

Education as an Art
Published by the Waldorf Schools of North America
Vol.28, No. 3 – Spring-Summer 1970

"EARTH, WHO GIVES TO US... "

By Franklin Kane and Betty (Kane)Staley

The other evening a group of friends were discussing the pressing issues facing man in the decades to come. Was it drugs, war and peace, the younger generation, the racial crisis, political corruption, the changing moral standards, or the East-West confrontation which lay at the heart of the matter? Where could education best serve the future generation to lay a moral foundation to face these issues? Most of these problem areas are symptoms of a failure to respect and understand the human being and his relationship to the world around him. Thus, the current concern for ecology directly relates to the heart of the matter. Then Mrs. G., a professional educator, who had had many disillusioning years of supporting idealistic causes, turned to us and said, "As a teacher myself, I feel that I have never really gotten to the core of it. I have inward concerns which I want to share with the children. They share my emotional involvement, but somewhere there is still a split between the day-to-day teaching and the hard facts of reality. I feel it's wrong to overemphasize these problems to young children and yet how else do I develop the feeling of responsibility? If ecology is the basic issue, how does Waldorf education deal with it?"

We began by suggesting that it wasn't a matter of drawing the attention of five and six year olds to the amount of hydrocarbons in the air or pollution in the water, but of meeting the child at his particular age with a positive experience of the world. We then discussed the approach of Waldorf education far into the night. What follows are some of the highlights that we could later recall.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS AND THE FOUR KINGDOMS

These two focal points weave in and out of the Waldorf curriculum like musical themes, threading their way through the child's growth and awareness of his world and himself. The four elements—earth, water, air and fire—were recognized by the Greeks to be the four "roots" of which the world is composed. They are the active forces working in the world and in man. In chemistry these could be equated to the four states of matter: earth, physical solid substance; water, liquids; air, gases; fire, warmth. The four kingdoms—mineral, plant, animal and man—inhabit the earth.

Characterizing the phenomenal world in this way enables the child to grasp the facts of the world clearly. These are dynamic categories, which are intellectually true, yet applicable to all ages.

THE EARLY YEARS - Preschool & Kindergarten

Because the young child lives in imitative activity, it is very important to have an attitude of reverence and love for all the kingdoms of nature. He learns through the will. Many opportunities are presented to actually participate in practical activities. To the young child the world is one; the world is good. He digs the earth, carefully waters the soil or rejoices when the rain does it for him. He sees that the wind in autumn carries the leaves to the ground or spreads the seeds. Father Sun sends his loving warmth to all that lives and grows. The children lovingly care for their garden, harvest the crops, bake bread, gather fruit and delight in the smells that fill their room when they are cooking. The earth to the young child is not just "dirt" but a living home for the seeds, beetles and stones. Plants have a rhythm of their own and children delight in the sprouting and budding of each one. That a giant sunflower can come from a tiny seed is a source of constant awe. There is the excitement of experiencing the earthworm plowing the earth, the caterpillar changing into a butterfly, the mother cat having her kittens. This can be experienced in the center of a city if we are willing to trade cement for even a very small plot of earth. The teacher is the primary representative of man. It is her inner

attitude and outer activity which affects the young child. The teacher must fully enter these activities rather than stand aside. She must be willing to get her hands dirty and feet wet as she explores the world with knowledgeable but awe-filled joy. The class itself is Man-the cooperation, the recognition of differences, the working out of social situations, the times to be alone, the times to come together. The themes of the four kingdoms and the four elements pervade the stories the children hear and act out. These are active in the fairy tales, in their songs, paintings, beeswax modeling, rhythmic exercises and drawing. A grace before lunch, often used, is: Earth who gives to us this food, Sun who makes it ripe and good, Dear Earth, dear Sun, by you we live, Our loving thanks to you we give.

FIRST AND SECOND GRADES

While many of the same outer activities continue, with the beginning of "formal" schooling more time is spent inside the classroom. Reading, writing and arithmetic are pervaded by the four elements and four kingdoms as expressed in nature and fairy tales. Out of the story of the water cycle can come the "W" (the waves), the "F" (the fish), and the "M" (the mountains), etc. In the second grade, fables and legends, which are teaching tools for reading and writing, carry insights into animals and man. Underlying the educational experiences in these early school years, is love for the world. For, without love, what is there to conserve?

CONSERVATION OR ECOLOGY?

There is a basic difference underlying these two words. Conservation implies conserving natural resources for the future. In conservation man takes an active part protecting (subduing) nature for his own use. Reforestation programs are initiated so that we can all have more lumber in the future; waterways are stocked so that there will be more trout for fishermen. Deer are protected so that hunters may pursue the sport for a longer time.

Ecology is much more subtle. Here it is not for man himself but for all living creatures - for the earth itself. Rather than planting trees or stocking fish as isolated remedies, there must be a consciousness of the great life patterns such as the nitrogen and water cycles, the intricate and delicate balance upon which all of the kingdoms are dependent.

THIRD GRADE

During this year the child begins to separate himself from his surroundings. He stands more objectively in relation to his world. In this feeling of loneliness, it is a help to engage in activities that build confidence. Third grade is a very practical year. The Old Testament forms the history/literature theme. After Adam and Eve are sent out from Paradise they must learn to work the earth, to build their home, to form a community. From this comes the study and practice of farming and house-building. The farmer - as a representative of man - must learn to work the earth, to know and work with the air and water, the weather, and the warmth if he is to have a successful farm. But this is not complete without the four kingdoms. The minerals are needed to enrich the soil or for a stone wall, the plants are needed for food, the trees for shade and for holding the soil. The animals fertilize the earth, help in pollination, carry burdens, pull ploughs, give milk, eggs, meat or wool. The farmer must consider other men as he plans his farm - those who send him seeds, repair broken parts for his tools and machines, who pick up surplus milk or deliver extra hay; those who will eat the food or weave the wool or cotton. And so in the end all comes together in one picture - the farmer stands as the balancer amongst the kingdoms and elements - a unity of many.

FOURTH, FIFTH AND SIXTH GRADES

In these middle grades, the emphasis is not so much on man the balancer and user, but on the phenomena themselves. Having gone from the total picture in the early grades, we now move to a more profound study of the individual kingdoms.

In fourth grade the animal kingdom is dramatically portrayed. The children enter into the sensitive relationship existing between each animal and its home. They come to respect the specialization of the animal, such as the ability to fly, dig, climb, run, swim. Man, who can do all these, is adaptable to

jungle, desert, and plain. He is not nearly so sensitive to nor dependent upon his immediate environment. Just picture for a minute a kangaroo living in a jungle or an elephant on a desert! Hence, if animals' surroundings are disturbed, their existence is threatened.

In fifth grade there is a thorough study of Botany. The relationship is studied between plant life and climate, geography and rhythm of the year. The quality and amount of soil, air, water and warmth are very important to the plant. Then the children consider the kinds of plants which are more connected with the earth, those which are airy and hardly seem to be held down by their roots at all, those plants which do best near or in water, and those plants that open and close with the sun. Each plant in its own time unfolds its full possibilities.

In sixth grade the mineral kingdom is taken up in the context of the earth as a living organism. The great forces, such as mountain building, erosion, volcanic action and earthquakes, are studied. The change of rock from mountain top to sand on the beach, of limestone to marble, of thundering waterfalls to a heavily used, polluted river, of ancient fern forests to diamond—all of these are examples of the powerful forces working in this living earth. The kinds of soil that emerge where there is a predominance of one mineral, too much or too little water, good or poor aeration and the quality of heat absorbed, bring in the importance of the elements. Here, as in the study of all the kingdoms, time is important. The time and conditions needed for a perfect crystal to form can be millions of years. The children learn to respect the time needed for a forest to grow or a valley to form of sediment. Man's relationship to the mineral kingdom is studied. What part does he play in erosion, farming methods and forestation?

In these middle school years the feelings are stirred by dramatic presentations. Joy, sorrow, anxiety, relief are all experienced. Without the feelings engaged, ecology is just an intellectual study.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES

In all the grades, activities appropriate to the age are possible. Camping trips to bring the city child into direct experience of mountains, forests, deserts and seashore are worth weeks of talk and study. In California this has worked most successfully. Classes do portions of their nature studies on location from fourth grade on. Petitions to save nature areas, clean-up projects, and newspaper collections, all are direct, practical applications to conservation. Hiking, camping and observing wilderness areas give the experiential picture of ecology.

SEVENTH AND EIGHTH GRADES

In the seventh and eighth grades physiology is studied. One might question the relevance of physiology to ecology. But in this study is a culmination of the work of the previous years. Man is seen as a being of earth, water, air and fire. What has been studied macrocosmically is now seen microcosmically. Just as one appreciated each of the individual kingdoms outwardly—now the wonder and mystery are brought inward. The basic concept of interdependence now is seen in the world and in man. An intense study of health and nutrition has ramifications for the individual, for mankind, and for the earth as a whole. If one system of the body is disturbed, it affects the whole balance of the body. Poisons absorbed by the body eventually have an accumulative effect. The circulatory system carries these substances to all parts of the organism. So, too, the effects of an atomic explosion in one part of the world are carried to other parts via the earth's circulatory system (water and air).

World geography taken in these grades, where a detailed comprehensive picture is given of mountains, climatic zones, major rivers, oceans, currents of air, gives the macrocosmic picture of the interrelations of all four elements. A formal course in ecology given in this period would make sense, based on the inner experience of the past years. Without the comprehensive buildup it would be a mere superficial treatment. Needless to say, on the high school level, all that has been presented would be dealt with in a technical and more conscious way.

IMAGE OF MAN

Right through Waldorf education an image of man is central. Man as a potentially moral being carries a responsibility for the condition of the earth. Man as a civilized being changes his environment by his very existence. Therefore he has to carry a consciousness of the effects of his deeds. This relates to the way history is approached in a Waldorf school.

If a child has lived with love and reverence for his teachers, parents, classmates and environment when he was young; if his feelings were stirred in the middle grades so that he felt deeply about the tragedies and joys of others; if his thoughts were raised to clear vision of the interrelationship of all things in the upper grades, then the groundwork is laid for meeting the challenging issues of our time. It will become understandable that man cannot escape his environment through drugs, cannot deprive other human beings of their rights without disturbing the whole of mankind and cannot judge the world in his own image but must learn to respect and observe what is there. This is what we are trying to do in Waldorf education to meet the question of ecology.

When we finished, Mrs. G. said, "I can see there is much more involved in this education than a superficial treatment of nature study. Can we set up another time to meet?"