

# Waldorf Tuition: Gift or Investment or Something In-between?

by George Eastman

**S**trong gusts of wind drive sheets of rain against the rhythmically moving windshield wipers as

Brenda and I drive from Cambridge to Lexington. We are going to an open meeting at the Lexington Waldorf School to discuss school finances. The meeting is to be chaired by the president of the Board, and in attendance to answer questions will be the school's Finance Committee. Siegfried Finser is a guest and will open the meeting with some thoughts on Waldorf financing. Brenda is the full-time director of development at the school, and I am a parent of a third-grade boy and a kindergarten girl. My wife is at home, tending to the important bedtime hour. We take turns going to meetings, and this one seemed more in my domain of interest.

Eventually thirty-five persons are assembled in the eurythmy room. In a handout entitled "Finance Committee and the Forming of the Budget," the sources of revenue and the expenditures are described. Special effort is made to clarify how the anticipated addition of a ninth grade in the fall will affect the budget and tuition costs. The handout asks, "How can parents help the school's financial picture?" and suggests that parents need to inform themselves about the

school's finances, pay tuition in a timely fashion, and contribute to the Annual Giving Campaign. The inevitable budgetary pie charts show that for 1995-96, tuition and fees account for 96 percent of the revenue, and that of the expenses, 51 percent is for faculty, 18 percent for tuition waiver and assistance, and 20 percent for general and administrative purposes.

Siegfried Finser opens the meeting with a story. He is a veteran Waldorf teacher with much experience in school start-ups and financing, but also with much experience in the corporate world. Suppose, Siegfried proposes, we go into a furniture store to buy a sofa. We take our time examining the selection, and as we perhaps sit down on a sofa to test it, a salesman says, "Comfortable, isn't it?" This is the start of a process of selling and buying. You, the buyer, probably have some idea of what you want to spend. Because you want the sofa, you bargain with the salesman and eventually agree to a figure.

Siegfried's story then takes an unexpected turn. After you have paid and are leaving, the salesman runs after you and exclaims, "I was impressed with you and our transaction. May I borrow two thousand dollars from you for a project which is likely to yield large profits in a

short time?" Siegfried notes that most of us would be surprised and probably put off by such a request. It would seem inappropriate and would probably be dismissed at once. However, someone might be willing to listen, and this would probably lead to asking the salesman personal questions concerning his education, training, competence to pursue the project in question, his place of residence, marital status, and so on.

Siegfried does not make explicit the moral of his story. To me he is suggesting the different ways that we can relate to money. In purchasing something, we have a right to purchase only what we truly

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desire. It would be a paradox in North American culture if we went into a furniture store and were told that we *must* purchase a particular sofa. Purchasing something should be a voluntary act, both with regard to choice of object and to price. A different relationship, however, is involved in borrowing or lending money. In this case, we, if we are the lender, or the bank - which is more likely the case - have a right to check out the borrower to safeguard our loan. We will want evidence the person is capable of paying back the loan, and we will want the loan backed up by collateral.

Having presented his story, Siegfried raises the question, "What type of money transaction is paying Waldorf tuition?"

My mind scans the possibilities. "Am I purchasing something?" I ask myself, and respond, "Well, yes, to some extent." And I ask myself further, "Am I giving a loan?" "No," I answer right away, because my tuition is a payment for something, and I expect to get that "something" in return, rather than money back with interest.

At last, Siegfried reveals the point of his story. Waldorf tuition, he asserts, is a gift. It is a gift that we give to the school to support the teachers to whom we entrust our children. "Waldorf schools," Siegfried exclaims, "are buoyed up by gifts."

Initially, I am carried away by the graciousness of the idea of gift-giving and by the warmth and conviction of Siegfried's manner. But very quickly I begin to feel uncomfortable. "Wait a minute," I say

to myself. "It is true I have entrusted my children to Waldorf teachers, but the tuition is not a gift. I do give gifts to the school, in the form of monetary gifts to the Annual Fund Drive, in the form of pro bono professional hours spent training mediation teams for the school; being a member of the Parent Council, and in other ways. These are gifts because there are no strings attached. To me, the primary feature of a gift is that it is given as free as possible of any expectation of return. Given what we are as humans - self-oriented beings driven by a host of conscious and unconscious needs - we probably seldom give a gift in this ideal sense. Pure altruistic giving is no more likely than pure altruism. Nevertheless, I feel the highest gift I can give is one free of any expectation of return."

**If we see our tuition as an investment, and we see ourselves as active, rather than passive, investors ... then we take on the responsibility to ensure that our investment yields the results we seek.**

As I run these ideas through my mind it becomes clear that the tuition I pay is an investment. However, I make this investment not in the hardnosed, self-protective way that I might purchase stocks or bonds or property. My Waldorf tuition is an investment made in goodwill, with a lot of trust, and with a certain spirit of

giving.

At this point I share my thoughts with the group, pointing out that I see the tuition I pay as an investment and not as a gift. The investment, I point out, is in the future of my children and, by extension, in the future of the world. As an investor, I am concerned with how my money is used to achieve certain purposes I have in mind. Whereas one can give a gift with no other motive than to express love and caring, in making an investment one always has an explicit objective.

The discussion then turns to the topic of the projected ninth grade, which dominates the rest of the meeting. Except for two speakers who support the idea of tuition as investment, no one discusses further the distinction between gift and investment.

I feel compelled to write on this distinction, however, because it raises some of the most fundamental questions regarding the governance of Waldorf schools and the role of parents in the decision-making process.

To whom are Waldorf faculty responsible? Are they responsible to the parents who provide, in the case of the Lexington Waldorf School, 96 percent of the revenues? And what does it mean to be "responsible?" Parents sign a contract with the school each year. In the current year at the Lexington Waldorf School each parent is even assigned a "Customer Number." The contract consists entirely of an itemization of the tuition and fees, with totals and with payment terms. In legal terms, it is a

poor contract at best in that it does not spell out the conditions that *both* parties are to meet or the safeguards both parties have against default. So although the word "contract" is used, it appears to be a euphemism for "bill" or "bill of sale." It states simply what I, the parent-"customer," owe the school and states nothing about what the school is giving in return.

We are entering murky and difficult waters here. Historically, teaching contracts have differed from commercial or fiduciary contracts. At the college level, where I have taught for over thirty years, a teaching contract spells out the number of teaching hours and of weekly office hours, the minimum number of student advisees, as well as committee assignments and other special services to the institution. It specifies the length of the contract and the conditions for renewal and for abrogation. It may even explicitly note the type and extent of scholarly contributions expected. The contract also states that the institution in return agrees to reimburse the teacher a per annum amount in specified installments. Usually accompanying the contract is a faculty handbook that spells out in more detail all of these conditions, plus what behaviors on the part of the teacher would release the institution from its contractual obligations.

The danger - the downside - of thinking of Waldorf teaching as a gift is that it implies an unrealistic and, in my judgment, an undesirable *carte blanche* given to Waldorf teachers. "Here," it may imply,

"you take my child and do what, in your Anthroposophic wisdom, you think is best for him. I give you this salary with no expectations and with total trust."

Certainly there needs to be trust, for trust is at the very heart of any voluntary organization, particularly one to which we entrust our precious children. But the fact is that our tuition *is* an investment of a most complex kind. For me, I am investing first of all in a philosophy and practice of education that embraces the whole child - his body, heart, and soul, as well as his mind. Second, I am investing in maintaining and strengthening a community of parents, teachers, and staff - a community dedicated to a vision of human life and of the world that I can personally support. Third, I am investing in a special type of education that provides a corrective to the reductionism, the escapism, the "virtual" reality that progressively pervades North American society and the industrialized East and West. Fourth, I am investing not only in my children's future, but in the future of generations yet unborn who will have an opportunity to attend the Lexington Waldorf School. And fifth, I am investing in maintaining a physical school, a building with desks, chairs, books, and supplies, a physical school that is attractive and functional and is an expression of Anthroposophy.

If we see our tuition as an investment, and we see ourselves as active, rather than passive, investors - which some Waldorf parents may choose to be - then we take

on the responsibility to ensure that our investment yields the results we seek. This means that we, as parents, need to be as clear as possible about what we seek for our children. We need to understand the Anthroposophical worldview that undergirds Waldorf Education. We need to understand our own motives, our own inner needs that are being met through our children. We need to become involved in the life of the school in whatever way we can, to tune into its pulse, to respond to the ebb and flow of energy. It is no coincidence that many Waldorf teachers begin as parents of Waldorf children and through their children come to appreciate the important way of being that Waldorf Education offers.

By the time the meeting at the school ends, the wind and rain have ceased. A calm, slightly foggy New England night makes one look forward to the warmth of hearth and of quiet time for thought. Driving home, I realize that the tuition I pay is somewhere between an investment and a gift. It is at a balancing point on the continuum between my right to expect accountability from the faculty and to have my expectations met, and their right to be trusted to make sound decisions in all of the domains affecting my child's developing mind, heart, and soul. It is perhaps our greatest responsibility as Waldorf parents to find where we stand on that continuum and then to act energetically and in good faith to have our expectations met.