

The Social Mission of Waldorf School Communities

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In many years of working with Waldorf schools, I am often asked why it is so difficult, why so many meetings, why work with consensus or, more pointedly, why doesn't the Board just appoint a principal or director and have this person run the school efficiently, without all this participation and complexity. Somewhat tongue in cheek, I say, perhaps it isn't a question of efficiency, but of liveliness, of engagement, of juiciness. Yet the questions are valid. Why is it that we struggle with new social and community forms in developing Waldorf schools in North America and around the world?

After thinking about and researching this question, I have come to believe that there are at least seven aspects of or dimensions to the social mission of Waldorf education. The first and most obvious answer is that the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart, Germany, was founded as an independent school, in large part as an answer to the conditions of social, economic, and political chaos resulting from World War I. The school, inaugurated in 1919, grew out of Rudolf Steiner's efforts to provide Central Europe with a new approach to thinking about and ordering society, referred to as the Movement for Threefolding Society.¹ In the midst of Steiner's political and social activity, Emil Molt, the director of the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory, asked him whether he could help in the founding of an independent school for the workers' children and others interested in a new form of education. Steiner responded with warmth and eagerness, for, as he said, "the great problem of the future will be that of education. How will we educate children so that they, as adults, can grow into the social, democratic, and spiritually free areas of life in the best way possible?"²

Steiner's response contained two essential perspectives. The first was that the school must be legally and financially independent of local and state government because the state can never foster an education for freedom; it needs to satisfy a myriad of bureaucratic, political, and economic

demands. Indeed, according to Steiner, not only the Waldorf school, but all cultural institutions—such as research institutes, school, colleges, universities, dance troupes, and theaters—need to be free of state control and to be permeated by the principle of freedom if society is to develop in a healthy manner. The state—the administration of laws and legislation for the common good—must be limited in scope and based on the principle of equality, of democratic participation, while economic life needs to move toward associations, embodying principles of brotherhood and sisterhood between producers, consumers, and traders.³ Although it is not my purpose to describe the details of the threefold social organism in this introduction, it is important to note that Steiner's social and political ideas embodied the principles of the French Revolution in a new way: liberty for cultural life, equality for democratic life, and fraternity for economic life. His ideas were far from utopian in the context of a Central Europe destroyed by war and torn among the competing ideologies of capitalism, socialism, and communism.

A second point, connected to the first, is that the form and curriculum of Waldorf education should lead to the proper education of children so that they can become conscious and creative adults, capable of developing a healthy society. Certainly, when we meet Waldorf school graduates, we may sense their optimism, creativity, and engagement with life. But the connection between Waldorf education and social reform is deeper and more specific. In the lectures cited previously, published as *Education as a Social Problem*, Steiner suggested that:

1. Providing a worthy environment and education through proper imitation in early childhood develops a sense for freedom in later life;
2. Developing a proper sense for natural authority in the lower school provides the

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basis for a healthy rights life in relationships and society; and

3. Developing a sense for human love, for the beauty and grandeur of nature, and for the magnitude and diversity of the human enterprise offers a basis for a healthy economic life or, as Steiner stated, “brotherliness, fraternity, in economic life⁴ as it has to be striven for in the future, can only arise in human souls if education after the fifteenth year works consciously toward universal human love.”⁵

These are far-reaching statements. The connections they imply are not always obvious. How can imitation be the basis of freedom or respect for authority the foundation for a sense for equality? A starting point can be the recognition that in early childhood the forces of the will are first developed and in the time between ages 7 and 14 the basis for a healthy feeling life established. Imitation of a healthy and loving social and physical environment builds confidence and security in later life while nurturing the substance of individual will, the basis for self awareness and the need for freedom. Respect for the authority of a caring teacher or a loving parent establishes boundaries, provides structure for the emerging feeling life, and encourages awareness of rights and responsibilities in the class and in the broader human community.

In describing further aspects of the social mission of Waldorf education, it is essential to gain insight into the nature of modern Western consciousness. The growth of individual consciousness, of self awareness, from the 18th century to the present, encouraged by the industrial and post-industrial ages, has led to an increased awareness of human rights, including such milestones as the abolition of slavery, the growth of women’s rights, and the U.N. Charter of Universal Human Rights. It has also led to a new psychological understanding of the human being in the many schools of modern psychology. Yet, for Steiner, this growth of individual self awareness

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has come at a price, and this price includes the loss of social instincts embedded in tradition and extended family structures and the growth of egotism, of anti-social attitudes and behavior. The struggle for mutual understanding, the breakdown of family relationships, and the growth of interpersonal violence are all symptoms of this anti-social terror of the age.

Steiner saw this development of consciousness as justified, indeed inevitable, but felt that new social forms, new communities, were needed to balance the anti-social tendencies of modern humanity:

Anti-social impulses must arise inwardly so that human beings may reach the height of their development; outwardly, in social life, social structures must work in such a way that people do not completely drift apart in life. Hence the social demands of the present; they can in a certain sense be seen as the justified demand for an outer balance to the inner, essentially anti-social evolutionary tendency of humanity.⁶

For Steiner, both the principles of the threefold social organism and the new self-administered community forms of the Waldorf school were ways of balancing the one-sided, more egotistical nature of modern consciousness; they were ways of helping people meet each other at deeper levels, thereby fostering a process of mutual development.

The self-administered partnership forms of the more than one thousand Waldorf schools and initiatives around the globe find their source in these insights into the nature of modern consciousness. To develop the appropriate forms of governance among teachers, parents, and staff, among a teachers’ college, a board of trustees, an administration, and a parent association is an ongoing task for each Waldorf school and is part of the social mission of Waldorf education. Since 1919, for ninety years, independent Waldorf schools have attempted to evolve community forms in which the interests of teachers, parents, staff, and friends can find true expression.

In most Waldorf schools in the United States and Canada this has meant a teachers' circle, or faculty council, having primary responsibility for all pedagogical life—determining the curriculum and hiring, mentoring, evaluating, and, if need be, dismissing teachers. The other main decision-making group is a board of trustees consisting of teachers, parents, and friends who carry legal and financial responsibility for the school, who support the education by making sure that there are adequate financial resources and a suitable physical space for supporting the education. An administration, grounded in an understanding of the curriculum, provides the support and the expertise needed to help increasingly mature and complex schools function well. The parent association may foster community dialogues, sponsor adult education, support festivals, and serve the cause of responsible communication between teachers and parents.

In Waldorf schools, the absence of formal hierarchy, the group decision-making processes, the need to get to know each other as teachers, parents, and staff pull us out of our isolation. The form and nature of self-administration in our schools mean we need to learn to appreciate the differences between people while at the same time accepting that we are brothers and sisters on the road of mutual development.

While it is an exaggeration, I sometimes suggest that Waldorf schools are designed to enhance conflict. Certainly they are formed to help us meet at deeper levels and to help us “rub each other into shape.” This means that all adults in Waldorf schools need to be on a path of reflective self-development, to be willing to work their issues, for, without this foundation, interpersonal conflicts can undermine the proper functioning of the school. Even in the first Waldorf school, with Steiner present as founder and director, questions of trust, leadership, interpersonal conflict, and the proper delegation of authority were significant issues, as the essay by Francis Gladstone, *Republican Academies*, makes vividly clear.⁷

Steiner described the reality of karma, of mutual destiny, as coming to expression in the social world, in the sphere of human relationships. For him, the fundamental reason for new social

and community forms was to give people an opportunity to awaken to the nature of their mutual destiny, to the reality of karma. The specialization of work and the large, complex, bureaucratic nature of modern institutional life, coupled with the anti-social nature of our present consciousness, create the danger that individuals will not meet at a deep enough level to awaken to their common destiny, depriving each of them of the opportunity of becoming who they are meant to be. If we reflect on our own life accurately, we will see the important role that a teacher, a grandparent, a chance conversation with a visiting friend, or a difficult experience with a colleague has played in helping us to become the person we are today.

The self-administered community forms of Waldorf schools exist to help us bring the mutuality of karma to consciousness. This mutuality is wonderfully expressed by a saying of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.⁸

The sixth dimension of the social mission of Waldorf education, that of supporting a new family culture, is apparent to most people involved in Waldorf education. The rich image of child development, the celebration of festivals, the importance of prayer and of rhythm in the life of a child, and the understanding that parents are trustees of the child with the task of helping each child discover who he or she is meant to become are just a few of the ways in which Waldorf schools help to develop a new family culture. A strong parent association can make this a central part of its work, hosting educational events and supporting parents in the often bewildering task of establishing a family.

The last of the seven aspects or dimensions of the social mission of Waldorf education is that of co-creating with the spirit. While not frequently

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discussed, Waldorf education is permeated with the notion that we are co-creating with spiritual beings. Indeed, for Steiner, the “task of education, understood in a spiritual sense, is to bring the soul-spirit into harmony with the temporal body.”⁹ The challenge to the teacher is to carry on the work of the angels; to harmonize the spirit of the incarnating child with an inherited physical body. Through meditating on an individual child, through working with verses and prayers, through celebrating festivals, and through practicing working with the good being of the school in sacramental conversation, Waldorf school communities are encouraged to practice a dialogue with the spirit. This practice is significant, for I have the experience that spiritual beings are anxiously waiting for the opportunity to enter into conversation with us. Vaclav Havel points to the reality of this co-creating process by calling for an awareness of the “secret order of the cosmos” and the importance of recognizing that we are “beheld from above.”¹⁰

Waldorf schools, in addition to their pedagogical mission of providing a holistic, age-appropriate education, have the social mission of developing new community forms for the future. This mission or task has at least the seven aspects described:

1. Education free of state control; this promotes a free cultural life.
2. Educating children to become healthy, creative adults who are capable of doing the good, of fostering a healthy society.
3. Partnership community forms in which the true interests of teachers, parents, children, and administrative staff are recognized.
4. Communities of mutual interest in which we are invited to become brothers and sisters on the road of mutual development, to grow by working on our issues together.
5. Destiny communities in which we are encouraged to become aware of our mutual karma.
6. Communities supporting the development of a new family culture.
7. Communities in which we are practicing co-creating with the spirit.

These aspects or dimensions of the social mission of Waldorf education describe a far-reaching

and complex task, for in exercising the social mandate of Waldorf education we are sowing the seeds for a new society.

Endnotes

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2. Steiner, Rudolf. *Education as a Social Problem*, Anthroposophic Press, New York, NY, p. 12.
3. Steiner, Rudolf. *Toward Social Renewal*, op. cit.
4. Steiner, Rudolf. *Education as a Social Problem*, op. cit., p. 13.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
6. Steiner, Rudolf. *Social and Anti-Social Forces in the Human Being*, Mercury Press, Spring Valley, NY, 2003, p. 8.
7. Gladstone, Frances. *Republican Academies*, R. Steiner Schools Fellowship, Forest Row, United Kingdom, 1997.
8. From a 1956 sermon, *Testament of Hope*, p. 11, and the “Beyond Vietnam” speech, p. 242. Washington, James, M. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.
9. Steiner, Rudolf. *The Foundations of Human Experience*, Anthroposophic Press, Hudson, NY, 1996, p. 39.
10. Havel, Vaclav. *Summer Meditations*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 1992, p. 6.

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