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# *Reading the Signs of the Times*

## **Seeking the Healthy / Healing Social Life**

— Nancy Blanning, on behalf of the WECAN Board

When the first Waldorf school opened in Stuttgart, Germany in 1919, Europe was emerging from the devastation of World War I. Germany particularly was in shambles and facing huge challenges politically, economically, and socially. Emil Molt, owner and manager of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory, approached Rudolf Steiner and asked if he had ideas for a new form of education that would help to prepare future generations for a more humane, socially generous future. So the first Waldorf school was opened for the children of the factory's employees. The founding of the school was a profound step toward building "the healthy/healing social life" based upon principles of liberty, brother/sisterhood, and equality. Today, Waldorf education approaches its hundredth anniversary. As we look at the spread of Waldorf initiatives all over the globe, we can feel deeply grateful that this approach to education is benefiting so many children. Waldorf education is finding expression in diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and political settings, truly demonstrating its universal appropriateness for the developing young human being. This is a "sign of the times" which we can celebrate.

Rudolf Steiner noted that we should observe signs of the times to sense trends in all aspects of life, not only that which is positive. While we can celebrate the success of anthroposophically inspired education, we also see disturbing trends that dim our optimism about human progress in self- and group development. Nationalism again seems to be on the rise, countries stepping away from cooperation and mutual support to be much more self-interested and self-protective. We are surrounded by daily rhetoric of disrespectful, blaming, accusatory speech that calls awareness only to our differences, not to the universal characteristics that make us a human family. We are surrounded by commercialism that wants to persuade us that happiness is measured by our material possessions. And we are becoming

screen-addicted so that our companions are our devices, not the human beings sitting beside us. Individuals are becoming more and more isolated from one another. These are the sobering signs of the times we see around us.

In our school communities, we are striving to achieve something higher and better than the general trend. Yet we cannot avoid being affected by what is happening in the world. Disconnection and strain are creeping into our school relations. Teachers, administrators, parents, and boards of trustees find themselves at odds with one another, each striving to serve the school yet unable to find the common ground of mutual respect and appreciation for each others' contributions. Questions around hours of work, equity of salary, and value of each person's contribution to the children's care and education are popping up in school communities across the continent. The form of discussions around these topics is increasingly from a financial perspective or a "who works harder" questioning that neglects human and social considerations.

If Rudolf Steiner were with us today, we imagine he would exhort us to use our most creative and generous thinking, feeling, and willing to commit to a path toward social renewal and health. This is a matter that the WECAN board is addressing with sincerity. Complicated situations in school communities show that the need to work for creative solutions is accelerating. As the WECAN board has begun its study and conversation to envision constructive approaches to meet these challenges, we ask for input from all of you. We call for you to share examples of how you have found ways for clear, respectful communication with one another. Please share your examples of how teachers—lead and assistant teachers in classrooms and early childhood faculty colleagues—are working to create and sustain respectful, collaborative relationships. Please share how your communities are developing the same

kinds of relationships with parents. Please share what has helped encourage collaboration and respectful discussion on difficult topics among and between teaching faculties, administrators, and boards.

How we communicate and relate to one another honorably and respectfully is an urgent challenge of our time. We all know how important this is for the health of our school communities and for

human communities in general. Thank you in advance for joining in this conversation. Please send your submissions, comments, and insights to [gateways@waldorfearlychildhood.org](mailto:gateways@waldorfearlychildhood.org) and include the subject line "Sign of the Times." We eagerly await your contributions to this collective, collaborative thinking. The content of this research and conversation will be shared in future issues of *Gateways*. ♦

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