
From the Editor

~ Nancy Blanning

A Call to Conversation “To turn and bend with others”

“Scarcely had the Snake beheld this venerable statue [of the gold king], when the king began to speak, asking: ‘Where do you come from?’

‘Out of the clefts,’ replied the Snake, ‘in which the gold abides.’

‘What is more exquisite than gold?’ asked the king.

‘Light,’ answered the Snake.

‘What is more refreshing than light?’ continued the other.

‘Conversation,’ said the Snake

~ From Goethe’s Fairy Tale—The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily

Etymology of “conversation”:

- directly from Latin *convorsari* “to live, dwell, live with, keep company with”
- passive voice of *convorsare* “to turn about, turn about with,”
- form of *com* “with, together” (see *con-*) + *versare*, “to turn”
- Conversation—to turn, bend with another or others
- The meaning of “informal interchange of thoughts and sentiments by spoken words” is from the 1570s.

We are coming to the close of the most extraordinary one-and-a-half years of schooling that we have ever experienced. The dedication, flexibility, creativity, commitment, and dogged determination from teachers cannot be adequately captured in words. The world turned upside down, and Waldorf early childhood education has continued valiantly, though restricted, compromised, tested, and hobbled in many ways, to be sure.

New forms and adjustments, new programs, and new approaches have emerged out of what could have been demoralized chaos. But teachers and children are managing to be together and finding joy in this simplified reunion. Parents feel stretched and are grateful for their children to have renewed social contact. There is much good arising in the face of these challenges.

When we can take breath and reflect a bit, many questions await consideration. What positive forms and processes do we want to take into the future, what leave behind in our second 100 years of Waldorf education?

Looking to the quotation from *The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*, where is the gold that we want to take forward? Conversation (or Speech) is the Snake’s answer. Intentional opportunities and forms for conversation are already birthing themselves in our community. Here are three examples.

One of the first responses to both COVID-19 issues and urgent questions about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) was the creation of the Waldorf Community Hub groups. WECAN, under the leadership and vision of Susan Howard, created this network of connections for early childhood educators across North America (also open to our international colleagues). Countless questions, contacts, ideas, conversations, meetings, discussions, and resources have been shared to the benefit of all. Interest groups, conversation groups, panels, and webinars have graced the internet waves with positive, practical tools; ideas; encouragement; and opportunities to

have conversations with colleagues so geographically separated that we could never have known them otherwise. New communities are emerging, despite the more local isolation that we are enduring. Here is conversation. It is gold.

There are so many questions—practical, pedagogical, philosophical, social, soulful, and spiritual—all tumbling around together. What is the gold we can extract out of turbulent but potentially transforming experiences? Responding to this call, a group of question-asking researchers, under the invitation of long-time early childhood teacher, Holly Koteen-Soulé, has come together as the newly formed WECAN Research group. They are focusing upon “reading the signs of the times,” as Rudolf Steiner encouraged, to sense what is essential for our education in this new century. Their initial conversations and work together has produced the first four articles of this issue. Holly’s article “2020: A Year in Review” lays the groundwork for building our questions. A description of how the Research Group came into being follows.

The next two articles are guides to asking questions. Laurie Clark offers a School Contemplation through which we can ask questions about our communities, our programs, our institutions and be led to introspection into our own values and attitudes as well. Stephanie Hoelscher’s article shares some vignettes that have stimulated deep questions about her work with young children and families that lead us into the consideration of DEI. The group also invites questions from colleagues everywhere to guide their research in directions that will serve teachers, children, and families. The link for contacting the group—for creating more conversation—is included.

A third conversation greatly influenced this issue. A kindergarten teacher, Marieke Duijneveld, posed a question to some colleagues that became a conversation with representatives from WECAN, AWSNA, and Alma Partners. The question: Children are asking questions about race, sexuality, violence, illness, and so on, for which we have no prepared replies. Can teachers share how they have responded to such questions in truthful ways that meet the children’s developmental level of consciousness? What

does “appropriate” mean now? In her article, Marieke generously describes the particular experience that provoked these questions. She humbly shares her questions without supplying answers. Her article is intended to **open up the conversation**. Following her article is a “call for submissions” to Alma Partners, who are briefly introduced with their “call.” This initiative is in direct response to Marieke’s question and subsequent conversation.

Another outgrowth of this conversation was the Martin Luther King, Jr. birthday story you will find from Jessica Oswald. A wonderfully re-imagined format for a birthday story was described during this meeting that inspired Jessica to create this story as a way to commemorate the MLK holiday with her class. You will be delighted to learn that the original of this story is being revised by its author, Dr. Linda Williams, from the Detroit Waldorf School, to appear in the Fall 2021 *Gateways*.

Another short piece comes from a parent letter sent by Laura Esposito from the Kimberton Waldorf School, connecting Dr. King’s mission with daily social practices and values shared in the kindergarten each day. And more conversation to fire our commitment to truly universalize and bring anti-racism into our practices can be found in Steve Spitalny’s article on “Reimagining Story” and Chris Shaw’s tale of skin colors in her classroom puppets.

“For the Classroom” shares two more stories from Leslie Woolverton—another diversity story and a summer story of just goodness and joy.

As we begin distilling what our Waldorf “essentials” are, one article reminds of our affirmation of imitation as the child’s primary learning mode. How is our use of and awareness of imitation being used in our classrooms? Thank you, Jane Philipson, for this consideration. And as we want to gently guide the children into practical and social life, another article reminds us of the art of transition. Roxanne Gregoria-Anthony helps us consider the conscious attention these critical moments can be guided by.

We also need to be aware of the different prominent early childhood streams that are often more well-known than Waldorf. Colleague Renee Schwartz is experienced and trained in both Montessori and

Reggio-Emilia pedagogy and practice. Comparisons to these approaches and Waldorf here help us become more familiar with these other two well-respected educational approaches. This article can help to prepare an answer for when you are asked, “Waldorf? You’re like Montessori or Reggio, right?”

The world of Waldorf education and humanity in general feels a loss in the passing of Ann Pratt into the spiritual world. Ann founded the early childhood program at Pine Hill Waldorf School, among many, many other accomplishments, and was one of the original WECAN board members. A remembrance and tribute honors her contributions and will delight you with some early pictures of the anthroposophical community in its earliest days.

Two book reviews close this issue. *Reclaim Early Childhood* is a very important new resource by Sebastian and Tamara Suggate, researchers who validate Waldorf practices with current scientific studies and bring philosophical insights into subtle questions about the development of young children everywhere—not just in our schools. *Don’t Look Away*, by Iheoma U., Iruka, PhD, et al, is an important

guide and workbook to bring anti-bias awareness and practices into our classrooms. The book wrestles with questions that challenge us to have inner conversations with ourselves and outer conversations to change our classrooms and schools into true anti-bias communities.

In Goethe’s fairy tale, before the Snake’s conversation with the gold king, she had come across gold coins that had been carelessly scattered by some will-o-the-wisps. These she swallowed. “And a most pleasant sensation overcame her; it was the gold melting and spreading through her whole body. With great delight, she saw that she had become luminous and transparent.” Everywhere she went thereafter, she spread a pleasant light.

At the end of the story, the Snake sacrifices herself to become a bridge joining two lands. She had transformed the gold to light which, opening up “converse” between peoples who had been separated. May our conversations with one another—twisting and bending with one another—uncover the gold we seek.

Be well. Be strong. Answer the call to conversation. ♦

Join the WECAN Community Hub

The WECAN Community Hub in Groups.io was established last spring to offer Waldorf early childhood educators opportunities to engage in conversation and share resources, especially in these times of the pandemic. Its membership has grown to 900 over the course of recent months.

The Hub offers resources and conversations on Activities for Children, Reopening our Programs, Health and Coronavirus, DEI, Inner Development, Courses and Webinars, and WECAN News. The Hub also has subgroups for Parent Child, Birth to Three, Home Programs, Early Childhood Teacher Educators, and WECAN Organizational Members. Several of our WECAN Regions also have subgroups.

We are very grateful for the opportunities the Community Hub offers for us all to stay in touch. We encourage you to join and share your questions and insights!

To subscribe, please go to:

WECANCommunity+subscribe@wecan.groups.io