

Thoughts on the Relevance of A Waldorf Education

by Peter Nitze

*The following address was delivered at the high school commencement of the **Rudolf Steiner** School in New York in June, 1991. Peter Nitze graduated from the Steiner school in 1976 after thirteen years there. He attended Harvard College entered the business world, did graduate engineering work at Stanford and presently works in Baltimore for a firm making industrial machinery.*

One of the comments often heard about Waldorf education is that it does not prepare the young person for life in the cold cruel world, for achievement in a competitive and highly technological society.

Mr. Nitze's case and testimony imply the contrary. In fact, Mr. Nitze credits to Waldorf education qualities and attitudes which have served him well in career and life: intellectual curiosity; the impulse to take the path less traveled by; the belief in human freedom and in the potential for growth through learning; the confidence in himself as integrated, and the love of making things and making them well.

R.E.K.

When I graduated from the Rudolf Steiner School in 1976 I did not have a clear sense of how my experience at the school had shaped me. I can remember struggling to find some frame of reference to help me sort out what had been valuable and what was lacking; but I had never attended another school so I had no basis for comparison. It seemed

to me then that what I had learned in thirteen years and the way I had learned it was good enough - good enough to survive the SAT's and Achievement tests, good enough to gain admission to an Ivy League college - so I did not agonize too long over what was special about the education I had received.

The move from the Rudolf Steiner School into the academic and social environment of college involved making some dramatic adjustments - a challenge which I believe all of you will face next fall. It will mean being away from home for significant stretches of time, living in close proximity with complete strangers, having more classmates than you could ever possibly meet, much less get to know intimately, and above all, enjoying a breathtaking degree of freedom. For me the most vivid experience of this new found freedom was on the first day. I walked into the student union for lunch and realized that I could drink as much soda as I wanted, without having to pay for it, and nobody was going to stop me. With this freedom you will soon discover comes responsibility. You may skip class with impunity, and wear whatever you please, but no one is going to volunteer to write your papers or wash your clothes.

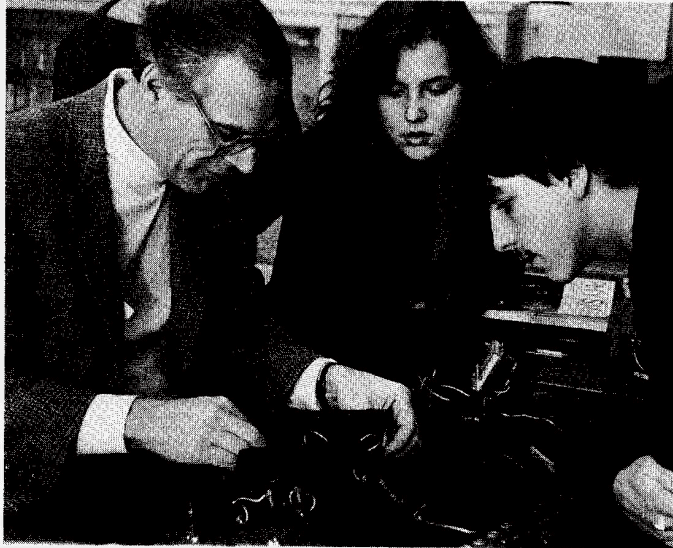
The loss of craft in the creation of a unique artifact impoverishes us as a culture, but the loss of ability to mass produce quality products threatens our way of life.

Neither you nor I are unique in having to come to terms with these new boundaries. Some of

your future classmates will be slightly better prepared, but most will be as bemused as you. The nature of the changes is so fundamental that it is difficult to identify anything in the Steiner experience that makes this transition qualitatively different.

In looking back over my entire four college years, however, I believe that the choices I made reflect beliefs that were planted in elementary and high school. Each semester I would scan the course catalogue for the offbeat courses; the class on urban terrorism offered by a visiting professor, or an introduction to jurisprudence given by someone from the law school. Not for me the tried and true. The courses on Shakespeare and modern European history were so well entrenched and widely praised they were practically institutions themselves.

I majored in Russian Area Studies, in no small part because the program was barely two years old. It was new, and untried and interesting. I gave little thought to where all of this was leading, or what it had to do with what I had studied in high school. In all my time at college I think I took two science classes, and those only because they were required. I loved science and still do. I was just more interested in other things at the time.



Underpinning this almost instinctive willingness, indeed eagerness, to make unconventional choices was the unexamined faith that human beings are not the prisoners of their past history or decisions; that each decision offers a fresh opportunity to learn something new, and most importantly, that every new piece of knowledge adds to our capabilities as complete people. But at the time of

course, none of this occurred to me. I was just enjoying myself.

Several years later while my wife Lisa and I were living in California, I was invited to be on a panel of Waldorf school alumni. I was to discuss my experience at the Rudolf Steiner School before an audience of parents who were considering sending their children to a newly opened Waldorf School in the area. The main idea behind the panel, it became clear, was to convince the parents that graduates of Waldorf schools do not necessarily go on to become herb farmers or eurythmy teachers (not that there is anything wrong with either of these occupations!)

There were six of us in all, representing a cross section,

four men between the ages of 29 and 55 or so, all graduates of different schools across the country, from New York to Sacramento, and even one who had gone to a Waldorf school in Europe. In the course of the evening, we all spent some time describing ourselves, our careers, ambitions, memories of school. One of the participants introduced himself as an assistant professor of English at a nearby college, another

was the president of a computer graphics firm, another an engineer living in Switzerland, the fourth a lawyer, the fifth a poet who supported herself by working as a receptionist, and I at the time was a manufacturing engineer working at a large company.

Lisa had come to the presentation, and, sitting in that audience she might well have wondered what was the common thread that bound these six people together, different as we appeared

to be. And yet when it was over and we had dispersed, she looked at me and said, "Now I understand what was special about that school." And the extraordinary thing was that there, in Palo Alto, California, over ten years, two degrees, two jobs, a marriage, and one child after I stood on this stage the day I graduated, I finally understood what made it special too. And it was in the different and crooked trajectories our six individual lives that the answer lay.

What Lisa saw and what I, through her eyes, finally recognized, was that all six of us shared the same confident vision of the self, a vision formed in our experience in a Steiner school. For each of us our school had helped us develop a confidence in our capability as a whole person, made up of a deeply interconnected body and intellect. From the very beginning of our educations we had explored the connection and interplay between the two and how they augmented one another.

The history of the computer graphics company president provides I think the most striking instance of the power of this vision. He had started his company after spending two years sailing around the world, and with no prior professional experience in computers or graphics. It was, by conventional standards, an audacious and highly risky undertaking. But he saw no obstacle that he did not believe himself fully capable of surmounting. Computers are, after all, nothing very mystical; they are simply extensions of our own capacity to reason, and rather crude ones at that. And geometry was for him not an elusive abstraction, but the memory of colored threads on nails and the sweep of a compass across paper.

Circuitous as his career maybe, it is certainly no stranger than my own crooked path. This has taken me from the Rudolf Steiner school, through Harvard, across two and a half years as an accountant at General Electric, two degrees from Stanford, separated by eighteen months spent as a manufacturing engineer, to my present position as a manager of manufacturing at a small machine tool company. It is difficult to discern a pattern in this short autobiography, but since my graduation from college, I have been absorbed with one overriding goal. The revival of manufacturing capability in this

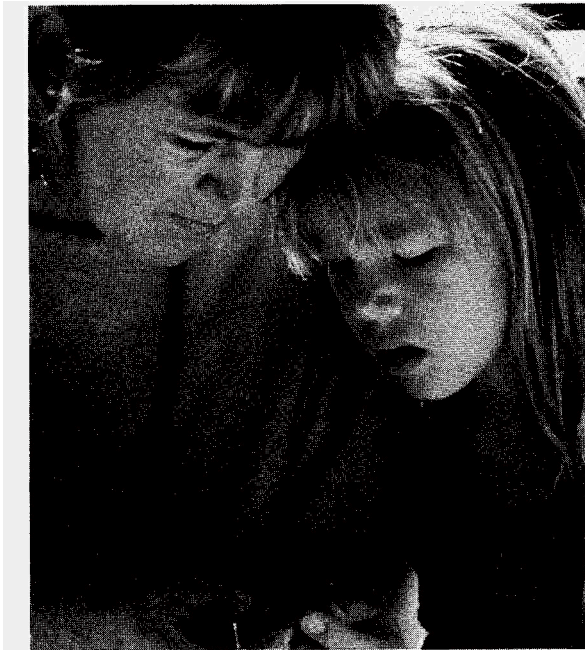


country - and each of the steps I have taken has been intended to better prepare me to pursue that goal.

What I do right now is help to build machines that are themselves used to make the parts for other machines. The machines we make are about as big as a 12-foot cube and cost about \$1.5 million each. They are capable of making a remarkable diversity of metal parts, from as small as a tea saucer to as large as a dog house. Virtually all of the metal things that are in the engine under the hood of your car could be built by our machines. Furthermore, any one of our machines could make hundreds to thousands, and in some cases, even millions, of any one of these parts in a year. But why should you care about the machines we build?

Making cars and other industrial products is a very expensive proposition. Cost is important but quality makes a difference too. Because how well the product performs is going to influence the customer's decision whether to buy one again. Our equipment is much cheaper to run than the alternatives, it takes up less space, uses less power and requires fewer people to operate - and yet can make just as many parts. On top of all this, the parts our machines make tend to be better, closer to what they ought to look like, and the machine tends to break down less often.

Being able to do this is important because it enables us to make things that are competitive in price and quality, and the health of manufacturing depends on being competitive. For at least one of our customers it had meant being able to keep its production facilities in this country when all of its competitors were moving theirs overseas. These kinds of decisions affect us all in the long run.



I would be hard pressed today to explain why I was inspired by any of this, or what has sustained my commitment over the last ten years. I did not tinker with cars as a teenager - I didn't even get my driver's license until after I entered college, no one in my immediate family is in manufacturing or has ever received an engineering degree. I have always enjoyed putting things together and understanding how they worked, but I was never curious enough to dismantle a lawnmower, or to build a radio from scratch.

Nevertheless, I have come to believe, passionately, that our ability to make things is vitally important. It is easy to take the enormous wealth of our society for granted, however unevenly it maybe distributed. Paved roads, frozen food, leather sneakers, color television are all part of most Americans' lives, and are treated as virtual birthrights. But these things do not come from thin

air. They are all products of a very complex system that depends more than anything else, on capable people who make it work. And if you look around, you will notice that, more and more, the things we often take for granted are made somewhere else. And that hasn't happened by accident. It has happened because in other parts of the world people understand how important it is to a society to know how to make to make things well, and they have taught themselves how to make things better than we can.

In the short term we are the beneficiaries of their industry and ingenuity, because we are their customers. But in the longer term, unless we are able to make things that other people are willing to buy, things that are made as well or better than anywhere else in the world, we will not be able to afford their products anymore. There are only a handful of people left in this country who know how to make a covered bridge; there are virtually none that can carve stone. In small, almost imperceptible steps, we are losing our capability not only to produce handcrafted objects but also to make items of mass production that are competitive. The loss of craft in the creation of a unique artifact impoverishes us as a culture, but the loss of ability to mass produce quality products threatens our entire way of life.

There will be among you, I feel sure, teachers, artists, doctors, perhaps architects, lawyers, even philosophers. I do not think I need to convince you how those of you who chose these callings will enrich all of us. There are many luminous examples that have been held before you. But how many among you know someone personally or as a model, who makes things. Do not underestimate the contribution, and no less the enormous satisfaction of creating things. Remember the feeling of a carved wooden bowl when you had finished waxing it, the texture of the marbled cover of the book you bound, the shape of the sock you knitted during the fifth grade. Remember putting the last square of veneer in your inlaid tables. There is an eloquence as powerful as a song or a poem in a thing well made.