

A Contribution to the Study of Core Principle #7

Frances Vig

Spiritual Orientation: *In order to cultivate the imaginations, inspirations, and intuitions needed for their work, Rudolf Steiner gave the teachers an abundance of guidance for developing an inner, meditative life. This guidance includes individual professional meditations and an imagination of the circle of teachers forming an organ of spiritual perception. Faculty and individual study, artistic activity, and research form additional facets of ongoing professional development.*

As part of my work in the Chicago Waldorf high school, I teach the history of architecture in 12th grade. Although I revise my approach each year according to the class I will be teaching, in recent years I have consistently opened the block by asking the students to look at our rented school building from a different perspective. By examining the physical structure and thinking about the design process, they are asked to consider what ideas the architect had about the human beings who would work in that space and the children who would receive their education there.

As the students consider each room and the connecting corridors and stairways, the thinking behind the design of this particular building becomes increasingly apparent.

The architect was bodying forth the ideas about children and their education that the community held at that time. The students quickly discern that the ideas behind Waldorf

education are quite different and that, ideally, the structure housing it requires a different form.

They come to realize that we are surrounded by the results of people's ideas expressed as materialized thoughts, whether in the visible design of homes, factories, hospitals, and prisons or the invisible structure of laws, regulations, and conventions. It is a small step for them to

consider which ideas about the nature of the human being are implicit in both the visible and invisible spaces that we create and what their effects are on us.

The thought that these materialized forms were shaped by other human beings working within a specific context gives us the possibility to make changes out of our own context. As you can imagine, this possibility dramatically affects the quality of our class discussions. Exercising the ability to "read" the consciousness expressed through the architecture of the past and appreciating our inheritance become part of the journey the students experience, but what often intrigues them most is to look at current issues in the world and to find out how social change can be affected by the quality of the spaces we create. How are human beings responding to their surroundings in our time? The intentions that shape design become the focus of discussion and lead the students

to think about the needs of the future they are approaching. How will they respond?

In the final block of 12th grade, we pick up this theme again when the students have an opportunity to review their education. They re-member their experiences by drawing images arising from their early childhood and from key moments in grade school. Looking at the

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murals they have created encourages all sorts of anecdotes and memories to surface. The ensuing discussions between those who have been in the school since the parent–tot stage and those who arrived later are richly peppered with stories—some of them funny, others sad—that reveal just how much children notice about their surroundings: details of the physical space, but also details of the soul space. These memories and the sharing of experiences, combined with time spent in early childhood and grade school classes, provoke many questions that become the content of the block.

Each year the intention behind the shaping of our school, as a faculty of teachers and administrative staff, becomes tangible in the questions and comments of the students. It is not always as delightful as we might wish. They have been educated to be perceptive, thoughtful, and articulate—and they are. It’s interesting to hear what they have observed and what they think. I often feel that I am seeing their soul experience of what we as a faculty have formed out of our individual commitment and collective collaboration. What is this commitment? And what is the foundation for our collaborative research? How might we be different from any other intentional community with a common vision?

I am reminded of an anecdote told to me by a parent some years ago prior to the opening of our high school. Her son was a delightfully challenging student in the grade school, skilled in asking provocative questions and keeping us on our toes. A few years after leaving the grade school, he was discussing his future with his mother. When she asked what he wanted to do after college, he responded, “I don’t know what I want to do, but I do know what I want to be. I want to be successful.” When asked what success meant, his response was, “I want to be successful like the Waldorf teachers. They are all really different from one another, but they figure out how to get along and work together for us.

There’s something they have, but I don’t know what it is.”

As his teachers we were, to say the least, rather astonished, delighted, and intrigued to hear this comment, as was his mother! What does this point to?

I think he was sensing the emerging intentional community that develops through the individual meditative practice of the colleagues, the forming and working out of shared agreements, shared study and artistic practice, on-going professional development, all in a context of the power of an awakening love for the incarnating human being.

When I consider the comments of students, my thoughts turn to what is called the “College Imagination.” I am mindful of the fact that all the members of a faculty—teachers and administrative staff alike—can be engaged in the activity described in this imagination. The picture of adults forming a chalice out of the power of their individual meditative striving, of the cup being woven out of a selfless sharing of each one’s strengths and the heightened awareness that can allow a different quality of insight, is potent. I see the question of spiritual orientation as an essential element in the strengthening of the “vessel activity” that can generate the imaginations, inspirations, and intuitions needed for the work. Surely the question is not a simple *if* but *how* we participate in this work together. Roberto Trostli’s article in the PSC publication, *Creating a Chalice of Collaborative Spiritual Leadership*, addresses the work that can arise when this imagination is active in a school. [This article is also available in two parts in the *Research Bulletin*, Vol. 16 #2, and Vol. 17 #1 – Ed.]

From a soul perspective both teaching and parenting are “athletic” activities. One parent, at the end of the 12th grade year, described the experience as a certain culmination of a personal Long March, and he expressed a deep appreciation for the experience of working for 14 years with the changing constellation of teachers.

Looking back, he could see how the content of the curriculum and the style of approach taken by the teachers had an emerging coherence full of meaning for students and parents alike.

Despite the discussions we have about the right language for communicating Waldorf education, I think that the most effective language in any human encounter is that which arises when we are actively present, exercising a profound listening and speaking out of our experience and understanding. It seems to me that we are effective to the degree that we understand the work of our colleagues in different subjects and levels and the role that they play in engaging the developmental curriculum. I think that we will find the language we need in each encounter when, as colleagues, we actively and authentically awaken the process of becoming a Waldorf school.

As teachers and administrators we know that what we do and how we work together is highly formative. When we take a position as teachers in a Waldorf school we are making a professional commitment that asks us to develop beyond our own personal inclinations without relinquishing our integrity. In the first lecture of *Study of Man* (CW 293), Rudolf Steiner speaks of the deep relationship that forms between teacher and students when that teacher concerns herself with thoughts about the spiritual nature of the evolving human being. This relationship also has the effect of helping us overcome our own individual one-sidedness and personal inclinations and encourages us to be more aware and attentive.

While Steiner is focused here on the student-teacher relationships, this also has a profound effect on all relationships in the school. What

does it mean for us to concern ourselves with thoughts of a spiritual nature about the evolving human being? It is a commitment to research and explore Steiner's thinking about the nature and development of the students who are placed in our care. Steiner was even more explicit about the importance of the teachers' meditative work in subsequent years. He was clearly expecting the teachers to take up what he was giving

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them not as mere information, but as themes for meditative contemplation. The Core Principles have been formed to support us in this work.

I experience the seventh principle addressing spiritual orientation as a remarkable invitation to become more authentically ourselves

as individuals as we engage in becoming contemporary researchers of the path to incarnation of the human spirit. Each of us brings significant strengths as well as real challenges to our work. But we do not work in isolation. As Waldorf teachers and administrators, we have

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the remarkable opportunity—the responsibility, in fact—to share our work with one another, learning from the variety of approaches, successes, and failures that we experience. We have the responsibility to develop honest relationships between us, with all the difficulties that this can entail. We organize the

daily life of running a school through shared agreements. All of this requires us to make commitments. These elements are part of the soul and spiritual architecture of our schools. These structures are the context for the students' experience of their education and will have a formative effect. As we live our commitments and agreements, day by day, we have the opportunity to model what it means to be in relationships that can develop. This process needs time—

not too much, but enough. We can revisit our agreements when needed and exercise the kind of responsible innovation that requires dialog.

In an increasingly splintered and time-squeezed world, as described by some of our students, we can give them the soul space in which to breathe, and we can model for them an experience of relationship-building that the children and youth so sorely need. I often think about the freedom we have and wonder whether we are using that freedom to be as truly innovative as our times and the needs of our students are asking us to be. We have been given the gift of this work; what do we choose to do with it? And how do we shape it to meet the emerging future? It really is up to us.

Frances Vig, born and educated in England, is one of the founding members of the Chicago Waldorf School, where she has taken two classes grades one through eight as well as being a subject teacher in the arts. She is currently a class advisor and high school teacher focusing on the sculptural arts and metalwork. A member of CWS's College of Teachers, Frances has worked in teacher development, served as College chair and as a member of the Board of Trustees. She also teaches in various anthroposophical conferences and adult trainings programs across North America, including the Arcturus Rudolf Steiner Education Program, of which she is a core faculty member. Frances is a member of the Pedagogical Section Council of North America, which she represents on the Leadership Council of AWSNA; she is also a member-at-large of the Teacher Education Network of AWSNA.

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