

# NARRATING VALUES: The Place of Story Telling in Values Education

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"Teachers no longer teach children right from wrong. Moral relativism extends the same level of sympathy to criminals as their victims. Children, unsettled by the chaotic, ill-disciplined atmosphere in schools, are becoming increasingly badly behaved and often violent."

*The Independent*, 11 September 1996

"'Value' is not chosen and created by isolated individuals, but is to be discovered woven into the fabric of the universe."

Aristotle

A lot of attention has been focused recently in the media, political and religious circles and the educational community on questions of moral education, the teaching of values in schools, and the values and morality of 'society' as a whole.

Foremost among concerns raised is the perennial question over the moral health and fibre of people today. Are we less moral than we used to be? Have our values changed? Larger issues lurk behind these questions. Is there any reality to the idea of universal human values? Have moral and ethical standards remained constant throughout history, or are they subject to transformation and development? Is moral behaviour a variable human quality, dependent on time and space, or does moral behaviour spring from, and accord to, a spiritual law of truthfulness, regardless of historical epoch, geographical location, or the quality of human consciousness? Is it possible to distinguish between objective moral laws and universal values, on the one hand, and my opinions, and subjectively perceived values, on the other? In the latter case my values may owe much to political and cultural history, family upbringing, sectarian teachings, or economic and social conditions.

Another factor which plays into the debate is the modern 'context'. We are, or we have been until recently, living in the *post-modern* world. A key tenet of this *post-modern* context is an attack on the idea that truth and values have universal significance and applicability. There are no rights and wrongs, except in the realm of science. Language is considered to be an inadequate vehicle for expressing reality. Ambiguity is celebrated, along with scepticism, relativism and cynicism. The *post-modern* world is experimental, eclectic, nihilistic, self-conscious and uncertain. External authority is rejected. Such a mentality can have unfortunate consequences. Alongside an apparently futile search for meaning, neurotic iconoclasm may set in. As we teeter on the threshold between arcane belief and self-knowledge, which is the key to self-determination, it may be that many of us lose ourselves without finding ourselves. In this setting, values lose any meaning, or hope of having a meaning. This is because values depend on human beings who are free to pursue freedom, who are autonomous, not automatons.

It is not the task of this piece to embark on a lengthy consideration of these difficult philosophical and existential questions.<sup>2</sup> The working hypothesis presented here considers

questions of moral behaviour and values in the following manner. Moral behaviour, it is argued, shares similar characteristics and adheres to similar conditions as the phenomenon of life: universality, objectivity and absoluteness – in the sense of truthfulness. Life is immeasurable and of supreme worth to each person. Life may be cheapened, damaged and destroyed; the life-force can be interfered with, abused, and given varying levels of worth by human beings in different situations. However, notwithstanding the changes which people may attempt to wring to the life-force and the contrasting opinions and perceptions that human beings may hold regarding the essential meaning of life, it remains the case that life is a universal, objective and absolute phenomenon, adhering to laws and principles which are not man-made, and unaffected by the thoughts that people may hold concerning its nature.

Uppermost of the questions which will be considered below is whether it is possible, desirable and necessary to teach children values which have been identified as being in the individual and collective interest. Other questions tend to proliferate from this question as well. What does it mean – to teach? Values – identified by who? Individual and collective interest – defined as what? It will be necessary to avoid dwelling on these questions, too, except by inference, or implication. However, the founding assumption with regard to the central issue of teaching children values is that a child, a person, learns, discovers and lives by values that are individually realised, in freedom. Human values that are acquired unthinkingly, by rote, by subjugation, or indoctrination are not owned and have no inner substance. Accordingly, such values, acquired through superimposition, while consistent with the 'behaviourist' stimulus-response model of learning, are, in human terms, untrue.<sup>3</sup>

Considering these matters, one is led to a fundamental question regarding the nature of the child and childhood. In contemplating the teaching of values to children, it is vital to formulate and acknowledge the picture one holds of the essential identity of the human being and the hidden element – if there is one – which manifests in each child. Is a child perceived as an unmarked tablet – Locke's *tabula rasa*<sup>4</sup> – or as an untamed plant – Rousseau's 'noble savage'<sup>5</sup>? Is the child seen as a highly evolved member of the mammal species incorporating complex and superior innate potentials in the physical, emotional and cognitive realms? Or, are we to look at the child as a unique being of body, soul and spirit, an individual with a destiny which embraces life, pre-natal life and after-life, subject to earthly and spiritual laws and justice – a re-incarnating human being on a path of evolving consciousness. This last picture is one embraced by Rudolf Steiner as a result of his researches into the spiritual world.<sup>6</sup>

### Telling Stories

An innate quality of the story and the narrative is the consideration and description of values. Stories form a deep well from which values may be drawn. The ability to tell a story well is a faculty which, for a teacher, it is difficult to underestimate. A computer can deliver the words of a story; the author's message and meaning can be sought. However, the teacher, as living speaker, can offer something which the machine cannot.

When a story is individualised by the teacher's learning and voice and gesture, the delivery or offering becomes subjective. The teacher becomes a mediator for the child. The values, the feelings, the events on the page are vivified by the teacher's artistic endeavour. Whereas a teacher may read a story for quite legitimate reasons – for the quality and varying styles of language and literature – it is nonetheless held to be important that, more often than not, the teacher 'tells' the story and that the story is recalled and discussed by children and teacher in the days that follow. In reading, the teacher becomes a second-hand reporter, not a partner. The teacher is preoccupied and less able to embrace the listeners. The 'book' is a barrier; the messenger loses immediacy of contact with the listeners. The pictures are related, not created. The direct speech of a story teller literally injects life into the telling. The story teller is present; there is no distancing, no abstraction. Steiner placed great emphasis on the living quality of a teacher's speech:

“Cultivate speech in yourself and your children with the greatest care, since far and away the most of what a teacher gives his children comes to them on the wings of speech.”<sup>7</sup>

In telling a story, the preparation is vital in order that the content and the characters may be assimilated by the teller. Has the narrator ‘noticed’ the story in its essence? Does he or she ‘believe’ in the truth of the story? If the narrator has moved inwardly towards the story, then the children can follow and make that movement too. Having prepared, it is helpful if the narrator can then forget, in order that a creative remembering can then occur.

Inasmuch as a teacher is a story teller he or she is a baker. The form, content and structure of the story are the flour and water, the ‘true to life’ images – the yeast and the salt, the leaven. The ‘values’ woven into a story are the bread that is eaten freely by a hungry person. The worth of a piece of bread, or a ‘value’ can only be realised once eaten, digested, and made one’s own. Only after this process of analysis and assimilation can growth take place.

Through the story, or narrative content, and in the broader pedagogical realm, the teacher is responsible for presenting the world to the children in his or her care. Depending on the manner in which one approaches this task, the above statement does not have to be either fatuous or arrogant. But what world is presented? A surface world – information, content, method, exam, pass/fail – only? No! Much more can be imagined! An inner world can be offered – the world of images, connections and values. In such a setting the narrator and the listener have the capacity to understand and anticipate integrated pictures of wholeness. The pupils can share the teacher’s outer and inner journey – the journey for meaning which the teacher has made and the meaning of the world which the teacher encounters. Such a task hands a teacher an enormous amount of freedom and responsibility and demands great integrity.

Teaching in this way, we cannot help but communicate ourselves, our world, our questions and our values. There is always more to a story or presentation than meets the eye. Yet, what is the quality of this communication? As Goethe pointed out, problems tend to arise not in the answer to the question ‘What?’ but rather in response to ‘How?’ This difficulty is certainly present in the area of values education.

In an important sense one could contend that values that are ‘taught’ are worth nothing, whereas values that are ‘learnt’ are priceless and immeasurable. The extent to which a teacher can discover, experience and ‘learn’ values that are self-supporting and true provides an environment in which the children can imbibe not the teacher’s values, but the spirit of enquiry, seeking and discovery.

In the world of story, or crafted oral presentation, the teacher imagines so that the children may re-imagine from the pictures that are created before them. The class teacher can lend potency to the content through the variation and range of moods. Speech carries the potential to act as a mediator between the soul-spirit and the life-body processes. Through living images, meaningful connections, personification and other means, the human soul is projected into the environment and the teacher’s astral forces are transformed into etheric, life-forming substance. When, at the end of the *Study of Man* course,<sup>8</sup> Steiner talks about the need for a teacher to have initiative, interest, courage for the truth and freshness and vigour, he is referring directly to the inner world and the inner journey shared by teacher and pupils.

Looking for precedents for the teacher’s role as story teller or ‘moral educator’, it is striking to read the account of Celtic bards given by Jakob Streit in his book *Sun and Cross*.<sup>9</sup> In a priestly training which lasted up to twelve years a bard was prepared for the life of a wandering, singing story teller. The bard had the task of “sustaining the vitality of the myth among the people.”<sup>10</sup> A senior bard could recite up to 350 stories. Apart from pre-Christian Celtic sagas, the bards also included the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and epics about Alexander in their repertoire. In Streit’s words, which serve as an ideal picture for a teacher to work towards, the bards

“... kindled courage and enthusiasm, praised and eulogised, soothed passions and mocked weaknesses. In this way they stimulated a human conscience... They were able to

clothe the mythic content in a brightly-coloured robe. They built bridges from the past into the present, from the supersensory to the sensory, and in this way approached their most important task: to prepare men for the spiritual in their thoughts and dreams."<sup>11</sup>

"They were the real guides and creators of the people's sense of right and wrong, they sang songs praising good and courageous actions, they sang songs that abused and mocked people who did wrong. These wandering singers and story-tellers were responsible for sustaining the culture and its customs; they were the real creators of the minds and souls of the people."<sup>12</sup>

In the Grimms' story of *The Star Child*<sup>13</sup> – a tale likely to be told in a Steiner Waldorf Kindergarten (age 4-6) – virtually everything that is essential concerning human values is conveyed in a few lines. In a concentrated and imaginative series of pictures, human values, founded in the moral will, are found in the midst of life. The values found in this story – individually-realised authority, selfless desire enacted in absolute freedom and with complete responsibility, empathy – identifying with, and thinking more of the other person than oneself – are qualitatively different from a person's political, social, cultural and educational preferences and views. These values are closer in spirit to the *Logos* than the sound-bite. Such values conform to spiritual laws. They are the vocabulary and syntax of soul and spiritual literacy. They cannot be found in any school's 'mission statement' since these values are unattainable institutionally; they can only be sought by individuals in acts of free will.

Stories and images are not just for small children, of course. An image that is appropriate for the age and 'true to life' speaks from heart to heart, whatever the age. Two further examples may be mentioned briefly in order to demonstrate the range. In Class 7 (age 13), chemistry is studied, including the nature and properties of salts. A picture of the primary importance and abundance of salt as a dietary need, the simplicity and universality of salt and the complexities of human affairs is powerfully portrayed in relating the Salt March, which Gandhi undertook in 1930, from Sabarmati to Dandi on the west coast of India, as a protest against the taxes on salt levied by the British colonial authorities.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, an example from the Upper School period (age 15-18), when ecology and environmental studies feature in the science and geography curricula: the focus on the physical phenomena and difficulties facing humanity and the earth is one side of the coin; a discussion of the moral issues and dilemmas in ecology will provide a healthy and much-needed balance to the science, politics and economics. The allegory – *The Man Who Planted Trees* – written by Giono<sup>15</sup> is a tale of faith, care, selfless good will and 'love for the thing itself', as well as a story of the earth's ways, nature's rhythms and man's contribution – as a partner, not an abuser.

Having discussed the merits of story telling in fostering moral health in children, a question which merits consideration is whether in our teaching and learning we pay due regard to the recall of story content. The recall, whether verbal or active, is a chance for the teacher to gather the homework, or the night work. During sleep, a process of metamorphosis takes place – a developing and completing. In the morning there is a harvest from the night. In sleep, moral development and the cultivation of values are placed in the hands of the angels.<sup>16</sup> The experiences and activities of the day are subject to a process of transformation. As teachers we wish the pupils to forget our stories, sleep on them, the pictures sinking into the night. What then grows in the soul is not a set of values that are pre-packed, instant delivery guaranteed, but a latent facility, a capacity for discerning and developing values in the will.

If an image is effective it will not necessarily elicit a response like a firework in the next day's recall. It may work inwardly over time, like a slow-burner. In raking through the innards of a story to extract the point, or hammering the life out of a moral picture through explanation, sentimentality and moralising, we may shoot ourselves in the foot, or feet. The children will experience what it is like to digest 'soul junk-food'. It is in the etheric realm – the realm of 'deep time' where thoughts flourish and grow. There is a radical difference between correct, instantaneous, shallow understanding, and a deeper developmental understanding, where meaning is gleaned through metamorphosis.

## Values Education

*Values Education* is not mentioned explicitly in the Steiner-Waldorf curriculum. However, in a lecture given in April 1920 Steiner did say, "It is not possible to make inner contact with the pupils in the moral and religious sphere unless we are able to reach them through all the subject and lessons we teach."<sup>17</sup>

Steiner's point, that it is mistaken to think that separate rules can be used to develop moral and religious qualities in pupils, might today be regarded as somewhat maladroit in terms of political correctness, given the amount of concern expressed recently over the teaching and, presumably, learning, of values at school. Yet for Steiner, the idea of slotting a subject into a timetable under the name of values education, or Personal and Social Education was simply out of touch with reality.

The same thinking does not hold sway in the mainstream sector. In schools following National Curriculum guidelines there is a statutory requirement that schools hold a daily act of worship which is mainly Christian. In 'circle time' sessions, young children, from the age of five, are encouraged to share experiences and discuss problems "in a supportive group discussion."<sup>18</sup> Personal and Social Education (PSE) courses "include many heavily value-laden issues".<sup>19</sup> PSE does not follow a nationally-prescribed list of subjects and there is considerable freedom and variation in the choice of issues covered. In the 1990s, following a trend set by the business world, schools began to write 'mission statements' declaring their 'values' and lists of 'what we believe in'. There is now a legal requirement for government-funded schools to declare their values in a 'mission statement'.<sup>20</sup>

In October 1996 the National Forum for Values in Education and the Community, a body set up by the Schools Curriculum Assessment Authority (SCAA), "distilled the values they thought society could agree on – the ones schools should pass on to children."<sup>21</sup> From September 1997, a hundred schools will have piloted moral and community education programmes before the statement of values is incorporated into the National Curriculum.

Against this background of a state sector devoting considerable efforts to various techniques and methods of values education, what is taking place in Steiner Waldorf education? With Steiner himself having explicitly rejected an approach that seeks to carve out a separate, custom-built *niche* for moral education, what are Steiner school teachers left to work with?

Apart from the worthy business of telling stories and firing the lesson content with pictures of meaning – activities which, in themselves, are brimming with values – there are many other subjects and methods in the Steiner-Waldorf approach which serve to awaken in pupils a sense for values. The importance of metamorphosis in the educational process and in the process of 'learning' values is not restricted to the oral presentation of lesson content. Metamorphosis is active in many areas of learning. In the *Study of Man* course Steiner stresses that a child's moral will is developed through repeated actions, not moral admonitions.<sup>22</sup> In the *Oxford* course of 1922, Steiner suggests that the way in which a child is introduced to mathematics has a significant bearing on the child's moral development.<sup>23</sup> In eurythmy, geometry and gymnastics a feeling for balance and rhythm may be transformed into a capacity for making wise and balanced judgments in adulthood.<sup>24</sup> The contribution of knitting and other forms of hand-work to moral education comes with the development of 'well-knit' thoughts leading to a capacity for clear, logical thinking.<sup>25</sup> Fostering natural reverence and a sense of wonder in the young child can metamorphose into moral strength later in life, while in the middle school years a true regard for authority can provide a foundation for self-regard, self-determination and individual authority in the years ahead. Far from 'values education' being rather thin on the ground in Steiner schools, one can assert that the whole of Waldorf education is orientated towards the cultivation of values.

## Conclusion

Mission statements, moral platitudes, statutory requirements, 'values packs for teachers' and

slogans plastered on class-room walls do not lead to the growth of a person's values. An abstract, adult-centred or prescriptive 'teaching' of values runs the risk of doubting or denying the inner life of child and teacher. Such methods are strong on 'What?' and weak on 'How?' and constitute a pragmatic or agnostic approach to the question of the nature of the human being. Whether values are thought to come from without, like a slogan on a T-shirt or an item of junk food, or felt to issue from within, bearing a seed-like capacity and requiring cultivation rather than inculcation, is a question which a teacher would do well to address before beginning. Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy seeks to distinguish 'human' values from political, social and cultural norms and traditions. Herodotus' dictum that *nomos* (convention) is 'Lord of All' is rejected. 'Human' values are understood as experiences, discoveries and treasures that are unconditional and incontrovertible. They are values that one can carry into the spiritual world, beyond death. They are archetypal, not tied to race, gender, nation or century. It is not so much that they are 'right' or 'true', as that they are healthy and lead to spiritual health, not spiritual illness.<sup>26</sup> Such values are more in tune with Emerson's idea of moral 'relatedness' rather than the moral relativism of the Sophists, or Plato's moral absolutism.

A question remains for those working in Steiner-Waldorf schools. Do we allow enough time and space for the children's spiritual natures to be articulated? Do we have the confidence and courage, to make known our spiritual experiences and listen to the spiritual experiences of our children? In this 'threshold time' in the life and path of humanity, are we devoting enough thought, enough consciousness to sharing our spiritual natures?

I am not seeking to suggest that schools and lessons are turned into places where spiritual froth and empty vessels crash around in a sentimental New Age wash. Nor that assemblies and main lessons become filled with organised piety or political correctness. However, in the narrative, in the recall, in discussions and news times, in the life of the class, we must not be found to have missed the moment and let slip the opportunities for the Spirit of the Time to breathe in the lessons. The Christ Spirit, to which Steiner made direct and frequent reference when addressing the children of the Waldorf School,<sup>27</sup> provides a seed-bed for individually-owned values that are true to the story of the universe. The activity of the Christ Spirit is at the heart of humanity's search for meaning. For educators the quest for meaning requires commitment not conformity, and conviction not acquiescence.

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