

## Teaching Sensible Science Course: A Sensible Science Moment

*by Kelly Larson*

Pondering the smooth reflective surface of the lake beside me, my gaze is drawn further out where small ripples sparkle. “How many suns do you see?” echoes from the morning conversation. Looking up, dark olive green mixes with forest, lime, yellow; shimmering giggles against a dusky cobalt sky that lightens to seeming grey at the horizon. Time no longer matters; what is past floats away; what lies anxiously ahead fades to being only this moment. Sounds drift by and I allow them to fade into the background unnamed, sharing only this moment in shimmering, transformative, and illuminated shadows, slowly connecting and opening up to the world. No worry or concern; all will be as it should if I remain open and trust.

As I slowly find my way back along the street, not speaking to those with whom I am sharing this journey, the harsh vibration of a lawn mower resonates within my bones, jolting me. Birds flit through shadows of a monarch. Cars on the street seem to fly by disconnected, closed off and too fast for the rippling water or giggling leaves. Without seeing, I am aware, sensing peripherally all around my being in circles of energy rather than driving towards a point in the future. I am here. Warm silky caressing air brushes gently against my skin. Tears well, as words form in my mind, “It is mine to choose, and the universe supports my choice. Though I may fail, at least I am alive in choosing uncertainty.”

Inspired by this reflective exercise from the “Teaching Sensible Science” course led by Michael D’Aleo, the emotions that arose were powerful and at times intense. In the open, safe environment created by this course, several participants had the courage to share their experiences. This simple activity, undertaken on the edge of Lake Michigan in Chicago, took us for a short time out of ourselves and allowed us to be completely present in the world, noticing the smallest details.

Someone who can be in the present  
and see the future is very powerful.  
All we have to do is choose it.

– Michael D’Aleo

This second week of three provided a multitude of practical hands-on experiences taken from the physics and chemistry curriculum of the seventh grade, including building and firing a lime kiln, working with different equipment, and leading labs. Yet the team leading the course encouraged us to go deeper, suggesting that cultivating openness is one of the greatest gifts we can give our students. Providing the space to share their intimate perceptions of the world, we open the door for them to seek patterns and explore relationships. This is the seed for will activities. In exploring their perceptions and discerning what resonates within themselves and with others, students are given the opportunity to discover a deeper sense of self.

Ultimately, Michael explained, this is what the students are hoping we can do with them. By allowing them a safe place to be vulnerable together, they can bear witness to their own being and develop a wakeful clarity of thinking. Meeting the challenges of our world requires a new way of thinking. The students must be awake to the interconnectedness of every activity in this integrated world. Rudolf Steiner, in a lecture given on September 22, 1920 (entitled “Balance in Teaching”), said: “Living reality can never be expressed in rigid concepts, and in dealing with a child, it is the intimate elements of life that are all-important.” It is too easy to break science down into rigid concepts. Instead the course leaders encouraged us to allow the intimacy of life and experience to guide our teaching of science, so that our students discover for themselves the relationships that resonate as truth.

Michael opened the week by reciting a poem he had written that made clear the choice was ours to make.

If you choose life  
It will bring  
uncertainty.

If you choose certainty  
What remains is only dead.  
Then there is no life!

It is our job to teach the students not to live only in this world, but rather to go beyond and live into their future. In Waldorf education we endeavor not to assign fixed identities to our students, but rather to see in each student who s/he is striving to become. The phenomena-based science we bring to the students in grades 6–8 exemplifies this intention. We could teach with fixed concepts and conclusions, just as in times gone by when the world was said to be flat, or we can open the door for the students to discover what they believe to be true for now. This is a challenging thought for people living in our instant-gratification

and fact-hungry world. Michael brought to the discussion the idea that too much of the Intellectual Soul drives us to a point, as an arrow, and there forward movement stops. He suggested that a properly used Intellectual Soul will find times to step back, open up and broaden the perspective, in order then to move forward.

When we began the course in February, we discussed science as being the “space between,” a place where conditions are not fixed and creativity exists. Naming something, though it feels safe and certain, also makes it dead. It cannot grow, change, or transform. Only living perceptions can do that. Michael continued to challenge our habits of thought: “It is not thoughts that need to be enlivened, it’s the activity of thinking itself.”

To the degree that we work with established facts, we find ourselves working in the past with what was, not with what is becoming. Phenomenological science strives to open the door for students to discover new ideas and concepts rather than live in a world so defined that it is dead and unchanging. As their teacher I am charged with assisting them to find relationships and posing open questions to inspire them to think more deeply.

Through this course I came to realize how often I use a term to name something rather than clearly describe my experience, my feeling, or my sensations. As I carried this thought with me into the closing of the school year, I caught myself labeling a child rather than describing what I had observed under particular conditions. With spring bursting forth and collegial or personal conflicts arising, I found myself pondering: If science is the expression of these conditions now, where are the relationships? If emotion is the expression of the current conditions and if love is seeing within another human being that quality that others have failed to recognize, can I shift the conditions enough to feel more love towards those with whom I find myself in conflict? Could I move beyond labeling the individual or

the situation and instead look to the moment and the conditions? In this shifting could we all experience something different?

As we closed our discussions at the end of the week the question arose: “How do we transition back to the life and relationships that have not been part of this journey with us?” We wondered aloud if we would be met with openness, if for some of us nothing would change and if we had changed, what must we do to carry this forward?

A truly powerful teacher training transforms not only the classroom but all aspects of the teacher’s life. In some trainings this may occur on occasion by accident, or by intent. It is inspiring to be engaged in a training that holds the transformation of its participants as one of its primary objectives.

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The “Teaching Sensible Science” course, sponsored by the Research Institute for Waldorf Education, is carried by a quartet of faculty led by Michael D’Aleo, an engineer and high school science teacher, and includes Gary Banks, also an engineer, class teacher, and high school science teacher; Lylli Anthon, a long-time class teacher; and Barbara Richardson, eurythmist and coordinator of Foundation Studies at the Center for Anthroposophy. Hosted by Chicago Waldorf School and made possible through a grant secured by AWSNA from the Waldorf Educational Foundation, “Teaching Sensible Science” is structured to support the teacher working with the sciences of grades 6–8 to achieve a depth not only of understanding but, through that understanding, of personal growth. It meets for three one-week sessions over a period of nine months.