



Understanding and Educating Transgender Youth in the Waldorf School

Jack Palmer

Appropriate treatment and rights of the transgender community have recently become topics of much attention and controversy at the national level. Special attention has also been placed on transgender youth, and their rights and treatment within the school system. At the national level, there are discussions regarding which sports teams, locker rooms, bathrooms, pronouns, and names these children are entitled to use. In addition to these practical, materialistic concerns, there are the questions of morality and ideology: should the transgender condition be accepted and respected, or is it a sign of psychological dysfunction, to be dismissed or eradicated? Across the nation, individual schools, school districts, and state legislators have taken up a variety of positions on this issue.

While the nation struggles to find an approach to the transgender issue, as students of anthroposophy and leaders within our Waldorf school communities, we must ask ourselves if spiritual science can provide insight. After all, as Rudolf Steiner states in his lecture, *Man and Woman in the Light of Spiritual Science*:

Anthroposophical spiritual science does not exist in order that human beings be estranged from life through some kind of mysticism. It should in no way divert people from their tasks in daily life or the present. On the contrary, spiritual science should bring strength, energy, and open mindedness to humanity so that people can meet what daily life and our times demand. Hence it follows that spiritual science must not concern itself solely with the great riddles of existence, of the nature of human existence, and the meaning of the world, but must also seek to cast light on those questions which confront us directly.

(Steiner, 2011, p. 36)

Steiner makes it clear that spiritual science is an appropriate lens to address the ever-evolving controversies that confront humanity on earth. The transgender issue is no exception: indeed, in this lecture Steiner makes use of spiritual science to discuss his progressive stance regarding the gender issue of his day, “the woman question.” A century ago, gender issues revolved around women’s suffrage, women’s place in

the workforce, and the increased prevalence of co-ed schools. Today, the landscape of gender issues has shifted; however, spiritual science remains a helpful tool for investigating this topic.

This essay aims to address the transgender issue on two fronts: first, How can spiritual science guide our thinking regarding gender, the gender spectrum, and transgender individuals? second, How can these insights inform our educational practices in Waldorf schools?

GENDER THROUGH THE LENS OF SPIRITUAL SCIENCE

Gender and Human Evolution: Past, Present, and Future

Steiner’s concept of human gender expands far into the distant past as well as the distant future. Steiner posits that in ancient times, all humans were of one gender. In his view, “the human realm did not divide into two genders until Lemurian times” (Steiner, 2011, p. 10). Prior to that, “the human shape was formed differently, and both sexes were in a way contained within it in an undifferentiated way.” At this stage of humanity, reproduction was asexual, and had to do with eating certain fertilizing foods, under the correct seasonal condition. Steiner draws a comparison between early human reproduction and the reproductive process of plants. He also notes that human reproductive organs were plant-like in character. This is why, he explains, “older art, which has retained so much of the traditions of the mysteries, represents hermaphrodites with plant-leaf-like organs of reproduction; these are the precursors of the human being which still had the old kind of reproductive organs” (p. 23). Indeed, this provides “the true reason for the presence of the fig-leaf on Eve.”

However, there was a problem during this phase of human evolution. Human beings, along with the earth itself, were becoming increasingly dense. That is, the physical bodies of human beings were dense and rigid, rather than pliable (p. 14). Accordingly, “as the earth became denser and denser, the human being became less and less capable of transforming himself through

the influence of his environment.” Luckily, “through the gradual departure of the moon from the evolution of the earth[,] this danger was averted. At the same time as the moon departed, however, the division into sexes took place, and with this division came a new impulse for the individualization of the human being” (p. 15).

The evolution of the gender binary system, Steiner argues, made it possible for human beings to develop individuality. Philosophically, two is infinitely more than one. Two creates duality, and allows for the experience of self and other. Additionally, on a biological level, sexual reproduction allows for the creation of infinite combinations of individuals, whereas asexual reproduction creates clones. As Michaela Glöckler, states in her essay “Sexual Union and Spiritual Connection,” “the major polarity between the two human genders also significantly intensifies the development of self-consciousness and individual experience. [O]ur singularities emerge all the more strongly through psychological and bodily encounters with the other pole” (Glöckler, 2014a, p. 37).

Steiner also suggests that spiritual science will guide humanity toward yet another evolution of human gender. He states, “the spiritual-scientific movement will prove itself to be eminently practical. It will lead humanity to overcome gender in itself and to rise to the level where Spirit Man or Atman stands, which is beyond gender, beyond the personal—to rise to the purely human” (Steiner, 2011, p. 74). Regarding this gender transformation on a physical level, Steiner says, “the human organs of reproduction in their present form will in the future be the first to lose their importance” (p. 22). Reproduction, he says, “will once again be non-sexual” (p. 34) and humans will give birth through the mouth, with the larynx playing a central role. He notes that “the speech organs at present contain within themselves the future organs of reproduction. ... [T]he fact that a transformation (change of voice) occurs in the male individual at the time of puberty is a consequence of the mysterious connection between the instruments of speech and reproduction” (p. 22).

Taken as a whole, Steiner explains that gender—and its evolution throughout past, present, and future human history—is intrinsically entwined with human spiritual advancement. Initially hermaphroditic, the development of gender helped humans move toward individuality, as they were able to experience self and other. In our current times, as we shift away from

the gender binary framework, to view human gender on a continuum, we move toward greater individual freedom, as well as toward an understanding of the non-gendered universal human experience. In the future, gender will become a moot point, physically, socially, and spiritually: “human beings [will] find that which transcends the sexes, then this issue of our time will have been resolved” (p. 46).

Gender and Human Development

Just as in Steiner’s view of human evolution, human beings transition from non-gendered, to gendered, back to non-gendered, so too does Steiner find this pattern within the lifecycle of every individual human in modern times. Humans, he claims, are non-gendered until age seven. He states, “people look upon a human being during the first seven years as if it already were male or female; from a higher point of view, this is entirely false” (p. 83). Up until this point, “the child retains a more general human character, as yet undivided into sexes” (p. 52).

Then, with the second seven-year stage of development, the human does develop gender. This physical change is necessary for spiritual advancement. This is the microcosm to the macrocosm event described in the book’s previous section, wherein the moon separates from the earth, and human beings transition from hermaphroditic to dual-sexed. As the individual human reaches puberty and takes on gender, he moves forward toward his own individuality, but simultaneously develops an ability to see the other and to comprehend humanity as a whole. Steiner notes,

The power to love, born during sexual maturity, embraces everything within the adolescent’s entire compass. Love between the sexes is just one specific limited aspect of love in the world. Only by seeing human love in this light can one understand it correctly, and then one also understands its task in the world... Physically, [with puberty] he becomes able to procreate. Spiritually, he becomes capable of experiencing humankind as a totality. (Steiner, 2011, p. 52-53)

Although this passage conflates gender and sexuality, the overall point remains relevant. In Steiner’s day, with an understanding of human development as gender binary and heterosexual, reaching puberty and becoming a man or woman represented a step toward individualization, heightened awareness of the opposite gender, and, consequentially, a greater awareness of humanity as a whole. Today, although we view both

gender and sexuality on a broad spectrum, the same is true: the adolescent steps into his or her own gender identity and sexuality and recognizes with heightened awareness the gender identity and sexuality of others. This leads him or her to discover truths about diversity and universality within the human experience.

Significantly, the individual's gender journey does not end here. In Steiner's picture of gender's evolution through past, present, and future human history, in a future era humans transcend gender. This same theme can be found in the life cycle of the modern human. Douglas Gerwin illustrates this concept adeptly:

One might say that as adults it is only in our twilight years that we begin to reorient ourselves to the more androgynous state from which we originated. Just walk behind an old couple shuffling down the street and ask yourself: Who is the woman, who is the man? The one, it seems, has lost the angular outline of his youth and is becoming less muscular, more rounded, with softer and more piping voice; the other may have lost the curvaceous outlines of her youthful figure and is becoming grizzley, perhaps sprouting facial hair and dropping the pitch of her voice.

(Gerwin, 2014, p. 12)

As an individual reaches the end of her lifecycle, having gained wisdom and played out her karmic hand, gender becomes a less prominent feature of the physical body.

Gender and the Fourfold Human Being

Anthroposophy also provides a number of insights regarding gender and the four-fold nature of the human being. The gender of the physical body is relatively simple to determine: in most cases, human beings are physically identified as either male or female at birth, based on anatomy. Intriguingly, Steiner claims that the etheric body of an individual is of the opposite gender as his or her physical body. That is, a man's etheric body is female, and a woman's etheric body is male (Steiner, 2011, p. 33). In this way, the physical and etheric bodies balance one another.

Steiner makes it clear that spiritual science is an appropriate lens to address the ever-evolving controversies that confront humanity on earth. The transgender issue is no exception.

Although the astral and ego bodies are not gendered, Michaela Glöckler suggests that the functioning of the astral body is significantly impacted by gender. In her essay, "Sex and Destiny: Guideposts on the Path to Homosexuality and Heterosexuality," Glöckler provides a very thorough study on the role of gender as it relates to the physical, etheric, and astral bodies. She notes that on the physical level, male bodies have an outward gesture. For instance, men have more resonant voices, due to thicker vocal chords; they have more body hair projecting outward; their reproductive parts reside outside the body; sperm is excreted. Conversely, female bodies have a more inward gesture: female bodies are generally rounder and more insulated; the reproductive parts reside inside the body; the

ovum remains inside the body, and dissolves if not fertilized promptly. These outward/inward gestures take the opposite form in the etheric body. This can be seen in the life forces, particularly the thinking forces. To put it somewhat simplistically, men are more prone to an inward gesture in their thinking forces. Men are more likely to "keep their thoughts to themselves" and think in a more "calm" and "systematic" way (Glöckler, 2014b, p. 330). On the other hand, women's thinking forces may be more "flexible, spontaneous, reactive, and even ejaculatory" (p. 330).

Glöckler also makes several important points regarding the effect of gender on one's astral constitution:

On the astral level, greater muscle strength and mobility as well as more body hair and deeper voices indicate that the astral body incarnates more deeply into the physical-etheric constitution in men than in women. This means that a woman's astral body connection to her thinking is livelier and more independent of the body. By contrast, a man's thought life is less astrally imbued and therefore more abstract, which is why men's emotional reactions, although perhaps more libidinal, are less verbal... It is easier for men to distance themselves inwardly from their problems and devote themselves to routine tasks. Women, on the other hand, may find it very difficult to stop thinking about emotional issues. (Glöckler, 2014b, p. 330)

The picture provided by anthroposophy is one in which gender works in a very sophisticated way, affecting not only the physical body, but the etheric and the astral body as well.

When we view gender as a complex force uniting and balancing the four bodies of the human being, we begin to understand why transgender people experience such a profound sense of dysphoria, extending beyond the physical body and affecting also the life forces and soul forces. As scholar and Waldorf educator Cat Russell states in her essay “Loving Relations, Ethical Choices”:

Using Steiner’s observation that the ‘normal’ incarnation involves a complementarity of gender between the soul and the body, we can speculate that this balance may be somehow altered in the case of the transgender individual, leading to profound feelings of dissatisfaction with life and particularly with gender roles.

(Russell, 2014, p. 305)

Russell continues:

How can we view this phenomenon through the lens of anthroposophy? If we hypothesize that it is possible for a human to be incarnated with etheric and physical bodies of the same gender, we have a picture of what the situation might be like for the transsexual person. Since it is presumably impossible to change the gender of the etheric body, the transsexual person is left no satisfactory choice but to change the outer physical body to restore the feeling of gender balance between the physical and etheric bodies. (p. 312)

Gender Dysphoria and Karma

Steiner asserts that reincarnation was not possible until dual sexuality had become established on earth (Steiner, 2011, p. 27). With only one type of human being, there was no point in reincarnation—it was not possible to return to earth and have a different experience. Now, in our current stage in human evolution, we incarnate alternately as male and female, which allows us to work toward a greater understanding of human experience overall and to strive for ever greater perfection and truth (pp. 40-41). As an essential component, we set for ourselves (prior to incarnating into a physical body), circumstances to overcome during our lifetime. As stated in *Unbornness*, by Peter Selg,

[B]efore birth, complex and even harsh biographies are arranged, including countless circumstances of illness, which must occur later, so that something essential may be endured and overcome. (Selg, 2010, pp. 36-37)

From this vantage point, it is evident that incarnating into the physical body of a transgender person would be a worthwhile challenge to set for oneself. The gender dysphoria experienced by the transgender community requires individuals to grapple with their physical, etheric, and soul forces to find internal balance. Additionally, according to Steiner, the very purpose of gender is to understand self and other, and, eventually, the universal human, which transcends gender. Transgender people are particularly well-positioned to take up this challenge, and move humanity forward on this path. Incarnating into a transgender experience requires a person to extensively investigate both femininity and masculinity, recognize social and cultural biases regarding gender, and advocate for change that allows for greater individual freedom regardless of gender.

WORKING WITH TRANSGENDER STUDENTS IN THE WALDORF SCHOOL

As established in the previous section, transgender students face a significant karmic challenge in achieving a balanced state between their physical, etheric, and astral bodies. Yet, in addition to this intrinsic challenge, many transgender students also face social, cultural, and political obstacles. Because of these factors, transgender youth represent an extremely at-risk population. As stated in *Safe Is Not Enough: Better Schools for LGBTQ Students*, even among the LGBTQ community, “transgender students are the subgroup that faces the greatest risks physically, psychologically, and academically at school... [T]ransgender students are often the last group under the LGBTQ umbrella to have their needs addressed adequately by educators” (Sadowski, 2016, p. 81). While statistics regarding transgender teens vary, PFLAG NYC provides some reliable statistics regarding LGBTQ youth: LGBTQ teens are 8.5 times more likely to report having attempted suicide and 5.9 times more likely to report depression; about two thirds of LGBTQ students report having been harassed within the last school year; LGBTQ teens are overrepresented in foster care, juvenile detention, and among homeless youth; they are twice as likely to say they do not plan to finish high school (PFLAG, 2016).

Some of the social, cultural, and political challenges facing youth are easy to identify. For instance, legislation that mandates students use bathrooms corresponding with their biological gender as assigned at birth (rather than their gender identity), is a direct example of limiting the rights of transgender students. However, many examples are much more subtle. For instance, in the school setting, children may be greeted with, “good morning boys and girls,” or asked to sit up tall in their desks, “like princes and princesses.” From a very young age, the toys, colors, clothing, and countless other items children are presented with are, in some ways, based on gender. These gestures are not intended to be oppressive or unkind! Yet, it is precisely this automatic assumption of a gender binary world which makes the experience of gender dysphoria so alienating. As a final point, we must recognize that when we discuss working with transgender students, we actually mean working with any and all students: it is unrealistic to assume that a teacher would intuit which students might be struggling with gender identity.

With these challenges and statistics in mind, I would like to raise the question: How can we, as educators, guide children through the grades and prepare them for life as healthy individuals? At the same time, as Waldorf educators, we are also the advocates for protected childhood; even as we sympathize with these complicated issues and strive to meet students with reverence and compassion, how can we avoid awakening and intellectualizing these issues at too young an age? For instance, the teacher can work to be increasingly sensitive to gender diversity and refrain from making gendered comments. Yet, to address the situation too directly with children could also be problematic. For instance, to bring a young child’s consciousness to gender distinctions, to ask the child to question, discuss, or analyze his or her gender identity, could very well be confusing or frightening. While overt discussion might be appropriate in a situation in which the child brings up or debates her own gender identity, in most cases, our approach must be a careful balance between acceptance and protection, between the explicit and the implicit.

Indications from Steiner

We must first recognize that “gender identity” was not a known term in Steiner’s day. Naturally enough, Steiner did not specify how we should work with

transgender students. However, some of Steiner’s pedagogical indications regarding sex education may be relevant to our question of how to approach gender identity.

Yet, even as we proceed in this direction, we should also note that Steiner’s views on gender are quite progressive, while his views on sexuality are far more moderate. Consider the following passage in relation to gender roles:

All the more radical, therefore, was Rudolf Steiner when, in creating the first Waldorf school out of the ashes of World War I, he suggested that girls and boys should share classes for all 12 or 13 years of their elementary and high school education. More radical still was his insistence that both genders learn the same skills: Boys should learn to knit and weave, girls to build engines and survey plots of land. (Gerwin, 2014, p. 11)

Contrast the above with this assessment of Steiner’s ideology concerning sexuality:

Steiner would advocate neither for an extremely repressive nor for an overly permissive stance toward sexuality... Steiner did not preach asceticism or celibacy, nor did he advocate that sexual urges be sublimated into art or spirituality. (Russell, 2014, p. 82)

Both in terms of coeducation and of “the woman question,” Steiner was very progressive for his time regarding gender. In terms of sex and sexuality, his views can be regarded as non-conservative moderate, in relation to his time.

In Steiner’s picture of gender’s evolution through past, present, and future human history, in a future era humans transcend gender.

Steiner’s stance regarding sex education, which he states quite clearly, is that sexuality, specifically anything to do with “lust for power or eroticism” (Steiner, 2011, p. 80), should not be discussed in schools. He believed that these topics “take their course below the surface of conscious life” and are not topics for the classroom. He further states, “The worst possible way of dealing with [sexual impulses], however, is to talk a lot about these things, especially with the children themselves, and to put all kinds of theoretical ideas in their heads” (p. 138).

What educators should do, Steiner posits, is awaken in the child at a young age a feeling for beauty. He states:

When you lead children to feel the beauty and the glory of sunrise and sunset, to be sensitive to the beauty of flowers and to the majesty of thunder and lightning, when, in short, you develop in them the aesthetic sense, you are doing far more for them than if you were to give them the sex education which it has now become customary to give children at the earliest age and which is often carried to absurd lengths. A feeling for beauty, an aesthetic approach to the world—these are the things that restrain eroticism within its proper limits. (Steiner, 2011, pp. 62-63)

With Steiner’s views of sex education in mind, it is possible to identify some foundational pedagogical elements to guide our thinking. Clearly, we must be mindful not to awaken, intellectualize, or eroticize. We could, however, view the natural world as a means of imparting these lessons. Additionally, we could work to instill a sense of beauty and reverence for relevant phenomena.

If we apply these ideas to the issue of gender identity, we find there are ample aspects of the natural world which may aid us in guiding children. For instance, in the fourth grade zoology blocks, it is possible to examine the complex ways in which gender functions in the animal kingdom. Many worms, for instance, are hermaphroditic, while there is a species of frog in which gender is determined not by genes, but by the temperature range at which the egg develops. Similarly, in the fifth grade botany blocks, it is possible to explore the myriad ways in which plants reproduce: some plants have male and female members, but some are asexual. In both the plant and animal kingdom we can find examples of species that transition from one gender to another during the course of their lifetime. To examine this aspect of the natural world, with reverence, is certainly a pedagogically sound way to approach gender identity.

[A]ccording to Steiner, the very purpose of gender is to understand self and other, and, eventually, the universal human, which transcends gender. Transgender people are particularly well-positioned to take up this challenge, and move humanity forward on this path.

Education: Body, Soul, and Spirit

In the introduction to *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Essays on Human Sexuality and the Education of Youth in Waldorf Schools*, Douglas Gerwin asserts that, in teaching students about human development and sexuality, the Waldorf teacher must consider body, soul, and spirit. He states:

The purpose or desired outcome of a program on the teaching of human sexuality, seen from a spiritual perspective, is to arrive at an understanding of the human being as a whole human being. This goes well beyond merely embracing both genders in oneself to considering the much larger question of the human being as a microcosm of the entire macrocosm. (Gerwin, 2014, p. 21)

Gerwin then provides a detailed account of how the Waldorf teacher could approach education of the physical body, the soul, and spirit through each stage of child development. In the context of our current discussion, Gerwin’s approach and insights provide a highly relevant and detailed framework for approaching the issue of gender identity.

In terms of the physical body, Gerwin states, sexual education is important in preventing pregnancy and disease. When we consider the types of education needed to support the physical health of transgender students, our attention must focus around habits of self-care and hygiene to counter dysphoria-induced neglect. That is, because teens who experience gender dysphoria may feel disconnected or even repelled by their own physical body, they may need more direct instruction regarding proper physical care and hygiene. Additionally, transgender youth are an at-risk group in terms of inflicting self-harm and substance abuse; educating students on the dangers of these behaviors also requires our attention.

Gerwin also explains why a Waldorf approach to human sexuality needs to take into account the soul, or, more colloquially, self-esteem. He writes, “to be successful from the perspective of social and emotional health, the purpose or desired outcome of a program on the teaching of human sexuality needs to cultivate in students a sense of self-worth, confidence, security, empathy for others, reliability, trustworthiness, and

freedom from fear and anxiety” (p. 17). These same goals are certainly true when we consider the healthy soul development of the transgender student. Gerwin explains that this soul development is most effectively done with “regular and disciplined practice of the arts” (p. 19). He makes a thorough and convincing argument explaining that the arts—from painting, to drama, to horseback riding—are absolutely the right tools for achieving steadfastness of soul.

Finally, as Waldorf teachers, we must also strive to educate the spirit. As Gerwin puts it, “at the spiritual level, the purpose of a program on the teaching of human sexuality is to develop a sense of wholeness” (p. 23). This aspect is perhaps the most relevant in terms of meeting the needs of the transgender student. Transgender people often struggle to feel whole: feeling incomplete or malformed is the central issue presented by gender dysphoria. Bringing a picture of humanity as a great whole, within which we all represent a small part of the complete human experience, may be deeply meaningful for the transgender student. A strong internal picture of wholeness—the wholeness of humanity encompassing limitless variations within individual experience—is precisely the healing picture we strive to present to all youth.

Resources for Working with Transgender Youth

While indications from Steiner, as well as thoughtful commentary by contemporary anthroposophists, do provide a framework for addressing the complexity of gender in a pedagogically sound way, there are also resources outside of Waldorf education that are not to be overlooked. One relevant resource for teachers and administrators is the recent book, *Safe is Not Enough: Better Schools for LGBTQ Students*. In this book, education scholar and author Michael Sadowski offers many practical resources for addressing the question how to work with transgender students in school settings. The book describes the evolution of policies and practices related to working with LGBTQ youth over the past few decades and identifies several public school districts that have developed and implemented clear and progressive policies for addressing LGBTQ issues. For instance, the Los Angeles Unified School District created a policy describing in detail all the ways in which it will address the needs of transgender students, from record-keeping to confidentiality to participation in sports. This document could be quite helpful to any Waldorf school aiming to bring clarity or create a policy for working with transgender students. Similarly, there are several existing curricula, such as the “Welcoming

Schools” and “Ready, Set, Respect!” that aim to bring an age-appropriate LGBTQ inclusivity and awareness to the classroom. We should note that the lesson plans, handouts, and reading lists offered by these programs may not always align with the pedagogical views of Waldorf schools. Similarly, other impulses—such as raising consciousness regarding certain topics and involving children in direct conversation and activism at a young age—certainly conflict with traditional anthroposophic ideas of healthy child development that refrain from intellectualizing emotional and other experiences at an early age. However, as leaders in education, we must not stick our heads in the ground, but rise to meet the challenges of modern day education. Important policies, practices, and curricula related to the treatment of transgender students are being developed. We may choose to address these issues in a different way, with guidance from spiritual science, but to ignore this movement altogether would be a disservice to our students.

Recommendations for the Waldorf School

In conclusion, several things are clear regarding the pedagogically correct approach for addressing transgender issues in the Waldorf school. First, we must be mindful of Steiner’s assertion that children are genderless until the change of teeth. In parent education, in our classrooms, and in our behavior toward the children we should strive to make no distinction between boy and girl children until at least age seven. Next, we should remember to educate body, soul, and spirit. With regard to the body, we must teach health and hygiene practices to the children, with special attention to those who may experience dysphoria toward their physical bodies. In regard to the soul, we must immerse the child in experiences of art and nature. Additionally, we can lean on the plant and animal kingdom to provide many important lessons about the natural versatility of gender and reproduction. This should be done with the greatest possible reverence. Finally, we must strive to educate the spirit, by working always from the whole to the parts and find the wholeness that comes from infinite variation. Furthermore, while we should always follow the guiding principles of anthroposophy in regards to child development, we must also be aware of progress made outside of the Waldorf world and utilize the aspects which are pedagogically sound.

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Jack Palmer is a class teacher at a Waldorf-inspired public charter school on the Big Island of Hawai'i. He has earned his B.A. at Lewis and Clark College, in Portland, Oregon, where he majored in literature, and is currently pursuing a master's in education and Waldorf teaching certification through Antioch University. Having started his teaching career with Teach for America by serving inner city youth in New Orleans, Jack is strongly dedicated to Waldorf education, as well as to public education reform.