

## Education as an Art

Published by the Waldorf Schools of North America  
Vol.32, No. 2 – Spring/Summer 1974

Wish, Wonder, Surprise

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In seventh grade English lessons, a study is made of the themes, Wish, Wonder and Surprise. Rudolf Steiner indicated that these would be important avenues of exploration for young people just reaching adolescence. In teaching seventh graders, one becomes quickly aware of the richness of their emotional life but also of its chaotic quality. They are up one minute, down the next; they love the world, hate the world; laughter and tears come tumbling out, one after the other. How is the young person to find balance? How is he to learn to find perspective in his dialogues with the world?

The breadth of the Waldorf curriculum tries to meet these problems from many vantage points. This intriguing study of Wish, Wonder and Surprise, I discovered, is one of the most direct ways. We can ponder the three words - wish, wonder, surprise - for many hours. We can ask ourselves as teachers what is really expected of us here. The study goes under the guise of a writing block, so certainly it is a means to study the difference in style between a wish, a statement of wonder, and the description of a surprise. But soon, as one begins with one's students to explore these themes, these attitudes of life, a whole mysterious landscape comes into view.

Wish, what really is the nature of the wish? Where does it come from? Where does it go to? The wish, we established, comes from within oneself and goes toward the outer world. We began to discover the many kinds of wishes. The most obvious, of course, is the wish for oneself, and here we could begin to distinguish between this and its extreme, desire or greed. Then we could see that one can wish for something for someone else. This could take the more subtle form of a prayer. Further, one can make an impersonal wish that could affect the world at large.

The students dug into the personal wish with gusto. Most of their stories were deviations from the archetypal personal wish expressed in "The Fisherman and his Wife." This theme of man or woman wishing to have more and more power until even God is challenged, repeats itself in most cultures. In the Old Testament stories it appears with Lucifer, who tries to take over God's throne and who finds himself, with St. Michael's help, transformed into the serpent. It appears again in the Tower of Babel, where men's desire for God's power results in the division of the one tongue into many languages, thus making communication more difficult. The theme can be enlarged to include curiosity: the wish for knowledge that is forbidden, the Fall of Adam and Eve or the legend of Pandora's box. This whole subject of extending wishes into rebellion of authority is very close to the adolescent's heart, and it was interesting to see what terrible endings were the result of this for their heroes.

When we turned to wishes for someone else, the class was confronted with a greater challenge. Now they had to step outside themselves and deal with another realm of experience. There was no gusto in this assignment. The mood was pensive and quiet.

We turned next to surprise. O what a relief! The class found this to be easier, more familiar. Everyone loves a surprise, a mystery. They wrote these with relish and loved a sneaky twist at the end. Where did the surprise come from? Outside - from the world. It came onto or at the person. What a totally different experience from wishing! Whereas the wish streamed out from the heart into the world, expressing a yearning or need, the surprise came from the world and superimposed itself on the person.

The most subtle of the three themes was wonder. When I introduced wonder to the class, it was very hard to distinguish it from a certain element of surprise. The students had to look at it completely

differently. They had to distinguish very carefully, had to go through a certain refinement of the emotional life to see if they could experience wonder. Waldorf education is built around the sense of wonder. Surely, from the nursery years on, we try to foster the sense of wonder at the world. But now, in seventh grade, as we consciously examined these emotions, we looked at it as if for the first time. Where did wonder come from? Well, certainly it came from within the human being, but it also came as a meeting with the outside world. Some of the students felt that they could not really feel wonder. We discovered that you can talk about wonder but it is quite another thing to completely feel oneself in an act of wonder. We learned that one has to be open to the world or one could not feel real wonder.

We tried writing compositions about wonder. Some students could bring to birth a real feeling; others were having great difficulty. We left this study, but I was not completely satisfied that we had done enough. We certainly learned that to fully explore wish, wonder and surprise, actually meant to sense the world, the human being, and the meeting of the two. It was in essence to begin to have a feeling for the universe and man's place in it.

After pondering this study for several weeks, I decided to try something more. We took one week, the last week of school. On the first day I told the class something of the lives of Henry David Thoreau and his friends, Emerson, Alcott, Hawthorne, and a bit of the times they lived in and how they met their challenges. The students became caught up in the biographies of these fascinating individuals. In connection with Thoreau's journals kept at Walden Pond, I told them that we were going to do something similar. Every day we were going to go to the bog on our school land, find a spot, and sit silently at that spot for twenty minutes. They could bring no pencils, no paper, and there had to be absolute silence. Their first reaction was, "How could they possibly sit quietly in one place for twenty minutes?" They were sure they would see everything the first day. I then showed them studies that people had done over a lifetime of one small aspect of the world. There was a collection of hundreds of photographs of different snow crystals. (1) We looked at them and talked about the subtle differences, about their similarities to geometrical drawings we had done, with plant forms they had studied. Then we looked at a book which delicately treated the subject of water. (2) We looked at the photographs of water in motion, of the imprint of water on sand, the similarity of the map of water in a delta to a tree and to the lungs of a human being. This recalled our earlier study of physiology, when we studied the development of man and his relationship to nature.

In order to feel the quality of the journal they were going to keep, I showed them a beautiful book, Gwen Frostig's *For Those Who See*. The delicate drawings of nature, the wispy treatment of ferns and butterflies, the interesting quality of the paper, all of it aroused the enthusiasm of the students. By now they were wondering whether twenty minutes a day at the bog would be enough.

I explained that after we came back from the bog, we would quietly sit down at our desks. On the board would be two short quotations from Thoreau. These were to be written on the left-hand page of the small book each was making. We would discuss these quotations the next day after they had had some time to think about them. On the right side they would write their own observation or thought that had come to them at the bog. They would frame the page with illustrations, leaf prints or designs, so that there would be a continuous feeling throughout the book of what we were experiencing. We would call it *The Book of Nature*.

We left and walked down to the bog. Everyone found a spot and the adventure began. Absorbed young people, sitting on logs, lying under trees or berry bushes, camouflaged in tall grasses, could be seen. At the end of twenty minutes they felt it wasn't enough time, but we adhered to the rules. When we entered the classroom, we discussed Thoreau's statement, "We are what we see." This became the theme for the week.

Day by day the experiences deepened. The young people's conversations changed radically. They became very sensitive to the differences in their spot of bog because of the change in clouds or

temperature. They spoke of how much one could observe when one was very quiet. Furthermore they were intrigued by the effort of condensing a thought into a few meaningful words. By the last morning they definitely felt this was only a beginning. Their books were beautifully done, and I as teacher felt that we had really experienced wonder. As a class, we were deeply changed by the experience. A sense of stillness and reverence settled over our otherwise active, bustling group of twenty-five. For a time we felt united in beauty, in awe - an inkling of what Rudolf Steiner might have hinted at when he suggested the study. In contemplating our Waldorf education and him who inspired it, I, too, was overcome with wonder and could only utter heartfelt thanks.

(1) W.A. Bentley and W.J. Humphreys, *Snow Crystals* (New York: Dover, 1962)

(2) Theodor Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos* translated by Olive Whicher and Johanna Wrigley (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1965)