

Diversity And Story In The Kindergarten
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We all have our own dragons. Can we strive to meet them, to go into the belly of the beast, and to transform them? That is our Michaelic task as individuals and particularly as teachers in the Waldorf School movement. “You have released me from my bondage, now I can show my true form.” The bondage of our fixed thinking, of our lower self can be overcome so that our true self, our higher self, shines through into our working on earth.

Further, can we help to release each other from the bondage of our own perspectives, based on our past experiences and struggles? Can we find in ourselves an attitude of welcome and acceptance? I ask myself: What barriers do I put up? What walls have I built that keep away the other? Am I attached to a particular way of doing something? Am I following a list, a script, or do I do what I do out of understanding? Does it serve the children? By asking ourselves these questions and striving for understanding, we walk the path of transformation. Then Waldorf education lives in us and is enlivened. The warmth of our enthusiasm then guides the parents toward our schools for their children.

“The most important thing is to establish an education through which human beings learn once again how to live with one another.” (Rudolf Steiner; Stuttgart, October 13, 1922; *The Younger Generation*)

How can we help children develop this most important social capacity for living together? Can we take this up as an activity of primary importance as Steiner said? The multicultural impulse is serving to further awaken and enliven our consciousness as Waldorf educators. It asks us to meet the vastness of human diversity with a living education. It serves to remind us that Waldorf education is a process and not a precious thing, or list of things to do. It is so important that we as teachers, and Waldorf education as a movement, are in the process of becoming, that we and our education have forces of growth.

In the last lecture of *The Younger Generation* series (October 15, 1922), Steiner described the battle of Michael with the dragon in our time in terms of spiritual, moral wisdom opposing materialistic, scientific thinking. Steiner said that the dragon slays the heart. What is needed is to build a chariot for Michael, “a chariot coming forth from the young, growing human being... we must have a heart. We must learn - pictorially speaking - to make ourselves allies of the approaching Michael if we want to become true teachers.” Among the intentions of Michael are the creation of a Michaelic culture not based on bloodlines or nationalism. I urge you to read the entire lecture just quoted and carry the mood of the lecture in your soul. Consider if perhaps the dragon of fundamentalism and tradition can be met with diversity and growth. I am presenting here some of my own thoughts and questions. I ask you, as Steiner did in the lecture just mentioned, to listen to these words not only with your head, but to let these ideas find a place in your heart. Live with them as questions, and listen to what comes.

Rudolf Steiner gave a curriculum for the first Waldorf School in 1919, and it has, now, strong tradition behind it. It is an incredible foundation for the Waldorf movement, and should by no means be thrown away. We have to start with that curriculum and the traditions in the Waldorf kindergarten movement (as there were none in Steiner's time) and seek to understand them. We can try to understand Steiner's intentions and find the substance of Waldorf Education. Then perhaps we can loosen some traditional behaviors while maintaining the underlying substance.

Why are we doing what we are doing? We must bring our individual and collective consciousness to bear. If one looks at the populations among students and families at Waldorf Schools, or at the population of

teachers, it is clear that these do not represent a statistical cross-section of the communities where they are located. We can ask ourselves what makes people feel not welcome enough, or even excluded, from our truly wonderful education? Do we create an environment in our kindergarten that affirms the humanity of an African-American family, a family of Asian or Mexican descent? The world is growing ever more diverse. Can we meet it with open arms?

The past and present, is filled with racism, imperialism and nationalism. Minority families are asking us - How can you heal these situations for our children's future? Are we working toward a Michaelic culture that has transformed and healed these inequalities?

For parents to bring and keep their children at a Waldorf School, they need to find themselves, their family, their culture represented and reflected in the school. In kindergarten, one way to be more inclusive is through story, stories that come from a variety of cultures, not just one. We can also be sensitive to stories that may be offensive to some.

A number of years ago, I chose to tell "Mother Holle" to my kindergarten. It is a story that I have a relationship with, had told for years before, and I have worked extensively with the symbolism, with the underlying "truth" of the story. An African-American parent in my kindergarten came to me in distress and wanted to talk about the story. To him it was simple. The industrious girl who did the good was rewarded with gold. The lazy girl turned black. This was a familiar, unpleasant stereotype for him. He did not appreciate my telling of the story. I explained about the symbolism of the story. I mentioned that the point wasn't that the pitch was black, but that it stuck to her for the rest of her life. One could say that the story speaks of events and qualities in the soul/spiritual realm, but this man experienced it more physically. He had an emotional response that I could not and did not have. I was born in a "white" body, and my life experiences are inherently different than this father who was born in a "black" body. When one is in a racial minority, a conscious awareness of race is carried which is different from that carried by those in the majority. It made me realize that my intellectual, and my meditative understanding of the story in no way offset his negative gut reaction. It also made me do a lot of rethinking. There is spiritual meaning, and there is also the possibility of perpetuating stereotypes. Where is the balance? Perhaps one could modify part of the story to say "a kettle of pine pitch was poured over her" or something like that. I have chosen to tell other stories instead.

As we know, the thoughts and feelings of the teacher and the parents penetrate the young child's organism. They are part of their environment. Yet the parents' feelings affect the child's experiences, of a story, or anything else. The parents' feelings also determine if the child remains in a school.

I am certainly not advocating a multicultural hodge-podge for our kindergartens. Nor do I want to join the bandwagon of "political correctness." I am saying to try and step into the parents' shoes, particularly those from different cultures and races from one's own, and to try to grow in awareness, in empathy.

It is not that America is the "melting pot." The whole world has become a cultural and racial mixing pot. There is hardly a spot on the globe where peoples of diverse cultures have not converged. This brings up many thoughts and questions for me. What of the folk spirits? Do they travel, do they intermingle with each other? What of the folk spirit of North America, for example? What about reincarnation? If this is true, as Rudolf Steiner said, then we all have lived other lives in other racial bodies and other cultures. Perhaps this is part of learning again how to live together? Of course we aren't consciously aware of our past lives, but perhaps on some deep soul level? Stories from diverse cultures give a taste of that culture, a taste of that region of the earth from which the story comes. Isn't that a step toward feeling into the lives of others, a step toward empathy? We can begin to taste the other, and it soon becomes less other.

The stories that we call fairy tales are in fact spiritual truths clothed in pictures that speak to the human being. They portray individual soul development in images made from words. This spiritual truth, this divine wisdom (Sophia) incarnates toward the earth through culture, through the individual folk spirits. It is universal truth, but revealed through a multitude of languages and cultures. No one culture has a monopoly on the truth. Perhaps one could say that the flow of words in the stories from a particular region sounds better (in English), but perhaps we need to try harder to find or make more beautiful translations from other regions.

With any story, one considers if it is suitable for the kindergarten. The story must be appropriate for the age of the children. How difficult are the tasks? How evil is the evil? Is the story true? And especially, what relationship does the teacher have with the story. We need to be comfortable with the imagery of the stories we tell, and allow the pictures to live within us.

We also need to look at the differences between “fairy tales,” legends, and mythology. Fairy tales speak of the development of an individual human soul and the characters are fundamental human aspects of each of us. Legends speak of the, perhaps exaggerated, exploits of a “real” human being. Myth speaks to how the world and the things in it came to be, and the development of mankind. It is fairy tales that best meet the stage of consciousness of the young child.

We must always ask ourselves, “What about the dream consciousness of the young child?” The child's developing consciousness is our primary yardstick with which to measure what is appropriate for the Kindergarten. The years of early childhood, through kindergarten, are a time of gradual awakening from dream consciousness toward self consciousness. It is a time of gradual incarnation, first into a physical body, in a family, in a home, in a specific locality. Then as the child becomes more awake, more self-conscious, and moves on to first grade, we can begin to guide her to an awareness of the wider world. The young child is at first a young human being, and is only gradually formed by culture. One can say - first incarnation as an individual human, then as a citizen of the world. As the child incarnates, we can guide her to an awareness of the world that widens appropriately as the child's self-consciousness develops. In kindergarten we are in the realm of the physical body, the home and our own backyards and neighborhoods.

We teach by example and imitation in the kindergarten, working within the dream world of the children. The goal is not to awaken the children, but to support the process of their own gradual awakening. Therefore, we don't instruct or teach the children in an intellectual or abstract way. If, before we present a story we were to say; “This is the story of “Brier Rose. It is a Grimm's fairy tale from Germany,” then this title and background information would become abstract and awakening for the children. Presenting the story on its own is more conducive to the flow of the young child's life. The question of multicultural stories is the same. In telling stories from Africa, Asia, Germany, North or South America, or wherever, describing the stories' origins and cultural backgrounds is merely abstract and intellectual for the young child. The children do not need the information, they do need the nourishment to their inner life that the stories provide. It is not yet the time to *teach* the children about the wide world, but a soul taste is entirely appropriate.

A visible element of storytelling is the puppet show, although immediately there is the question of what skin color to use to make the faces and bodies. This question becomes moot if the puppets have red or blue or purple faces as representative of the soul-spiritual characteristics in the story. Yes, the story speaks of soul and spirit in development, and not of physical reality.

Perhaps the old king and queen could be purple, clothed in gold. The simpleton, red or golden. This way, the viewer, parent or child, can imagine what they choose and not experience the story as something that is not them.

“Where and when did it happen?...” Anywhere, anytime..always! For each of us.