



From the Executive Director

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Florian Osswald, Co-Leader of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum, gave four stimulating lectures earlier this year on the rightful uses of technological devices in education and in service to human development. During the annual June teachers conference of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA), he lifted out the central task of technology: namely, to help us achieve our mission as fully embodied human beings on earth. The tools of technology, he argued, help us both to stand back from our surroundings in order to become truly free of them, while at the same time helping us to connect with the world of nature in such a way that we transform it without polluting or even destroying it. Like any tool, of course, it can serve us or enslave us. Think only of the story of the Sorcerer's Apprentice.

Florian's lectures raised a broader issue: What is the mission of technology in our time? This is a huge question to which the Research Institute would like to turn its attention in the coming years with a series of funded research projects, starting with the role of technology in our Waldorf schools. Where and how is it helpful, where not? What can Waldorf education contribute to the debate on the merits and mischief of modern technology? We hope in coming issues of the *Research Bulletin* to report on this research.

In thinking about this topic, my mind turns to the growing popularity—and controversy—of a recent technological device that may point to a contemporary spiritual yearning. For longer than we have kept historical records, we have hiked with walking sticks and guided our discussions with talking sticks. Now we have the selfie stick.

Patented nearly a decade ago in 2006 by the Canadian inventor Wayne Fromm, the selfie

stick allows you to hold a camera at up to three times the length of your arm as you take a picture of yourself. Originally called the “monopod” (a telling name, I would suggest), the selfie stick makes you much more independent and self-reliant. No longer do you need to ask a passing stranger to take your picture in a setting of your choosing. Instead, you have become the self-sufficient recorder of your own circumstances. And it allows you, furthermore, to mark off a territory as distinctly your own—for at least the time you are taking your picture in it. As Fromm put it in a recent interview, “With the selfie stick, people are forced to walk around you. That was one of its selling features.”

I find it interesting, however, that a growing list of institutions—from the Colosseum in Rome and the Palace of Versailles to soccer stadiums in Brazil and the famed Wimbledon tennis competition in London—have slapped bans on selfies, fearing safety concerns or what the organizers of the British Open Tournament call their “nuisance value.” The Australian Open, the first grand slam competition to crack down on the use of these sticks, has designated special “selfie zones” placed at a safe distance from the crowded stands.

Leading museums and art galleries around the world, likewise concerned about baton-wielding tourists, have outlawed the selfie stick as well. In justifying this ban, they report that photographers using this device are so concentrated on themselves that they become oblivious to what is going on around them. According to the curators, the narrowed focus of these visitors endangers the museums' priceless works of art, especially when these sticks are wielded in crowded settings.

Even without the use of a stick, the current popularity of the self-administered photograph points to a phenomenon of our times. At some level, we yearn to view—or at least photograph—ourselves as others see us.

Rudolf Steiner identified this yearning as a symptom of a deeper wish to see objectively, not just our faces but our inner selves as we appear to the world around us. He attributed this thirst for self-knowledge to what he called the Consciousness Soul, an aspect of ourselves which, if deliberately cultivated, liberates us from our subjective perspective (looking from the inside out) and gets us to perceive ourselves objectively and dispassionately (from the outside in), viewing ourselves as though a stranger. It is our mission to develop objective self-reflection, he said, since this advanced spiritual capacity is a necessary step along the way to attaining true human freedom.

Viewing the relationship of technology and human development from another perspective, Steiner characterized the devices of technology as representing harbingers—albeit prematurely precipitated into physical form—of advanced spiritual capacities that it will be our task to develop into future times. On this view, for example, the telephone and television can be considered to be precursors, in material form, of our nascent ability to communicate at a distance (clairaudience) or see at a distance (clairvoyance).

For as long as these devices are used as tools to enhance the development of spiritual capacities, they can serve the advancement of human consciousness. The mischief begins when a technological device supplants—rather than enhances—these capacities so that we grow dependent upon the tool rather than striving to develop spiritually the capacity that it simulates in material form.

From this vantage point, then, one can also view the selfie—and by extension the selfie stick—as a physical precipitate of a central responsibility of the Consciousness Soul: namely, the ability to develop a more objective awareness

of who we are and of the context in which we find ourselves.

To the degree we awaken to the objective relationships existing between “I” and “world,” the selfie can confirm what we already perceive and thereby strengthen our understanding of these relationships. But put the selfie ahead of self-development and we are headed down the road of the original selfie-wheeler, who was depicted in ancient mythology as Narcissus.

And we all know—or should know—what became of him. Utterly self-absorbed, Narcissus lost all touch with his surroundings, and ultimately with himself. He became his own environment. In him the development of Consciousness Soul was arrested, even reversed. “I” and “world” were blended, dissipated. He fell victim to what one contemporary commentator has dubbed the allure of the “narcistick.”

Though it can help us capture a photo of our outer appearance, the selfie stick will not supply us with a picture of who we really are. And yet it may remind us—metaphorically, through its inherent gesture—how to attain one.