



Photo courtesy of Brooklyn Waldorf School

## Waldorf Early Childhood Education—Urban Style

— Meggan Gill

### *Waldorf schools.*

These words ignite imaginations of beautiful classrooms, gentle teachers, and outdoor fields and gardens. Waldorf families are typically striving to guard their children against the ills of society that come in the form of materialism, commercialism, over-stimulating environments, and over-scheduled lives. The young children are invited to wake slowly to consciousness, coaxed by their natural development, the soft spoken adults and the wonder of nature around them. Waldorf teachers will go to great lengths to prepare the space for the children: lazuring the walls with natural pigments, making toys by hand, and wearing naturally made, thoughtfully chosen clothing. They go to sleep and rise early to meditate and review the story that they've memorized word for word. Waldorf parents are most likely serving on multiple committees, striving at the heels of their dedicated teacher, feeling guilt if everything isn't made from scratch or if at some moment they buckled under the pressure and let their child watch a movie. They squeeze school events into their busy mainstream lives, jobs and families. Everything, and I mean everything, is carefully considered in this thoughtfully prepared environment.

For many years, I worked in a rural school with six lovely acres on the edge of a small city, endowed with a small forest area, an open field, rich soil, and historic buildings. We went out our front door to the "apple garden" freely and with

ease—this play area was just for the kindergartens. If we ventured out the other door, we could visit and feed the neighbor's horses or tromp over to the ripening blackberry patch. At Michaelmas, a real horse carried St. George into the field; at the Advent Spiral, a parent hosted us in the open air barn while another played the harp; and May Faire was an idyllic picture of nature in bloom. It is, and remains, the picture that most people have come to relate to as a "Waldorf School" and shows why many families will relocate to experience this.

What about the urban Waldorf school? If you've been to New York City, you may wonder: How could you possibly keep children guarded from commercialism and media or provide them with an authentic nature experience? Isn't it noisy, dirty and fast? Isn't that the opposite of what Waldorf says is best for children? Where do they play, run, climb trees? What sorts of children and families come to this school? What are "city kids" like? Is it not in fact, an oxymoron to have an Urban Waldorf School? "I thought Waldorf Schools were about being natural," people ask me. I have a good idea of why people think that. We've been defined by our own web sites, our own conversations, our own views. So, while I understand the value and beauty of the bucolic life, I have really come to appreciate the qualities of the city and what city children teach me. And this is what I want to share with you.

I had the fine fortune of studying with Ann Stahl, one of our oldest and wisest teachers still working in

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our midst. She asked us soon-to-be teachers: What is, in fact, the definition of a Waldorf School? Is it the crayons, the walls, the songs? Or rather, is it the teacher, the striving, the intentions that the children are imitating?

“We are, after all, dealing with what will live in the future, not in the present generation ... In us has to live what only the following generations will bring to outer manifestation. Something of prophetic becoming one with the future development of humanity has to live in us.” These are words spoken by Rudolf Steiner at the opening ceremonies of the first school in the city of Stuttgart, Germany in 1919.

In Brooklyn, on the way to and from school, young children navigate a variety of loud sounds, the presence of strangers, and countless images. Sometimes, they walk to school or get a “car service,” but more often they take the subway train or metro bus. On weekends and short vacations our children enjoy their upstate country homes, and on longer breaks travel the world, Europe, or the Cayman Islands. They know about the twin towers, what googleplex is, and the dangers of drinking the tap water. The lives of our children’s parents are not typically marked by clocking into Monday-to-Friday jobs, affording a steady schedule and paycheck. Instead our parent body consists primarily of writers, actors, musicians, artists, filmmakers, financiers, and lawyers, working project to project, ambition to ambition. Also, with ours being one of many private schools that New Yorkers can choose from, most people do their due diligence in regards to a Waldorf school’s stance on media and have already made these choices for their own life and health even before having children. So, while many of them work in media, many have TV-free homes.

As with many Waldorf schools, our large, brick building, also known as the “castle,” is an oasis. We have rainbow colored walls; dedicated, inspired teachers; and beeswax crayons. We have rooftop beehives, a developing postage-stamp-sized play yard and garden terraces on each corner of the building. We’ve gone to every extent possible to ensure the quality of the air, water and any other material to make sure it’s as hazard-free as possible, even though our neighborhood has been historically referred to as the “lead belt.” Our classrooms, in fact our whole building, has been laboriously transformed on the inside to look more like a Waldorf school and less like

the Catholic school it was for many years, which had stood empty and minimally cared for over 25 years. True to the footprint of most New York buildings, our classrooms are small, and every bit of storage space is thoughtfully used, no hoarding allowed. When I have a visitor or a parent in the classroom, I have to instruct them to move to different parts of the room during different activities. We also spend a bit of time daily rearranging our furniture to provide for more movement space and have designed cleverly configured tables to allow for different activities.

Our daily nature walk consists of crossing intersections and playing in a community playground where three or four other neighborhood schools and daycares frequently come. There are climbing structures and cement but also a rim of grass with seasonal wildflowers and tall ginkgo trees. The children are happy to collect bottle caps and lost hair beads, which they lovingly call “treasures” and leave in the gnome homes decorated with a few dandelions, sticks, and the coveted random piece of plastic.

Around our school live community members, primarily of Afro-Caribbean descent, and a growing number of gentrifying young hipsters, living inexpensively in order to attend the local, prestigious art college. On any given day, we see some people who are on drugs and/or mentally disabled, trudging along talking to themselves or just standing in utter stasis. We pass the needle exchange bus parked outside the church and religious altruists passing out literature. We hear a variety of loud emergency sirens, car alarms, pumping stereos, and personal squabbles on the street corners. We walk past construction sites, condemned buildings and trash bags that line the street curb. Sometimes we even see a rat scurry out or step in some dog poop.

When the children in my class are big enough and ready, I take my kindergartners on the subway train most Fridays to our local, 526-acre city park. Here we bask in the comfort of tall trees, watching autumn turn leaves from green to gold and red. In the winter, we have the place to ourselves. Then we spend time throwing chunks of ice into the lake, “skating” on frozen-over fields, and then drink tea from a thermos while we watch the ducks that also stayed for the winter. Boldly comes the New York springtime with a plethora of blossoms, covering the ground and the trees. The squirrels offer us plenty of entertainment as we hike to the big field where we spend the day

watching the clouds pass overhead. Then it's time to head back. Pulling them along on our rope-train, I feel the tangible weight of the city on the children come again with the subway platform, the cement under our feet, the street corners, and the rush of the city. It's a long day, but oh, so worth it.

I find that I LOVE working in an urban school. Why?

One of the biggest surprises that I've had moving to the city is that being around so many people brings the children a beautiful sense of belonging. We know our neighbors, young and old, and of many, many races. We greet our crossing guards, our cobblers opening shops, building superintendents sweeping the sidewalks, and construction workers who are already at work for the day. These are real people engaged in real work, and it is through watching their activity that we understand the world. For example, in New York, where we primarily walk everywhere, people must re-sole their shoes frequently. This past winter my class was doing a circle about a cobbler and all the (Brooklyn) townspeople whom he would help. So we went one morning into our local cobbler's shop, "Magic Joe's," owned by an older Jewish man who had been resoling my shoes for a long time. We burst into his store bringing tea and homemade bread, sang our songs and danced our dance for him. He was so touched that we made this connection that he asked me if he could give something in return to the children. A few days later we returned and he gave each of the children a clementine and a very warm thank you. Here, nature isn't handed to us. We have to cultivate our human nature and good will to create opportunities for the children to experience life in its purest form.

In regards to relating to the earth, its creatures, and the cycle of life, I have found again to my surprise, that the children, at least in our community, are very sensitive and observant. An unexpected benefit of having small indoor spaces and public transportation is that the children, as part of their lifestyle, are outside—walking, climbing many stairs and frequenting our abundant parks. They experience themselves in regards to the changing weather



Photo courtesy of Brooklyn Waldorf School

and develop their will forces to fully dress in winter clothes, learn when to shed them, hydrate when hot, and rest when they are tired. A daffodil, a snowflake, a bird's nest, a clap of thunder, or a sweaty, hot day are noticeable and perhaps leave an impression of natural processes against the backdrop of sidewalks, bricks and bustle that suburban children may take for granted. Once, while walking along our street and singing a classic song you may know, written by a famous folk singer who happened to be a grandparent at our school, a child looked up and said, "There it is!" Sure, enough! A mother mourning dove was "nesting in the branch on the tree and the tree in a hole and the hole in the ground, and the green grass grew all around, all around! And the green grass grew all around!" Magic.

It is true that our city children tend towards the nerve-sense/intellectually-awakened spectrum of development. You likely know what these children are like in your own classes; we just have more of them. To respond to this, we, as teachers, must find ways not to diminish their experience or feel pity for the children because of the demands of their environment. We have to be creative about how we offer them opportunities to breathe, to feel secure in themselves and their bodies, to experience variety in movement, and to encourage rhythm in and out of the classroom. This requires us to examine closely who they are, what their home lives are like and to bring acceptance and balance to those qualities. It means that the children speak and are spoken



to more than most Waldorf early childhood teachers would prefer, and we have to find ways to meet them in that, softening their experience with our ability to truly listen to them and lovingly guide their parents as well. It means that sometimes they have changes in their home rhythm because a parent is on Broadway or traveling to Europe or staying in a hotel while HBO is using their house for filming. It's our job to create rhythm, predictability, and a classroom culture filled with kindness and clear expectations. While we cannot grow wheat and thresh it, we can make butter and bring the buttermilk to the dog who "works" in the parking garage across the street. While we can't always control the influence of the people we meet each day, we can make Valentine's cards for the public school crossing guard, "Ms. Chichi," who diligently helps us cross the busy intersection. We look for things we can do; we focus on what's good.

I have learned that an urban Waldorf early childhood program is not essentially different than what is found in other Waldorf Schools. We are all striving to provide the same essentials for the children's healthy development. No matter where we are or how much nature surrounds our school or who are the families that come—we are all striving to see and meet the children. We are all doing to our best to be creative with the space that we have, the dynamics and skills of our faculty and the challenges of our times. I think often of an excerpt from *What Is Waldorf Education? Three Lectures by Ru-*

*dolf Steiner* (SteinerBooks, 2004):  
"The possibility was granted to us to place what was to become the first Waldorf school in a city, in the very life of a city. There was no question of first insisting on the right outer conditions for the school. What mattered was to achieve what had to be achieved through the principles and methods of our education under [the] given circumstances."

I feel fortunate to be working in an urban school with colleagues who inspire me in their creativity, bravery and ingenuity. Together we meet the future, the future being created before our very humble eyes.

Our welcome is always extended and our door is always open to colleagues from afar who would like to experience our urban Waldorf life.

I leave you with our one of our Faculty Verses:

*Have courage for  
the truth. Sharpen  
thy feeling for  
responsibility of  
soul. Imbue thyself  
with the power  
of imagination.*

*- Rudolf Steiner*

**Meggan Gill** is currently a lead kindergarten teacher at the Brooklyn Waldorf School. She moved to New York City six years ago from Olympia, WA, where she began her work at the Olympia Waldorf School in 1997. Her interest in how to address the needs of urban children with Waldorf Education has been a main theme for her since she began her teacher training at Sunbridge Institute in 2008.