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# Reconsidering the Good, the Beautiful, and the True

*Stories from a Waldorf early childhood educator  
looking for a wider map of the world*

— Stephanie Hoeschler

## Acknowledgements

I introduce this essay with an intellectual acknowledgement. What I share here comes not from books or articles, such as might be footnoted and referenced in academic writing, but from people. Whether a silent observation, a fleeting encounter, or sustained relationship, people from our Waldorf world and beyond have provoked the thinking that I tentatively share here. And so I begin by acknowledging the formative contributions of teachers at the Spark Teacher Education Institute, Brattleboro, VT; Bessie Jones and Mikaela Simms, authors of *In the Company of Black Women: A Conversation about Race and Raising a Young Child*; and parents of the Desert Marigold and Orchard Valley School communities—those who came and stayed and, more significantly, those brave enough to come, to leave, and to speak about their experiences.

## Guiding Thoughts

It does indeed seem that the world is falling apart. We, in our Waldorf circles, feel it, talk about it and hold pressing questions, both practical and existential. On a wider inclusive map of the world, chaos, dislocation, constant change, and an uncertain tomorrow affect all. Where might we find our compass to orient us? What is true cannot be learned from a sweeping master narrative. Our compass that guides us in a wider world asks us to be aware and awake to the nuances of daily life. We all have experiences in our daily lives that can help us ask the right questions. The world needs us to ask these questions. I write this essay as an invocation to that goal, open-ended and wondering.

How do we walk in the world? Do we walk as “Waldorf teachers” with a narrowly defined Waldorf worldview? Do we walk as human beings? How do we “see”? Where does our gaze go? Do we have narrowed “Waldorf” eyes or eyes open and receptive to the other?

## Stories of Places Not Yet Found on the Map

Stories are important to us. These include not only those we tell the children, but also those we live as people. Thinking consciously about how the two flow together is a way to stay active in our work, to make a difference in the world. We tell our parents, “Share a story from your life.” We can say this because, regardless of the content, we know that the telling of a personal story brings connection and intimacy.

For many people, keeping their family safe, fed, and cared for—keeping everything from falling apart—is an ongoing, daily challenge. The world does not present itself as good, beautiful, and true. Where in our everyday encounters with others do we find meaningful connections that can help guide us to new places? Below, I share a series of stories to extend this question. I have resisted bringing them into neat and tidy congruence.

## Decentering the Good, Beautiful, and True: A White Parent Perspective

I was a parent at my first parent meeting at a charter Waldorf school in Phoenix when I first heard the words that would initiate a personal and professional journey:

“All children need to know is that the world is good, beautiful, and true.”

That is how I remember the words, words that I received with deep resonance and jolting dissonance. They struck deep with meaning about what I wanted for my son and deeper many times over in discordance with the world in which I lived at that time. Guns, overhead police presence, poverty, racism, human exploitation, environmental degradation. I asked for reflections on this conflict between one’s hope and one’s reality, as it is experienced. “What do you do, as a parent, when you do not yourself see that the world is good, beautiful, and true?” I asked.

Come to acceptance or take action.

Acceptance or action.

White and privileged, I labored for the next several years to move my family from a desert megalopolis to the green mountains of Vermont, the whitest state in the country on a per capita basis, where the Waldorf bubble of the good, beautiful, and true stayed intact for me.

My child lived a life that was good, beautiful and true. The children in my care did the same until a visiting parent poked my Waldorf bubble by asking, “Where are the brown children?”

My classroom had brown dolls and a dark-skinned Madonna on the wall. My classroom was “beautiful” in aesthetic terms, or so I believed, as it was “good” and “true” as well with materials and furnishings that checked the boxes for inclusion, multiculturalism, and diversity. But in this moment a mother from India speaking Marathi to her husband who translated to me in English—while looking down at the floor at his black leather shoes to hide his discomfort at her question—told me in plain terms: “I see one thing and one thing only. I see whiteness.”

### **Another Decentering Story: A Black Parent Perspective**

Two black early childhood educators held a conversation on social media. In the flow of words exchanged there arose a picture of a Waldorf world that is not good, beautiful, and kind for all children. Not all children experience our classrooms as places of belonging. Not all families feel received with a gesture of warmth and acceptance.

The belief bubble of many listeners burst, hearing about a teacher and parent of a son who went to a Waldorf school for one year and left because the mother realized, not unlike the mother from India, that the world of the school was not “good, beautiful, and true” for her son.

### **Another Story: Why Not?**

Would you use this song in your classroom? Why? Why not?

Mentors from the Spark Teacher Educational Institute asked this question of a group of teachers,

mostly white, during a professional development workshop, “Teaching in Solidarity with Black Lives,” held last summer. The song in question, “Which Side are You on, My Friend,” is rooted in the hills of Kentucky and was sparked by a 1931 miners’ strike. After Florence Reece, mother of seven and wife of a miners’ union organizer, was terrorized in her home by Kentucky lawmen, Florence tore a sheet off the calendar on the wall and wrote this song. This song, written in protest and rage, spread throughout the union movement. It then was adapted and adopted during the 1960s by the Freedom Singers in a call and response form.

I heard this song in this form. Call and response. Singing into the ether.

“Which side are you on, my friends, which side are you on?”

“Freedom.”

We sang this song together. And again, the simple question was asked, “Would you use this song in your classroom?” Why? Why not?

The experience of this workshop and the question posed about this particular song took me back to a time when I was an untrained teacher. I had been asked to step up and hold a class. I did not know anything Waldorf. I did have a pressing and urgent need to connect with the eighteen children gathered around me for circle. In the absence of a Waldorf knowledge base, I turned to a song that I knew would bring me and the children together. Steady rhythm that invited hand-clapping, slow and steady to bring heartbeats into unison; rich repetitive consonants. The song came from South Africa. I knew it as sung by Ladysmith Mambazo.

And the song did what I needed it to do. It brought the children and me into relationship. Only now through this work with those educators asking, “Why not?” do I see that a song in our classroom offers an opportunity for bringing the good, beautiful, and true that is connected to the wider world.

This is not unlike a sister teacher in southern China who sings, “We Shall Overcome,” as she goes about her day with many children in a home-based program.

Sometimes in our vulnerability as teachers striving to do the “right” thing, we ask the wrong questions. Sometimes we need to reach within and look beyond ourselves to find the truth.

### **Finding Truth, Beauty and Good in the Everyday: A Daily Practice of Positivity**

Do we see the world as “Waldorf teachers” or as people who participate in the world as all-sensing human beings? How might we be and see differently in order to find connections that are meaningful for a wider circle? These are the questions that we are living with in this unusual time. I find that opportunities arise in unlikely places, as in the following story.

Human breath rose in a steamy puff on a startlingly cold fall morning from a figure twisted and hunched over a walker. Long strands of gray hair swung in sync with labored steps. Glasses slipping, lenses fogged, a plastic shopping bag swaying from the grips of the walker met one’s eyes. The observer’s gaze traveled downward to receive the depths and truth of this man’s burden.

Metal rods replaced the bone, muscle, and flesh of what had been legs. Trotting next to the man was a small black dog. Looking beyond the surface observations of a disabled person walking his dog on a morning is a lesson about perspective: the goodness, beauty, and truth in our world is inseparable from its pain and injustices. That day in the classroom—Michaelmas morning—the children heard a story of this early morning Michael, a story of courage, of conquering darkness, and sharing the beauty of selflessness.

### **Final Story: An Enduring Essential Truth Revealed**

A father perched on a child-sized chair for his child’s parent-teacher conference. He came to this country as a political refugee from Rwanda. Another family, the mothers of an adopted brown skinned child, had paid for his child’s tuition so that she might attend school. The father dressed, as he always did when talking to his child’s teacher, in a crisply ironed dress shirt tucked into trousers. He held his tall angular form in an upright posture despite the lilliputian chair. A warm beaming smile penetrated through the formality of manner.

“My daughter corrects my English now and wants to speak English at home! Not so much Kinyarwanda.”

His daughter had started school speaking no English and not speaking at school at all for the first half of the year.

The father laughed, bemused at the reality of this truth.

“I see my daughter is learning to become a good person here. To be a good person. That is what we want. That is what is important to us.”

“That is what is most important to us.”

An enduring essential truth of our work and one embracing of the strivings and hopes of all: To be a good person.

### **Questions Calling**

How are we attentive to the possibilities for touching the world in an all-sensing way that expands the parameters of our “Waldorf world” in which all may feel that they belong? This is not just a matter of curriculum. This is an invitation to participate in the subtleties of our daily lives in order to do what we need to do. This has always been true but is particularly potent now.

The questions that are arising may seem densely impenetrable, but they need not be. We only need to look at life as our point of entry. Our point of entry is startlingly simple. We all have moments in our lives, indeed in our daily lives, that are portals into new connection. In every encounter lives a story. In every story lives a point of meaningful connection that allows our map of the world to be wider. Interest is more powerful than love. Taking a compassionate interest in others is a healing gesture towards others, and the doing of it is healing for ourselves. A soul habit for the “new normal” awaits. ♦

**Stephanie Hoelscher** *teaches a mixed-age kindergarten in central Vermont. She has a spouse, child, two unruly dogs, and many chickens. She feels called to connect her anthropological orientation for listening and observing with her work as a Waldorf teacher.*