

I and the Others

Strengthening a Seventh Grader's Relationship to the World Through History and Geography

by

David Brierley

Translated by Ted Warren

The great explorations are a central theme for history and geography in the seventh grade in the Waldorf school. The climax of this historical epoch was reached in the period between Columbus' explorations in 1492 and Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe in 1522. Exactly in the middle of these events falls the year 1507, when a new cosmography appeared, the Copernican heliocentric view of the cosmos with the sun as the middle of the universe rather than the earth.

Now that the globe has been mapped out to the slightest detail, is there anything left to explore? New discoveries are made by teens that "feel" their way into the world. From this perspective history and geography support the student's drive to explore the world.

The geographic path

Geography can easily become a system that we use to collect, absorb and record information. The subject is so encompassing that it may resemble a journey in the desert. As teachers we must search for the subject's themes and we must define its methods. Is geography a science or does it belong to the humanities? Not until the middle of the nineteenth century was it treated as a separate subject. Geographic literature at that time was basic information with no explanation or deep scholarship. The only explanations offered fell under the more established subjects of: astronomy, mathematics, history, biology, and so forth.

In the Waldorf schools we teach geography from the age of nine until the age of seventeen. A turning point in geography instruction comes in the seventh grade. At that point a leading motive for fourteen-year-olds is to be different, and traditional, geographical facts do not offer enough substance to those motives.

In the first stage of the seventh grader's explorations we give them opportunities to search for knowledge of their own journey into the unknown. We concentrate on people and lands, geography's anthropological and geomorphologic sides. From both the humanistic and the scientific sides of geography our pupils receive the associative quality for which we are searching.

The scientific method in the seventh grade includes the study of the physical globe, while the humanistic view addresses the peoples on the earth. If you look closely at the seventh grade curriculum you find both aspects. The work with the peoples of the earth appeals to inner picture creativity, while the scientific work deals with the shape of the continents based on map observations together with the children. The instruction is not aimed at a goal but to develop a learning process that will continue in the children. Nowadays we are so concerned with goals that we often believe that the shortest way is the best solution. Our youth are used to a world with immediate results, "instant coffee and instant happenings." Too often we shut down the learning process and thereby prevent valuable experiences.

Because we are so concerned with doing things, the importance of "being" is neglected. Without the quality of "being" the spiritual strivings of our youth are weakened as well as their search for truth. The truth appears in the learning process because truth is a process, a path.

The great explorations yielded great material benefits for the participants but also provided important consequences for their spiritual development as a seed for the future, an awakening, and a renaissance. For the ocean sailors new activities taught them that a breakthrough into the unknown of the physical world could not take place without a breakthrough in the spiritual world. These men were motivated by an intuitive belief that their actions prepared the way for profound changes. That the journeys were very dangerous is reflected in much of the literature of their day that includes themes of storms and shipwrecks. Shakespeare used this in *Pericles* and *The Tempest*, perhaps two of his greatest plays. *The Tempest* is not the product of gifted fantasy but the story of an inner battle in relation to outside forces. Fourteen-year-olds should learn about such dramas in their English lessons.

Youth are most concerned with the future. But the past is learned through history that flows through each individual. It helps fourteen-year-olds become anchored in their own time and to be creative in the future. They will become better explorers in their own lives when inspired by all that others have discovered in the outer world.

The sense of space among the great explorers

What was Columbus's starting point? He had great a imagination and an absolute belief in himself. Before he made his decision in 1492, he studied the

maps of Paolo Toscanelli and Martin Behaim. Both showed Asia west of Europe but the distances were not accurate. At that time everyone struggled with the enormous concepts of world circumnavigation. They faced a new relationship to distances and space.

Quite often navigational errors resulted in great discoveries, the case with both with Columbus and Magellan. The question for the classroom is “What are distances?” From one perspective distances deal with space between objects. From another perspective distances are between human beings, between my Self and the other’s Selves. This is a fundamental element of early puberty that pupils find in geography’s humanistic and geophysical aspects. After conquering enormous distances, Magellan lost his life on the island of East Mactan due to errors in his social distances. And Columbus’s biography is filled with struggles for self-knowledge when breaking through the unknown.

Columbus also met new peoples! Indeed, few have met such radical differences. America’s nature and natives were totally foreign for him. The discoveries of Asia and Africa took longer periods of time and were therefore not as much of a shock. Even landing on the moon was prepared for with photographs and satellite measurements. The discovery of America brought Europeans face to face with human diversity. In naming the natives, “Indians,” Columbus not only committed a geographic mistake but acknowledged that the Indians were less different than he imagined. He wrote that they were not barbarians but simply people who spoke another language. With these observations Columbus initiated a new science; ethnography became a part of geography. This subject is introduced in the seventh grade and is completed in the twelfth grade in the Waldorf schools.

Columbus’s experiences proved that human diversity was no longer limited to the imagination, it could be observed in the physical world. A huge question arises: “What do I see and what do I not see?” The ability for accurate observation in the physical world is essential during puberty. Our pupils can observe how Columbus struggled between fantasy and solid observations, just as they do during their seventh grade year.

Space and social distances

The question is often raised, “Why do you teach the discoveries of foreign continents from a European point of view?” In the meeting between known and unknown the opportunity arises to reflect not only over the diversity of nature all over the globe, but also the totality of nature. In addition the great distances between Europe and the newly explored continents are important. Compare this with the Islamic relationship to the world that grew from an ever-expanding empire without such great distances involved, or the problem concerning mankind’s diversity and differences which developed in China.

New people and the unknown must be discovered if we are to have social dimensions in the modern world. Our teens grow by discovering the world. Human life is thereby stretched between two extremes: one in which the Self enters the world and the other in which the world enters the Self. During puberty our teens struggle to correlate both extremes.

The sense for diversity cannot be nourished without first the feeling of belonging. Nor can the pupils properly experience the curriculum in the seventh grade if they do not already have a feeling of belonging. The geographic path moves from the feeling of belonging to the feeling of participating and then from the known into the unknown. Belonging gives security and creates the basis for geography. Local geography is therefore very important in the fourth and fifth grades. We eat, rest and bathe at home. We go home when we are tired. The home nourishes life processes and has a great influence on our sense of space. But one's hometown has no lasting meaning until one discovers it in relation to other towns.

In the transition from childhood to adulthood it is necessary to relate to the unknown. At the Waldorf school the first stage (fourth, fifth, and sixth grade geography) is based on the methods of comparative geography first taught by Carl Ritter in the 1950s.

For the seventh grader we compare the known with the unknown. For example the students listen to the following passage from Columbus: "The beauty of the new land far surpasses Campina da Cordova. The trees shine as they do in Seville and carry fruit as fine as the best harvests in Trujillo. The air is just as warm as it was in Castile in April, and words cannot express how beautifully the nightingale sings." (October 14, 1492)¹

We find such comparisons not only with nature but also with peoples: "They are more white than from the other island. We saw two girls who were just as white as the Spaniards." (December 13, 1492)²

From Cortes they read:

"Concerning their behavior and relationships, they have about the same standard as the Spaniards at home, just as much harmony and order when one considers they are barbarians and stand far from God and any contact with reasoning nations.

"It reminds me of the silk markets in Granada. The main tower is higher than the tower on the cathedral in Seville. The marketplace at Tenoxtitlan is a huge place, surrounded by columns bigger than those in Salamanca."³

1. See Colon, C. *Journals and Other Documents*, New York: the Heritage Press, 1963.

2. Ibid.

3. Cortes, H. *Letters from Mexico*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

The individual and the world

Geography deals with two types of communication between individuals and the world. The first is from human to human and the second is between humankind and nature. The first explorers used mostly inter-human communication. They considered themselves civilized and related to written reports based on past events. On the other hand, the native peoples related to the interchanges between humankind and nature. Medicine men interpreted nature before native peoples acted, and they related to the future using magic, signs and fortune-telling.

Every day our students observe foreigners and landscapes by discovering that the others are either identical or different. In the worst cases, students take a superior or inferior attitude. They swing emotionally between the past and the future. If teens can not integrate these forces through a pedagogy that brings the appropriate methods of learning, the emotional forces can become destructive and thereby limit the individual's growth. Examples appear when seventh graders become aloof or when they hide themselves in groups.

These tensions between the known and unknown, between the same and different, provide the basis for geography lessons in the seventh grade but not in the eighth grade. When our pupils strive to discover abilities they already possess but can not yet access, the teacher's most important task is to make "public" the abilities that are in the process of developing! This gives them security, trust and confidence in themselves. If individual abilities are not grasped teens often experience the tragedy of unresolved talents fading away or appearing falsified.

The individual is only one side of the teenage years. The other is found in group activities. Teens learn group psychology in the balance between their personal expression and repression in favor of group mentality. If parents or teachers notice that a teen is no longer acting in line with his or her individual strengths but is sliding into a negative phase, it may be due to the fact that his or her emotions dominate over reason. Teens will always have a seat in this arena.

Leon Battista Alberti

Before the Renaissance human consciousness was in general terms more dream-like. Today we think of the mentality of the Middle Ages as childish, naïve belief and an illusory world perspective. During the Renaissance Italians were lifted to a clear separation between the individual and his surroundings. The well-rounded human appeared, the "L'uomo universale." One example is Leon Battista Alberti who was famous all over Italy at the end of the fifteenth century. As a young boy he was known for his physical skills. At the age of fourteen he could leapfrog over a man standing upright! And he loved to show off that feat. In an open piazza in the middle of the city, he would collect his audience. This was a game for young Alberti, a battle with the natural elements. Until puberty he

practiced with the enthusiasm of a child. Later he trained his systematic, athletic skills until people came to see the young man ride wild horses from town to town. Or he would throw a coin so high onto the church roof that they could hear it cling on the stones. These are just snapshots into his fascinating biography.

At the age of twenty-four he dropped athletic feats in favor of learning trades. In the shoemaker trade he worked with materials from animals. As a carpenter he worked with materials from trees, and as a blacksmith he worked with materials from the mineral kingdom. He was so gifted that he earned a good reputation in all of those trades.

At the Waldorf school students follow the same path from woodworking in the sixth to leatherwork in the seventh and metalwork in the eighth. They take part in transforming nature into culture, adding their own personal touch.

Returning to Alberti, he developed further from nature to culture and then to art. His doctrine of “eurhythmia,” the aesthetic proportions, was an outstanding contribution. With it he wandered through architecture, sculpture, and painting before reaching poetry and music. Finally he worked at various artistic, craftsmanship tasks, which demanded all of the skills he had so far developed. As an architect he was awarded acclaim for his construction of the St. Maria Novella Church in Florence (1470). He was a significant composer of music. The highest honor he received was the position of author and artistic advisor for the Pope. Now his signature had power!

But Alberti did not reach fame without challenges. The motivation for his athletic feats was to be seen, as all children need to be seen, by adults. The question is always how. Later Alberti was confronted by his personal nature—his frugality, his ambition, wealth, and his thirst for greatness. Recklessness surfaced in his personality. How much did his success occur at the expense of others? And how much jealousy and deceit did he face?

Renaissance Italy was influenced by people who grew up taking active part in the inner battles of their day. Their personal actions had great importance for the public. “To the Afterlife,” a letter written by Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarca is a personal testimony of the deep search for self-knowledge that isolated renaissance men from the world of nature. Therefore, new cultural impulses emerged. We find the inner battles for self-knowledge in our seventh graders where we observe these two categories in youth: those who adapt to other’s needs and personalities and those who project their personality onto their environment and meet strong responses! In the biography of Girolamo Cardano (1498) we find both struggles. He described in detail his physical appearance, his personality and his spiritual strivings. In that way he exposed himself to the public in Milan, something brand new at the turn of the sixteenth century!

For further reading see *The Not Yet in the Now, Reflections of a Teacher and His 13-Year-Olds*, by David Brierley. The book may be ordered from the Sunbridge College Bookstore in Spring Valley, New York.