

KEEPING IDEALS INTACT

The Waldorf High School: KEEPING IDEALS INTACT

by David Sloan -- Reprinted from *Renewal Magazine*

During an eighth-grade parent meeting this year at the Waldorf School in Boulder, Colorado, parents extolled the virtues of Waldorf education: the freshness, openness and enthusiasm evident in their children; the unflagging devotion of the teachers; the artistic element weaving through every aspect of the curriculum; and the sense of community they had found for their children and for themselves. Then the discussion turned to the future and to how many students were continuing their education in the Waldorf high school. Many parents spoke ardently in support of the high school, but others raised heart-felt concerns.

“My daughter has been in this school for ten years. She says she wants a change...you know, a bigger ‘pond’ where there’s more of a social whirl. If that’s what she wants, how can I say ‘No’?”

“I’m just not sure that a Waldorf high school will prepare my children for the real world.”

“My son has already received what Waldorf has to give. What can a Waldorf high school offer that another good private school couldn’t provide?”

What indeed does the Waldorf high school have to offer today’s youth? Is it a quaint but outmoded relic of an earlier time, or is it a far-sighted antidote to the malaise sapping the energies and imagination of a whole generation?

How one educates teenagers depends largely on how one views this tumultuous phase of life. Some mainstream educators see adolescence as less than it really is: as a simmering rebellion which needs to be quelled before it runs amok, or as an illness that only time can cure. Still others consider the high school years simply as a time of preparation for college or the workplace. It is not surprising then that our high schools begin to resemble armed training camps, or treatment centers, or obedience schools.

Waldorf high school teachers, however, view adolescence as something more than it appears. They recognize it as an important stage of human development. In the teenage years a profound transformation takes place and powerful inner forces for the future are unleashed. Only in the first years of life do children change more dramatically than in their teenage years. In adolescence, for the first time, young people consciously begin to forge their own identities and to fashion their own values. They have inklings of what may become a lifelong aspiration. In adolescence alone do they awaken to feelings simultaneously painful and exhilarating; of something familiar dying within, and of a whole new interior world being born.

What is dying? It is the innocence of childhood. Adolescence is often presented in Waldorf circles by the Biblical image of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. This is indeed a true picture of the dying away of the “paradise consciousness” of childhood. It doesn’t happen all at once. William Blake describes the “prison bars” that begin to close around us already from the moment of birth. By puberty this paradise that was childhood, with the endless days of play, the fertile fantasy life, the lack of self-consciousness, seems but a dream. The loss of the buoyancy and brightness of childhood can turn the teenage years into a period of intense mourning.

What is being born? On a physical level it is the ability to reproduce. The bodies of these young people change so that they are capable of conceiving children. Just as mysteriously, their consciousness transforms,

deepens and becomes more sensitive so that they become capable of conceiving new thoughts. Quite suddenly their inner lives acquire dimensions they never knew existed. It is a bit like walking through one's own old comfortable home and discovering a whole new floor or hidden wing of heretofore unknown rooms, with vast new vistas, as well as dark closets.

So Waldorf educators see in adolescence a convergence of two fundamental human experiences: the loss of childhood with its charmed innocence, and the birth of adulthood with its potential for creation. The high school teacher then must be both a midwife and a grief counselor, attending to the birth and to the dying away that are occurring within the students. In the midst of these traumatic changes, ideals are welling up within the young person. These ideals maintain that the world has meaning, that one's own life also has meaning, and that one can positively influence the world. The adolescent needs to have these ideals recognized and affirmed. He/she needs to have experiences that corroborate them. Hence the young person longs for three fundamental experiences:

- to find meaning in his or her life
- to find human relationships and a sense of connectedness to the world;
- to feel that he or she can make a difference in the world.

Adolescents whose ideals are affirmed and kept intact will of course survive adolescence and become functioning adults. But beyond this they are more likely to achieve mastery over themselves and their destiny. And they are more likely to become healthy adults who continue to grow inwardly long after the physical body has begun to deteriorate.

Unfortunately, today more than ever before, young people are starving for this very nourishment. The great tragedy of secondary schools in our country today can be traced to this single fact: the younger generation's vision of life's transcendent possibilities has shrunk and shriveled into a cynical, passive acceptance of the view that the individual doesn't really count for much and certainly can't make much of a dent in the grand corporate scheme of things. Their longing for inspiration, for affirmation of their ideas, is not being met. Hence, they are becoming insufferably critical or withdrawn and self absorbed.

New York City's Teacher of the Year in 1991, John Taylor Gatto, who has taught in public schools for over 25 years, has said:

"We need to rethink the fundamental premises of schooling and decide what it is we want all children to learn and why. For 140 years this nation has tried to impose objectives downward from a lofty command center made up of 'experts,' from a central elite of social engineers. It hasn't worked because its central premises are mechanical, antihuman, and hostile to family life. Lives can be controlled by machine education, but they will always fight back, with weapons of pathology: drugs, violence, self-destruction, indifference."

Gatto then recites a litany of adverse effects that the public school system has had upon young people: lack of curiosity, weak powers of concentration, little sense of the future or of the past, lack of compassion, rampant materialism, and uneasiness with intimacy.

The Waldorf high school curriculum consciously aims to nurture and encourage adolescent ideals, and to satisfy longing for meaning in the world and self, and for a sense of importance. It seeks with clear intent to avoid (and if necessary to heal) the destructive habits of mind and spirit so common among young people today.

In order to find meaning in the world one must first awaken to the world, to its phenomena. This requires the power of observation. Even adults are seldom observant enough to notice what their spouse or child is wearing on a given day. An adolescent can be almost unconscious of what is going on around him/herself. I once asked my students to close their eyes and tell me the color of the shirt I was wearing. One fellow said, "I don't even know what color shirt I'm wearing!"

So in the Waldorf high school we arouse and sharpen the powers of observation. In a chemistry class the students must describe clearly and precisely what happens when heat is turned up under a beaker of water. In English they must portray an object as commonplace as a pencil or an acorn, noting its color, texture, shape. In art history and anatomy classes in the ninth grade, they study a Greek statue or draw the miracle of the skeletal system. Through this the human form—their human form— becomes a source of wonder and beauty, instead of a cheapened soulless media image.

This training in observation transfers to the social and moral realm. The students learn to observe other people, and to be aware of their needs and problems. A student schooled in observation is more likely to notice that a classmate is feeling ill or “down” and to make a gesture of aid than is one who is lost in a cloud of adolescent self-absorption. Observing the world is a first and necessary step in making a positive impact on it.

In a Waldorf high school history is taught showing the interrelatedness of all epochs, all cultures, and all areas of life. In the tenth grade Ancient Cultures course, for example, students are often fascinated by the parallels between the Egyptians’ preoccupation with preserving the physical body through embalming and our culture’s obsession with staying young through exercise, cosmetics, and surgical procedures. Music is presented along with mathematics, since it cannot be fully understood without it. The artistic achievements of a Michelangelo are studied in relation to the anatomical discoveries of a Vesalius. Thus for the Waldorf high school student, history is not a list of facts and dates but a living, integrated tapestry of human activity and striving. Coming to know and to marvel at this tapestry he or she acquires a sense of the meaning and coherence of human history and culture.

Waldorf high school teachers also stress the power of individuals to shape their world. History is presented as filled with the breath and pulse of real living people. The young people study the lives and achievements of the great personalities of human history: Socrates, Joan of Arc, Schweitzer, Churchill, et al. They come to know them as real persons of flesh and blood, with a spark of divinity. They see them as individuals who were able to make a positive contribution to the world. The young people learn that the individual can indeed help shape the world. They are likely to realize that they too have a spark of the divine and that they too can make a difference.

A person able to express him or herself effectively is more likely to find meaning in life and more able to influence the world. In English classes, we work consciously to bring meaning and value back to words. As George Orwell predicted in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there are today many forces at work to undermine the foundation of our humanity—our language. To a terrifying degree, “Newspeak” has come into existence. Missiles are “peacekeepers,” taxes are “revenue enhancements,” and in certain circles “bad” means “good” and “cool” and “hot” are used interchangeably. Hence through each part of the English curriculum of a Waldorf high school—the morning verse and the weekly writing assignment, the group recitation and the memorization of great poems and passages of prose—the adolescent is enabled to express him or herself clearly and truthfully in speech and in writing.

Teenagers are insecure almost by nature; unsure of who they are and what their limitations and possibilities are. For all their bravado, they can be as fragile as seedlings set out in the spring. The process of empowerment involves giving them the skills which will help them to meet the challenges life presents them in the future.

This includes, of course, the basic knowledge and skills in math, English, and the sciences. It includes also the artistic and handwork skills. In most high schools today these are considered frills—secondary exercises in self-expression.

In a Waldorf high school, the arts and handcrafts are, as they were in the first eight grades, an essential part of the core curriculum. The students continue with their musical instruments, sing in a chorus, do eurythmy, learn how to bind a book, draw a figure in perspective, hammer out a silver bracelet, weave a scarf.

This training prepares the students for the unlimited situations they will encounter in life. Also, it gives the young person a broad-based self-confidence in his or her ability to learn and to apply new skills. In addition, the arts and handcrafts help the student in the academic side of learning.

Rudolf Steiner emphasized the extraordinary power of the arts, therapeutically and pedagogically. They are bearers and cultivators of thought. They create the power to think, reason, conceptualize and imagine. Modeling clay, doing eurythmy, weaving, all nourish the thought forces which allow the sophomore to comprehend poetry and grammar.

Thus in a Waldorf high school the adolescent is helped to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. The ideals which are emerging with such heat and passion are recognized and supported. The young person is helped to find meaning in the world, and in his or her own life. He or she is helped to understand and feel that he or she can make a difference in the world. It should be noted here that, in addition, the Waldorf high school prepares students for the real world of college and career as well or better than other high schools, public and private. There has been as yet no formal study of Waldorf high school graduates, as there has been in Germany. All indications, though, are that they do well on college boards, are admitted to and excel at quality colleges and universities, and are able to pursue successful careers and professions.

For the child who has had a Waldorf elementary education, the benefits of the high school are magnified. Seeds sown years before in the early grades grow and come to flower. The tenth grader who came to know the saints and Old Testament figures in the second and third grade meets them again in the study of the Bible as literature. The eleventh grader finds that the freehand geometric drawing done in the fifth grade is the basis for a new study: projective geometry.

Rudolf Steiner recognized the high school years as a critical period of life. From the beginning he intended Waldorf education as a twelve-year, not just an eight-year experience. And indeed the high school years are too critical a period to leave to teachers and administrators who fail to recognize and honor adolescence for what it is. However, while there are today close to a hundred and fifty Waldorf elementary schools in North America, there are still only three dozen Waldorf high schools. For the benefit of the adolescents of tomorrow, let us hope that this number will increase in the years ahead.

In the broader educational arena, most educators and administrators today are searching desperately for an approach—any effective approach—that will kindle adolescents. The Waldorf curriculum is just such an approach. For several decades it has been quietly educating young people and graduating them into the world with their ideals intact. The time has come perhaps for the Waldorf high school curriculum to be recognized and implemented in the wider arena.

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After working in a home for troubled adolescents, David began teaching at the Green Meadow Waldorf School in Spring Valley, NY. He has taught high school literature and drama there ever since, except for a year spent working in Boulder, CO, helping the Shining Mountain Waldorf School to launch their high school.

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David is the author of Stages of Imagination: Working Dramatically with Adolescents and many articles on Waldorf education.

David has four children, all of whom have gone to the Green Meadow Waldorf School from kindergarten through the twelfth grade.