
Reading the Signs of the Times

Some Thoughts on Waldorf Education and Religious Diversity

— Stephen Spitalny

In the present time, it is essential that Waldorf school communities everywhere, in consciousness and freedom, create an inclusive welcome for people of any religious, ethnic or racial background. As a member of the Waldorf school movement and as a representative of anthroposophy, I believe it is incumbent upon me individually and upon all of us to ensure that Waldorf schools shine as beacons of a universal, spiritual education not associated with any religion, a truly nondenominational education.

All Waldorf communities should work to create truly welcoming, open, universal havens where all families can feel welcome and connected. It is through celebrating our shared values through new festivals—festivals that we are going to have to create ourselves—that we will bring forth this new community with the children at the center. This is what the spirit of our time is asking of us.

As a Waldorf consultant and teacher trainer, I wish for all schools to take the time and make the effort to create unique festivals that can be appreciated universally. These festivals would strive to speak to the place of the human being within the earth and cosmos, to the seasons, the peoples, and the other kingdoms of life, and not be confined to any single religious tradition. We must be courageous and bold in creating original stories and imaginative pictures to present images that are universal. It is hard work but so worth the effort and it is a necessary activity of our times.

A well-intended gesture to acknowledge all religious, ethnic, and cultural streams can quickly turn into a hodgepodge of festivals that is undigestible for the children and burdensome for the faculty. On the other hand, this proposed rethinking of community celebrations is not suggesting a retreat into a bland, dead version of Waldorf education with no festival life. This is a call for vibrant, enlivened,

spiritual, and spirited festival celebrations created out of the thinking and will of each school's faculty and community. Then we will have festivals that speak to everyone.

There are various elements at play in all of this. One is the curriculum. It is clear that by eighth grade, Waldorf students have experienced a breadth of world culture and religions. This is an amazing intention in Waldorf schools. Here we can consider classroom decoration and help each other to discern if we are presenting one-sided religious images associated with Western European traditions on the classroom walls or in the students' main lesson books.

Festivals and special events are an important area to consider. Can we try to live into the experience of a Jewish family? A Native American family? A Muslim or Hindu family? Many people question whether Waldorf education is a Christian education. When questions about religion come, it is a call to examine what we do that makes it seem so to others. This reminds us of the open-mindedness Steiner asked of us. We have to be active with our will in our thinking to develop a true social impulse for our time.

The name of Christ and the traditions of Christianity in Waldorf schools is what is off-putting for many families. All branches of Christianity, as well as esoteric Christianity, say that Christ's deed was for all humanity and for the earth, for us all. The "turning point of time" came when our earth needed renewal and the Sun being, whom we call Christ, united itself with the Earth, thereby renewing all of our etheric forces. The deeds of that being are for all humanity, regardless of religious beliefs. In *The Universal Human* lecture series, Rudolf Steiner said:

Today I wanted above all to explain that Christ was that spirit from the cosmos who, in the course of earthly evolution, brought spiritually what was originally intended for our outer form

but could not develop externally, because we would then have become automatons of love and equality"... We have the right feelings for Christ only when we see in him the savior, rescuing humanity from dispersion and separateness; only then can Christ fill our innermost I. Christianity lives wherever people are able to understand this union of humanity through Christ. In the future, it will not matter much whether what Christ is will still be called by that name. However, a lot will depend on our finding in Christ the spiritual uniter of humanity and accepting that external diversity will increase more and more" (Lecture 4).

In other words, we can know if an initiative is connecting with what Steiner called the Christ impulse when people are united, when people join together. If separation is created, then, according to Steiner, the Christ impulse is not present. It is an easy-to-use compass.

I am passionate about deepening Waldorf education through our will, through our hard and diligent work so that our education attracts families of all backgrounds and becomes the seed for social renewal. The core of Waldorf education is Steiner's idea that "The most important thing is to establish an education through which human beings learn once more how to live with one another." One aspect of this is how we relate to each other as individuals. We can address this by taking up such practices as Nonviolent Communication (NVC) or other tools that foster personal social skills and communication between individuals.

Creating inclusive communities is crucial for the future of Waldorf education. Failure to create more inclusive communities will relegate Waldorf education toward the fringe of society. On the contrary, we want to grow and expand the Waldorf school movement, making it something vibrant and thriving for the times to come.

To become a universal beacon of welcome and inspiration is Waldorf education's goal. We know that its methodology develops capacities for the future; its view of the developing human being is profound and unique. Yet schools and some teacher training programs are struggling, shrinking, even

disappearing. Economic issues explain some of this struggle, but the perception that Waldorf education is a religious education is another factor. The times are calling upon us to reconsider all of our traditional festival celebrations—the Advent Garden, St. Nicholas, and Michaelmas for a start.

Filling the school calendar with festivals from many religions would not by itself address this question either. Let's look with fresh eyes at all our practices, and with open minds recommit ourselves to the best of Waldorf Education. When we marry that with our creative wills, something amazing and inspiring will become manifest. The question is how to create meaning without the trappings of religion.

Everyone has biases—some we recognize, others are hidden from our awareness. This is true for every human being. Our task as Waldorf teachers is to embrace the inner experience of others and, thereby, overcome our biases. We want to discover aspects of ourselves previously hidden from our own awareness. Openness to the perspective of the other is part of self-education, the path to "know thyself."

My work as a teacher trainer has taken me to Asia and other locations far from western, Christian culture. I am often asked to address the question of the Christian underpinnings of Waldorf education. My answer always is that Waldorf education and Waldorf schools are meant to be universal and inclusive, not representing any particular religious tradition. I am happy to discuss the Christ impulse in Waldorf education with the teachers and the trainees. It has nothing to do with religious traditions or religious education. It has to do with creating thriving, welcoming communities where people of diverse backgrounds join together.

It is deeply disappointing when families of different traditions do not feel included and recognized in Waldorf school communities. I offer this verse to describe the goal we can strive toward:

May the Spirit of the World
Be unveiled to those who are seeking,
In the healing Light shining by which we can see,
In the singing of the choir of Peace, resounding
in human hearts,
And in Love streaming into human deeds.

Editor's Note: Steps toward the Future

We see our times politically, socially and religiously tightening and becoming more dogmatized. This is the absolute opposite of the spiritual intention for our times under the guidance of the Archangel Michael, and this is completely counter to the motivation and intent upon which Waldorf education was founded these hundred years ago. Awakening to the call for an education that frees the human being and spirit from dogmatism into freedom of thinking and human association is a mandate of our times.

A first step within WECAN activity toward this end was the publication of *Seasonal Festivals in Early Childhood: Seeking the Universally Human*. Editor Nancy Foster explains that many festival celebrations we think of as “Waldorf” originated not in the first Waldorf schools, but in the familiar European and religious cultural traditions of the time. We are challenged today to renew our celebration of the seasons of the year through bringing the healing forces of a rhythmic life to the children, in ways that honor all human experiences in a universal way. Our communities today are awakened and enriched by the different cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious orientations in our school communities. As we strive to create festival celebrations that are accessible to all and true to universal human experience, this book was created to be a helpful resource for strengthening Waldorf education for the future.

Discussions about racial, ethnic, religious, and gender diversity and inclusion have been paramount during meetings of the WECAN board, and in conversations outside of meeting times. At the 2018 spring meeting, the board met with expert consultants who helped the group uncover and evaluate implicit

biases that influence teachers' behavior toward children and their parents. The board has also formed a Diversity Working Group, which is working to arrange group study and facilitation workshops with diversity and social justice consultants.

The intent of this letter is to open up discussion around these questions of diversity, inclusivity, and universality in our schools. Your positive ideas and practices to expand this conversation and share newly formed festival and community celebrations are invited by Gateways — gateways@waldorfearlychildhood.org. ♦

Resources:

- Nancy Foster, editor, *Seasonal Festivals in Early Childhood* (WECAN 2016)
- Rudolf Steiner, *The Universal Human* (Gas 117, 124, 165) Lecture 4, Bern, Switzerland, January 9, 1916. See also Rudolf Steiner, *The Universal Human: The evolution of individuality* (Great Barrington, Massachusetts: SteinerBooks 1990)

Steven Spitalny is an early childhood consultant and writer, offering lectures, workshops and mentoring around the world. He is on the faculty of the Waldorf Institute of Southern California. He is the author of *Connecting With Young Children: Educating the Will* (2011), *Living with Young Children* (2015), and *What's the Story: Storytelling as a Path Toward Living Happily Ever After* (2015). He has been a WECAN board member and editor of Gateways Newsletter.