

Honest, Complete Assessment and Social Renewal: A Revolution

Patrice Maynard

*“The revolution will not be televised...
the revolution will not be right back... the
revolution will not go better with Coke...”*

– Gil Scott Heron, 1968

The Revolution

We underestimate the revolutionary possibilities of Waldorf education. Constructive revolution was inherent in the ideas Rudolf Steiner gave the first Waldorf school teachers and asked the parents of those first classes to support. There are many revolutionary ideas inherent in the way Waldorf educators teach, but four are highlighted here:

1. To view a human being as an unfolding mystery.
2. To view human beings as unfolding in clear developmental stages.
3. To practice what we may call “practical altruism.”
4. To teach concepts imaginatively, aiming at rich, pictorial insight.

The first two, knit together, show our students to be “developing mysteries” and provide a framework in which children can learn as individuals held in a developmental wholeness. Each child learns at his or her own pace; however, he or she does this within an imaginative picture of children in a certain developmental time of life as the guarded, invisible area that grown-ups hold on the child’s behalf. In each developmental phase teaching methods differ. Teachers in Waldorf schools try not to begin a different way of teaching until the signs are clear in a child that a developmental phase is actually shifting. Teachers may wait longer than the world deems proper so that a child can actually consolidate learning from one phase before beginning the next. Just as a plant

rests and even shrinks a bit after outgrowth and before launching into the development of buds, or as the sea pauses after hitting the shore before rushing back upon itself again, a child waits a bit before rushing forward with recently completed mastery, grasping it as personal accomplishment before plunging into what can be done with it.

Regarding practical altruism: In Waldorf elementary schools, students are rarely held back simply because of academic failure; nor are students pushed forward because of academic prowess. This attention to the health of the group holds an important message: “Here we all are, lucky to be together. What good will it do us to push anyone out or up or back? We are good as a whole class and shall remain that way. If one of us is wanting in an area, we will help that want to be fulfilled. If one of us is especially gifted, we will share that gift with those who need it.” Young people leave Waldorf schools and go out into the world imbued with ideas like this. Giving up on others is not an option that gets us anywhere. Rejoicing in the opportunity of those with whom we are gathered is the only way to fulfill any community. Working through conflict, not excluding an opponent, is the revolutionary result.

And regarding imaginative teaching: The actual thought processes of Waldorf school students are cultivated with pictures full of imaginative light. Waldorf school students tend to imagine things first and to act upon them only after there is a full picture in their well-practiced imaginative capacity.

Through the rigorous use of artistic work to comprehend things and to illustrate them, through the insistence that experience comes first and deriving a concept comes later, and through the steadfast preparation of a teacher to find the appropriate picture, symptom, or overview in pre-

senting any new subject, biography, or line of learning, each student learns a number of important skills. The feelings of students are exercised as imaginative pictures arise within them and course through their inner experience. Students' feelings may rush from like to dislike and back again as a teacher fleshes out a biography of, say, Queen Elizabeth. Tender-hearted young queen, shrewd politician, lover of music and theater, aggressive and acquisitive ruler, patron of many in need of support, loved by her people, never married, courageous and canny diplomat, ferociously independent, and always alone. The imaginatively educated feeling life of a Waldorf school student is noteworthy because quick reaction is not so ordinary in them. Their educated feelings tend to say in the face of an unsettling story, "There must be another side to that tale, another point of view, another piece of the picture. I'll react and decide when I know a bit more."

Child observation is a key element in this fourth point, because, as the teacher creates images for the students' feeling life to consider, he or she watches carefully. Which children react in which ways to which parts of the story? Later in the day, the teacher imagines the students, forms a mental picture of the class, and evaluates her teaching along these lines. The students feel this and react in confidence that the teacher sees them, knows them, and imagines them. The students then complete this process by imitating their teacher's practice of inner picture-making.

Moral Encouragement

Woven through these four revolutionary points is moral encouragement. To view a developing human being reverently and to protect each developmental phase of a young person's growth is responsible, moral, and kind. To make space for all children, all students, is an ethical practice. To view the world imaginatively, as a series of connected illustrations, and not as isolated facts or intellectual concepts, is to give a human being an organ of perception able to care for the world and to be interested in the world. Imaginative thinking is limitlessly flexible and rarely sinks into "either-or," "good or bad" assessments. Wholeness is a moral gift of pictorial thinking because nothing can exist outside of a context. All things influence other things, and to understand this is to pause to consider before taking action.

In speaking to the parents of the first Waldorf school, Steiner explained that the Waldorf school would be ridiculed because the way of teaching would be so revolutionary and that parents should be prepared for this. He also explained that it would not be necessary to worry about the ridicule because Copernicus and Galileo were also ridiculed when they first introduced the revolutionary concept of a heliocentric universe. Just as, after one or two hundred years, most embraced the heliocentric universe, so, in one or two hundred years, most would recognize the wisdom of the Waldorf school approach to education.

Parents Are Essential

Recently the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) has been working on the most effective language by which to characterize the uniqueness of Waldorf education. A next step in spreading an appropriate message is to invite all who come into a Waldorf school community to become co-creators of the constructive revolution implicit in Waldorf education.

Those parents who bring their children to a Waldorf school who have not been formally invited into the constructive revolution may bring with them a fear, like that engendered in some by the "No Child Left Behind" Act (NCLB) of 2001. These parents might want Waldorf education to be a prep school education that keeps their children competitive, introducing academic subjects early in children's school years and at a brisk clip so that they can "succeed" in the "real" world. The arts may then be viewed as delicate embroidery around the edges of a more standard education and not as the powerful heart of original and revolutionary ideas.

Assessment may become a point of brittle disagreement among those who have not taken the part of co-creator, those who are not aware of the revolution. How can parents tell that students know what teachers think they know? How is a parent to trust "subjective" teachers' reports? When too much in our culture points to "objective" data like test scores and believes that we have adequate tools to hold schools accountable through testing, parents are pressured not to believe that a written report can tell enough about a student's achievements.

Assessment and Transformation

It is in assessment that the agreement among parents, teachers, and administrators to be co-creators becomes a constructive revolution that defines Waldorf education. We must all become conversant in viewing growing human beings as unfolding mysteries that may or may not learn what we think ought to be learned in the way we think it ought to be learned. All involved in Waldorf education must become conversant in the language and art of child observation. This may sound easy enough. After all, parents and teachers alike are engaged in caring for the child.

Good Waldorf school teachers, however, know that child observation is a demanding, subtle, and difficult part of teaching. It is nuanced and tender. Students, trying to do their best, often compensate ingeniously for what they struggle to achieve and this may be missed if observation is not careful enough.

The demanding tasks at the heart of the revolution are often quoted as, “Receive the child in reverence; educate the child with love; let the child go forth in freedom.”¹ All involved must keep these goals at the heart of their work on behalf of children. Parents cannot do this without teachers; teachers cannot do this without parents.

In Waldorf school communities, making a conscious request of parents to join the revolution would define the point of transformation clearly. It would require articulating all that must be sacrificed in order genuinely to create something new. Things to be sacrificed include: standard assumptions about how to assess human development; suspicion of other adults; demands to alter curriculum without due consideration; a view of human beings as receptacles to be filled early and abundantly; and fear. Practices to replace sacrificed attitudes include: child observation; trust in each human being’s desire to learn and capacity for learning; gratitude for the opportunity to educate children in a new way; loving attention (tough love included) to the needs of children; self-discipline; courage to speak directly and honestly about concerns; and collaboration in forming a picture of a child.

One former parent in a Waldorf school community suggested that parents might write a report about his or her child at the same time the teacher does. Both teacher and parent could read

both reports and learn more about the student in the process, and more about each other as adults responsible for the unfolding of the student. Such a practice could contribute to the revolutionary possibilities of Waldorf education.

Focus and Patience

Revolutions are difficult and require focus and patience. The time in which we are undertaking this effort is, perhaps, more difficult now than it was when Rudolf Steiner started the first Waldorf school.

The inability of our Congress to ratify NCLB with alterations is testament to a consensus that this legislation is a failure. Despite the idealism inherent in the original vision of NCLB, and the yearning in all good American hearts to make a good education possible for all children, NCLB is widely viewed as unsuccessful. There is agreement that testing inappropriately directs curricula. Dropout rates continue to rise in many high schools as students feel increasingly labeled as “failing.” Preparation for testing and testing itself take too much time from actual teaching. Teachers often dare not deviate from a given curriculum and, therefore, are frustrated because they cannot answer the real needs of children in their classes. And yet, the rewards of “accountability” are still too difficult to leave behind (NTLB: No Test Left Behind).

Lisa Keegan, educational consultant to John McCain’s recent presidential campaign, speaking to the Council for American Private Education (CAPE), said that no one is willing to let go of the accountability portion of NCLB now that, at last, we have a way really to monitor failing schools and failing teachers. After decades of not knowing what’s going on in schools, at last we know, she said. Even as Ms. Keegan acknowledged that a data-based approach might be choking off the very educational goals we hold dear for our young people, accountability through testing is perceived to be too compelling to change.

In light of these trends, the possibilities for a constructive revolution provided by Waldorf education become more promising. Graduates of Waldorf schools all over the world provide the bountiful testimony of satisfied people, happy in life, happy with friends and family, grateful for peace and purposeful work. The results of this

revolution, evidenced in its graduates, hold potential for the social renewal Steiner intended for it to have.

As co-revolutionaries, all in our Waldorf school communities can encourage each other to examine what it is that is genuinely new in what is being done, what of the old must be released, which pillars of trust are forged on behalf of the young people entrusted to our care. Courage, not fear; trust, not suspicion; imaginative comprehension, not quick reaction to an isolated point: These are the tools we must create ever anew to succeed in this constructive revolution. Appreciation for all the people we meet and with whom we work, celebration of the rewards of difficult tasks: Social renewal is the castle built from such pillars. Here's a revolution worth working for.

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I believe that our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and foreordained, and only he holds the key to his own secret. By your tampering and thwarting and too much governing he may be hindered from his end and kept out of his own. Respect the child. Wait and see the new product of Nature. Nature loves analogies, but not repetitions. Respect the child. Be not too much his parent. Trespass not on his solitude.

—Ralph Waldorf Emerson, from “Education”

Endnote

1. Editor's note: Quotation attributed to Rudolf Steiner. The actual quotation is:

If we have received the child in religious reverence, if we have educated him in love up to the time of puberty, then our proper course after this will be to leave the youth's spirit free, and to hold intercourse with him on terms of equality. We aim, that is, not to touch the spirit but to let it be awakened. When the child reaches puberty, we shall best attain our aim of giving the child over to free use of his intellectual and spiritual powers if we respect the spirit and say to ourselves: You can remove hindrances from the spirit, physical hindrances and also, up to a point, hindrances of the soul. What the spirit has to learn it learns because you have removed the impediments. If we remove impediments the spirit will develop in contact with life itself even in very early youth. Our rightful place as educators is to be removers of hindrances.

(Steiner, Rudolf. *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, GA 305. Full text available at <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Education/19220819p01.html>.)