

# The Future of Waldorf Education: Beyond 100

## Waldorf News



By Torin Finser

Adapted from a speech at the Center for Anthroposophy in New Hampshire, June 2019.

In 2019 we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Waldorf education. This evening I would like to look beyond 100, towards Waldorf education's future. But first, a look at the past. Taking the number 100, let us divide the past century into three periods. We will look at the number  $33\frac{1}{3}$ , first from a more external point of view and then from an internal aspect.

If we add  $33\frac{1}{3}$  to 1919 we come to 1952. I would call the years from 1919 to 1952 Waldorf education's European period. Of course the Steiner School in Manhattan was founded in 1928 and schools opened elsewhere, but the first school was founded in Stuttgart, and Waldorf schools proliferated during that period throughout Europe, in Scandinavia and the U.K., including reopenings after World War II.

During the next  $33\frac{1}{3}$  years, ending in 1985/86, there was an explosion of enthusiasm for Waldorf education in the Americas, particularly the U.S. This observation may be influenced by my having gone to a Waldorf school in the

1960s, doing Waldorf teacher training in the 1970s and starting my career in 1978: I experienced it firsthand. That was the time of the environmental movement, the anti-war movement, and the rejection of old forms of working. The embrace of alternatives was in full swing. And in those years there were very few critics of Waldorf education. The Association of Waldorf Schools of North America was established, and there was a lot of energy in the movement.

The final 33½-year period brings us to 2019. My experience as a traveler is that in this last period the explosive growth has been largely in Asia. I have been to Korea, India, Nepal, China, Australia, New Zealand and Taiwan, and have had the pleasure of experiencing enthusiasm for Waldorf education and the rapid growth of schools.

One can wonder: Where will new growth occur in the future? When giving what I was told was the first-ever Waldorf talk in Amman, Jordan last winter, I had a sense that something is dawning in the Middle East. The question I am left with is, how we can best learn from each other across continents, cultures, and languages? With our present-day communication tools, are we adapting fast enough, and can we form more of an international Waldorf learning community?

Now, everything external has an internal component. The inner aspect of 33½ years can be viewed from a variety of angles, from biography to Christology. I cannot do justice to either tonight, but summarizing these approaches, one can say that death and resurrection are central themes. We are talking not just about physical death, but the death forces that come with materialism, calcification, divisions, growing polarization and other aspects of our society today. And by resurrection we mean rebirth, renewal and finding new beginnings.

In 2019, on the "3 times 33½" anniversary of Waldorf education, these competing life/death forces are tripled, stronger than ever. Waldorf education is at a tipping point. Will it die, or renew itself?

Tremendous spiritual forces are at work right now in our movement. There is a kind of battle going on between life and death. Before looking at renewing impulses for the future, I'd like to share some of the symptoms of the death forces at work today in the Waldorf movement, at least in the United States.

Several schools have recently closed. Four in the Eastern region are questioning whether they can continue beyond next year. Others are in various forms of crisis: in one, things are apparently so bad that teachers and board members are resigning and parents are leaving in droves. Then there are the struggles in New York State and elsewhere around vaccinations. One larger, well-established Waldorf school in New York had to cut \$1 million from its budget over the summer.

These are all symptoms of death forces. A living organism needs community, healthy relationships, and a place for an experience of the sacred, something rare today. If these qualities are sundered, divided, then we extend an invitation for death forces to enter. But an aspect of death that I find much more troubling is what I call the "slow drip": the phenomena of regular budget deficits that can lead to stagnating salaries, cutbacks in programs, last-minute combining of classes, then more deficits and cutting back more programs, until you become so vulnerable as a school that you feel it's all hanging by a thread. Consequently teachers and school families live with an ongoing debilitating uncertainty.

I feel the Waldorf movement is yearning for a renewal, but there's a wrestling match going on right now and whatever we do in the next few years will be decisive. In fact, Rudolf Steiner said that at 100 years, a movement or institution either dies or needs refounding on a new basis.

So I would like to posit seven aspects, pathways, opportunities, ways to bring new life and strength into the Waldorf movement over the next years.

1. The first has to do with core principles as pillars. Core principles, those unalterable facts upon which Waldorf pedagogy rests, are like the pillars of the temple of Poseidon in Greece, which I recently visited. The Aegean Sea was

beautiful and shimmering; the blowing wind, the play of the light, everything was in motion. And yet those pillars have withstood the test of time and are literally rock solid.

I would like to suggest that each school actively take up conversations around "What are the core principles that are essential to our work?" AWSNA has published some core principles that form a good starting point, but each school needs to begin in-depth conversations among faculty, staff, board members and parents. There are many differences among key groups within our schools that have rested under the surface for too long. We need to face them, even risking that some people may head for the exits. Internal divisions around core principles and values need to be confronted and dealt with. One board member in an AWSNA member school suggested that the school needed to become "Waldorf-aligned." We need to know, and then affirm, who we are. It is not only a matter of integrity, but now an urgent necessity.

Society today has become more fragmented and polarized than ever. The Waldorf movement cannot afford to become another symptom of a relativist culture. If we are to be respected and taken seriously, we need to be responsible to the spirit and knowledge that stand as a basis of the pedagogy. As Peter Selg writes in *The Agriculture Course*, "At the current stage of human evolution, the world of the spirit wants humanity to do particular things in the various domains of life, and thus it is up to us to pursue the impulses that come to us from the world of the spirit in a clear and true way. Even if this gives offense initially, in the long term it will be the only healing thing."

If we do the hard work around core principles, then out of the strength that comes with unity we can summon the courage to let everything else go. Our rich traditions have served us well, nourishing us in festivals, rites of passage and much more. But just like the wind and waves surrounding the temple of Poseidon, we need to bring things into movement to provide a refreshing impulse. And for that we need to risk some empty spaces.

Rudolf Steiner said some interesting things about creating out of nothingness. It's not a very popular notion to talk about. But I do feel that in our situation, with this amazing curriculum and all the resources available to us thanks to

anthroposophy, there is a tendency to carry around a lot of stuff and feel that if you simply accumulate enough material, you'll be a good teacher.

I feel the following words of Rudolf Steiner are particularly relevant for our theme of Beyond 100. Steiner said we need "a world from which the workings of the old causes will have disappeared, a world from which a new light will ray out into the future. The world is not subject to perpetual metamorphosis into different forms (which is our common habit) but the old is perfected and becomes the vehicle of the new. Then even this will be thrown off, will disappear into nothingness, so that out of this nothingness something new may arise. This is the great, the mighty idea of progress...the continuous arising of the new." ("Evolution, Involution and Creation out of Nothingness," Berlin, June 17, 1909.

My first point is simply: Can we establish the pillars, then let everything else move into this place of nothingness and start to re-create? We cannot just throw everything out. Without the pillars we would lose contact with the archetypes and spiritual essence behind our work. There are certain core principles without which we would not have Waldorf education: a developmentally appropriate curriculum, the freedom of the teacher, working with an image of the whole human being as presented in anthroposophy. There are many. AWSNA has seven; I have been working with 15, including Waldorf for social justice. I've been asked to publish them, but am resisting that request because this is the work each of us needs to do with our colleagues, parents and board. The point is not to get something done and then put it in a file so we can say "Done that." The whole idea is to do the work together as a school! The conversations that happen when you talk about core principles in themselves bring new life forces into existence. We are talking about rebirthing Waldorf education.

Along the way, we must be willing to test assumptions and explore together. Take, for example, the important core principle of "Waldorf education as an art." Are we still on board with that? All of our teaching strives to be artistic, but it's not just the paintings on the wall. It involves science education and more. Everything you do in a Waldorf school you do artistically. If you ask people who know little about Waldorf, they'll say, "Oh yeah, they do a lot of art in their schools." But how does this core principle interact with the next one?

2. Waldorf education for social justice. Here, I would like to relate how one core principle – Waldorf education as an art – can be seen through the lens of social justice. In their Evolving Consciousness course, my students recently worked with a selection from *Unequal Childhoods* by Annette Lareau, a thorough study of class, race, language and family life. Through this research we are introduced to several families, including the McAllisters:

The McAllister family lives in a part of the project consisting of rows of two- and three-story brick units. The brown, block-like units on their side contain five two-story apartments. Because the apartments have only one small window per room, they are dark on the inside. Sometimes residents keep lights on during the day.... The refrigerator is broken. Ms McAllister has complained to the manager and although she has been promised a new one, it doesn't arrive during the three weeks we are visiting. Ms McAllister makes do by storing some food next door in their friend Latifa's refrigerator and some in coolers packed with ice.... There is one bathroom. Three televisions are in the house.... most of the time at least one set is on.... Although the McAllisters once had a phone, for much of Harold's fourth-grade year they haven't had one due to budget constraints. Ms McAllister receives messages from the school at her sister's house.... (p. 135)

By comparing the family life of Harold McAllister with that of Alexander Williams (in a white, middle-class home) and others, Lareau describes how the emerging sense of entitlement contrasts with an emerging sense of constraint, right down to one's language skills in dealing with teachers, doctors and other professionals. Alexander's free time is highly organized with after-school activities, while Harold has time for free play; Alexander has learned to negotiate with elders, even argue, while Harold is respectful. Both children learn the skills necessary to negotiate life in their spaces. However, in the larger world, Alexander's skills are more valued than Harold's.

My main point is this: When Waldorf schools are perceived as pro-art and anti-TV, we are invitational to some and exclusionary to others. A sense for social justice can help us become more attuned to this. For some, art can seem a luxury that assumes access. It is no longer enough just to celebrate how much art we do in our schools. We need to show how the arts can help all children, not just the privileged few.

So with every core principle, I recommend that we attach the phrase "so that." Do we teach the arts so that we have beautiful pictures on the wall? Or do we teach the arts so that... and then the real conversations can begin! So that we develop emotional intelligence? So that we help children with judgment formation? So that we help children decide between right and wrong, good and evil? So that we help children make choices? And we need to demonstrate how the artistic process involves all these elements of character education. These are the conversations we need to have! Why are we doing what we are doing? And how do our language and our understandings influence who sits at the table?

3. Next, I would like to propose that we engage in active work with our alums. We recently had five of our children home for the high school graduation of the sixth. All have now graduated from Waldorf schools. We had amazing conversations; they have so many astute insights. They have met hundreds of people, have formed networks of colleagues in their professions in technology, business, public health, investment advising, security services. The Waldorf movement now has thousands upon thousands of alums, working in all professions, connecting and learning. I feel we've just begun to tap the alum resources available to all.

My father is 87. He's looking forward to being in this room next June for his 70th High Mowing School reunion. Imagine a school like High Mowing celebrating a reunion with people 87 years old! The resources are immense, and I don't just mean financial resources, although all these points are somewhat interconnected. It's mostly the connecting with others who can help us take the next steps in this renewal process of Waldorf education. For that, however, we need to go beyond alum reunions as nostalgia to active questioning, listening and learning to support Waldorf Beyond 100.

One of our sons, for example, said, "You know, the way you talk about Waldorf isn't working for us. You need to talk about Waldorf as entrepreneurship. That's what it has meant for me. It's all about entrepreneurship. The things that have happened in a Waldorf school have helped me become a good businessperson."

AWSNA is building an alum platform for all the member schools. Our Center for Anthroposophy in New Hampshire has received grant funding and will launch an alum association for our CfA and Antioch alums, not just according to the traditional format, but looking at new ways of doing it, and engaging alums in conversations around its creation. We are beginning with two events during the Renewal courses, and will then follow up regionally and online. We also have a survey underway ([info@centerforanthroposophy.org](mailto:info@centerforanthroposophy.org)) and are collecting stories of teacher success ([acoffey@waldorfmoraine.org](mailto:acoffey@waldorfmoraine.org)).

4: Accessibility. Education in this country began with private schools: William and Mary, Harvard, Yale. This was long before Horace Mann started the first public school in Massachusetts and went on to become President of Antioch College. Long before public education, we had a tradition of private education. As I see it now, we have a fault line between private (or independent) schools and public education, which has a long history in our country. Public education has emphasized accessibility, and truly every child deserves an education. Private education has emphasized choice in admissions and freedom in teaching. Private education (including homeschooling) has also historically served marginalized populations (e.g., Native American, African-American) as ways to maintain cultural integrity and provide an alternative to traditional, state-sponsored schooling. And private education has also been a way to circumvent public education when community members did not agree with judicial edicts such as integration. Both models have pros and cons. But we are caught in this divide. Teachers are pulled in different directions and we are competing against each other, at least financially in recruitment and retention. More important is the question: what is our vision of how independent and public Waldorf schools can support each other? What is our vision of the totality of the movement?

Many worthy independent schools are seriously challenged today. A high level of freedom to teach without testing or state mandates comes at a price. It comes with a heritage of private education in this country and a tuition model that is a burden for so many parents. So we need to find ways to network with key individuals who can help us turn the tide.

I am reminded of a story J rgeren Smit told me. For many years he went to public school conferences in Norway, where he met a gentleman from the public



sector and they became good friends. The man asked if he could come and visit the Waldorf school in Oslo. After a week of observing classes and talking to teachers, he said, "You're doing everything and more that the state schools are doing. You should get the same level of funding." They had a conversation about freedom in education and how to support the Waldorf schools by providing, say, 80 percent aid (without mandates) instead of the usual 100 percent provided to state schools. Jørgen's friend went on to become a Minister of Education, and all of Norway's Waldorf schools began to receive government support with minimal restrictions. Rather than simply falling into the old fault lines of history, I believe it is possible to address both accessibility and freedom in this age of the Consciousness Soul. But we need to work together to do so!

In Norway, and in countless other situations, it all starts with a human connection. We need a thousand Jørgen Smits! The traditional open house events at which we hope people will discover us will no longer work. We have to reach out, take an interest in others, and network. That is the foundation of establishing accessibility.

5. Which then leads to money and social finance. We have inherited the private school tuition model, and we have old attitudes towards money and finance. I'm surprised how often in a Waldorf school where the faculty is so proactive and advanced in the pedagogy, the very same people carry a lot of old concepts around money. And board members often provide needed expertise but also bring old concepts of money, such as that tuition can "buy" an education. We need a complete revolution in how we work with money in our schools.

As a 10-year-old, I mowed lawns for neighbors. Some people paid me a dollar for a small lawn, others \$5. From an early age we learn that you work to earn money. Now we need to turn that around in our schools and work with our parents to develop the notion that money frees us to work. This sounds like the same thing, but it's very different. A few years ago the Center for Anthroposophy made a change. We used to pay staff and faculty at the end of the month, and we started paying people on the first of the month, before the work. Money can free us to work, but especially in education, it does not pay us for the work.

I remember getting my first paycheck in Great Barrington at the end of my first month of teaching. I was shocked to find it in my mailbox one afternoon. I was having so much fun with my class, and then this check came along and suddenly there was something jarring about it. I didn't equate what was going on in my classroom with the check.

Then there is the old notion of "You get what you pay for." How many times have you heard that? You went out and bought cheap shoes and they fell apart? You got what you paid for! This works with commodities such as shoes. But can we be flexible enough in our thinking to change that into something such as "paying forward"? Lisa Mahar tells a wonderful story of going to a workshop for which no tuition was charged, but participants were required to attend a short session on finances. So partway through the workshop, leadership presented the workshop budget: this is how much it costs for the instructors, utilities, food, and so on. They then explained: "The reason you're all here for free is because the last people who took this workshop were so appreciative, they made donations so we didn't have to charge you." After some questions and conversation the workshop leaders said, "Here's the donation box. If you think this workshop is valuable and should happen again, make donations for the next group." So the attitude of the leadership was that if the work is valued, it will be supported. And if the participants had declined to support it, that would have told the leaders to move on and do something new, to innovate: also a good outcome.

In order to change how we work with finances, we need to work more intensively with parents, for so many see education as a commodity. I've heard several instances just in the last few weeks of parents asking for a refund. So, if I go to the store and I buy a pair of sneakers and a few days later they fall apart, I have no problem going back to the store and asking for a refund. Shoes are a commodity. But education is not.

However, for the sake of argument, let's take the opposite position that education is after all just another commodity, another business. If you take that point of view and follow it through to its logical consequences, a business has assets that can either depreciate (thus a refund or tax write off) or appreciate over time. So if you have a child in your class who ends up being the next Jeff

Bezos in thirty years, your school should receive a large portion of his net worth, currently \$165.6 billion dollars, the appreciated asset you helped create.

The old attitudes in our schools regarding money are holding us back. We need regional workshops on money and social finance, perhaps led by RSF Social Finance. We need to radically change our business model if Waldorf is to flourish beyond 100.

6. We need leadership development. This is crucial to the future of our schools. As many of you know, we do Waldorf administration and leadership workshops at Antioch University New England. Let me describe one scenario. A Waldorf school asks a senior colleague to step up to a leadership role because s/he is respected and loved, and the teacher agrees out of devotion to the future of the school. The teacher agrees to take up that task, even though s/he may not have the necessary skill sets in human resources, conflict management, communication, facilitation, all those things. But that person, a true reluctant leader, agrees to give it a try.

Meanwhile, board members might be saying, "Those teachers take weeks to make decisions, and every time there's a conflict it gets worse. They don't know anything about marketing or how to manage the website, and our retention rates are slipping. We need to hire some experts. We're going to bring in a marketing specialist followed by an admissions director." Usually these new employees do indeed have the needed expertise, but often they do not share the values and anthroposophical insights that the teachers carry. So when you put this well-meaning pedagogical leader in with these outside experts, it's like asking your oral surgeon and your car mechanic to collaborate! From an organizational point of view, this is what often happens in our schools. It is a systemic problem, which I see far too often.

Just as there are ways to straighten out finances or solve a pedagogical problem in the classroom, there are tools available for us to deal with reluctant leaders, lack of role clarity, and cultural differences. But we are not using them! Eurythmy in the workplace, role playing, presentations of recent research in leadership development, case studies, social color exercises, and group discussion are some of the techniques available to help prepare our school

leaders to work together on fundamental aspects of leadership. So much can be done when you bring the pedagogical and administrative leaders together in five-day institutes. (For more information, contact lthomas@antioch.edu.). But in order to do so, our schools need to see the need, and support their leaders.

7. Circling back to an earlier theme, we need to reclaim our original social mandate as Waldorf schools. In the lectures Rudolf Steiner gave in August 1919 in *Education as a Social Problem*, he not only describes the threefolding impulse, but also the current social challenges of his time, such as egoism and materialism. These lectures came on the heels of a concerted effort at the end of World War I to introduce new ideas on addressing social issues. When they did not succeed, Steiner turned his reform efforts in the direction of Waldorf schools as a beacon for social change. And his requirements, such as equal education for boys and girls, were all social in nature. Indeed, during preparations for the 1923-24 Christmas Foundation Conference, Rudolf Steiner said that every spiritual movement that truly advances mankind must be there for all of humanity.

Today we need to attend to the social needs of our time. We need to address the opioid crisis, racism, affordable housing, environmental degradation, income inequality to name a few. Waldorf schools cannot solve these issues, but we need to engage in conversation with community members, engage with local groups addressing these issues, and demonstrate how deeply we care. Helping others may be the best way for us to help our schools.

So if we look Beyond 100, I suggest a new focus on Waldorf education for social justice. What would that mean? There's a lot we're doing in the curriculum that deals with social justice; many schools give generous scholarships, and public Waldorf schools are usually open to all. But from the outside, Waldorf often looks like an expensive refuge for the lucky few.

For things to change in our schools, we each need to be able to change from within. Meditative work, personal efforts to change attitudes and old ways of thinking are needed before we are sustainable. One of the most fundamental change agents is taking an interest in others. And when we recognize others, we need to celebrate their success. Recently I had the pleasure of once again

meeting the founders of the House of Peace in Ipswich, Massachusetts, where they inherit troubled situations from around the world, with children and families from Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan and other countries. Carrie Schuchardt spoke beautifully about how interest leads to empathy, which then leads to a new experience of the Sophia. The Sophia lives in anthroposophy. What can happen when one begins to reach out and really experience the other? Rudolf Steiner says in the "St. Francis Lectures" that this interest in the other actually builds a new universality and a kind of moral strength to go forward.

In conclusion, I would like to point out the symbiotic relationship among some of my key points tonight. If we look at Waldorf Beyond 100 we can begin to highlight some of the key themes that deserve our attention moving forward: working with our alums as never before, changing our attitudes and practices concerning money, collaborating to enhance both educational freedom and increased accessibility, clarifying core principles and reclaiming our social mandate. The good news is that any effort around any of these impulses will yield exponential results, reinforcing each other and building positive momentum. So if we're able to work with our alums more intensely, they will help us with the social justice piece. And the social justice piece will influence accessibility. And the accessibility will influence resources and funding.

All these things can work together, but we're going to have to summon the courage: a new courage to serve the Waldorf movement.

I would like to end on a note that emphasizes the transitory state we are in today. This is a time when we need to look at nothingness, a place where all the old ways may be, indeed are, falling away. We need beginners' eyes, and we need to walk new pathways. This will require a certain vulnerability in not knowing in order to know.

As Antonio Machado puts it (quoted in *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry*, by Arthur Zajonc):

Wanderer, the road is your footsteps. Nothing else.

Wanderer, there is no path. You lay down a path in walking.

Walking you lay down a path, and when you turn around you see the road  
you'll never walk on again.

Wanderer, there is no path. Only tracks on the ocean foam.

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