

Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner

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Editor's note:

As part of the Waldorf100 celebrations, a new and greatly enhanced record was published of Rudolf Steiner's meetings with the teachers at the first Waldorf school, including a new introduction and extended commentaries by Christof Wiechert, former Leader of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum. The following article is drawn from his introductions to each of the six years during which Steiner met with the teachers, sometimes late into the night, at the school in Stuttgart. These commentaries, along with his more detailed notes and the actual transcripts of the faculty meetings, are now available in English as a special section in the Online Waldorf Library of the Research Institute for Waldorf Education (www.waldorflibrary.org). We are grateful to the Pädagogische Forschungsstelle and the Rudolf Steiner Verlag for granting RIWE permission to translate and publish these introductions and commentaries.

Introduction

Reading the transcripts of the faculty meetings brings us closer to the way the first Waldorf School came into being than any cycle of pedagogical lectures can do. We witness this education in the making, and with it the birth of the movement as a whole. They are a must-read for anybody who has Waldorf education at heart.

These meetings show us Rudolf Steiner in action, not only as Director of the school, but also as a colleague who was first among equals, giving shape to the pedagogy during the years of his leadership from 1919 until 1925. There was great fluidity in the way the pedagogy was developed; there was no fixed, preconceived concept. We should also take into consideration that the social and economic circumstances of the time could not have been more adverse to creating a new school. A modern-style feasibility study would have flatly declared the venture impossible.

Three things can be learned from these meetings, if one is inclined to take them to heart.

First of all, we can find original indications and content. There are large-scale outlines for the curriculum of the individual years, with delightful gold nuggets sprinkled in, such as this recommendation for eighth grade reading material: "Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity", by J. G. Herder (*Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*). Anyone who actually takes up this recommendation will be delighted to find that children of this age relish the stories contained in this book; the ideas meet eighth graders exactly where they are.

Steiner repeatedly challenged teachers to develop grammar in dialogue with the students, gave incredible insights into the way Shakespeare's dramas affect us, indicated at what age drama is appropriate, made suggestions about reading out loud versus telling stories (reading would require

more preparation). He also gave indications for individual subjects and how to develop curricula for them. We can follow how all these suggestions came into being. In addition, controversial remarks regarding contemporary figures and events provide rich food for thought.

Secondly, we find teaching habits and practices that Steiner corrected or criticized. Steiner carried on a never-ending crusade against the traditional, teacher-centered style: Don't simply lecture from the front, doling out intellectual information. Converse with the students, bring them in and engage them, don't hold forth from "Olympian heights." Other things he fought against included sloppiness, tardiness, lukewarm and disengaged teaching. He criticized misplaced esotericism (case in point: children were fooling around early in the morning while teachers were together reciting the weekly verse from his *Calendar of the Soul*). He hoped that, instead of casual nonchalance, "pluck" and team spirit would develop. He repeatedly expressed the hope that teachers would not teach from books and instead would stand in front of the children without notes. He also didn't want teachers to write in their attendance book during lesson time, and he urged them to be involved in the pedagogical work with heart and soul. He even asked them at one point not to perform the Christmas plays because they were expressing more enthusiasm for their performance than for their teaching. All these we can recognize as practices that continue in our schools to this day.

Thirdly, we meet Steiner in a new role, not as a recognized lecturer, but as a practical man in action. We see how he listened to the teachers and took in what they had to say; we experience his fine sense of humor and quick repartee, his astounding universality of knowledge in every field. Reading these meeting reports, we can even get a sense for his intense presence of mind.

When teachers complained about the behavior of some students, we witness Steiner's soothing mildness, his empathy and understanding for how children are—"they are just playing pranks, nothing more"—so much so that one feels, "Yes, this is how one ought to treat them."

The economic and social situation after World War I and the ensuing revolution in Germany were by no means easy in Stuttgart. Children were neglected at home, many of them had hardly ever been to school. Large numbers came to school without having had breakfast, more than half of them suffered from severe malnutrition. There was insufficient housing for teachers, lack of space for the school, and there were never-ending financial worries. Such circumstances contributed to the severe crises that rattled the school as it was developing. Due to these dire circumstances, we experience Steiner also as a crisis manager who could analyze problems with clarity and steer the teachers toward solutions with a firm hand, a leader who wouldn't shy away from confronting shortcomings, holding up a clear mirror to the teachers when necessary.

When one takes into consideration that this was also the time when an attempt was being made to put Steiner's Threefold Social Organism for social reform into practice, an attempt that led to vehement attacks on Steiner, it is astonishing that the school survived at all. In fact, it was nothing short of a miracle, made possible by the indefatigable energy of the first teachers, who made great sacrifices and gave their all so the school would succeed, and who, on top of that, were often told by Steiner that even that wasn't enough.

Reading these meeting transcripts can bring one to the realization that seeds were sown in those years the fruits of which we can still harvest today. However, the trees that bear these fruits need tending in order for them to remain fruitful.

These conferences have the power to awaken the enthusiasm necessary to do this tending, if we have the heart.

The First Year (1919 – 1920)

(17 faculty meetings, from 8 September 1919 to 31 July 1920)

At the beginning of the school year, there were 253 students, 143 of them “Waldorf children” (children whose parents worked for the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory) and 110 “others”. By the end of the school year the number of “Waldorf children” had dwindled to 137, but the number of “others” had risen to 151. These numbers were published by E. A. Karl Stockmeyer in the *Waldorfschulnachrichten*, the news bulletin of the first Waldorf School (“Das erste Jahr der Freien Waldorfschule in Stuttgart” [The First Year of the Independent Waldorf School in Stuttgart], number 17 of 1 September 1920, p. 397).

It was September 1919, and the upheavals of the war and the German revolution had only just passed. Many children were traumatized, seriously malnourished, wild, and lacking classroom experience. They came in either directly, without kindergarten experience or with only fragmentary education due to the upheavals of war. Many parents couldn’t afford to pay tuition and were not employed by the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory, but their children were covered nevertheless by the firm. Two boys died during the first school year.

The school itself was poor, too. Parents were asked to carry the cost of the extra lighting needed during the winter months. Money was scarce everywhere. Living conditions for teachers were frightfully primitive, school supplies were limited to the bare minimum.

The opening ceremony, however, was extremely festive. There were meaningful speeches, there was music, and the event was attended by hundreds of people. The mood was highly celebratory. For Emil Molt, the director of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory and founder of the school, it was the crowning moment of his biography. It is reported that Rudolf Steiner had never appeared as happy and relaxed as when he was on his way to the founding of the Waldorf School.

After a two-week preparatory course, the teachers were full of ideals, hopes, and expectations. Would they manage? On the last day of the course, Steiner added a personal remark, “For me, the Waldorf School will be *ein wahrhaftes Sorgenkind* [a child I need to be concerned about].” In a lecture to the Anthroposophical Society in Stuttgart he used similar words. It was as if he had perceived that even though the educational course he had given had engaged the teachers intensely, it would take a lot of time for teachers to build up the necessary skills. And so it was: the first year, which Steiner

had called a trial year (for the teachers, that is), would test the enormous aspirations of this new art of education, especially considering the adverse conditions of postwar Germany.

So these were the tasks of the first year: gain pedagogical experience, figure out what to do with unexpected student behavior, try not to panic in the face of a host of pedagogical and methodological questions about which they were clueless. Steiner gave advice, soothed ruffled feelings, observed the most difficult children at Christmas time and concluded there was much that could be done with them, and repeatedly urged teachers to nurture the relationship with the children.

By the end of the school year, the projected growth for the following year amounted to 160 new students, even though no money had been set aside to appoint new teachers or acquire the necessary new buildings. At first Steiner threatened to institute a cap on the number of children they could accept. However, money was somehow found, teachers appeared, and schoolrooms materialized, somewhere or other. They were able to go on, even though conditions continued to be tough both for the students and the teachers.

The Second Year (1920 – 1921)

(7 meetings, from 2 September 1920 to 26 May 1921)

Two teachers were needed for the new first grade, and the sixth grade had to be split in half because it had over 50 children. A ninth grade was added, for which Steiner gave elementary curriculum indications. This ninth grade was small because many parents who worked at the Waldorf Astoria factory preferred enrolling their children in apprenticeship programs rather than send them to a high school which was an unknown quantity for them.

During the course of the year, it became clear that this would be the only Waldorf school for now, and that no new schools could be founded in Germany for the time being. All available resources were tied to Stuttgart, which meant that the basic conditions for founding other schools were increasingly tenuous. Rudolf Steiner visited only a few times compared to the previous year, and while he was there, pedagogical difficulties were brought up and solutions considered.

Right at the beginning, Rudolf Steiner clarified his relationship to the other teachers and the school. He said his effectiveness would depend on the attitude of the teachers. He could be truly effective only if teachers would take up his suggestions in freedom. Since he worked as an esoteric teacher, he would never act on the basis of his own authority or impose his will. Everything would depend on the free will of the teachers to translate his suggestions into action.

At the end of the school year Steiner analyzed the ill will which had been mounting against Emil Molt as a person. Herr Molt was identified with the Waldorf Astoria factory, and still filled the role of employer. The teachers felt he applied this role also to them, and they thought it inappropriate. Steiner had to explain to the teachers that the firm itself had contributed next to nothing to the founding and running of the school, and that financing the venture was almost exclusively the work of Emil Molt himself. They should be glad to be allied with him, not with the factory. The outcome

was that the Waldorf School Association was founded in the spring of 1920, a necessary step for the school to gain independence from the Waldorf Astoria firm.

The Third Year (1921 – 1922)

(8 meetings, from 17 June 1921 to 10 May 1922)

The school kept growing. Next to two first grades, grades three and five also had to be split in half, and a tenth grade was added. There were now 15 classes, including Dr. Karl Schubert's "extra help" class, and 30 teachers for over 500 children. After two school years the number of students had almost doubled, and they were still housed in the same small quarters as before.

A special event this year was the school evaluation by the local school inspector. The teachers were worried; they thought the inspector was not well disposed towards the school and wouldn't take the relationship between teachers and students into account. Steiner suggested they write articles to counter the main points of criticism. A year later, however, Steiner read the actual report by Superintendent Eisele, and concluded that the inspector had been sympathetic to the undertaking and had approached both school and students with insight and understanding. Steiner was perturbed by the way teachers had received this report, especially because he thought some of Eisele's criticisms were to the point, and he told the teachers so in no uncertain terms.

The general economic situation was a great cause for concern. Inflation was climbing to terrifying heights, and "Der Kommende Tag" ("The Coming Day", a corporation which tried to put Threefold Social Organism ideals into practice), led by Emil Leinhas, had trouble staying solvent. On February 25, 1922, therefore, it was decided to pull the Waldorf Astoria holdings out of the share capital of Der Kommende Tag and sell them. Because of the general inflation, this was a risky undertaking. Leinhas preferred fast action and went against the deal which Emil Molt had carefully been brokering. Molt had found a banking consortium willing to take over the stock holdings. Leinhas, however, sold the stock to a discount company in Mannheim, Germany, which spelled the beginning of the end of the Waldorf Astoria factory.

Steiner criticized the lack of response by the teachers to the lukewarm involvement of many of the students, urging teachers again and again to nurture their relationship with the students more actively. Elaborate indications for the curricula of grades 9 and 10 were presented.

At the end of the school year, tenth graders asked for a private audience with Rudolf Steiner, without teachers present. They communicated their concerns to him, complaining that they felt "not seen" by the teachers. The consequences showed in the fourth year.

The Fourth Year (1922 – 1923)

(18 meetings from 20 June 1922 to 8 March 1923)

It is not always easy to gain an impression of what actually happened during this school year, which is generally regarded as a crisis year. It is hard to realize the vehemence of the attacks against Steiner

and anthroposophy at that time. The attacks were massive, aggressive, highly skewed, and in cases where Steiner was attacked, personally defamatory. At the start of the year, however, Steiner began an extensive lecture tour of Germany, covering 12 cities. At the same time, the Threefold Social Movement was being attacked on all fronts. In order to prevent the bankruptcy of Der Kommende Tag, the holdings of the Waldorf Astoria needed to be sold. Helplessly Emil Molt had to watch his beloved factory and employees being taken away from him.

An academic lecture course held in Berlin did more harm than good, according to Steiner, but another academic course, involving seven Waldorf teachers as lecturers and held in the Hague, was more successful. Before the fourth school year began, a large part of the faculty was engaged with the second international congress of the anthroposophical movement in Vienna, the so-called East-West Congress. It was a great success, but the teachers had given it their all and were therefore exhausted even before the beginning of the fourth school year.

In addition, teachers had to deal with an exponential growth in the number of students, so one can assume they felt completely overloaded, inwardly as well as outwardly. The toll of this congress soon became apparent. Teachers could not manage the upper grades, and a number of students were clearly out of control. Some of them were expelled, a decision Steiner regretted but was unable to undo because he saw that the cause of the problems lay more with the teachers than with the students. He lamented the lack of enthusiasm and energy on the part of the teachers, as well as the tense mood and the fact that teachers didn't work well together.

Another stressful task this year was to institute an executive committee. Numerous conferences were held over a long period of time to figure out how to deal with this. Neglected difficulties concerning collaboration among the teachers were brought to light. It was a sheer miracle that, despite these tensions, teachers were able to hold meetings to further expand the curriculum and take up Steiner's further advice and insights about human development.

The school was teetering on the brink, the Threefold Social Organism venture was teetering on the brink, and the Anthroposophical Society was shaken. Only in England and Holland were there promising developments in efforts to open further Waldorf schools.

The Fifth Year (1923 – 1924)

(13 meetings from 30 March 1923 to 27 March 1924)

Minutes from this year's meetings show that the teachers were standing on firmer ground, and that difficulties could be named and worked with. Despite the crises of the previous year, the school was favorably regarded from the outside, so much so that enrollment continued to rise. The new school year started with 21 classes and almost 700 students.

As previously mentioned, Rudolf Steiner developed the school together with the teachers and did not push a preconceived plan in any way. This comes out clearly in the way they dealt with the question of final exams, among other issues. It was decided to hold the final exam at the end of twelfth grade, even though Steiner doubted the outcome of this plan would be successful because he was not sure teachers would practice the necessary economy in their lessons. Steiner didn't develop a

specific Waldorf curriculum for the twelfth grade but suggested instead that the state curriculum requirements be used to prepare students for the final exam.

Many pedagogical problems were studied in depth and dealt with, primarily those concerning the ninth grade. Unexpectedly, one of the members of the executive committee, Paul Baumann, announced in a letter that he was stepping back from this leadership group after only a few months in this function. Steiner discussed this letter with the faculty on the same day the third parallel grade, 5c, was inaugurated, taught by Martha Haebler. All of this happened on the same day that Steiner gave the last of three lectures on the inner work of teachers, *Deeper Insights into Education* (CW 302a). The next day he recast the content of this lecture in meditative form and gave it to the teachers. In this verse, he ties the mystery of human will to the will of Michael, and it has come to be known as the “Second Teachers Meditation”.

After the Christmas holidays and the founding of the General Anthroposophical Society at the Christmas conference in Dornach, the teachers had to find their way with this new organization, meaning the school was not part of the First Class of the School for Spiritual Science. Steiner made it clear that it was up to individual teachers to decide whether to become a member of the School.

The Sixth Year (1924 – 1925)

(Seven meetings from 9 April 1924 to 3 September 1925)

The sixth school year ran from 30 April 1924 to 30 March 1925. It was a stroke of destiny that the closing date of the school year coincided with the day Steiner died. The last time he was able to meet with teachers, however, was on 3 September 1924. Two weeks before his death, he wrote a parting letter to teachers and the students.

In June of 1924, Steiner held an in-depth discussion with the teachers and the first class of twelfth graders about the way they would go about the final exam in the future. It was decided to institute an extra preparatory course, not as a thirteenth grade but as preparation for the final exam. Once they had made this decision, the curriculum of the twelfth grade was developed as the crown of twelve years of education.

The school and the curriculum were now established; no new grade needed to be prepared. The sixth year began with 784 students in 23 grades. Daily worries returned, including complaints about the burden of writing reports. At times, people noticed a slight resignation on Steiner’s part. Pedagogical shortcomings had to be discussed again in the meetings of 19 June and 15 July. Steiner realized that pedagogical skills were lagging behind the needs of the students. A proper relationship between teachers and students was not sufficiently established, and as a result, the morale of teachers and students was not in tune. Steiner complained that teachers were not working on forming ‘psychological pictures’ of their students during his absence. Steiner used words like, “If the school is to continue to exist”, and spoke of “a new beginning, if the Waldorf school wants to go on.” He understood the “new beginning” to mean that the morale of the school needed to be talked about. His words were full of portent. “We need to think seriously how we can grow beyond this, if the Waldorf school is to continue to exist. There has to be a combined effort of good will, perhaps

by having, prior to the beginning of the new school year, a series of teachers' meetings where we can discuss this very thing: the morale of the school." The last two meetings represent both assignment and legacy.

Further detailed commentaries by Christof Wiechert on individual faculty meetings with Rudolf Steiner between September 1919 and September 1925 are available for free downloading at the Online Waldorf Library (OWL) of the Research Institute for Waldorf Education:

www.waldorflibrary.org