

FOCUS: Creating Relationships with Parents

Working with Parents: A Different Perspective

— Louise deForest

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Many years ago, when my two youngest children were still very small, I would occasionally visit a friend of my mother's named Mrs. Robb. She was quite active in those days; at that time she was the oldest living survivor of the *Titanic* and was much in demand to give interviews, visit talk shows and tape her memoirs for different maritime museums. She was in her mid-nineties when I met her and she lived alone in the village where my mother also lived. She was losing her sight but still remained active in her small community and had many friends. I considered myself one of those many friends. Because we lived quite far away, I would see Mrs. Robb only every four to six months. The children and I would knock on her door and she would open it with a big smile on her face. She would kiss the children, give me a hug and invite us into her lovely home. She bustled about as she gathered things for tea, telling me the freshest news from town and recounting amusing anecdotes from her latest round of interviews. Finally everything was in place—the tea was brewed, cookies were on the plate for the children, and we were all comfortably sitting on the sofa with the late afternoon sun streaming in through the windows. As Mrs. Robb poured out the tea for us, she said, "Now, tell me dear, just who are you?"

I find myself often wishing that parents in our schools would receive the same warm welcome I received from Mrs. Robb, basking in a sense of well-being and feeling as if they are already our friends. Instead, too often, they are met with closed doors, with *dos* and especially *don'ts*, and opinions and judgments about the "right" way and the "wrong" way to parent their child. Each year we teachers open our hearts and our classrooms to new groups of children starting on their journey into life, but often we forget to do the same to their parents. Too often, parent evenings are seen as a chore, and it is not unusual in our schools to blame parents for the difficulties their children may

have. And yet, if it weren't for the insight, courage, and sacrifices of our class parents, many of us would not be able to practice our vocations. They enable us to fulfill our destinies as Waldorf early childhood teachers!

There is much talk these days about the different kind of children coming into our classrooms and we have worked hard to adjust to this change. We have changed our rhythm of the day, we have incorporated much more movement into our circles, adjusted our snacks for those children with allergies, and spent long hours researching different syndromes to better understand these little ones. But there is also a different kind of parent these days; a parent who asks

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questions, who is not content to take our word for anything, who demands more information, communication and answers. And this is just the way it should be. We are in the fifth Cultural Epoch and humanity is striving to develop the Consciousness or Spiritual Soul. Our task at this time is to develop ourselves as individuals, becoming, in the process, ever more antisocial. We are asked to develop equanimity in the face of the unknown, in the face of the breakdown of all familiar forms, and we must increasingly rely on our inner lives to give us any sense of security. All of us increasingly experience alienation in our thinking, isolation in our feeling life and powerlessness in our will. Choices have to be made now that have consequences for every human being alive, yet our relationships are more and more impersonal. However, if humanity were not faced with this difficulty in mutual

understanding, the consciousness soul would not be able to develop. It is a trial we are going through, but an essential one.

And, as is true in each cultural epoch, we are also sowing the seeds for the next epoch, one that Rudolf Steiner tells us is significantly different from the world we know today. In the sixth Cultural Epoch, Steiner tells us that there will be three areas of major differences from our present times. The first is that belief in the spiritual world will be a given for the humanity of the future; the second is total freedom of thought. One will not be bound by organized religions, family perspectives, or traditions or social mores. And the third major difference is such complete empathy with the other that our own personal well-being will be completely dependent on the well-being of others. If one person is hungry or suffers, their hunger pangs will be ours; their suffering we will feel.

There are some meditative exercises that I find helpful when working with parents. These are called the Six Basic Exercises or Subsidiary Exercises. Rudolf Steiner gave these as preparation for leading an active meditative life, but I have found, after thirty years of working with them, that one never graduates from them. These exercises keep us oriented and, over time, allow the “I” to work less on keeping the body, soul, and spirit together and more on refining the spiritual essence of who we are. They involve exercises in concentration (our thinking), will, equanimity, positivity and open-mindedness. And the sixth exercise is harmonizing them all. You do the exercises one at a time, adding more as you become adept at the ones before until you are doing all of them all of the time. Rudolf Steiner suggests beginning with one, doing it for a month, starting over each time you forget or are unable to complete the exercise, before beginning the second exercise. It took me years before I was doing more than one at a time!

I want to look at these exercises from the perspective of working with parents. How am I *thinking* about the parents I work with? Is there warmth in my thoughts? Am I interested in who they are? Do I have critical thoughts as soon as I see them? How do I speak about them with my colleagues, or my partner at home? Is there kindness in my thoughts about them? When I have an antipathetic reaction to a particular parent, do I realize that this says more about me than it does about them?

Will: do I have the will forces to find parents the help they need if I cannot provide it? Can I have yet another conversation with a particular parent when I

am already tired, without feeling resentful? Do I have the will to do the research to better understand a child or parent in my care? Can I write a thoughtful, honest and fair report for their child at the end of the year? Do I have the interest to call a family, even when their child has not done something wrong? Do I have the will forces and imagination to look beyond the outer behavior of a child or parent to see the being of that person? Can I do for my parents what I would want a teacher to do for me and my family?

Equanimity: Can I respond, rather than react? Responding to a difficult situation means that on a human level we are both left free; reacting is on a much more animalistic level and leaves all parties unfree. Can I develop within myself a center of calm, no matter what? Can I not take things personally but rather ask myself what is the other thinking? Am I professional enough to move away from my sympathies and antipathies? Our own feelings say nothing about the other; they only express our own limitations. Feelings are really outside of who we really are. Can I not allow myself to be rushed into things, no matter what the deadline? Rudolf Steiner tells us that the only way we can move into the future and meet evil and survive, is through the development of inner tranquility.

Positivity: Have I found something that I can admire and respect in each parent? Can I give the parents (and find within myself) a positive picture of their child, no matter how difficult he or she is in the classroom? Can I embrace even the most difficult and unpleasant situation knowing that within it lies the potential for my growth? A dear friend of mine and a master class teacher once said to me, “When you see trouble coming down the road towards you, drop down to your knees and give thanks, for you are about to learn something important.”

Open-mindedness: Are we open to new ideas? Are we open to other ways of doing things? Waldorf teachers are famous for believing that we are the ones who have found the truth and are doing the best work with children, and we are very often disinterested in the work going on outside of the Waldorf movement. Can we develop interest in different ways of working? Can we truly say that we are free of prejudice? New manifestations of truth must find us ready at any time to receive them. Can we look beyond all the tattoos and piercings of a new parent or colleague and find the human being within? Can we accept a parent’s perspective and thoughts with the same enthusiasm as we carry our own? For those of us who have been in Waldorf schools for a long time, can we accept what the

younger generation of teachers bring to this work even when it is different from what we expected? Can we recognize the gifts each generation brings? How open are we to differences of opinion in our personal and professional lives? Are we so afraid of conflict that we become defensive or retreat?

Now of course, in this age of fierce individualism, conflicts will naturally arise. What can we do? The first thing is to ask yourself, *What is the problem?* Essentially, that just means taking time to not react but to think about what has happened and to identify the issue. Then one needs to ask, *How did this come about?* What were all the steps that brought you to the present situation? This is really looking at it ethically. It is never about placing blame but about recognizing all the nuances of a situation and our own part in it. *Why did this problem happen?* And here we have to put ourselves into the motives of another. . . and our own motives. Honesty is really important here. *Who is the person doing this?* is another question you could ask. And here we are reminded of the sacred mystery of the other. Which part of me is responding to this situation? My higher self or my lower, more personality-bound self? And why? And perhaps one of the most important questions to look at is: what am I being asked to develop within myself with this particular situation? If we believe in the Laws of Karma, we have to know that the big things that happen to us in our lives have been orchestrated by ourselves. Where do I need to grow? What do I need to let go of, however comfortable it may be? We can never change the other, as we well know through our personal relationships;

we can only be responsible for ourselves.

Looking at a problem in the above way moves the problem in us and makes it less fixed. It allows us to look at it with perspective and objectivity and helps us to remove our personalities from the mix, allowing understanding to flow. Any time we fail a parent, we have also failed the child.

Martin Buber once said, "All living is meeting." In our working with parents, we have the opportunity to overcome our sympathies and antipathies and replace them with true interest in the human being who stands before us. It is not struggle but the rendering of assistance that truly promotes progress. Many of us have had the remarkable blessing of meeting Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy and working and living with his insights. But with this blessing comes a responsibility: we must take anthroposophy personally! Anthroposophy offers to revolutionize our way of living through a path of doing. It offers nothing less than social renewal, and with it, the respiritualizing of the human being. It is our task and responsibility to be the midwives of a new age. In truly meeting the parents who come to us, we can participate in this new birth. ♦

After many years as an early childhood educator, Louise deForest now dedicates herself to the mentoring and evaluating of teachers and programs and is actively involved with teacher training in the US, Canada, Mexico and Europe. She is a board member of WECAN and is one of two North American representatives to the IASWECE Council.

*Drawing by Deborah Grieder
from Tell Me a Story*

