

Building the Kingdom of Childhood Together: Two Vignettes

— Stephanie Hoelscher

Lashio, Shan State, Myanmar

When human beings meet together seeking the spirit with unity of purpose then they will also find their way to each other.

—Rudolf Steiner

An American teenager stood in a Buddhist temple complex. He, the observer, was seventeen, educated through eighth grade at Waldorf schools in southwestern and northeastern United States and now studying in a public high school.

They, the subjects of his interested gaze, were kindergarten-age children eating their lunches. Many, many children. Dozens of children. Too many children to count. Burmese, Shan, and Chinese children.

They sat on benches at long rectangular tables arranged end-to-end. The six tables occupied most of the space in the rectangular room adjacent to a row of six classrooms. Tall pots of rice and vegetables sat on a counter alongside a jug of water and a plate of cups.

The lunchroom was quiet. The children were eating. When finished they stood from their places, scraped their bowls, and rinsed them at a sink. Children wanting more food helped themselves standing on tiptoe at a stool to reach the food. The children were as young as three and a half. A few teachers worked quietly in the corners of the room. They did not speak. No verbal instruction or redirection was needed.

The observer was astonished. “That would be utter chaos in the United States,” he reported to his mother.

His mother, an American Waldorf early childhood teacher, agreed. She turned to her host, Ying Hwe, who had brought them to this “leading kindergarten” in the northern Shan state of Myanmar. This school, the first to bring Waldorf early childhood education to the Shan state, serves over 200 young children in

twelve classrooms in a large temple complex perched on a high hill overlooking Lashio, the final stop on the British-built narrow gauge railroad line from Mandalay, a 12-hour ride away.

“We could not do this in the United States,” said the American teacher. “How is this possible?”

Ying Hwe did not understand the question. She cocked her head, wrinkled her nose, crinkled her eyes and grinned at her American friend. The American rephrased the question; she tried to provide a cultural context.

Ying Hwe was quiet. She looked out into the expansive outdoor play space, quiet and empty at lunchtime. Some moments passed before she spoke.

Ying Hwe gestured toward her heart. “When the teachers are calm inside, the children will be calm,” she said in reply.

The American mother and son looked at her. They looked at each other. They did not speak.

Ying Hwe sensed their wondering puzzlement. She continued:

“Every morning before the children arrive all the teachers come together for twenty minutes of meditation. All together. Two dozen teachers each and every day.”

Ying Hwe’s seven-year-old son pulled on the arm of his American teenager-friend. The older obliged the younger with a smile, and the two scampered off. The two teachers continued to sit together in silent contemplation. Brought together months ago in Dornach. That is another story.

Every day something must be achieved inwardly.

—Rudolf Steiner, *Guidance in Esoteric Training: From the Esoteric School*

Yulin, Guangxi, People's Republic of China

A single dusty fan pushed heavy, humid air around a classroom crowded with tired and sweating bodies. After a morning of physical labor during a community workday at the Little Forest home kindergarten, this Waldorf classroom in southern China had new wood flooring inside and a brick pathway outside. The audience of forty or so people perched on benches and straight-backed chairs marked with names like “Little Fish” and “Flying Cloud.” Most were young and parents of the young children who played noisily outside in the dirt, water, and scrubby grass of a large, fenced lot. Outside the fence was a half-acre of land farmed primarily by elderly women who lived nearby. The open door of the classroom led to a covered porch overlooking the garden's mounded rows of ripening corn, beans, and tomatoes. It was mid-summer, sunny, and very hot.

It also was a special day for the school. Little Forest, one of the 300 private initiatives in China practicing Waldorf early childhood education, was celebrating its five-year anniversary and its new home on the first two floors of a three-story house on the outskirts of a large city, Yulin, in the province of Guangxi. The school's founder and director, Chen Qiaohong—a grey-haired, motorcycle-riding visionary—had procured funding from the International Association of Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE) and China Waldorf Early Childhood Education Forum (CFCEF) to support my two-week mentoring visit to her school. As part of the anniversary festival, everyone gathered for the school's first outreach event, a public lecture on a topic known in all corners of the world: the work of parenting.

Over the course of the afternoon individuals recalled memories of their own childhood to reflect upon the shared work of building a kingdom of childhood in the world today at school and home.

What came forth in this honest and open collective self-reflection spoke not of cultural traditions that divide but of a common human experience that unites. What brings to children a world that is good, beautiful, and true, then and now, there and here? Family, home, human relationships: a father's voice announcing his arrival home after work; a cat curled on a pillow at bedtime; the aroma, anticipation, and taste of a grandmother's cooking; the cool touch of a mother's hand on a warm forehead; a waiting dog. Hearth, home, and family. Warmth, love, and security.

More than 2000 kindergartens in 80 countries around the world exist in this year of Waldorf 100. After a summer spent with Waldorf teachers on the other side of the world, I return to my work here reassured by what I witnessed. Waldorf pedagogy is neither a theoretical system nor a collection of methods. It is a wellspring of living insight. As Orchard Valley begins a new school year, it is my hope that we might forge new intentions informed by the worldwide movement and begin to think beyond the confines of our own place and purpose in rural, central Vermont. In the preamble to the IASWECE statutes, Dr. Helmut von Kùgelgen writes: “Against a background of prevailing materialistic trends in education and modern culture, the protection, indeed the salvation, of childhood as the fundamental state of each individual's unfolding life has become a worldwide pioneering work.” ♦

Stephanie Hoelscher *lives in central Vermont with her family, dogs, and chickens and teaches kindergarten at the Orchard Valley Waldorf School. She is deeply grateful for the opportunity to support the international movement which unites her work as a Waldorf educator and an anthropologist who believes in the power of observation, participation, and deep listening.*