

The Beginnings of Our Waldorf Early Childhood Movement

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This coming year, the Waldorf kindergarten movement will celebrate its 80th Anniversary! This brings an opportunity to reflect back on the origins of our work, to consider how this work has developed over the course of eight decades a rich lifespan in human terms and to ponder its renewal in the 21st century in light of the current needs of the child and cultural conditions around the world today.

The first “official” Waldorf kindergarten opened at the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart in 1926, a year and a half after the death of Rudolf Steiner. However, there was actually an early first attempt that is less known. I have looked through various articles, unpublished manuscripts and notes from conversations to piece together the following story of the very beginnings of our Waldorf early childhood movement:

Even before the opening of the first Waldorf School in 1919, Rudolf Steiner had spoken about the importance of the first seven years of life and his regret that the class teachers would receive the children only after this formative period was complete: “The teachers will take on children to educate who are already at a certain age; and they must consider thereby that they are taking on these children after they have already experienced the education or perhaps the miseducation of their parents in the very first stage of their lives. What we are striving for will only be able to be accomplished completely when humanity has progressed so far that parents understand that even in the first period of upbringing, modern humanity has special educational needs.” (Opening lecture in *The Study of Man*, or *Foundations of Human Experience*)

Five years earlier, in 1914, Rudolf Steiner had met Elisabeth Grunelius, a nineteen-year-old from the Alsace region of Germany, who had just completed her state kindergarten training in Bonn. Elisabeth had read *Theosophy* by Steiner, and decided to help with the building of the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. She

joined a group of artists working under Steiner’s direction on wood relief sculptures for the new building. Elisabeth stayed in Dornach for eighteen months, working on the woodcarvings and attending lectures by Rudolf Steiner, before resuming her early childhood studies at the Pestalozzi-Froebel Seminar in Berlin.

Afterwards, she was drawn to the newly developing Waldorf school in Stuttgart.

Once the first Waldorf School opened in 1919, Rudolf Steiner asked the teachers to free up a room for a kindergarten, but it was not possible. Finances were strained, and the faculty chose to use every available space for additional grade school classes. Later, in 1920, Rudolf Steiner spoke again with the faculty about the importance of the kindergarten: “It is true that it would be better if you could have the children in kindergarten. The longer you have them, the better. Thus you could admit children who are not yet old enough to come to school. ...It would be very nice if we could bring in some children in the first seven years of early childhood education. In the end, we must have them somewhat younger; it is much less important when they are older.”

After a visit to an elementary class, he was heard to exclaim, “We need kindergartens! We need kindergartens!” He asked the teachers to free up a classroom for a kindergarten, but again they said it was not possible. According to a later comment by Elisabeth Grunelius, the teachers did not seem to grasp the importance of the kindergarten.

Steiner remembered Elisabeth from Dornach, and asked her to write a sixty-page proposal for how one would work with three- to five-year olds. She tried, but felt she could not do it, since she had not had any direct experience with young children.

“I felt I had to have experience first. One could not sit at a table and figure it all out. Today it is perhaps difficult to imagine a time when no one

had worked consciously with the imitative capacities of the child. We need to remember that class teachers teach, but the kindergarten teacher must show what should be done through her life and being."

(From an unpublished article, *Rudolf Steiner Asks for Kindergartens*, by Elisabeth Grunelius.)

Then, in the spring of 1920, a new government regulation changed the beginning of the school year from Easter to September. This meant that the children who would have begun first grade at Easter now had no teacher until September. On Good Friday, 1920, Rudolf Steiner asked Elisabeth Grunelius if she would take on a kindergarten group from Easter to September. She later described this moment as follows:

"I was now finished with my (state) training and was very certain that on no account did I want to work with children! I wanted to study medicine. I answered Rudolf Steiner, 'I must think about that further', and stood there looking down in thought. As I stood there, he also remained standing, as if he was waiting for an outer answer from me. When I looked up, I was puzzled that he was still there. I thought, well, if Rudolf Steiner is there and helps, then perhaps I can carry this out! And I answered, 'If you will stand behind me, then I can.'"

A week later, they began. But it was hardly an ideal beginning! She met for three hours each afternoon with about twenty pre-first-graders. The room was used for the eighth grade in the morning, with fixed benches running along the walls, and heavy table-desks that could not be moved, and the floor was painted black! Luckily, it was spring and summer time, and she could be outdoors with the children most of the time. She had no toys or play materials. She had only Rudolf Steiner's statements that meditation should be the basis of life in the kindergarten, and that she was to work out of imitation—two entirely radical thoughts that she had never encountered before in her training for early childhood education!

She later remembered one little girl who slammed the door each day very hard. She had asked her several times to do it nicely, to no avail. On the third day, Elisabeth realized that she herself did not close the door completely. So when the little girl was watching, Elisabeth closed the door "nicely," and after that, the little girl also closed it nicely every time. This was an incredible experience for Elisabeth at that time.

Once she showed Rudolf Steiner crayon drawings the children had made, and he said it would be even better to let them do watercolor painting with good, large brushes and flowing colors. "It is not the picture that is important," he said, "but the children should imitate your 'noble attitude,' they will want to dab around (*nachpatschen*) with the color, rather than exactly copy your gestures." (from a conversation between Elisabeth and Danish kindergarten teacher Ingeborg Brochmann at the World Kindergarten Conference in Dornach in 1984)

She also did clay modeling: "the children could hardly wait to plunge their hands into this sculptural material and start forming it," she later wrote, and she told fairy tales.

The kindergarten continued until the end of the summer holidays, but then there was no real possibility to go on in that unsuitable room. There was also "an overflowing deficiency of money," and still no real support from the class teachers. Elisabeth Grunelius joined the College of Teachers and worked as a handwork teacher and substitute for class teachers until 1926. She returned to Dornach from time to time to work with artistic activities eurythmy, speech, clay modeling, painting and anthroposophical studies these experiences were her Waldorf kindergarten training.

During these years Rudolf Steiner continued to urge the teachers to open a kindergarten, and gave lectures such as *The Roots of Education* and *the Essentials of Education*, where he spoke of the work of the early childhood educator. Finally, in 1924, one of the teachers, Herbert Hahn, heard Rudolf Steiner's call and decided to take up the challenge of having a kindergarten built on the school grounds.

The new kindergarten was finished in 1926, nearly eighteen months after Rudolf Steiner's death. It was described as "barracks" with three rooms, one a eurythmy room painted "bluish pink like rose mallow," a color Steiner had indicated for eurythmy. The room for painting was a dark blue, "darker than the sky," and the playroom was carmine red. Rudolf Steiner had expressed how different color experiences for the children, according to whether they were restless, slow, etc., would provide inwardly arising complementary color experiences to meet their different needs. For children with sleeping problems, for example, Steiner had suggested deep orange curtains around the bed. Outdoors there was a sandpit and a garden.

Elisabeth tried to build up kindergarten activities out of sensing in her fingertips what the children needed, working meditatively, and aspiring to work with imitation rather than "pulling things out" of the children.

Once she invited a basket maker to come and work in the presence of the children. "He was a young man, and he had his shirt sleeves rolled up so that the children could see how strong he was. He had a big basket, and he finished it with large branches. On the next day, in the cloak room, I saw reeds hanging from the coat hook of one of the children, a very inhibited girl. I asked her why she needed the reeds. 'To make baskets,' she replied. Then I immediately went out and bought reeds and bottoms for baskets and on the next day, all the four-year-olds made baskets. I wanted to help them, but they could do it themselves. They never could have done that if they had not seen the basket maker at work."

Three years later, Klara Hatterman, a young woman from Hannover, Germany, who was eager to learn to be a Waldorf kindergarten teacher, approached Elisabeth Grunelius and urged her to offer a training course. But Elisabeth felt too inexperienced; reluctantly, she agreed to meet with a small group of four to five interested people. But when they arrived, she asked them all to leave, saying that she was not ready. They all left, except Klara, who became her intern and later her friend and colleague for life. One could say that these two were the pioneers of our movement.

In 1931, Klara founded a small kindergarten in Hannover. The new Hannover Waldorf School was struggling spiritually and financially to establish itself, so the kindergarten had to be independent. Klara rented a two-room apartment and transformed one of the rooms into a space for the children each day. Here the work blossomed. For ten years, as many as twenty children visited the kindergarten each day.

In 1938, the Stuttgart and Hannover Waldorf schools were closed by the Nazis. Klara's home kindergarten, less visible, continued until 1941. When the Nazis closed it, she fled to Dresden and opened a small kindergarten in a cellar there. It was the only remaining Waldorf initiative until it too was discovered and closed by the National Socialists.

In 1940, Elisabeth sailed from Genoa to the United States at the invitation of friends. In 1941, she opened a kindergarten at the Myrin farm in Kimberton, Pennsylvania, as the foundation for a new Waldorf school. In 1948 she went on to found a kindergarten at the newly founded Waldorf school on the campus of Adelphi University in Garden City, Long Island. It was here that she wrote and published her book, *Early Childhood and the Waldorf School Plan*, which was translated into many languages, including Japanese.

After the war, Klara Hatterman returned to Hannover in 1946 and started a kindergarten again under very primitive circumstances, with a tar paper roof and umbrellas to provide indoor shelter from the rain. Grass grew through the floor, and in winter there were snow crystals on the walls. In the beginning, outdoor free play consisted of playing in the post-war rubble and discovering a spoon or a nail or something to help build up the kindergarten.

For seven years, the kindergarten, now a part of the school, took place under these difficult circumstances, until the "ugly duckling" became a "swan." The woodwork teacher developed the architectural plans and built the furniture, and the school's business manager devoted himself to creating the social and financial basis for a kindergarten building. At Christmas, 1953, the new kindergarten building was dedicated.

Beginning in 1950, at the age of forty-two, Klara Hatterman invited other kindergarten teachers to come together each year for several days during the Holy Nights, to deepen their anthroposophical study of the young child. They asked, "How can we develop ourselves so as to be able to receive the being of the young child from the spiritual world? What activities and approaches can we develop for work in the kindergarten? How can we provide real support for parents in the upbringing of children?" They struggled to deepen their understanding of the power of imitation, of the child as a sense organ, of the thought of reincarnation in relation to early childhood development. They committed themselves to founding and developing kindergartens, working out of an anthroposophical view of the human being.

We could say that these gatherings were the beginnings for what eventually incarnated in 1969 as the International Association of Waldorf Kindergartens. Today, there is truly a worldwide movement that includes over 1,200 kindergartens, home and center-based child care, parent-child groups, and family centers.

We can look back with gratitude to Elisabeth Grunelius and Klara Hatterman for their courage, their tireless enthusiasm for their work in the face of adversity, their heartfelt love and warmth for the little child, and their profound devotion to ongoing deepening of their work through study and inner development. They were researchers, intuitively feeling their way along out of exact observation of the children in their care. They were visionaries, able to see far beyond their own immediate surroundings, and able to consciously work with the reality of the spiritual nature of the child.

Today, we carry forward the work of these pioneers, exploring new approaches to meeting the needs of the young child in a new century. What are the needs of the incarnating spiritual beings in our care today? How can we grow and deepen so that we can be worthy of their imitation? What is it that lies at the core of our work spiritually?

The early gatherings at the Holy Nights in Hanover grew into large international kindergarten conferences held each year at Whitsun. For many years, Klara Hatterman opened each conference with the following verse, "Whitsun Mood," by Rudolf Steiner, which reminds us of the spiritual context out of which our work can grow and flourish in times to come:

*Being aligns with being in widths of space.
Being follows being in rounds of time.
When you, O Man, remain in widths of space, in
rounds of time,
Then you are in realms that fade and pass away.
Yet mightily your soul rises above them,
When you divine or knowingly behold the
Eternal,
Beyond the widths of space, beyond the rounds
of time.*

Note: I hope to gather more information about the early Waldorf kindergarten teachers in North America, and would be grateful for whatever you might be willing to share with me about the early days, between the founding of the Rudolf Steiner School in New York in 1928, to the founding of the Waldorf Kindergarten Association in 1983. Please contact me at 413-549-5930 or showard@waldorfearlychildhood.org.