

In Memoriam: David Spear Mitchell

In what turned out to be a final contribution to his voluminous set of writings on Waldorf education, David Mitchell posed a fundamental question, followed by a characteristically bold reply. “What Stands Behind a Waldorf School?” he asked in an article that appeared in this journal just a year ago. To which his first response was: “I contend there is no such thing as a Waldorf school—there are only schools striving to become Waldorf schools.”

He went on to explain:

A true Waldorf school is always in the state of becoming. This involves human striving and self-development during which teachers remain open, constantly observing, and focused on Waldorf ideals while being centered in the world.¹

In retrospect, we may say that this passage could just as well be a description not only of a Waldorf school but also of David himself, in that he devoted his life—with a will that was at once mighty and gentle—to a program of ceaseless becoming. With bounding energy and boundless enthusiasm, he shouldered one building project after another with a potent mixture of knowledge, courage, and dedication, while remaining “constantly observing and focused on Waldorf ideals.”

David’s shoulders were broad and his arms were strong, figuratively as well as literally. As a young man he seemed headed towards a career in professional football

when, through an encounter with a friend, he met anthroposophy and so also Waldorf education. Instead of pursuing life in the glaring klieg lights of a grand stadium, he opted for the relative obscurity of a country classroom, taking the inaugural first grade through eight years at the Pine Hill Waldorf School in Wilton, New Hampshire. At the same time as he was building up this little school, he was also building his own home—tools in one hand, a “how-to” book in the other—and raising with his wife, Anniken, a family of four children.

After a stint as high school teacher and director of admissions across the road at High Mowing, a Waldorf boarding and day high school, David felt called to yet another building project, this one at the base of the rugged Flatirons of the Rocky Mountains. Here he helped

to pioneer a new high school at the Shining Mountain Waldorf School in Boulder, Colorado. For this, much to his surprise, he was selected by the Amgen Corporation as Colorado’s “Teacher of the Year.”

Perhaps David’s most ambitious project was still to come. At the urging of his friend Wolfgang Schad, a Waldorf high school teacher and university professor revered for his essays on biology and phenomenology, David began to produce a growing collection of new books and articles under the aegis of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA), an institution with which he was already deeply involved. From this initiative was born AWSNA



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Co-Director of the Research Institute
for Waldorf Education

Publications, which David parlayed with the help of a generous donor and the backing of the circle of North American Waldorf schools into an international house of several hundred titles. There is barely a Waldorf teacher in the English-speaking world today who has not benefited from some educational resource that David discovered, wrote, edited, designed, distributed, marketed—or put together as a science teaching kit.

In addition to his prodigious output as Chair of AWSNA Publications, David served for the last eight years, with me, as Co-Director of the Research Institute for Waldorf Education. In this capacity he expanded the Institute's twice-yearly *Research Bulletin* (which he managed meticulously right into the details of design and layout) and pioneered several major research projects, including a widely cited *Survey of Waldorf Graduates*, the first overview of its kind on this continent. He also reached out on behalf of the Institute to other like-minded groups in Europe and Australia, forging networks of collaborative research and joint publications.

In his final years, David began almost single-handedly to build up via the Research Institute's Online Waldorf Library (OWL) a freely available series of eBooks and other electronically reproduced materials on Waldorf education that otherwise would have remained inaccessible to the wider public. As Marianne Alsop, the librarian of the OWL, pointed out to him shortly before he died, well over 75% of the contents of this electronic clearinghouse could be traced to his research, editing, and production.

So what *is* it that stands behind a Waldorf school? In the latter part of the article cited earlier, David offers his own response: the spiritual being that feels drawn to the striving of strong teachers! As he points out, it is not the strength of individual teachers—necessary though that is, along with the appetite of children to learn and the trust of their parents in the education—that sustains a school; rather it is an ineffable yet almost tangible

presence that shines through those teachers who, despite their differences and tensions, succeed in collaborating for the sake of Waldorf education. At such moments, something greater than any single human being comes to life in the school.

David was painfully aware of the obstacles standing in the way of this kind of collaboration, since strong individuals are as likely to butt up against each other as they are to collaborate. As David put it,

Inner strength, this strong personality, is a matter of personal destiny. Either one has it or one hasn't. It can't be faked. While this strength of personality makes the teacher adequate for the classroom, it can make him or her less inclined to fit comfortably into a community.²

David certainly exuded this kind of strength and he struggled mightily to put it at the service of collaboration, forever wrestling with the impatience to “go it alone.” The very fact, for instance, that he chose to work in harness with a fellow co-director for close on a decade underscores his dedication to this ideal. Though he could be highly productive on his own—often getting up before dawn and still working late into the evening—he observed more than once to me how much more he accomplished when he felt the spirit of collaboration hovering over a project. Over the years I have learned immensely from his example and from his struggle.

David Mitchell, we know, cannot be replaced. Just as the Research Institute and AWSNA Publications were different (in the latter case, non-existent) before he came on the scene, so these institutions will be different in light of his departure. However, because he was by nature a builder—a maker of things both physical and metaphysical—he leaves behind a home where the spirit of Waldorf education can flourish and grow. For this, as for his generous heart and mischievous sense of adventure, we are indeed blessed.

At a colloquium of anthroposophical leaders held in Ann Arbor, MI, just two months after David died, one of the participants handed out a verse printed on small squares of plain white paper. No one seemed to know the precise origin of these lines, which were annotated “Verse by Rudolf Steiner via David Mitchell, AWSNA Summer 1999.” Clearly this verse carried special significance for David, as it now may for those who contemplate it in his name.

– Douglas Gerwin

Endnotes

1. Cf. David Mitchell, “What Stands Behind a Waldorf School?” in *Research Bulletin* Vol. XVI, No. 2, pp.17–20.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

To resolve our past
Requires knowledge.

To forge our future
We need courage.

To experience the present
We must develop dedication.

Our thinking needs
Riddles to wake up.

Our feeling needs
Pain to mature.

Our willing needs
Resistance to become strong.

– Rudolf Steiner

To Celebrate the Life on Earth of David Mitchell

*Let the wind blow through you and
it will not blow you down.*

– Lakota saying

Finding adequate words to celebrate the life of David Mitchell, a man who worked so potently with words as author, editor, and Chair of AWSNA Publications, is indeed a daunting task. It heightens the difficulty of formulating an encomium for such a man as he. My own human frame is too small to contain the feelings that rise up in remembering and picturing a spirit so powerful, so vast in vision as his. It is necessary, however, to honor the man, as imperfect as such an attempt is inevitably to be.

David and I first met in 1987. He was at Pine Hill and High Mowing Waldorf schools at the time while I was working to establish the Merriconeag School in Maine. I felt very lucky to be billeted at the Mitchells’ home three years later in the summer of 1990 during my teacher training at Antioch University New England. David commanded my admiration

and appreciation because he was so insightful, kind, and attentive. In my room, for instance, David left out a copy of Michael Spence’s recently-published book on economics, because he remembered my interest in this topic.

For me, David embodied what AWSNA is and means. AWSNA Publications was his response to an identified need for high quality materials for teachers. Evidently inspired by the remarkable Wolfgang Schad, David took up the task of providing a steady stream of valuable books and articles for Waldorf teachers and for those who wished to know more about this vibrant education.

Until some time around 1999, my eighth grade year of teaching, I read almost every book that David produced. Then it became too much for me because David was laying his hands on so many texts—in all over 400 books and monographs—so that the world (and teachers most especially) could better understand the significance and purpose of Waldorf education. Later, when I was appointed to the leadership of AWSNA, I got

to see at close quarters David's tremendous breadth of vision and his boundless creativity to serve the needs of the Waldorf movement and beyond.

David not only published books, of course. As Co-Director of the Research Institute, a position he shared with Douglas Gerwin, David was *the* "research center" of the English-speaking world. Questions of all kinds came to him from around the world, and he would take the time to answer these no matter who the questioner or what the question. He would crawl through the ancient stacks of the Rudolf Steiner Library, search for hours without stopping, ponder conundrums, and discuss ideas energetically, all to find the answer to a question or to follow a line of research he knew would be useful. Clearinghouse, teacher, scientist, translator, recognizer, direction

setter, and positive influence on all of us, in the Waldorf movement, in our culture—all these in a single individual!

David was most like the wind. Mighty, gentle, forming things in its path, terrible in its ferociousness and always kind in its ultimate motives—cleansing, pruning, refreshing, carrying seeds, bearing the breath of the earth, ringing chimes, and carrying the birds of air-like thoughts thousands of miles beyond where they could ever go without him. Understanding this image, as I did one day in a failed attempt at a birthday poem for him, made it possible for me to "let the wind blow through" rather than stand against it.

Trusting and being formed. This does not cease with David's new journey. Like the wind, his work goes on without end!

— Patrice Maynard

