
Focus—Building Relationship

Dismantling Racism Is the Call of Our Times: A Call to Action for Waldorf Teachers

~ Lynn Turner

Lynn and her sister, Kirsten, are the founders of The AntiRacist Table, a platform focused on rehumanizing African Americans, educating Americans about true American history, which includes the truth of the Black experience and contributions of Black Americans, and promoting empathy and action. Information about The AntiRacist Table is available at theantiracisttable.com.

The need for racial reckoning, that has been amplified these past several months with the continued dehumanization of Black people as more Black deaths take place without meaningful and timely consequences, is now more consciously with us. The killing of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and so many others created a breaking point for Black people and a painful new awareness for many Americans. We must look more broadly now to see that concerns about anti-Blackness expand beyond the physical violence against Black people. Anti-Blackness attitudes are interwoven throughout American life. This is a community problem and needs every heart and mind joined in the struggle.

Overcoming racism is a fight for humanity. We are fighting to liberate ourselves and ascend to a higher form of collective consciousness where every individual is seen and valued as a free and contributing member of society. As teachers we carry power. We can use that power to cultivate joy, to inspire the learning and growing of the children in our care, or we can wield our power in a destructive way that oppresses and snuffs out a child's self-worth and, ultimately, their will—stunting their ability to learn and grow. We must love every child equally, no matter the color of their skin. Each child must see their reflection in all aspects of the school community; in aspects of the curriculum, in the student body, in

“The healthy social life is only found, when, in the mirror of each human soul, the whole community finds its reflection, and when, in the whole community, the virtue of each individual is living.”

~ Rudolf Steiner

the teaching staff, and in the administration.

How are we seeing and loving every “Black, Indigenous, People Of Color” (BIPOC)* child and family? Are we teaching Black children to see their gifts and share them with the community, with the world? Black children must be able to see themselves and know that they matter to their teacher, their peers and their school community. The quote from Rudolf Steiner at the beginning of this article speaks to this need. The reverent relationship between individuals creates the community and is at the heart of the matter and the

heart of Waldorf education. A healthy social life is only found when in each person's vision, the whole community finds its reflection, and when the gifts each one has to offer are valued and supported by the whole community. We must strive to do better. We must become AntiRacist. The very act of becoming AntiRacist is transformational and always evolving; it is fluid and unfixed.

For years, so many people have carried the banner of diversity, inclusion and equity almost like a stamp, to prove they are good people doing good work; yet, the inner root of these ideas has not been addressed. Doing one yearly diversity workshop that checks the box, or

adding a Black doll to a classroom, does nothing to dismantle the ethos of anti-Blackness. The denial that racism and anti-Blackness exists in Waldorf schools, schools across America, and worldwide is real. As a Black Waldorf early childhood teacher, I work daily in a white, Eurocentric-dominated school environment, and I have experienced racism and microaggression first-hand. The dominant environment is not a truly safe and inclusive place for BIPOC teachers or students. It is critical that this reality be illuminated, so that denial can be recognized and worked through. Recognition of this truth is the only way forward. Movement towards healing and growth can happen, but that growth will also require a necessary commitment to unlearn old ways and learn new stories of the American experience from the voice of Black people. As W.E.B. Du Bois said, “We who are dark, can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?”

Similarly, as journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones said in her Pulitzer-Prize-winning *1619 Project*, “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.”

We want to build a more perfect Union. We want to honor the ideal that all persons are created equal—as human beings of body, soul, mind and spirit.

Listening, learning, and truly understanding and respecting the African-American experience form a critical step that is essential for teachers to take up the work of becoming AntiRacist. In tandem, and equally essential, is the inner work of looking into the mirror and dismantling bias, insecurities and racist ideas and policies in each teacher and each school. **This is the moral call of our time.**

Rudolf Steiner had a similar calling after the 1918 Pandemic and the First World War, when the social fabric of the community and the soul of a nation was in peril. He formulated the Three-Fold Social Order at that time as a way to heal a war-torn and disease-ravaged Europe. The Cultural Realm was to be the realm of individual self-expression, and full of diversity. The Rights Realm was to be a realm of equality before the law for every person. And the Economic Realm was envisioned as a realm of brotherhood and sisterhood, where we all acted from the premise that we are “our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.” His ideas were not taken up by those formulating the Versailles treaty. Steiner

realized that people could not understand his ideas.

That same year, in 1919, he was asked to set up a school for the factory workers’ children at the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette company, owned by Emil Molt. Steiner began the Waldorf School, which was, radically, for both girls and boys, and was free—with no tuition. The curriculum was set up developmentally and designed to cultivate the capacity for “free thinking,” for individuals to develop imaginative capacities and the ability to see multiple points of view. Waldorf students could then understand this Three-Fold vision and help birth it into a renewed human culture.

Instead of Steiner’s Three-Fold understanding and proposal, the Versailles treaty’s premise was retribution; and harsh economic punishments were imposed, causing post-war German society to be in even more desperate straits. This laid the ground for resentment and gave fertile soil for Hitler’s “National Socialist” program to take root. Hitler made sure to burn all of Rudolf Steiner’s books and to close all the Waldorf schools in the 1930s. Anthroposophists were targeted for arrest by the SS. Fortunately, the headquarters for Anthroposophy had been built in Dornach, Switzerland—neutral territory. After the war, the work began to resurrect the Waldorf School movement and to expand it. We need to remember this heritage and this vision because they speak to the rights and dignity of individuals as active participants creating a vibrant, thriving community.

Waldorf Schools in the United States began as part of the private school movement. Private schools are economically based on private tuition, which generally results in a less racially and an economically diverse student body. In addition, the American private school phenomenon has a racist history. For example, before public education in the South, wealthy whites funded private schools that were only for their children. It was illegal for Black children and people to be educated. There were no schools for poor whites. Even after desegregation, “Segregation Academies” were created in the South to keep white students from having to attend school with Black students. Black teachers were also forced out of education as a result of integration. Presently, Waldorf Schools are becoming more accessible to Black children in the form of Charter Schools, which receive public support, similar to the German Waldorf Schools. Yet the mission of all Waldorf Schools has always been to strive to build a

better, more inclusive world. Therefore, before we can look to lesson plans and diversify our circles and stories, we need to meet and embrace this racial reckoning.

Leaders in the worldwide Waldorf school movement, like Joan Almon, Betty Staley, Themba Sadiki and many others, consciously embraced research into African heritage and stories in their quest to create equity, to focus on and celebrate Blackness and Black culture. Joan's father was arrested as a Jew in Germany, narrowly escaping the Nazi camps—fleeing with his wife to America. Even though Joan was born in Delaware, she was well aware of ethnic/racial oppression and persecution, and worked as a college graduate in the Civil Rights movement. Joan saw Waldorf education in a worldwide context. For every child she taught she carried a vision of hope for them to realize their gifts and be looked upon with the inherent dignity of a human and spiritual being. The whole community and the gifts of each individual stood behind her worldwide work in the kindergarten movement. She shared key principles with me as my mentor during my Waldorf Teacher Training at Sunbridge Institute, while at the same time she recognized and honored the gifts I was bringing to my work with children and families as a Black teacher with a rich cultural heritage and wisdom.

The deep inner work it takes to live by AntiRacist principles is an essential aspect of being a teacher. In keeping with Waldorf values and vision, the moment calls for our community to embark on a path to AntiRacism; a transformational journey of inner reflection and inner work. My sister and I have created a self-guided 30-day challenge—it will awaken and hopefully inspire change and liberation in each person who actively engages in The Challenge. We have taken our own lived experiences as descendants of enslaved people and mothers to Black sons—a space which holds rage, sadness, and hope—to curate a welcoming invitation to this critical work. Our hope is that it will become the foundation for a new AntiRacist, mindfully-inspired approach to living, that will permeate the participants' life and work as educators—committed to teaching the hearts, minds and souls of our collective future leaders and world citizens.

The ten core principles of the journey exist at the very heart of who we are as interconnected human beings. They universally and seamlessly intersect with how we see and engage with the world. Our core principles and lessons are both heart- and mind-opening, and form

a kind of scaffolding. They build upon each other and can be implemented in all areas of life.

The AntiRacist Table 30-Day Challenge is centered around the *ten core principles of education, intention, courage, individuality, humanity, being AntiRacist, equality, empathy, alliance, and love*. The Challenge is ultimately an invitation to do the hard work to become AntiRacist. It is an invitation for teachers to use their superpowers as educators, to weave these universal principles into their pedagogy.

To be AntiRacist requires EDUCATION

As leading AntiRacism scholar and author of *How to Be an AntiRacist*, Ibram X. Kendi, PhD says, denial is at the root of racism. The first step towards dismantling racism is to educate oneself about the history of African Americans and the Black experience in this country. To understand what “racism” is, and accept that it exists, is a prerequisite for change. We cannot acknowledge or change things that we deny or choose to ignore.

The INTENTION to cultivate an AntiRacist life is needed to be AntiRacist

Doing anything starts with an intention. AntiRacism requires an open heart and mind. Setting an intention brings presence and mindful awareness. Undoing and resisting racist conditioning is a daily struggle that requires attention and intention. Intention has an impact on how one shows up.

AntiRacism demands COURAGE

Facing denial and sitting with the discomfort of white privilege and white supremacy requires courage. The capacity for “white people to sustain challenges” to their racial position, which “is limited—and, in this way, fragile,” is known as “white fragility” according to sociologist and author of *White Fragility*, Robin DiAngelo, PhD. Dr. DiAngelo says that when white people are confronted with minimum amounts of racial stress (e.g. the topic of race comes up), common initial reactions are to become angry or fearful or to feel guilty. Running from shame, blame, guilt, and anger results in the inability to examine and accept racism and anti-Blackness. Courage and vulnerability are key to addressing emotionality and fragility, tethered to racism. AntiRacism allows us to be everyday heroes and to inspire collective heroism.

To be AntiRacist is to see the *INDIVIDUAL*

To see people as individuals, without attributing positive or negative qualities of that individual to others, is critically important. The institution of chattel slavery and all that followed created a negative group identity for Black people. This negative group identity, and underlying dehumanization, has a lasting legacy that embraces harmful stereotypes. Combining these with mental shortcuts, known as “heuristics,” which “can lead us to make potentially damaging assumptions about other people,” result in making split-second judgments about Black people and Black children as being violent, lazy, dangerous, and/or stupid.

AntiRacists take actions that support *HUMANITY*

To support humanity is to fight for humanity, and to oppose things that dehumanize human beings. Actively working to rehumanize African Americans is at the heart of being AntiRacist. “Othering” and dehumanizing allow people to treat others cruelly and to stand by in the face of inhumanity. As noted by philosopher Michelle Maiese, the process of dehumanization demonizes “the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment,” resulting in a framing of “good versus evil.”

AntiRacism includes at its core, the daily work to be *ANTIRACIST*

AntiRacist is a verb, defined by the action one is taking. AntiRacists are actively in pursuit of equity and oppose things that promote inequity. To be AntiRacist is to dismantle racist policies and to create AntiRacist policies. To see all racial groups as equals and to intentionally promote equity is to be AntiRacist.

AntiRacists champion *EQUALITY*

Holding all groups of people—of any race, color, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, age, and any intersectionality—as equal, is to champion equality. Ultimately, to champion equality is to also fight for equity, which means each one gets what he or she needs in order to thrive. Different needs are all met.

***EMPATHY* is a key tenet of AntiRacism**

One cannot rehumanize the dehumanized without first cultivating empathy. Empathy is also needed to

get past shame, blame, anger, and guilt, attendant on white emotionality and fragility.

To be AntiRacist is to be an *ALLY*

To be an ally or co-conspirator is to take on the fight for an AntiRacist America as if it were your own, as if it is not something that you have the luxury of turning away from. It means that you do what is uncomfortable—you may get into “good trouble.” It means using your white privilege for the good of others. Being an ally or co-conspirator means you are committed to taking a risk and to sharing your white privilege to put marginalized Black and brown people in the center.

To be AntiRacist is to choose *LOVE*

To be AntiRacist one must see and choose love over fear and self-centered comfort. Love is what propels us and energizes us to fight a battle that we might not see to the end. At the center of vulnerability, courage, and empowerment is love. Love fuels the AntiRacist through the hardest struggles and times. Love also brings hope, joy, and gratitude, which are necessary for this work.

These ten core principles intersect and overlap in the work needed to be AntiRacist.

The Challenge is free and can be incorporated in study for your full faculty, or it can be taken up individually, in the privacy of your own home. This is a call to action. This work is the call of our time. I hope we can meet this challenge and begin the work to repair, heal, and mend what has been broken in our humanity. Renewal and liberation for each of us as individuals and as Waldorf teachers is the goal of our work on this important issue.

As the Perseid Meteors once again shower Michaelic iron into our earth’s atmosphere, let us take that energy forward. Michael is the Archangel who is most associated with cosmopolitanism and diversity, rather than homogenous, physically-based group identities. This spirit is the spirit of our time, the Consciousness Soul Age. It means that we need to form new communities based on mutual respect and wider consciousness. One of Joan Almon’s favorite pictures of the development of a new consciousness-based community to undertake extraordinary tasks can be found in the fairy tale from Goethe, “The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily.”

“Midnight had arrived, they knew not how. The Old Man looked to the stars, and then began speaking. ‘We are assembled at the propitious hour. Let each perform their task, let each do their duty; and a universal happiness will swallow-up our individual sorrows, as a universal grief consumes individual joys.’ At these words arose a wondrous hubbub; for all the persons in the party spoke aloud, each for themselves, declaring what they had to do.”

As kindergarten teachers we work primarily through the limbs and with the will. The warmth and caring for the children in our classes and their families comes from our personal development and striving. We incarnate those qualities in our actions. Let us take time in our preparation to courageously embark on a journey to become fully aware of the need for racial justice in our society. Let us broaden our understanding and offer in our work a fuller expression and reflection in our lives and in Waldorf Education of our beautiful, diverse county and world. ♦

* References throughout are primarily to Black children and Black people as a result of the uniquely anti-Black American culture. This is not to say that Indigenous and People of Color are not also subjected to discrimination, however, in diversity, inclusion and equity terms, POC is sometimes used in place of Black, and fails to address foundational anti-Blackness. Any effort to correct anti-Blackness is a fight for humanity and benefits all people.

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