

# Internalized Racism and the Imitative Nature of the Young Child

~ Magdalena Toran

My parents are politically liberal. You could even describe them as Leftists. My father grew up on the South Side of Philadelphia, the son of a first-generation Jewish immigrant. His Bubbie (grandmother) spoke only Yiddish. My mother is a white, former Catholic woman, raised by parents who didn't know how to properly love and care for children. Yet their house was full of music, and my mother learned to play the piano starting at age four. She went on to study nursing at Mass General and music at Eastman School of Music in New York. My parents met at a protest rally.

My mother became a visiting nurse, which she was for most of my childhood and adolescence. In the late 60s and early 70s, she was a nurse for the mothers and

fathers of the Black Panther movement. She cared for homeless children under bridges and old folks who didn't see many other people between her visits.

When I was nine years old, my father moved to Washington, DC and soon moved to an all-Black neighborhood, where he lived until just recently. He often had Black youth gathered at his house, where he taught them his chandelier business and called them apprentices. But I stayed in New England with my mom and visited him only a few times a year.

Where we lived in New England, there were only white people in my immediate community. We mostly socialized with my mother's family, which was white. I only had one Black student in

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my kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade public school experience.

It wasn't until I went to college, in a predominately white, New England community, that I discovered, to my shock and shame, the insidious presence of internalized racism living within me. To this day, I am amazed by how I can "believe" conditioned ideas about the life of another person, that are totally incongruous with what I know, deeply to be true. I share the picture of my parents that my brothers and I were raised in a progressive household. My parents lived and worked in Black communities, but we rarely talked about race.

Racism is in the air we breathe. It is an ocean in which we swim, knowingly and unknowingly. So what does this mean for the young child?

Rudolf Steiner spoke about the child as an imitative being. He described children as "a great unblinking eye." When our school did a workshop on inherent bias, I was so moved to realize that this principle of imitation, which is a powerful tool for well-being, is also the way that bias or conditioned thinking becomes part of our thinking. Everything that children experience enters their bodies and affects their whole being. In Waldorf education, we know that the inner life of the adult profoundly affects the child. We understand that children take in information through all of their senses, in a totally unfiltered way.

In a workshop offered by a local educational organization on inherent bias and early childhood education, the facilitator shared an important piece of research. Picture a white mother walking down the street, holding the hand of her two-year-old child, and a Black person comes walking toward them. If the mother reacts to seeing the Black person by tightening her grip on the child's hand, that fear imprints itself on the child. The child's little body receives the message that "Black person" equates to "unsafe." This is imitation on a bodily level. There is very clear research that racial bias is implanted in the child by a very early age.

Recently, Bessie Jones of Sowell Tots and her friend and colleague, Mikaela Simms, hosted an important conversation about race and young children. Mikaela spoke about how Black people perceive a white person's body tension when they enter into conversation. She said, "Get rid of the tension in your body." When, as

educators or parents we get tense or red in the face when a child brings something up about race, or if we feel tense in our bodies when we are speaking with a parent or person of color, that is taken in deeply by the children, by all children: white, Black and brown. When we pause, breathe, drop into our bodies and proceed with the best of our understanding, we have the opportunity to do less harm. We even have the possibility to make something right. In our educational practice we are encouraged to reflect, to seek collegial collaboration, to honor and recognize our mistakes and to try again. And try again we must.

One of the most difficult obstacles to Waldorf early childhood education becoming an anti-bias, anti-racist education is confusion over the idea of "protecting" children. We have mistakenly understood that in order to "protect" childhood, we must not talk about or acknowledge painful or difficult things in the world. But I would suggest that in order to "protect" childhood we must have the courage to talk with children, in an age-appropriate way, about race and class. Children are swimming in the ocean of racism and classism, and we are not "protecting" anyone when we let them swim there alone.

In Waldorf early childhood education we are also confused by the idea that anti-racist, anti-bias education somehow tells the children that the world is not good. I believe to my very core in inherent goodness. I believe in inherent wholeness. I believe that the natural world and the potential of every single human being is truthful, beautiful and good. But the society and culture are created and perpetuated by human beings over time, and we are confused and conditioned. We are making unconscious agreements all the time, based on fear and greed. So, the world is inherently good, but the society or culture is not. So goodness is not the experience of every child. We affirm the goodness and wholeness of the world when we are honest with children about the mistakes humans have made and when we work to correct those mistakes together.

It is our task as Waldorf educators to create educational environments that are deeply honest and courageously self-reflective. We must examine our personal, internalized racism. As a highly sensitive being, I took in what the society "told" me about race.

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And what it told me was profoundly wrong, dangerous and separating. It is in there. It is in my subconscious. It is in my body. And I have to work daily at undoing it. (I do this through my meditative practice, through study, through collaboration with colleagues, and through listening deeply when people of color speak.)

We have to work together to cultivate a Waldorf approach to anti-bias education in our understanding and our practice. This is how we “protect” children. This is how we show children and make it true, what they know within them: that the world is good, beautiful, and true. ◆

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