

Uncharted Waters

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The year 2020 brought unprecedeted challenges to us as individuals, as families, as institutions and even as a nation. We have been tested mightily by social isolation, racial justice protests, and political chaos. Individual and collective acts of kindness, empathy and courage- humanity at its best- has kept our lifeboat from being swept out to sea but nevertheless, brought us face-to-face with existential questions that we usually keep at bay.

As Waldorf early childhood teachers, we have had to ask ourselves:

How flexible and creative can I be?

What IS the essence of Waldorf education?

From where do we get our inner strength and conviction?

Early childhood educators are used to being calm centers in stormy times, but in this situation, we have been dealing with extreme levels of uncertainty- for ourselves, our families, the parents of the children in our classes, our colleagues in our schools. We continue to be in uncharted waters as a culture, a school movement and as Waldorf educators.

On many occasions I have found myself wondering what is REALLY happening? Why did the whole world need to push the pause button? Is there a shining opportunity under the surface of this phenomenon that will only be open for a short period of time and then close again, like flood waters after the rainstorm?

I am writing this piece during the first week of 2021, not knowing, but hoping, that by spring our feeling of unsettledness will be eased, that we will be seeing dry land ahead and a path back to familiar rituals and rhythms in everyday life, including hugging our family and friends and shaking hands with our colleagues.

In my conversations with colleagues, however, it is clear that there is no “going back to normal.” The depth of the disruption and the questions that have arisen are urgent and many of us feel compelled to try to integrate the lessons of this year into our lives as we return and regroup. We want to recognize and take hold of the real jewels in our work and polish them even more brightly. We are less fearful of letting go of those things that we had built up and thought were precious but are not as real and vital in the same way.

Having to adapt to distance learning has allowed us to look with fresh eyes at Waldorf education, at what is so central and difficult to maintain without face-to-face contact. What is changing in our larger social sphere? The pull of the longing for the familiar and the comfortable will be tempting. We will need to be awake to new possibilities and to find ways to make the good things that often arise in a crisis a part of our new normal. The likelihood of that happening without both individual and collective effort is slim.

“What is my part?” Each of us has the opportunity to renew the work within our own Waldorf communities and beyond, in the human community. Hopefully we can share what we are continuing to learn through the WECAN hub and the other means of communication that have been set up during the past year. In some areas, like the importance of rhythm, for example, we were happily confirmed in its health-giving benefit. Out of our recent experiences, however, we may make new decisions about the balance of inside and outdoor activities or about creating daily schedules that are simpler than what we had previously established for our classes.

In other areas, we have been really shaken loose from our old habits and required by the circumstances to try out new ways of working, especially in the realm of relationships. The constraints on our interactions have had a deep impact on us all. The undeniable longings for contact, loving touch, and the fullness of an in-person conversation are becoming increasingly palpable. Even those whose preferred mode of interaction prior to 2020 was social media have come to recognize that feeling of being “hungry,” even though they have just eaten a digital meal! Modern culture’s love affair with technology and social media is meeting with an unexpected rival- the longing for human touch, human interaction!

Relationship is the heart of Waldorf education. What are we learning about our relationships with the children, the parents, our colleagues?

Some colleagues have remarked:

- “I am the anchor for the children, and they are mine. I couldn’t go on without them.”
- “My parents have been able to see more of why I do what I do, and I have been able to really understand their needs and struggles. It is a partnership for which we are both so grateful.”
- “My colleagues and I have had to work much more collaboratively than ever before in order to find a creative way to meet the stringent conditions we have been facing.”

Out of my conversations with colleagues, I am sensing that we have discovered something profound and are preparing for a paradigm shift in all of our relationships. The restrictions on our interactions dictated by the pandemic and the rising urgency of the issues of diversity and inclusion have both echoed strongly in our Waldorf communities. As we take up our work anew and rebuild our relationships, how can we not fall back into old patterns of thinking, feeling and reacting?

What have we done differently that allows us to connect or not connect? How have we learned to listen more deeply when communicating to a matrix of faces on the screen? How have we learned to feel what is in another’s soul, even though all we can see was a digital image? Can we hang on to the mutual vulnerability that has brought us into more authentic relationships? Can we recognize that we, as well as the children, are all humans-in-becoming?

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The bridge between these two years is a story of strength and softness, harshness and beauty, of breaking down and building up, of holding on and letting go, of breathing in and out, of listening deeply to ourselves and others. We have looked down at the smallest things in the grass with the children and up at the stars when they were asleep. We are waking up to things that we have been asleep to, seeing our circle expand, and remembering how much more we can do when we work together.