

Elan Leibner

The following essay is adapted from an address delivered at the graduation of Sound Circle Center's Class of 2011 in Seattle, WA.

Dear graduating class, colleagues, families, and friends,

We are gathered here on the eve of Pentecost, and though what I want to bring today is not overtly related to this festival, I would say at the outset that the image of people gathered in a circle, inspired by a spiritual fire, turning outwards and devoting their lives to the spreading of an inwardly experienced truth is very much what stands at the core of Waldorf education as we should strive to practice it.

The path you have chosen is as noble and worthy an undertaking as there is. Of course, you know that nobility and good intentions carry you only so far. Effort, perseverance, patience, talent will all play a major role in what lies ahead. Your destiny will bring you to certain situations, and we all pray that you will rise to meet them in the right way. The specifics we do not know in advance. But here is what we do know:

The crises of our time are primarily crises of authenticity. In the food we eat, in the thoughts we articulate, in the societal structures we have erected, in the manner we produce, consume, and discard goods, most surely in the education that most children receive today, we have divorced ourselves from both the reality of nature and the nature of reality. Authenticity means that the spiritual and the material, the ideal and the manifest, are in harmony. We call people authentic when their actions and words convey the indelible thrust of their individualities,

norms and traditions (while respected) notwithstanding. We are often willing to forgive them social transgressions of tactlessness or absentmindedness precisely because we sense an authenticity that is precious for being so rare. In their words, as Emerson noted, we hear our own rejected thoughts.¹

The appearance of a person or thing will only then be deemed authentic when we behold in it the underlying spirit. From authentic art, conveying experiences at once intimately personal and vastly universal, to authentic reproductions of ancient crafts, employing the original methods and materials, to such mundane examples as authentic cuisine, meaning utilizing the ingredients and methods of its nominal region, we demand an honest connection between that which is perceived and that which can only be thought.

Authenticity, while often proclaimed, has seen its star decline. The reality that was once evident, then remembered and finally only understood, seems a quaint relic. The conception of nature as whole has been replaced by a conception of nature as a collection of things. The conception of the human being as an embodiment of a divine spark has been replaced by a host of “nothing but”s. The heart is nothing but a pump; the self is nothing but an epiphenomenon of matter, and so on.²

Indeed, with reality as it was once understood in decline, we pride ourselves on the incredible sophistication of the new, virtual reality. Virtual means “almost,” so we have almost reality, and it increasingly seems preferable to actual reality. Children have virtual pets and virtual farms and virtual friends, and parents like them because a virtual

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pet does not soil the rug and virtual friends can be monitored with filters and web cams. A child who plays, if we can call it that, in the virtual playground will not get run over by a car or fall and break a leg. I don't want to go on, but my intention is clear, I think. When I say that the crisis of our times is a crisis of authenticity, I mean that the underpinnings of reality have lost connection with their manifestations, and we look at these manifestations as accidental arrangements, then fancy we can do better. We can rearrange the manifestations for greater convenience and profit.

The sad thing is that we are actually meant to do better, just not in the way we have been understanding that possibility. Doing better means doing authentically, doing in accord with the spiritual essence of the human being and of nature. What is urgently needed is the understanding that nature can no longer heal us on her own, and in fact needs us in order to be healed herself. In the words of Dennis Klocek, Mother Nature is now old. She needs her children to care for her.³ Rather than rearranging the manifestations of reality for convenience and profit, we need to rearrange convenience and profit to accord with reality.

We will have to learn, but also help create, the virtue of reality—a newly emergent, humanized reality—so that virtual reality will not be the final word. We will have to develop heart intelligence so that artificial intelligence is not the final word. To the World Wide Web we must add the World Wise Web, a web of human relationships for those who seek both wisdom and its application.

And where does this idea lead when we look at education? Human nature is not different in this sense from the rest of nature. Convenience and profit now dictate how we approach young human beings, too. On the one side: "Global competition means we have to produce more engineers and programmers!" On the other: "My child's feelings were hurt, so

he doesn't feel like completing his craft project before graduation." The idea that authenticity means identifying a child with his or her own self, not with a profit motive or emotional chicken soup—that idea is almost nowhere to be found.

It would be so very tempting to pronounce here that Waldorf education is the answer to the quest for authenticity in education. Follow the curriculum, best practices, AWSNA self-study guidelines for your school, Sound Circle instructors' methodologies, and voila: Authentic education!

Of course, understood correctly, that Waldorf education is the answer to the quest for authentic education is exactly what I will be saying. But I would like to characterize Waldorf education more as a

verb than a noun or an adjective. I would like to ask you to "waldorf" with your students rather than "give them a Waldorf education." Using nouns as verbs is known as verbing. I once saw a cartoon that said that "verbing weirds the language." It seems apt, however, because in making Waldorf into a verb we come closer to its spirit, and hence to its potential authenticity. I believe that, in the long term, we may be better off ditching the name altogether and just empowering ourselves to educate. The curriculum that has been taught in Waldorf schools is wonderful, wise beyond compare. But even this remarkable achievement can become a burden if the person teaching it is slaving under it like one whose spirit has been shackled by tradition.

What is the alternative to predetermined do's and don'ts?

See the child, love the child, know yourself: Now teach. This is the immensely simple and so endlessly difficult maxim of authentic education. For what it includes, and also for what it excludes, it comes close to pedagogical anarchy if applied selfishly—and to a truly

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human education when applied with humility and courage. Let's look at those exhortations. See the child, love the child, know yourself: Now teach.

See the child.

Every tuft of hair, every gesture, every speech impediment or artistic talent is a sign. A sign in the sense that words are signs, pointing towards meaning. But words are someone's words, and someone else has to understand them. The tuft of hair, the tilted head, the nervous laughter—they are the speaking of the child's invisible spirit. You have to permeate them with the light of your mind, to read the signs together into speech if you are to see the child so that you can help connect the spirit with its instrument—that is, if you are to foster authenticity. The language anthroposophy has given you should help as a set of principles to organize your seeing. Used well, it fosters true beholding. Used badly, it's an obscuring curtain, a nominal classification that absolves you of the charge to see.

And how will you know whether the child is seen, and grows authentic? The child will let you know. Ask every evening, and the answer shall be given unto you.

Love the child.

Though he may not love you—at least not initially. Love even the child you cannot grow to like. Liking is of the soul. It half sleeps and cannot lightly be convinced to vacate the soul dwelling it acquired in the murky past. But love is of the spirit. You may let your actions flow towards what the moment asks of you even if every disliking strand of you begs permission to mock, or cringe, or run away, or blame heredity, nutrition, media, traffic and weather together, or the Montessori kindergarten for all that ails the child. Be like the angel, your angel,

that has stood by you despite all that you have done to make yourself unworthy of angelic love.

And how will you know if you have loved? Love is a peculiar force. The more you give away, the more you have. If it grows within you, you have been giving it away. The child you have loved will form a bond with the Self she means to be. This need not mean without trouble, all confident and happy. But she will confirm the fact that you are on her side as she seeks to find her way. Your relationship will bear the stamp of your love for her, rather than your like or dislike of her. It will grow authentic.

Know yourself.

“Know thou thyself” is an ancient call, an ancient riddle. Who is to know whom? It directs us to the mystery of cognition, which is well beyond the scope of this address. Today I would like to speak of it in a humbler sense. Know yourself, that you are also an embodied Self, that in this embodiment you have talents, weaknesses, abilities, and disabilities. Launch into the teacher's journey with warmth, enthusiasm, and determination. Please, please do not attempt to do everything as well as the teachers in your teacher education courses have demonstrated. You were given examples of lessons by people whose special strength is music, or drawing, or movement. They were not all as musical as the musician or as talented a storyteller as the storytelling master. What made them good enough to be invited to teach you was that they developed their gifts.

So in your first year or two, concentrate on developing and nurturing a teaching style that builds on your gifts. Are you a poet? Teach math in rhyme, geography through the poetry of the regions you wish to explore, and history with ample samples of the dramatic, the epic or the lyrical. Are you a lover of nature? There

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is English in the trees and mountains of your community, physics in the meandering brook, and history in rocks and wildlife. You are given the freedom to meet your students' needs in a manner unique to the uniqueness of the day and tasks at hand. When you have built a teaching hut from which to set forth every day, then surely you can work on developing those talents that you did not receive as a gift of destiny. Nature's lover can engage his dormant love of music, and the poet can brave her fear of colored chalk or movement. Live on the edge of the comfortable, enlarging it.

But first get comfortable. Ask for help. Accept the help. True help is of the same nature as the teaching we are looking for; it seeks to help you find your voice. At times it may simply mean that someone else will carry music, nature, or poetry for you. As a seasoned teacher I can promise you that people like me long to be asked for help by their new colleagues. Take advantage of them. A mentor worth his oats will strive to help you teach the way you ought to teach, connecting your gifts of destiny with the task at hand: that is, to teach authentically.

So know yourself, and love the child you've learned to see. With your colleagues, form the Waldorf Pentecostal circle of those who seek self-knowledge, a new seeing, and Love in its noblest, most spiritual sense. Together, you will know more, see more, and love more.

Now teach!

References

- 1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance" from *Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1985).
- 2 For an enlightening discussion of the absurdity of these "nothing but"s see Georg Kühlewind's essay, "Theories of Consciousness" in *Feeling Knowing* (Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press, 1993).
- 3 Dennis Klocek spoke these words during a seminar for mentors held in Seattle in April, 2011.

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