

Thoughts on Diversity

— Leslie Woolverton

The choice of my son's nursery school had been an important decision to make. My son's grandmother, my stepmother and only living parent, told me to see a school that was located not too far from our home. This school, she told us not too long after my son's birth, far before we were ready to look, would eliminate the need to tour any others. And when our son was ready to enter into his first independent class at the age of three, she said again that we needed to visit Acorn Hill.

My stepmother, of Dutch descent, had been in a Waldorf School in Holland during World War II up until the final day when her school was forced to shut down. My step-grandmother also had been one of the first anthroposophists and carried a society membership card numbered in the mid twenties. When we saw the school nestled in the woods and began to meet many teachers, we knew why she wanted her grandson there. Immediately, we were in a nurturing, supportive, environment without any unease for our biracial son. My son's father is white and I am a Black mother.

In 2004, I became a faculty member at Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten & Nursery School assisting

in Parent-Child and Nursery classes. At that time, I could have never known how transformational this work would be for my own life and how it would further unfold for me first as a mother, and then as an educator. My son had brought me to Acorn Hill. I knew after the first visit that here, my only child, would be seen, nurtured, and loved for his gentleness, love, exploration of all plants and beings of nature, and for his sunshine. His first teachers still see the beautiful, loving young child who is now becoming an incredible young man.

Throughout the years, diversity has come to be a central focus for our school. Diversity work at Acorn Hill had begun years before I came, affecting how we meet and work with young children and with each other. All teachers, board members, administrators, and the full parent community have participated in conference days and weekend workshops to advance this commitment.

2019 marked the 100 Year anniversary of Waldorf education, founded and based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. Several teachers from the Acorn Hill community celebrated this centennial together

in the spring at the International Waldorf Early Childhood Conference at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. Over 1100 teachers from over 50 countries and every continent celebrated in joyful collaboration our serious commitment to bridge together as a whole world the important work in Waldorf early childhood education. We all were charged at the conference to continue in our strivings to meet each other as colleagues, parents, and children with honor, dignity, and love while recognizing and celebrating all of our differences of race and cultural, ethnic, and religious differences.

Then one year later, almost to the day, the world experienced the outbreak of COVID-19. In several weeks, the world shut down. Our schools shut down; and as educators, we all undertook brand-new technology to communicate with each other and with our classes. The spring of 2020 marked for many the need to stay separated, to ensure health and safety, to prevent becoming sick or worse, in the grip of a worldwide pandemic. We all were scared and remained uncertain as we continued to face the unknown.

Then one more thing happened—the murder of George Floyd. The USA and the whole world had to face its history and the uncomfortable truth that all is still not fair. In the United States, we are being forced to face the horrors of systemic racism and brutality, solely based upon the color of a person's skin.

At this time in the world, many people are looking deeper into themselves to understand why all of this is happening. So many things were happening to divide and isolate us from one another. We teachers scrambled to reach out to meet one another, especially with our young families. While this was made possible through the new streams of technology, we still needed to keep our focus for the youngest, to reassure them that the world is good. As an educator, this made sense. I could continue to work and support my class families through this remote connection that could bring us closer together in many ways.

Yet for me, as a Black, fifty-four-year-old woman, also of Cherokee descent, this past spring was the hardest and most painful year of my life. I needed to conceal my own fears, as day by day, news unfolded around so many injustices that were being revealed. At the same time that I had to stay true to my dedication to the children and the families of my classes and

school, I also had to look my twenty-year-old son in the eye and assure him that he, too, would be okay... that he would be safe. Could I honestly say that?

I remember, as if it were yesterday, the first time I drove up the driveway at Acorn Hill. Located in my neighborhood of Silver Spring, Maryland, Acorn Hill was one out of over ten schools I had previewed for my only child, my guiding light. I, like every mother and family, only wanted the best for my son, as he and I began to navigate our journey of schooling. This is universal for all mothers, for all families; and my husband and I both felt this school was another home—a peaceful sanctuary that spoke to us both.

What is not universal is what mothers of Black children, especially boys, must carefully consider when sending our children out into the world—this world. In this past spring, that raw pain and fear was finally felt by us all. For the first time in front of my son, I held my head in my hands, unable to hold back uncontrollable tears—tears I could no longer swallow back, emotions I had suppressed since even before Trayvon Martin's death. Back then, again as a mother, I had had to make the life-and-death decision that my twelve-year-old son could no longer wear *Gap* hoodies or hoodies of any kind. On this day I could no longer contain my overwhelming daily fears. My son, my young man full of his own questions and fears, cradled me in my need to understand the hows and whys of unfathomable cruelty inflicted because of the color of one's skin.

Diversity in Waldorf Early Childhood means so many things to us all. At Acorn Hill, many of our educators, past and present, felt this work to be crucial in the teaching of our young children, even as we still stay committed to furthering outreach in our student body. Our school's commitment to Diversity has led our faculty to ask the most difficult questions when we begin to untangle many painful truths, which we, as a world, have come to realize this past spring. The color of one's skin will place men, women, and children in harm's way. Even still, this is only one aspect of diversity in our world today. But our being different in just that one way, even when our angels see in us our beauty, honor, and truths, means that often in this society, we are not good enough or equal enough for basic dignity. Yet, this past week, in honoring the life of John Lewis, we all saw, once again, the meaning of

hope, and were re-inspired never to give up on climbing our rocky hill of racial and ethnic injustice in America.

A question for us to ask now is, “How is this relevant in the work we do as early childhood educators, in how we see and teach our young children?” Today, as all schools continue to plan for what our upcoming 2020-2021 year may look like, again in the news, video footage was shared from Aurora, Colorado (or “Anytown,” USA). An African-American mother, and four female children, who were simply going for a “girls’ day out” to a nail salon, were accosted in the parking lot at a shopping mall. Police approached the parked car with guns drawn. They took the driver aside, and the four children were all made to lie face down on the asphalt parking lot ground, the youngest being six, with a 12-year-old, 14-year-old, and a 17-year-old handcuffed behind their backs, as questioning took place. The younger children (6,12,14), terrified and crying, could be seen and heard, as a tape of nursery songs and rhymes played from the van’s radio in the background. Subsequently, the nation learned that it was all about a mistaken license plate;

the police alert was about a Montana motorcycle, NOT a Colorado minivan...

Systemic racism, colorism and ethnic prejudice are worldwide issues. So, yes, a true commitment towards diversity work together is a most-needed calling in our work today and must take center stage for all of us, especially as we teach *all* of our young children. ♦

Leslie Woolverton *began as a Parent-Child teacher assistant at Acorn Hill in 2004. She completed her full early childhood training at Sunbridge Institute in 2014. She splits her time as co-lead teacher for the Three-Day Nursery and Parent-Child classes. Leslie has been an interior designer for over twenty years, recently incorporating her love of textile art with plant-dyed textiles and use of natural dyes. She is currently working on a seasonal treasury of diversity stories and the history of diversity in American Storytelling. Her son Matthew continues to be her guiding light.*

Internalized Racism and the Imitative Nature of the Young Child

~ Magdalena Toran

My parents are politically liberal. You could even describe them as Leftists. My father grew up on the South Side of Philadelphia, the son of a first-generation Jewish immigrant. His Bubbie (grandmother) spoke only Yiddish. My mother is a white, former Catholic woman, raised by parents who didn’t know how to properly love and care for children. Yet their house was full of music, and my mother learned to play the piano starting at age four. She went on to study nursing at Mass General and music at Eastman School of Music in New York. My parents met at a protest rally.

My mother became a visiting nurse, which she was for most of my childhood and adolescence. In the late 60s and early 70s, she was a nurse for the mothers and

fathers of the Black Panther movement. She cared for homeless children under bridges and old folks who didn’t see many other people between her visits.

When I was nine years old, my father moved to Washington, DC and soon moved to an all-Black neighborhood, where he lived until just recently. He often had Black youth gathered at his house, where he taught them his chandelier business and called them apprentices. But I stayed in New England with my mom and visited him only a few times a year.

Where we lived in New England, there were only white people in my immediate community. We mostly socialized with my mother’s family, which was white. I only had one Black student in