect. To believe that it originates in Steiner's work is also incorrect.

5. Consensus

Steiner has little to say about school decision-making and does not use the word consensus or its possible German correlates. When Henry Monges asked Steiner about the process for selecting General Secretaries for the Anthroposophical Societies in various countries, Steiner replied:

This is a further matter which I would not wish to lay down in any way by means of statutes for the various groups all over the world. I can well imagine, for example, that there are national Societies who will most certainly want to employ democratic procedures. I can

7. Wilmes 1983.

also imagine that there will be others who will want to be thoroughly aristocratic in their approach.... Thus I rather assume that the, shall I say, somewhat aristocratic method I have adopted with regard to appointing the Vorstand may well be imitated. In some quarters, however, this method may be regarded as highly undesirable, and in those quarters the democratic method could be used.⁸

Later, he adds that, because of “mutual recognition...in practice there will be little difference between democracy and aristocracy.... Anyone who is expected to carry out a function must have freedom above all else.”⁹ These words on choosing Society leaders translate easily to comment on much decision-making in Waldorf schools.

“Consensus” is one form of democracy—republican representation is another, direct voter referendum a third, and we can imagine others—and as such is a valuable concept for making decisions. We should be clear, however, when we adopt this model, that this is a decision we make; we are not following Steiner’s commandment. And when others choose, in mutual recognition, a different model, we must acknowledge their right to do so.

Further, it is clear that we have work to do in implementing an understanding of Steiner’s work on social health. We acknowledge that teachers have the freedom to carry out their functions as teachers, but we are less clear about the role of school administrators and trustees. To take a hypothetical example, it is clear that teachers must be free to admit those students whom they believe they can teach. There is no consensus involved here. It should be equally clear that another administrative body—a rights administration, perhaps consisting of teachers, administrators, and others—must guarantee the rights of the applicant and her family to participate in a fair process, regardless of the final decision. Here, too, legal and ethical requirements reign, regardless of consensus.

6. Drugs

Steiner discusses the effects of drugs common to his time—caffeine, nicotine, even opium—but not marijuana, LSD, amphetamines, and so on. The spread of the use of these drugs, especially among teenagers, should be a prime concern of Waldorf schools, yet they are hardly better controlled or managed here than they are in other schools. Waldorf schools should be at least as concerned about teen drug use as they are about media exposure in the early grades. Schools have media policies that necessarily extend beyond school hours—imagine the parent of a young child saying, “Well, she wasn’t watching TV on school property.” The effects of drugs extend beyond the time of their use, and so should school drug policies. Since the 1960s we sometimes find it convenient to believe that teens “will” experiment with drugs. If this is our belief, we will find it to be true. If we choose to combat this view, we may count on some success.

7. Early Childhood Education

Few people know that the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart had a kindergarten for only about six months during Steiner’s lifetime; it ceased existence before he died, I believe, because the school needed the space as it grew. Further, Steiner’s educational lectures contain much about the development of young children but little about their actual education. Given his view of child development, it is easy to laud the growth of Waldorf early childhood programs, but their practices—silks, sing-song voices, rosy walls—cannot always be said to represent direct indications of Steiner himself. Consequently, we can imagine other forms of early childhood education that appear different but that equally fulfill Steiner’s intentions. Howard’s essay, referenced above, is a healthy look in this direction.

8. Eight Years of Elementary School

According to Mark Riccio,¹⁰ who has looked into records from Steiner’s time, an eight-year elementary school was a state requirement in Germany and Switzerland, and so the eight-year cycle was

8. 1990, pp. 89–90.

9. Ibid.

10. Riccio 2002.

a compromise; Steiner would have preferred seven. Anyone who has been a class teacher of eighth graders, not that it isn't fantastically rewarding, can appreciate that these students are ready for a different educational form. Knowing this—studying Riccio's work, for example—can inform the teaching in the Waldorf upper elementary grades.

9. Elementary School Admissions

Between 1930 and today, the age at which students were generally welcomed into first grade in Waldorf schools was delayed six months, from turning six by December first to turning six by June first. Steiner's general description of school-entering age, having to do with losing milk teeth, refers to "the seventh year," which begins on a child's sixth birthday and ends on her seventh (a child's first year occurs from birth until a first birthday). Older children may be easier to manage in first grade, but ninth-grade-age students in an eighth grade class setting can present a real challenge. We live in a world in which an often unquestioned assumption is that earlier is better; we do not necessarily need to substitute the contrasting view that later is always better.

10. Faculty-Run Schools

Steiner simply never said that schools should be "faculty run," and the first school in Stuttgart was not faculty run. Emil Molt footed the bill and Rudolf Steiner, who was not on the faculty of the school, was the Director.

According to Betty Staley, Stewart Easton, a professor and anthroposophist in New York, determined that the "faculty run" method was appropriate and fostered it, in particular, in his students who were interested in anthroposophy.¹¹ Easton's ideas may have originated in England, or they may have been his own interpretation. Steiner described the Waldorf school as "self-administered" (*Eigenrat* or *Selbstverwaltung*), not "faculty run."¹² Literally, these terms mean that schools should take their own advice in self-administration.

11. Staley 1999.

12. Staley 1998, pp. xxiii–xxvi in particular.

Steiner is clear that administrators should be active teachers, not state ministers or civil servants, or even retired teachers.¹³ Administration is not governance, however, or not all of it. For Steiner, administration dealt specifically with day-to-day pedagogical operation of the school—pedagogical practice, schedule, calendar—and not necessarily with other governance areas—funding, budget, and legal incorporation in particular. These areas, as they are found in independent schools in the U.S. today, were hardly conceivable in Germany after World War I. At different times in the life of the Stuttgart school, especially in its first years, different arrangements held sway from time to time. At no time, however, could the first Waldorf school be said to be, or intended to be, faculty run.

I also do not believe it is correct to say that Steiner's role in the first Waldorf school was a unique exception—that he was an initiate and therefore could participate in a way closed to the rest of us. Nothing in his work leads to the conclusion that initiates can transcend rules in this way. The point is not, then, that he included himself as Director and participant at faculty meetings as an exception, but that the possibility is open for schools today to include in faculty meetings (or college meetings) those who do not teach at the school but who add value to its community.

Further, U.S. schools have misinterpreted Steiner's remarks about a "college of teachers," or Collegium. According to Uta Taylor-Weaver and Nancy Parsons Whittaker, the German use of Collegium translates as "faculty."¹⁴ The British, they say, see a college as an exclusive group; this was not Steiner's intention. For schools to have a college separate from the faculty, and to have separate weekly meetings for these groups, can foster an exclusivity that Steiner opposed. (See also "Meeting Martyrdom" below.)

11. Festivals

Steiner spoke beautifully, powerfully, repeatedly, and in depth about religious festivals and their meanings. These lectures, however, occur outside the context of his educational lectures. It is not a bad thing that schools participate in annual festi-

13. Steiner 1992, p. 12.

14. Taylor-Weaver [Undated]; Parsons Whittaker 2001.

vals and rituals as described by Steiner except in two cases: The first is when these are represented as part and parcel of Waldorf education. They are not. As cultures and traditions change, and as schools are founded in non-Christian nations, it is appropriate that the festivals and rituals celebrated at a school change, too. The second occurs when schools that are multicultural do not recognize this, and marginalize, say, a Jewish segment of the school population through representations of Christian festivals. It is appropriate to include many different festivals in the school, or to move all festivals outside of school hours, or, as in Austria itself, to leave festivals to the local community, separate from the school.¹⁵ (I do not mean to confuse festivals with assemblies; Steiner favored periodic assemblies for parents and others at which students could demonstrate what they had learned.)

12. Group Meditation

Group meditation, as practiced and modeled by Georg Kühlewind, for example, seems not to have been part of Steiner’s repertoire. Steiner’s work on meditation makes it clear that this is largely an individual, private practice. It is not wrong for a group or community to practice group meditation, but it should be clear that this choice is not grounded in Steiner’s practice or indications. Teachers who balk at group meditation should have their views accommodated in a school community.

13. Holism

Again, a word that cannot be found in Steiner’s work. Also, a word that requires work to understand. A materialist—like James Lovelock, inventor of the computer models that are termed the Gaia hypothesis—can be a holist, as can someone who denies the existence of the material world. Holism exists in many forms. Using the word colloquially, on the other hand, can drain it of meaning.

14. Low Academic Standards

Steiner himself had a doctorate, no mean feat in

15. Thanks to Michael D’Aleo for drawing my attention to Austrian community festivals.

nineteenth century Germany. A bracing quotation cuts to the quick:

The aim of Waldorf education is to arrange all of the teaching so that within the shortest possible time the maximum amount of material can be presented to students by the simplest possible means.¹⁶

Schools can work harder to implement “soul economy” and to demonstrate to parents and communities that there is no compromise between a good academic education and a Waldorf school education. This will not mean teaching more material sooner, chasing the local independent day school, or aiming for high scores on a standardized test, but teaching more deeply and more consciously.

15. Math Gnomes

As Christine Cox demonstrates in her M.S.Ed. thesis,¹⁷ math gnomes and other imaginative, anthropomorphic versions of arithmetic operations such as “King Plus” actually work against Steiner’s understanding of math teaching. Math, akin to other spiritual activities, which we may picture as belonging to Plato’s eternal “intelligible” or ideal realm, needs to be brought to earth through practical, real-world problems. Steiner advocates beginning to teach arithmetic with the operation of division by bringing a pile of pieces of paper or beans into the classroom.¹⁸

Math gnomes were the invention of Dorothy Harrer, based on verses by Margaret Peckham, both of them celebrated Waldorf class teachers. But the wisdom of Steiner and his student, Hermann von Baravalle, suggests we should liberate math gnomes from Waldorf school curricula.

16. Meeting Martyrdom

The first Waldorf school had close to 800 pupils and a commensurate number of teachers in its first few years of existence, yet it had only one faculty meeting per week. There was no inner circle, no separate College or Council, although there was an “extended faculty” that included those—

16. Steiner 2003, p.118.

17. Cox 2006.

18. Steiner 2000, p. 7.

we might call them subcontractors today—who taught at the school but were not committed to its mission. Most independent Waldorf schools today have separate faculty and College or Council meetings, in addition to “school” meetings of the early childhood, elementary school, or high school faculty. This is not to mention the plethora of Board and school committees that dedicated teachers attend. Eugene Schwartz has recommended that schools cut in half the number of meetings they hold. Schools with fewer meetings demonstrate greater trust in the work of the faculty and staff and enjoy the fruits of these individuals’ initiative.

17. Non-Competitive Games

Again, not necessarily a bad thing, but not based clearly on Steiner’s work, and more likely an outgrowth of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s than a clearly anthroposophical point of view. Healthy competition is a part of the function of the spiritual sphere of the threefold social organism and could find its reflection in healthy competition in schools.

18. Notebooks, Main Lesson Books, Good Books

My suspicion is that notebooks—illustrated, decorated exercise books and textbooks—as found in Waldorf schools are part of German education in the 1920s and not unique to Waldorf schools. Steiner found the readers and textbooks of his age execrable and spoke against their deadening influence. This injunction, however, does not necessarily translate into a dictum to produce illustrated manuals for every main lesson, especially when students may spend hours decorating the borders of pages or slavishly copying a teacher’s notes. Similarly, it is difficult to know what Steiner would say about contemporary textbooks, including those written by Waldorf school teachers, which come in an increasingly broad variety.

19. Pedagogical Stories

Steiner is clear that nature and the world around us provide the raw material for all necessary “pedagogical stories.” Teachers do not have to include such characters as cute elementals or anthropomorphic frogs in order to create interest in the lessons they aim to impart through such stories; children see right through these concoctions. Instead, teachers can find the objective truth that they wish to impart in the truth of the world around them. Such an approach to storytelling brings us closer to Barfield’s “final participation,” wherein the inner truth of our metaphors and the truth of the world around us become one.

20. State Control of Schools

The U.S. has always enjoyed greater local control of schools—through taxes, school boards, and local governments suspicious of centralized control—than any other modern nation. We do not have federal or state school inspectors, as Germany did in Steiner’s time, and schools belong to voluntary accrediting organizations. To turn away from engagement with local schools, public or independent, causes Waldorf schools to appear cloistered and out of the mainstream. Why not join with other independent schools—as the Rudolf Steiner School in New York did in the 1930s—to promote good education for more children? Why not forge alliances with local public schools to share knowledge and resources and to combat the encroachment of such measures as “No Child Left Behind,” which few public school teachers or administrators endorse? The “Alliance for Childhood” provides one example of work in this direction.

Conclusion

I remember my wife, Janis, knitting until 2 one Christmas morning in order to complete a doll for my son, and I remember how he treasured his “Gnome Prince” for years. Janis spent many dollars and many hours creating a beautiful gift for our son. But we miss the point if we believe he treasured the natural materials, the expense, or the time it took to create his doll. In *The Education of the Child*, Steiner advocates tying knots in a handkerchief and adding inkblots to make a

doll.¹⁹ This is a far cry from the expensive, natural material kits from which, often, we painstakingly produce our Waldorf dolls. Such costs, materials, and time are a luxury—not one easily found in post-World War I Germany, I would guess. And Waldorf education is clearly not intended only for the wealthy.

When we are blinded by the beautiful trappings of the education we treasure, we are in danger of stepping into the modern “sin of literalness.”²⁰ We are then, regardless of professed beliefs or values, edging close to a kind of fundamentalism based on a kind of materialism that we say we wish to overcome.

It is easy to tell ourselves not to be blind, harder to suggest a cure. As Owen Barfield put it, unlearning a habit of thought is as difficult as unlearning how to ride a bicycle.²¹ We may begin, however, by enlarging our relationship with Steiner’s work. We may do this by hewing more closely to what he actually said—and not to what he didn’t say—and having the courage to more fully imagine what this might mean.

19. Steiner 1996, p. 19. Anyone who has actually tried to follow the directions Steiner outlines knows that this technique is almost impossible; it is intended as a “for instance” and not as a prescription.

20. Barfield 1988.

21. Barfield 1979.

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