

# Book Review

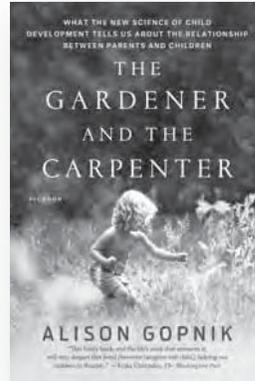
## ***The Gardener and the Carpenter***

by Alison Gopnik

Review by Nancy Blanning

Alison Gopnik, professor of developmental psychology and philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, writes widely about early childhood development, in particular how young children learn about the world. She is a mainstream scientist; her approach is rooted in evolutionary biology. She is also an advocate for helping children grow up into flexible, innovative, creative thinkers and doers. And in this way, she offers support to the way Waldorf education sees and respects early childhood.

Gopnik's latest book, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, is about "parenting," a fairly recently invented term for what's characterized as a goal-oriented activity. Gopnik tells us that, according to the "parenting" paradigm, "being a parent is like being a carpenter. The parent's job is 'to shape the material into a final product that will fit the scheme you had in mind to begin with.'" Carpentry is a precise craft, all its steps tightly controlled to yield a perfect end product. If applied to children, Gopnik sees, this model stifles children and makes them rigid. She asserts that parents should be less like carpenters and more like gardeners: "Instead, parents and other caregivers are designed to provide the next generation with a protected space in which they can produce new ways of thinking and acting that, for better or worse, are entirely unlike any that we would have anticipated beforehand." This picture comes from evolutionary biology as well as recent studies in child development. The image of the gardener suggests more caregiving and less controlling. The gardener creates rich soil in which the seeds can grow and flourish. The outcome is less predictable, but the surprises delight.



The most enjoyable content of this book for Waldorf-oriented readers comes when the author validates through scientific research how children develop into these flexible, adaptable, imaginative, innovative individuals who will create their own lives and mold the future. In short, the first essential element is that children need adult role models who are worthy of imitation. The children watch and then *imitate*. They take in the processes of adult work and then repeat them in their *play*. The chapters "Learning through Looking," "Learning through Listening," and "The Work of Play" are mainstream affirmations of what we know and practice with young children in our Waldorf classrooms. Reading these chapters is well worth the time. Gopnik recognizes that imitation and play are essential to healthy human development. She supports her view with mainstream research and explains how neurological studies confirm that the activities of imitation and play build the young brain. It is good to have such research to share with parents whose thinking is more receptive to mainstream science than to the insights of Waldorf education.

Gopnik celebrates the joy and wonder of the bond that can exist between children and their parents and other loving caregivers. Deep learning about self, others, and the world is achieved unconsciously through watching and listening, imitating, and playing. Gopnik urges us adults to honor this process and get out of the children's way so they can create something new—which the present and future so badly need. ♦