

Extending the Arc

A Direction for Waldorf Education in the 21st Century

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It was suggested to me to talk about the future of Waldorf education in the 21st century, a suggestion I immediately accepted, simply because it makes so much sense.

The question makes sense because education, and especially Waldorf education, is by definition *future oriented*. This is one of the things that makes Waldorf education unique and right: that the practice itself, the class time, the face time, the time of co-presence of child and teacher is, on the one hand, fully grounded in the here and now—in the face-to-face contact, in the removal of distractions, and in the living in the present, in this very moment, of this story, this image, this bread loaf, this body movement, this number, this idea—while originating from the past, sometimes from a very ancient past. And yet, the whole situation, the whole work done in the school is projected toward the future: the future person and future life of this child who is in my classroom today.

As Waldorf teachers, you all know that the mission of your work, whether conducted between four walls or out in the garden, is that of assisting these children into their futures—not necessarily into their future *careers* but into the future person each will become. You know that you are gardeners who do not have the ability to enter the seed and make it become a plant, a tree, a flower, or a fruit, but that you can and you do provide these seedlings with the nurturing, and guidance, and support, and tools to flourish in this world as they will take off onto their own individual paths.

About these paths: Where do they lead? What becomes of your students when they graduate from Green Meadow? What becomes of Waldorf students in general when they complete the course of their primary and secondary education and go out into the world? Where are they, who are they, and what are they doing beyond the college years? Do we know? Do we have a clear picture?

One of the great things about the insider's view in a Waldorf school is the visual unfolding of a developmental arc, an arc that stretches from nursery to 12th grade and through which the development of a child into an adolescent becomes clear. One of the great things about a well-integrated and well-functioning Waldorf school is that the 12th grade art teacher, for example, can compare notes and images with the former class teacher of her or his students and visualize the progressive arc that leads from a child's second grade drawing to her 12th grade self-portrait. In placing side by side a set of drawings, produced along an extended period of time, the development of this child becomes visible, just as it does when placing side by side a collection of main lesson books, from first grade through twelfth grade. This is one way of making visible the particular arc of development of an individual child within the guidelines of the Waldorf curriculum, just as the arc of development of the Waldorf curriculum itself is visible in its general outlines to each informed and experienced Waldorf teacher.

But I think we now need to extend this arc, which means to have, indeed, a clearer picture of what has become of the Waldorf child after she has left the school, gone into the world, experienced college, made some life choices, and is now 35 or

47 or 62. Where is she now? What is she doing? How did the guidance in her childhood years set up the course of her later experiences?

I have asked this question at several different Waldorf schools, and I did get answers: They are artists and artisans, and teachers and social workers, dieticians and biologists, designers and architects. Whatever they are doing, it seems to me that their work is invested in the well-being of people or in the spaces in which people live, study, or work. But this is an impression, my impression, based on scattered questions here and there, and I think what we are missing, what is very much needed, is a clearer picture of the future of the children that Waldorf schools have sent into the world.

About this world and the world's future: It seems very clear to me—and I would certainly not be the first one to suggest this—that the future of this world, a future which is already upon us, is framed by two life-altering factors: ecological disruption and the ubiquity of technology. These two factors are altering and will continue to alter human experience, human existence, and the world where this existence takes place, a world-existence that is inextricable from human-existence. How does this relate to the future of Waldorf education? Very deeply.

Let's start with technology. Waldorf education, as you all know, has had a difficult relationship with modern technology, especially in recent years with the rise to what almost seems like absolute dominance of screen technology, and especially the hand-held screens that dupe people into thinking that they are holding the world in their hand, that everything is instantly knowable and everywhere is immediately reachable. We become more and more distracted from our surrounding world, from the here and now, from the capacity of sustained attention, from the ability to follow a prolonged line of thinking, from the inner power of a self-controlled will.

And yet, we need to remember, and we will eventually need to find ways to instruct our students, that the history of human incarnation, that is, the history of civilization, of carving a place for ourselves in the physical world—which is still the world we navigate best—is inseparable from the history of technology. From the stone, to the flint, to the stick, to the fire, to the wheel, to the spear, to the tent and the hut and the plow and the lyre and the flute and the pen and the keyboard to the screen—these are all modes of expansion of humanity into the physical world made possible by the tools of technology. What man is in his inner core is one thing: What he has become in the here and the now of physical life was made possible by these tools, by technology. And this incarnation into the physical world goes beyond survival and sustenance and economy: Technology enables art, writing, self-expression, creativity. Technology can no longer be perceived as that which is opposite and opposed to human nature.

What I am trying to say is that Waldorf education needs to reassess its relationship with technology. It needs, in my view, to spend some good, thoughtful time with this question, which for quite a long time was dealt with in a reactionary way in order to keep away the clear harms of unchecked screen technology. We need to invest ourselves in a better understanding of the role

of technology in human development and the current human being, so we can go back to the classroom and nurture a healthy understanding in the student, an understanding that will translate into an ability: the students' ability to discern when they are using technological tools and when they themselves are being used by technology; when they are assisted in their perceiving and thinking by machines, and when they are handing over their thinking to machines to do the job for them, to *be* instead of them.

A better understanding of the role of technology in human existence is also crucial

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for the other dominating factor in the unfolding future, what I refer to as ecological disruption. You can also call this the environmental crisis: the tilting out of balance of various systems of nature, leading to or manifesting in pollution of air, water, and soil, rising levels of carbon in the atmosphere, rapid extinctions of various species, the melting of ice caps and ice plates, the consequential rise in sea level and flooding of low lands, etc. This is all very troubling to lovers of nature and environmentalists, but environmental issues should concern *everyone* because they are about to change *everything*. For example, the rising of sea levels will force mass human displacement. Bangladesh alone—a nation currently counting 161 million souls—is predicted to be underwater by the end of the century. Where will all these people go? Can you imagine the effects of such displacement? Surely their neighbors in India, a nation of already 1.3 billion people, millions of whom are living at unacceptable levels of poverty, will welcome these environmental refugees with open arms and readily available resources? Probably not.

In general, the unsustainable rise in human population and the justifiable but even less sustainable rise or demand for a rise in standards of living in developing countries, coupled with the fast decline in non-renewable energy resources make it very clear that these so-called environmental problems portray a future that will challenge and even endanger various aspects of human and non-human life. The problems that we call *environmental* already prove to be *existential*.

Now that I've managed to scare you, let us go back to my previous question: How does this relate to the future of Waldorf education?

Well, the futures of Waldorf and of Waldorf graduates are going to meet the environmental-existential challenges of the future picture to which I have alluded. This is their future. If this future, wherein the climate has changed and the conditions of living have transformed, is

a real and clear possibility, isn't it the role of educators, whose entire work is projected toward the future, to either prepare for or perhaps even alter such a future? Furthermore, isn't Waldorf education, with its cultivation of respect and love for nature, with its emphasis on our dependence on and gratitude for the world of nature, and with its fundamental commitment to ethical responsibility—so fundamental we don't even say it—isn't Waldorf already geared toward preparing Earth's protectors? Didn't you already release into the world a great number of environmentalists?

The future needs help, and Waldorf education, with its intrinsic ecological and ethical grounding and outlook, is well-positioned to take part in, perhaps even to take a *lead* in this help.

In presenting his newly-formed educational approach to the audiences that cared to listen, Rudolf Steiner often designated its mission as preparing a generation for its future task. The task at that time was to reconstruct Germany's social and moral landscape after the devastations of the Great War. Ironically, Steiner, despite his far-reaching clear vision, did not see into the future and the even greater devastation that the next Great War would bring. Today, we do not need clairvoyance to see what the future would be like if the trends of ecological disruption continue in their current direction. Climate science, along with other scientific fields, tells us quite clearly what the ecological future will be, and how it will be setting the physical conditions of a social future. With such a future in mind, we are called upon to renew the original impulse of Steiner's Waldorf education as a cultivation of the next generation for its future task.

This means in practice that as we gain a better picture of the current future of former Waldorf students, namely what and who they have become, we might be able to direct future Waldorf graduates more explicitly and more pointedly to their place in a future that needs them. In recent years, more and more professions and tracks of higher education have been developed and continue to develop with

the aim of addressing the looming environmental crisis and adjusting to more sustainable living. These include various fields of science—climate science, earth science, oceanology, ecology—and proceed to engineering, sustainable agriculture, design, and architecture; green economics and environmental education; journalism and philosophy; and further to environmental policy, politics, and smart technology. These are only some of the directions and professions that already await Waldorf graduates and that will allow them to both fulfill themselves individually and direct themselves collectively to the greatest challenge ever to face collective humanity.

Generations X, Y, and perhaps even Z have been characterized by the apathy, disinterest, and the self-centeredness of their ways—a characterization that is often attributed to the lack of a major, heroic, existential challenge, like the one that faced the Great Generation in fighting fascism and reconstructing a post-war world. If this is the case, then *this* generation and the ones that will follow has finally found its challenge and calling before it even knew that it was looking for one. You can call it generation E, for Ecology, a subject that perhaps needs to be introduced as a main lesson in Waldorf high schools in order to clinch and reinforce the values and worldview the students have already been encouraged to develop in previous years, and in order to guide them in the direction of these multiple professions and various individual paths, that all lead in one direction.

An ecological outlook, in my view, is already at the core of the Waldorf approach, one that looks for and finds the relations and connections of all things, organic and inorganic, that make for the web of life and culture, and that include the viewer who is not a mere outsider to this view. Waldorf education directs its students to look into the world with sympathy. *Sympathy*, from the Greek *sun pathos*, “with feeling,” means to look into the world with the emotion that binds us internally with the world externally. Emotion, as you know, is an internal thing: If you find

yourself crying while watching a movie, it is not because the character is hurting; it is because *you* are hurting for the character. In other words, it does not testify to the emotion you are exposed to externally, but to the emotion you are experiencing internally. To look into the world with sympathy means, from the outset, to foster our internal bond with a world that only appears to be external to us, to cultivate the approach that makes it clear that we are *of* the world and the world is of ourselves.

This is one of the senses in which Waldorf education is already imbued with an ecological worldview, with which we prepare our students to step into the world and find in it their individual paths.

An understanding of our relationship with technology will be necessary in any of these paths—because just as we would not have been able to disrupt the ecological balance without all the technological equipment and the unguided and thoughtless ways in which we have been using it, so it will not be possible to correct this imbalance without technology and a thoughtful, guided use of it.

How do I see the future of Waldorf education in the 21st century? I see it proceeding by understanding what kind of future past Waldorf students have developed, rethinking the question of technology and incorporating this new understanding into the high school curriculum, and devising more explicit ways for directing future Waldorf graduates to align their personal futures of self-realization and self-fulfillment with the collective task of ensuring a livable future for all in an ecologically balanced world.

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