

Some Thoughts on Religion by Stephen Spitalny

In the present time, I think it is an essential task of a Waldorf school community aspiring to consciousness and freedom to create an inclusiveness, a welcoming, for people of any religion or ethnic or racial background, wherever that Waldorf/Steiner School happens to be located on our shared planet. As a white male, as a member of the Waldorf School movement and as a representative of Anthroposophy, I think it is incumbent on me and anyone of like mind to make sure Waldorf schools are not perceived as 'Christian' schools. That means, Waldorf schools must become beacons of a universal spiritual education.

It is incumbent on white people to undo the prejudices and in-the-clubby-ness of the past and create truly welcoming and open and universal havens where all families feel connected. It is through our shared values, and our common celebration of new festivals, festivals that we are going to have to create ourselves that we will create this new community with the children at the center. This is what the Spirit of our Time is asking us.

As a Waldorf consultant and teacher trainer, I wish for all schools to take the time and effort to create unique festivals that can be appreciated universally that speak to the place of the human being within the earth and cosmos, the seasons, the peoples, and the other kingdoms of life. In other words, festivals that do not come from ANY religious traditions. Write our own stories, develop our own pictures that can have intentions standing behind them, but the images can be universal. It is hard work, but so worth the effort.

I am not promoting a bland, dead version of Waldorf education with no festival life, and no acknowledgement of spiritual life. A hodgepodge of festivals is undigestible for the children, and a unnecessary burden for the faculty. I want to see vibrant, enlivened, spiritual and spirited festival celebrations created out of the thinking and will of the unique faculty and community in a school. And I want it to speak to everyone.

There are various elements at play in all of this. One is the curriculum. It is clear that by 8th grade in a Waldorf school, students experience a breadth of world culture and religions. That is amazing and unique in Waldorf schools. (It relies on the original Stuttgart curriculum being expanded upon.) Here we can consider classroom decoration and can help each other to discern if we are presenting one-sided Christian or overly abundant white-skinned imagery on the classroom walls or in the students' Main-Lesson books.

Festivals and special events are another area to consider. Can we try to live into the experience of a Jewish family? A Muslim or Hindu family? Many people describe

Waldorf education as Christian education? One can either say that those people just don't understand what we are doing, or one can examine what we do that makes it seem to others that we are a Christian education. This is the openmindedness Steiner asked of us. We have to be active in our thinking with our will to develop a true social impulse for our time.

The profound question of the Christ Impulse lives in my heart and my thinking. All branches of Christianity and esoteric Christianity both say Christ did what Christ did for all humanity and for the earth, for us all. The 'turning point of time' means something to me, our earth needed renewal and the sun-being who is called Christ by many united with the Earth thereby renewing all of our etheric forces, among various other intentions and results. The deeds of that being are for all, whatever one's religious leanings. The name *Christ* and the traditions of Christianity IN Waldorf schools is what is off-putting for many families.

Today I wanted above all to explain that Christ was that spirit from the cosmos who, in the course of earthly evolution, brought spiritually what was originally intended for our outer form but could not develop externally, because would then have become automatons of love and equality. ...We have the right feelings for Christ only when we see in him the savior, rescuing humanity from dispersion and separateness; only then can Christ fill our innermost I. Christianity lives wherever people are able to understand this union of humanity through Christ. In the future, it will not matter much whether what Christ is will still be called by that name. However, a lot will depend on our finding in Christ the spiritual uniter of humanity and accepting that external diversity will increase more and more... (The Universal Human – Lecture 4, 1/9/1916, Bern (pps. 85 - end))

I am passionate about the idea of deepening Waldorf education through our will, through our hard and diligent work so that our education inspires parents of all backgrounds and is the seed for social renewal. The core of Waldorf education is Steiner's idea that "The most important thing is to establish an education through which human beings learn once more how to live with one another." And I think that there are two important aspects of that. How we relate to individuals, whether we take up and teach NVC or other tools for developing social skill and individual one-to-one connecting is one aspect. And the other is the larger picture of how we invite what is other into our community. This is the crux of the problem for the future of Waldorf, and what will relegate Waldorf education more and more to an education for the few, or support the growth and expansion of the Waldorf School movement into something vibrant and thriving into the times to come.

I am deeply concerned about the future of Waldorf education. I think its hope is in becoming a universal beacon of welcome and inspiration and hope for the future. We all know that the education methodology is remarkable, and the view of the developing human being is profound and unique, but why are schools and some teacher trainings struggling and shrinking, or even disappearing. Yes there are economic and class

reasons, and I am convinced the other reason is the perception of Waldorf education as religious based.

As far as some specifics, first I think we need to recreate the Advent Garden to make it a universal experience of the light coming to earth and living in each one of us, and leave out Mary wandering over stars and angels walking in to light the center candle. And how about a new name?

I think St. Nicholas can be abandoned altogether, especially considering the image of his helper, Rupert. I love the *Oberufer Shepherd's Play* and what it stands for. I have played all three shepherds as well as the star singer at various times. This may be hard for some to be open to hearing: I think the Shepherds' Play does not belong in Waldorf schools. It surely can be produced and offered all around the world, and it can be an extracurricular offering for those families and students who freely choose to attend.

What about Michaelmas? It does not have to be an annual repeat of the St. George and the Dragon story. The world is full of amazing stories portraying courage, intelligence, compassion and other qualities worth emulating. Think about the Michaelic possibility of doing a different story each year, of going into the unknown and creating something new. Additionally, I think filling the calendar with festivals from many religions would not truly serve the students. Let's look with fresh eyes at all of our *sacred cows* and practice openmindedness and see what arises. When we marry that with our creative wills something amazing and inspiring will become manifest. The question is how to create meaning without the trappings of religion.

Each of us is prejudiced. It is a given in the nature of the human being. One of our tasks is to embrace the inner experience of others and thereby overcome this tendency in our thinking. This is one way to discover aspects of ourselves previously hidden from our own awareness. Openness to the perspective of the other is part of self-education.

Many years ago, I annually told the story of Mother Holle in my kindergarten. One particular kindergarten year in the 1990s, I got a call from a parent the first day I told that story. He was African-American and not happy. After a lengthy phone conversation, we arranged a face-to-face meeting where I explained to him the background of the story, the symbolism, and that it was in the context of many other stories from many cultures I told each year. He appreciated the esoteric symbolism of the story, and said "But you are not Black and don't know what it is like to be Black in America." We discussed what *pitch* really is, me claiming pitch is sap from a tree and he reminded me of the common phrase 'pitch black.' He went on to describe his experiences of being followed when he went into shops. He said that being white I couldn't understand that the picture of being good and getting rewarded with gold, and being bad and turning black is widely, blatantly and subtly woven into western culture. His was a gut

experience, a physical experience, and I got it. I could only get his perspective because he articulated it for me and I was somehow able to be openminded.

I have spent a lot of time in Waldorf schools and trainings outside of Christian culture, I train Waldorf early childhood teachers in North America and Asia, and am often asked to address the question of the Christian religious approach of Waldorf education. My perspective is that Waldorf schools are meant to be universally inclusive, not representing any particular religious tradition. I am happy to discuss the so-called Christ Impulse in Waldorf education with the teachers and the trainees. It has nothing to do with religious traditions or religious education.

I am saddened when Waldorf schools can be experienced as not including families whose traditions may be different - *by those families*. There is a feeling of 'this is weird, this is not our family.' I do not think I am being picky or overly sensitive. I fervently think this is one area that will make Waldorf either an education for all children, or a cultish education for the few and fewer.

*May the Spirit of the World
Be unveiled to those who are seeking,
In the healing Light shining by which we can see,
In the singing of the choir of Peace, resounding in human hearts,
And in Love streaming into human deeds.*

I write this in hopes that I can stimulate some much-needed conversation.

Sincerely,
Stephen Spitalny