
A Strip of Fruitful Land Between Stream and Stone: A Waldorf Forest Kindergarten's Ways and Future Potential

— Myrthe Jentgens

Reprinted from the IASWECE Newsletter, October 2020.

A few years ago, an agricultural apprentice of my husband opened my eyes to a phenomenon that I had not been fully aware of until then. He had seen my husband setting up a cultivator in the field and our four-year-old son standing next to it. The latter literally sucked the process into himself. Every movement was stored, every detail was “absorbed,” so to speak. Our apprentice suddenly realized that a normal apprenticeship would simply not be enough to reach the level of my husband, who also grew up on and next to his father’s tractor, in agricultural matters. Perhaps, as he said at the time, it would even be impossible, in some respects.

How intensively a child learns! The intensity of a child’s perceptions creates a completely different sense of time! “Every” spring as a child, one pulled up the turnips, although one did so perhaps twice at most. One “always” went on vacation or celebrated Christmas in this way and no other. Moments appear as small eternities and are stored in a pantry that accompanies the child and from which it can draw for the rest of its life.

The intensity of these learning processes is probably due to the fact that the children do not only learn with their heads, which can always remain at a distance, but with their twelve senses, which enter into a deep connection with everything that surrounds them. Although sensory activity prepares the cognitive element because it plays a major role in brain development, it also forms the cradle of what is ultimately much more important and what could be called the sense of aesthetics and moral sensitivity. In three ways, the Waldorf Forest Kindergarten, as I have come to know it as a mother and as a helper, seems to me to make an important contribution to a foundational development of the senses and thus to the most important future questions of our time.

The Climate Question

The Waldorf Forest Kindergarten carries a responsibility to provide children with a resilient

toolkit for the realities of the 21st century. A materially reduced, near-natural environment is part of this preparation. What is missing is a building whose construction and heating use up the forces of the earth. Materials from nature and some kitchen utensils for the sandpit are completely sufficient to keep the children busy for a whole morning. In fact, there are no signs of lack of play or inspiration in this respect. On the contrary. If the educators move away from the home base with too much perseverance, climbing, building, rolling and running, some children even complain about not having had enough time “to play” in the familiar place.

In my opinion, the work areas of the future will not be mainly “in the office” as they have been for the last 30 years. In the foreseeable future, it will be much less about managing, marketing or redistributing products, but rather about whether and how we humans can still take care of ourselves, our earth and our fellow human beings in a physical-material sense. An educational practice close to nature and the body therefore seems to me to be urgently needed in order to be able to meet the future requirements to some extent. The children of the Waldorf Forest Kindergarten get used to a life in the open air, to which they relate, which they appreciate and admire, and from which they also learn to distance themselves. They get used to a daily routine in working clothes, with earth under their fingernails and heavy clumps of mud on their boots. They find a relaxed but attentive way of dealing with wind and weather and with questions about the appropriate equipment. They get to know a wide variety of animals and insects without being afraid of them and they learn which plants are edible and which are not. They learn to endure, and to be intimately happy about a beautiful sunny day in autumn, winter or spring. They learn to perceive their own body and its needs more precisely when the question arises at regular intervals: How many layers do you have on and what material are they made of? Are the feet warm, are they wet, are the hands warm, is the scarf enough?



Photo by Lori Lynn Hoffer

Have you already been creamed? Where is your sun hat? These matters are actually not stressful matters in this kindergarten, as I have already experienced in other kindergartens. They are not questions that turn being outside into a “survival”-like state of emergency, but rather an unexciting, necessary routine. Those who live outside have to take certain precautions, then they can move around freely and pursue their projects.

The increasing awareness of one’s own warmth balance, and of the differences between cold and warm days, clothes, and environments, also offer the child a valuable learning field in the area of its own sense of warmth, and the daily care for the children’s warmth balance can enrich and strengthen the relationship between the children and the educators, as Emmi Pikler has described in an exemplary way with regard to the immense value of mindful body care of the infant.

The “event character” of our contemporary experience of nature is known to be associated with extreme, climate-damaging conditions. If no snow falls, we need snowmaking machines. If you want to

go skiing in summer, you go to the indoor ski hall, including an après-ski stand and mountain panorama. Nature is expected to deliver sensation, adventure, beauty, and a heightened awareness of life. In the Waldorf Forest Kindergarten, children experience that nature can also be a daily environment, a home. Its joyful characteristics are not to be found in big actions, but in the little things that can be discovered by the children themselves, in fruit or flower formations, in ice crystals or other seasonal processes, in special weather conditions or skies, in surprises from the animal world.

Last but not least, nature in the Waldorf Forest Kindergarten is a world that is shaped by people. The kindergarten teachers work on nature by tending the beds and bushes, planting trees, making wood, baking bread, swinging the rake, harvesting and boiling down berries, feeding chickens, etc. The area around the construction trailer, with its clay oven, tool shed, composting toilet and nearby chicken coop, seems almost like a kind of village in a nutshell, surrounded by trees and, at the back, bordered by a high, round

wall of branches and twigs, where birds and other small animals live.

On the walks in the open countryside, the children get a feeling for how to create islands of home in the middle of an overwhelming environment. Picnic areas have to be found and prepared, huts and fairy houses can be built and made cozy, materials can be collected, sorted and put together into something new and redesigned. In short, one could say that this is a Waldorf village kindergarten that combines Waldorf education with the idea of the forest kindergarten and the village idea of the European Middle Ages. Again and again it seems to be about feeling how much openness, freedom, and wilderness is good for the children on the one hand, how much covering and framing they need on the other hand, and how they can learn to produce it themselves. The educators perform a continuous movement between expansion and concentration, circumference and center. The calmer and more comprehensive the movement between these two poles, the deeper the feelings of happiness, trust and creative power that the child, and the adults, can feel.

The memory of these feelings, in the midst of the wonderful, but also threatening, natural surrounding, will, I am convinced, benefit the children in an existential way in times of increasing weather extremes and physical emergencies.

The Health Question

The concept of a Waldorf kindergarten can also respond to the crisis of our physical health in an appropriate way. Don't pediatricians everywhere complain about the lack of fresh air, daylight and exercise? And are we sufficiently aware of what we are depriving children of when we increasingly deprive them of air, light and movement?

Fresh air and daylight form the basis for creativity, relationship-building, and imagination. Physical development and organ formation, which are of central importance in the first seven years of every human life, are stimulated in the most positive way by fresh air and daylight. We know this, but we continue to make our children spend their playtime and lives within four walls. The amount of time we are exposed to today's flickering and originally blue LED light and, even worse, the light of computer screens, is



Photo by Lori Lynn Hoffer

extremely harmful to our health. On the other hand, it is becoming more and more known how health-promoting it is to grow up outdoors, for example also with regard to children's eyesight (see Renz-Polster 2013, p. 24).

Movement forms the basis for all later learning and comprehension. A well-balanced, well-developed sense of movement goes hand in hand with a healthy sense of balance, which in turn is the basis for other senses. Children move outside, in nature, much more than in their home environment. My daughters' Waldorf kindergarten group stops every day at certain climbing trees and "mountains." The fresh air gives them energy, the expanse invites the children to run and jump without disturbing anyone, all kinds of obstacles challenge them to jump, tree trunks invite them to balance, and the uneven ground requires constant balancing and movement.

In this context, walking itself, walking on two legs, seems to me to be infinitely important. Pediatricians increasingly point out how important walking is for healthy growth of the legs and even the organs. The development of the body, as well as the spiritual grounding of the child, is fundamentally promoted by walking. In our Waldorf kindergarten, the children walk one kilometer daily from the collection point to the construction trailer and back. In addition to this, there are some more walks on Tuesday and Thursday.

Walking is also a development aid in a broader sense. The child learns patience, how to estimate and walk along a path. All becoming needs exactly this form of patience, needs tenacity and rhythm,

needs the trusting devotion to the moment and at the same time the experienced foresight. Today we want to be everywhere, literally “in flight,” we want to have everything here and now, to be everything, and to disregard the earthly realm and its limits as if by magic. Walking is the countermovement to this all-encompassing impatience of our zeitgeist and teaches children: Good things take time! The path is an important part of the goal.

The Spiritual Question

The Waldorf kindergarten can develop facilities for more than its own subsistence in a natural-material sense. The small “village” between woods and meadows is also a picture for the world of the middle, human domain. Between great wilderness and a small seasonal table, between the breadth of nature and the narrow construction trailer, a human spiritual life unfolds, so to speak. To me, the perceptions seem to find deeper resonance in the hearts of the children, perhaps because the pressures of noise, social stress, bad air and artificial light are eliminated. The many songs about processes and events in nature are given a concreteness that can offer an elemental joy to the children, and the adults. To their wide-open senses, berries they have picked themselves seem somehow redder, their freshly baked bread smells more fragrant, the springtime meadow seems somehow more enchanting. And against the background of the gray-brown winter world, the colors of the costumes for a nativity play, for example, which are pulled over fat baggy pants and snow suits with the most serious devotion, shine strangely intensively.

The culture of the puppet shows under the open sky also has a completely different appeal. How huge and wide is the real sky and the tall oaks and the distant edge of the forest compared to such a little mini-world evoked through cloths and dolls on the lap or on a piece of earth. And yet, time and again, we succeed in making this world appear as large and enchanting as the great outdoors. Even in stormy weather conditions, the children sit in the closing circle like little red-nosed gnomes and look spellbound at what is happening in the middle. In the closed room, the walls of the house take over part of the demarcation. If educators and children manage to draw their sensory activity together in such a way and direct it towards such a small process, I believe they work on the development of a resistant and at the same time wonderfully delicate inner life.

Of course, one cannot claim that the educational task within a forest kindergarten becomes easier. Where the four walls of a house do not hold and protect the children, it seems more than ever the task of the educators to hold the children. This is done above all by building bonds. The living relationship, along with the rituals and rhythms, forms an important part of the sheath within which a child can move with confidence and trust. Lower costs and the limited space of the construction wagon make it possible to limit the number of children in the group, which facilitates active relationship work. And the basic freedom of movement, the consciously sought-after places of retreat, and the intensive workload of the children create a good basis for making even difficult educational demands more bearable and workable.

Just as lovingly cultivated space between wilderness and urban civilization seems to be becoming increasingly rare in our world today, I believe that we can also observe a growing impoverishment in the area of human soul life between will and intellect. “If only we too could discover a pure, contained human place, a strip of fruitful land of our own, between stream and stone!” wrote Rainer Maria Rilke. To me this seems to be the world of the heart, between banal physicality and abstract spirituality, which in times of dehumanization must be preserved, or rather, constantly sought anew and brought to life. The Waldorf Forest Kindergarten village of my daughters represents for me, in this sense, a “strip of fruitful land.” And especially against the background of the climatological prognoses, I think almost daily that many, many more children should be prepared in this way for a life “between stream and stone.” ♦

Resources:

1. Renz-Polster, Herbert, and Gerald Hüther, 2013. *Wie Kinder heute aufwaschen* [How Children Grow Up Today]. Weinheim, Germany: Belz Verlag.
2. Rilke, Rainer Maria, 1986. *Duineser Elegie* [2nd Duino Elegy]. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag.

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