

History, Humanity, and Handwork

By Carmine Iannaccone

Our age may be a major turning point in history. Advances in microelectronics, information processing, and communications are bringing a new era, not just in technology but in all the areas of life: art and culture, human relations and education, economics and lifestyle, perception and cosmology. The personal computer has radically changed how we think about and use information, how we act, and how we interact. But even relatively simple products such as the telephone answering machine, the VCR, and the microwave oven have altered our sense of time, our expectations, and our daily lives. More sophisticated products such as cellular phones, compact disks, portable video cameras, and digital photography are having and will continue to have a yet more profound impact on what it means to be human.

This revolution is for many a cause for concern. There are obvious benefits, but such profound changes will also have unforeseeable consequences. As we try to understand this “electronic age,” the example of an earlier generation that confronted issues of a similar type and magnitude may prove a guide. About a century ago, a host of inventions including the typewriter, the automobile, the electric light, and the phonograph were ushering in the “mechanical age.” A number of thinkers-among them, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the founder of Waldorf Education; John Ruskin (1819-1900); and William Morris (1834-1896)-were concerned about the short-term and long-term effects of this revolution in tools and production techniques.

Machines are able to replicate a product with great precision but work best with designs based on the straight line, the right angle, and on rigid symmetry. Straight lines and right angles give precision to a product, but they take away a dynamic and living quality. For Steiner and for others, confronted by the fixed and hard-edged quality of things made by machine, “organic” forms took on new significance and value. In nature, virtually all forms are characterized by a sensuous curvilinearity and an absence of right angles. Steiner’s aesthetic, his preference for organic and metamorphosing forms, is evident in his designs for the first Goetheanum and for the second.

Rudolf Steiner’s active involvement in the debate about the effect of machines and machine production on human life and his aesthetic based on natural and organic forms greatly influenced Waldorf Education. Wherever possible, Waldorf school architecture and interior design are based on natural, non-rectilinear forms. This is not only out of aesthetic concern. Steiner said that the buildings in which we live, learn, and work have a profound effect on our moral life. Also, arts and handcrafts have an important, even central, role in the Waldorf school curriculum.

According to Steiner’s aesthetic, each artistic creation should capture the vitality, fluid beauty, and uniqueness that living organisms manifest. While machine-made goods are uniform, handmade things are beautiful by virtue of their irregularity. A hand-carved wooden bowl or spoon, a hand-knitted scarf or hat, a wall that has been lazured (i.e., painted with many layers of thin watercolor washes), a piece of hand-dyed cloth-each of which can be found in a typical Waldorf classroom-express this sensibility. Natural materials such as wood rather than synthetic materials such as plastic also support this aesthetic. For this reason, in a Waldorf school the children’s desks and chairs are usually made of unpainted wood so that the natural beauty of the grain can show. In their crafts and handwork, the children-beginning in the kindergarten-use natural materials such as beeswax, clay, and unspun wool-and experience with their hands the living beauty of the natural world.

The importance of handwork in the Waldorf curriculum is related to the dichotomy of the machine-made and the handmade product. The very imperfection of handmade goods is a mark of dignity and bears witness to the limitations that make the artisan-and all of us, by extension-human. When the first grader finger-crochets a circular mat, or when the sixth grader learns to cut a pattern and sew together a stuffed animal, mistakes inevitably arise and corrections and revisions are made. These provide lessons in humility-in the original sense of the word-derived as it is from humus, Latin for "earth." The child's experience of fallibility is an experience of her relationship to the rest of nature. It is this relationship, this connection that Steiner and other thinkers of his day realized the machine would alter.

Also, the children experience in handwork class the absolute uniqueness of each human being. Given the same materials and the same instruction and employing the same methods, a class of fifteen children will create fifteen unique pieces of work.

Because of the special value of crafts, many writers of Steiner's time held that the crafts should be as highly regarded as the arts. In Waldorf schools this is indeed the case. Waldorf eleventh graders learn bookbinding. The beautiful books they make of fine papers sewn together and bound within cloth covers are as much acknowledged as the drawings, poetry, and prose with which the book comes to be filled.

For progressive thinkers of Steiner's era, aesthetic values were not present only in the "fine arts" but also in all phenomena in nature and in human activities and creations. The Waldorf curriculum puts this idea to work by acknowledging that the sense of harmony, proportionality, and right relationship that one associates with the arts should be evident also in disciplines like biology, history, and mathematics. For each subject, Waldorf students make a main lesson book that contains both facts and artwork. The students bring together thinking and making, information with that which preserves the information, knowledge of facts with caring about how those facts are embodied. Behind this is a vision of the arts as pragmatic-rather than frivolous-in that they assist in the evolution of civilization, and virtuous in that they assist in the moral development of the individual.

Many thinkers of the late nineteenth century feared that the machine would sever this connection between meaning and matter. Simple tools designed for the human hand make this connection between the world of thought and value and the world of matter more visible. Such tools allow human beings to create products possessing a unique kind of "honesty."

The fountain pen is an excellent example of such a tool. Waldorf students learn handwriting using a fountain pen, rather than a ballpoint, precisely because the fountain pen emphasizes this connection between thought and matter. Because its point can easily catch on the paper, the fountain pen teaches attentiveness and sensitivity. Because the ink will pool if one presses too hard, or not register if one glides too lightly, it teaches balance and appropriateness. Because the pen needs to be maintained, it teaches the value of care. As with all work done by hand, writing with a fountain pen forces one to experience the "denseness" of physical reality-which is exactly what higher technologies try to mask or overcome. The student must work conscientiously and consciously in order to manifest her will in the often obdurate material world.

Using a tool such as a fountain pen when a much less problematic tool like a ballpoint pen is available brings up the issue of anachronism. Waldorf schools are sometimes criticized for keeping children uninformed about the realities and necessities of modern life-the personal computer, for example. (In fact, Waldorf schools do teach students to use a computer, but at the time when the children are ready for

such activity-in the high school years.) Reformers at the turn of the century were also criticized for advocating “old-fashioned” ways of doing things. What is at issue here, though, is not one’s attitude toward the past, but one’s attitude toward the present and what the present brings. Should one automatically embrace all things new, simply because they are new and seem to make things easier and faster? Or should one consciously examine implications and consider options? The nineteenth-century reformers did not reject the new technologies and tools. But they wanted diversity. They wanted to retain the possibility of choice and the critical attitude that choice cultivates. They recognized that new technologies engender new attitudes, patterns of behavior, and values that may in time negate the benefits of greater efficiency. They felt that all the implications, short-term and long-term, should be considered carefully.

Steiner and other thinkers of his generation feared that the mass production of machine-made goods would lead to depersonalization, apathy, consumerism, and other social ills. They were not wrong. Our media-dominated and electronics-oriented culture is a step further along on the same path of technological progress, and we suffer from these same ills. This makes the experience that Waldorf Education offers to its students more than still relevant; it makes it still necessary.

Carmine Iannaccone is an adjunct professor in the School of Fine Arts at the University of Southern California. He also teaches painting and drawing at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts. He has been a parent at both the Pasadena Waldorf School and the Highland Hall Waldorf School.

This article appeared in the Fall/Winter 2001 issue of *Renewal*