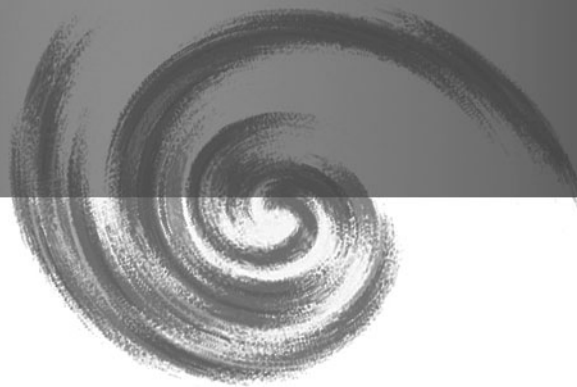


A Waldorf Teacher's Journey

A personal reflection after forty-some years

John Anderson



“W

hatever language was that young man speaking?” Miss Judy Compton Burnett asked her colleague as I left the room, having just completed my interview with the College of Teachers at The New School, King's Langley, England. That language I was speaking had, clearly, a strong enough American accent to undermine her idea of good speech.

Miss Judy, as she was called by one and all, was a pupil of Rudolf Steiner, sent by him, together with her sister, Miss Vera, to introduce eurythmy to England. When these two young Victorian women replied that they had not as yet finished their eurythmy training, Dr. Steiner simply remarked that they should learn along the way through experience.

All this I found out some time later, but it did explain why after my hire, when I had begun my first real lessons at the school, I encountered Miss Judy feeling her way along the main corridor. Her blindness and old age had little effect on her arriving at the school most days, and she recognized people either by their footsteps or voice. In my case, probably both. “You, come with me,” she said in a voice filled with warmth and purpose. Every week during term time, Miss Judy and I met in the *Old Kitchen* of the former hostel. It had nothing in it but for our two chairs, yet as Spartan sparse as it was, it became a sacred place for us, as Miss Judy imparted her wisdom and love of speech through insight and instruction to one who had waited his entire life for this opportunity without knowing it.

It was Miss Judy who later encouraged me to leave the school after four years to study speech at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. If I may be so bold as to reveal a certain intimacy, I was invited to the Compton Burnett's ancient thatched cottage in Berkhamstead for tea and the conversation that would lead to my speech training. Because Miss Vera had a way of dominating the talk around the table, Miss Judy indicated she wished to speak to me alone and took me upstairs to her room. Stepping into that room was like entering another era, except for one quite modern Seiko clock on the mantle, probably a gift. Later, back at school, one of her closest colleagues, a co-founder of The New School, told me of the honor of having been

invited to her room, adding that I was most likely the only male to ever have entered it.

There is a tale to tell behind the naming of The New School, Kings Langley, founded in 1949, my birth year. Michael Hall has always laid claim to being the oldest Steiner-Waldorf school in the UK, and has the technical right to the title. However, when Steiner came to England for the first time, he was invited to a school run in Kings Langley by a certain Miss Cross who was a keen supporter of Steiner's new educational philosophy. It seems that Miss Cross did her utmost best to follow Steiner's pedagogical instructions, with the possible exception of her insistence on cold baths for children, but that is another story that I heard from one of Miss Cross' students. During his visit, Steiner gave Miss Cross permission to found the first school in England. This was in 1922, well before the founding of Michael Hall in East Sussex, 30 miles south of London. Kings Langley is located in Hertfordshire, some 30 miles north of London.

Located at *The Priory*, a medieval Dominican monastery on the grounds of the former summer home of Plantagenet kings, the school was an exceptional, historical site. During my time there, the entrance to a secret tunnel was discovered beneath the building that came out in the cellar of the local pub, *The King's Palace*, itself of medieval roots. Archeologists determined that the tunnel was the king's escape route in times of danger. My upper school students had their own ideas of what they might use it for.

Miss Cross continued with her school for some 25 years, but when newer teachers, including the Compton Burnetts, challenged the rigidity of her older age, they decided to found a new school on the property next door. Miss Cross' school soon closed and *The New School* began to prosper.

By the time I arrived, in 1977, class size was between 30 and 35, both in the upper and lower schools, though after class 10 there was some attrition due to the English exam system. Thirty-five 14-year-olds, my first class in English, looked with some interest at their new teacher from North America. One girl, now a

well-known London artist, seemed to be admiring my LL Bean couture and I nervously blurted out, “Oh, do you like my new pants?” The class erupted in laughter – *What did he say... Did he say pants?* Realizing that I had said something wrong, I blushed. Afterwards, that same girl came cautiously up to the front desk and after looking around to be sure no one was listening, lowered her voice and said, “Mr. Anderson, you didn’t really mean to say *pants*, did you?” “No” I shyly offered. “Because,” she went on in a whisper, “in England your pants are your underwear.” So, first day, to a class 7, do you like my new...?

There are many challenges that a novice Waldorf teacher must face that are true for most new teachers of children and adolescents. I only want to go over what is perhaps held less in common. The first is the sheer amount of preparation, the need for which becomes all too apparent from the onset, and the effect that this has on a teacher’s former everyday life. Friends and family notice it too. You seem to drift off, preoccupied in thoughts you cannot immediately share. Who at the dinner table could know that a mention of a particular woman whose heroism was recently reported in the news would send you off in thought reviewing the biography of Joan of Arc, which you were presenting to Class 7 that week? They would also notice that your free evenings, once reserved for downtime and friendly conversation, seem now to only happen on weekends.

More deeply, what is happening is that Waldorf teaching, *ab initio*, shows your personal will no longer to be entirely your own. This is a sacrifice that one is asked to make, and how each of us meet this is an individual undertaking. It is the beginning of an initiation; the first trial known in the mystery centers of ancient times, such as Ephesus, as a *fire trial*; the burning off of the old as something new prepares to be born within. In my experience, this trial can find a certain resolution by the first three years. It does, though, reappear for further refinement and deepening in later years, as what was at first a *felt* experience finds a deepening in one’s thought life. In a verse given by Steiner to the early eurythmists, such as Miss Judy and Miss Vera, and later adopted by teachers, appear the lines: *Life will be harder around me. Life will be richer within me.* The reality of this richness appears later as the years progress. One’s will may no longer be entirely one’s own, but a new space is created within for the will of another. I will call that other *the spirit of Waldorf education*. It becomes a real being; one that is palpable.

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The colleagueship that one discovers at one’s first school forms bonds that can span decades. I am still closely connected with some of those first individuals, though our careers have taken us far apart. For many of us, those first years also bring a harsh reality. The inner progress that one has to make in Waldorf teaching with all its richness can also cast a shadow. While the longing for real community is shared by those in Waldorf teaching, its shadow side appears when the personal sympathies and antipathies of colleagues appear unrecognized and are often turned into ideals that are thought to be commonly held when in fact they are not. Groupings can and will appear. Only when there is sufficient insight and strength to handle and heal such discordances, can deeper conflict be avoided. I have found this a most difficult challenge at particular times in a career that has spanned schools in five countries.

In this regard, I would like to point out the verse used at many Waldorf schools:

The healthy social life is found

When in the mirror of each human soul

The whole community finds its reflection.

And when in the community

The virtue of each one is living.

What does this actually mean and demand of both the individual and the community? Firstly, all the group recitation in the world will not make this ideal a reality without it being openly shared amongst colleagues as to how they actually put the ideal into practice. Such sharing I have seldom found in practice. Even with a more gentle approach, many in the Waldorf school community find it exceedingly difficult to speak out honestly about the challenges and progress they have made in working with the meditation. This is so easy to avoid when there is much important business to take care of: festivals to be planned, students

to discuss, parent issues arising, pressing, even urgent, administrative tasks to be seen to, and let’s not neglect that preparation to be done when all these other matters find their place. I have always looked upon such as the bait that leads the community of teachers further away from this meditative ideal.

How can you manifest the virtue of another when they have become so impossible in meetings and appear as a hindrance to decision-making? How can you speak out of this recognition of the other when that virtue

you have seen in another is now overshadowed by personal antipathies or even sympathies? How does an individual manifest the will of the community when this will appears so wrong to them?

I found this conundrum often in schools where ideals were taken as a given that lives on within a general consensus that everyone is trying their best. That is until it is announced that someone's schedule appears to be lighter than yours, or when a colleague is granted a certain consideration that you feel you have been denied.

I have often found it helpful, in pondering the content of verses given by Rudolf Steiner, to find ways of changing the perspective. *The healthy social life is found when...* There was always something awkward in the phrasing of this opening line to me, perhaps even a bit rigid as well. I ascribed this awkwardness to the difficulties of translation. But, at this point of my career, a second year speech student who could now speak German, albeit with a slight Swiss accent, I was able to consult the original. Well, I was surprised to learn that the opening line said nothing at all about the healthy social life or where it was to be found; though it may be implied: *Heilsam ist nur, wenn...* goes the German, that is, *Healing is only when (if)...* . This allows for quite another perspective. With further research, I found that Steiner had given this verse to his English co-worker and sculptor, Edith Maryon, who had devoted her talents to understanding the art of the future, *the social art*. The meditation had thus acquired the title, *The Social Ethic* (or *Motto*). One can see how the *healthy social life* had attached itself to the English translation while losing something quite special found in the original. *Heilsam* is an active word, a process in itself that counters an illness or sickness that has appeared, bringing a needed healing. The healing begins when the community is able to fulfill the two conditions: *when individuals can reflect the whole of the community within their soul, and when the strength of soul of each individual lives in the community*. The original verse speaks as if the illness already is present.

When a community is in need of healing a particular social issue or a greater malaise, it will need to find suitable processes to bring this about. We are *not* moving now in the realm of what is today departmentalized as HR. The processes of healing go much deeper, whenever possible transcending legalities and dealing with the soul forces of antipathy and sympathy, which undoubtedly are behind much of what is encountered in conflict. Worth noting: Edith Maryon was working on

the statue of Ahriman–Christ–Lucifer when this verse was given to her.

I have spent decades trying as much as my humble efforts would allow to bring healing to such situations. It has been at times welcomed and often ignored while business as usual carried on. I have contributed my own shadow sides as well.



Walking up the hill to the Goetheanum for the first time, the thought came to me that I could never regret a day

being here. And that proved true for the four years I spent studying speech and so much more. Building on my already established record in using the wrong word at the wrong time in another language, my early attempts at everyday German did cause some embarrassment. Though I could already recite poets like Goethe and Hamerling half way decently, I found myself one afternoon in the supermarket trying to buy a jar of mustard

(don't ask) and got lost in the unfamiliar aisles. I asked the salesperson, *Ich möchte gern Seife kaufen. Können Sie mir Bitte helfen?*

Helpfully, she took me down the aisle into the detergent section. Confused, I repeated my request, and when she looked perplexed, I pointed to my mouth, saying, *Seife, zu essen*.

The Swiss sense of humor only extends so far and I had reached the limit. I left without my mustard and later learned the difference between *Senf* (mustard) and *Seife* (soap).

While I sided with many speech students at the Goetheanum who found much to criticize in the old-fashioned approach to acting and to teacher-student relationships, there was little doubt that my inner organs were undergoing a sea change with the daily exercises, choral recitation, breath work, and, most tellingly, private instruction. I went from Miss Judy to Ruth Unger Palmer and considered myself one of the most fortunate fellows I knew. Ruth had been a pupil at two of the first Waldorf schools in Germany. On the Goetheanum stage, she appeared as Luna, one of the three soul forces from Rudolf Steiner's *Mystery Dramas*, and her speech was full of power and movement. Some of my classmates wondered how I could have been so lucky to have lessons with one of two *grand dames* of speech in Dornach. Ruth had a soft spot for English speakers, Americans in particular, and I reaped the rewards.

In a wooden house that today would remind you of a Hobbit dwelling in *Lord of the Rings*, but was built in the goetheanistic style of the first Goetheanum, I ascended a raised platform in her studio and looked down on a being that was the embodiment of the art of speech; so much movement, so much breath, such nuanced expression in her interpretation of the greats of middle European poetry and literature. While my appreciation knew no bounds, it has taken me decades to comprehend what she was trying to communicate. When I was not getting “it,” her left foot would begin to tap at speed, and I knew I was in for it. *More breath*, came the command... *What have you got in your mouth, a potato?... It's not moving... Did you practice since last lesson?* With so much that is significant in one's life comes the wish to be allowed to repeat an experience and get from it what you know now you missed.

Four years, never regretting a day, and it was time to move on. From my training years in Detroit, the first school in Stuttgart where it all began loomed large in my imagination: Steiner's initial courses for teachers; the first successes and missteps; praise and criticism alike from the founder. The school was just over three hours away from Dornach, and with the encouragement of one of the leading teachers of the second generation, I applied for a position as an English instructor. A most popular American language teacher was leaving to return to the US. Some readers may have heard of him, William Fordham. My interview with the assembled *Interne Konferenz* (the College), some thirty weighty souls, had something of that earlier interview at King's Langley. I heard later that one colleague-to-be had asked another whether I was merely charming or did I have any real depth? The latter assumption wasn't too far off the mark, notwithstanding the anti-American prejudice lurking below the surface. It was time to plumb the depths. Three years there taught me to dig deeper. My language colleagues in Russian, French, as well as in English, formed a tight bond and we were in continual interaction to improve teaching methods, share insights, and seek advice. I owe them greatly.

But how could I better my linguistic faux pas after *pants*, *mustard* & *soap*? Well, it didn't take me long. I have related the following anecdote before and it has sometimes jarred sensitive ears, but I will repeat it here.

We are again in Class 9, English for German speakers, and we are reading a Hemingway short story. “Two

men walked into a bar...” I know this sounds like the opening of a bad joke, but wait. While preparing the lesson the evening before, I knew someone was going to ask what a *bar* was. I searched for a synonym in my *Langenscheidt's English-German Dictionary*, and found it. Sure enough, next day, Michael, back row, left corner, *Mr. Anderson, what's a bar? Well, Michael, in German that would be a Bumslokal*. Dead silence throughout the class. *Mr. Anderson, were you ever in a Bumslokal?* I believe in being honest when asked about myself by a student. *Yes, when I was younger*.

I might be over-dramatizing this, but I believe they not only fell into silence at that moment, but also left the classroom that way. Realizing again that I had said something that I shouldn't have, I asked one of the oldest, most experienced language teachers, of the traditional kind, what a *Bumslokal* was. Magda Meier's expression twisted as if someone had just forced a lemon slice into her mouth. *A Bumslokal, my dear man, is where some men go to pick up ladies of the night. Why ever would you ask?* Oh, just wondering.

The next day's class began and I dreaded what I had to ask. *How many of you went home last night and told your parents...* I never finished the question as 18 hands shot straight up into the air. I backed out of this one as graciously as I could and told them to never take the first synonym you find in a foreign language without double-checking its meaning.

After three years in Stuttgart, I was not ready to leave, but destiny had spoken again. I couldn't resist teasing some of my colleagues who had wondered years before if I had any depth and would ever speak more than a basic German. I concluded the announcement of my resignation at a faculty meeting with... *Ja, Lieber Kollegen, was kann man tun, wenn die Schicksal so spricht?* (What can you do when destiny speaks?) The reaction was immediate. **Das**

Schicksal, Herr Anderson, das Schicksal, nicht die. My retort had been carefully rehearsed. *Aber, wie so, wenn es so oft in die weibliche form kommt!* (But how can that be when it so often comes in a female form?)



If it can be generally said that English lives in the vowels between the consonants, German comes alive in the latter. Now, there are English exclamations such as *drat* or *piffle*, that illustrate this. The vowel sounds leave little to go on, but the movement is provided by

the consonants. German can sound harsh, even hard to the untrained ear, but it is a goldmine of consonants for language teaching.

Not so Danish; next stop: Denmark. My fourteen years there involved endeavors beyond teaching, and I welcomed new experiences in social therapy, biography work, and organizational consultancy.



Much discussion over the last decade has focused on diversity, justice, and racism in society, and our schools have rightly been involved. In thinking back over the decades, I have reviewed my past experiences in this light. One pronounced expression of nationalism stood out. It happened during the Falklands War, when the English tabloids exploded with nationalistic and degrading headlines regarding the Argentinians. *Give the Argies Some Bargy* was one unmemorable page one. On this particular morning, when I did not have to rise quite so early as I was not on main lesson, I awoke to a loud flapping just outside the window. My upstairs flat faced the school grounds and the flagpole was just a few yards away.

I had never seen a Union Jack so large, waving proudly in the breeze. Why this day, I wondered? Then I remembered that the day before the papers carried the news that a Royal Navy submarine had sunk the Argentine cruiser, the *General Belgrano*, with the loss of 323 lives. I was young, American, and easily vexed when my ideals were disturbed. There was not going to be any English nationalism on my watch, and I marched out the front door and lowered the flag. When I entered the school an hour later, I was confronted by an irate science teacher and a senior boy. *What right did I think I had lowering the English flag on such an occasion?* Whatever words I used seemed to have a sobering and more calming effect. How could a Steiner school take part in celebrating the loss of life, even of the enemy?

There can be no doubt that more diversity and ever-more racial, social justice and religious awareness are positive developments. Yet, I have also found that generalized judgements spoken out to discount the efforts of the past as biased and insufficient have left me unsatisfied. The biographies and societies that I have seen introduced forty years ago in European schools have included studies of South American culture, the US civil rights movement, Apartheid in South Africa, Laozi, Gandhi, the mistreatment of the indigenous tribes of the US and the horrors of manifest destiny, the slave

trade, Belgian colonialism in Africa, Islam's contribution to world history – I could go on. Many deep-going discussions arose between teacher and students because of these efforts. Awareness is a human faculty that should be deepened without discounting past efforts, which were appropriate to their time, but no longer in ours. I will go so far to say that in my experience, when efforts are made to strengthen and enact the good, shadow sides also come into being. I am concerned that not enough attention is given to this biographical fact.



Who will teach the teachers? I can't recall when I first became aware of this question, but it has brought me to assess and appreciate the teachers that came to The Waldorf Institute of Detroit in the 1970s, presenting Waldorf education, anthroposophy, and the practical impulses inspired by Rudolf Steiner to its students.

We were for the most part, but by no means all under thirty. The oldest were involved in a change of profession, the youngest, to which I belonged, in finding one. Before arriving at the Institute, I had been a devotee of Amanda Marga and Hatha Yoga and I was encouraged by the local

group to study Montessori and early childhood education. This brought me from my native New England (Vermont) to a pre-school in Kansas, where Anada Marga had an active and lively Montessori inspired pre-school. It was where I was to first experience *destiny* as a conscious reality. I can still distinctly recall, in the small school library, coming across a thin, yellow-jacketed book, with its title on the spine: *The Education of the Child*. Unfamiliar with the author's name, I asked the lead teacher what the book was about. She said two things: 1) It is a book on Waldorf education by a German educator, and 2) she really knew nothing about it, but she did know where I could find out more. The *where* oddly enough happened to be a thousand miles to the east, at the Washington Waldorf School of DC.

I finished my Montessori practice teaching period in Kansas and made for the nation's capital. I really had little idea of what was driving me, but it was something more than the baby blue VW Beetle that carried me those many miles. A call to the school, located next to the Washington Cathedral, got me an appointment to see the head teacher, an Austrian who had come to the US via New Zealand. I think Carl Hoffman saw something in me, as he was very generous with his time and description of the aims of Waldorf education. After an intense conversation, he invited me to an upcoming lecture by Dr. Werner Glas, the head of the

Waldorf Institute of Mercy College in Detroit. This was in early summer, and after the lecture, Dr. Glas invited me to visit him at his vacation spot in Virginia Beach. In hindsight, it appears that I just said “yes” to all that was asked of me because at the end of our beachside talk, I had committed myself to enrolling in the teacher training course that September. My road map, long before Google Maps and in-car GPS, had a blue line that went from Vermont to Kansas to Washington, DC, Virginia Beach, and finally Detroit, Michigan. It seemed I was not going to be a Montessori teacher after all. In Detroit, I did things backwards, starting out in teacher training and receiving my diploma, and then enrolling in the Foundation Year studies at the same school.

Werner Glas and Hans Gebert, lead teachers and founders of the institute, were an inspiring pair who developed a warm and deep connection to their students. There is much I could write here about the profound and lively way they introduced us to what lay at the heart of this education. In brief, what I can see now is that in addition to the artistic and practical methodology of teaching which was also partly covered in the adjunct courses at Mercy College, the various streams within anthroposophy were represented by a visiting faculty that came for intensive periods throughout the year – Aristotelians, Platonists, Camphill founders, Christian Community priests, class teachers, bee-keepers, agriculturalists, Executive Committee members from the Goetheanum, and so on. Today, the need to parse part-time, online, and summer courses to achieve such training have a much different rhythm and learning curve. I cannot compare them having only undergone the one, but after two years, every weekday, for eight months of the year, I had found my profession. I had practice taught in classrooms with a diverse student body both in a Waldorf school and a Detroit public school, and was waiting to hear back from the schools that I had written to.

Which is how I got to England, The New School, and Miss Judy. But not before being stopped at UK Customs, where the immigration officer carefully read my letter of acceptance as a humanities teacher at The New School, asking pointedly why England needed an American to teach it English. I was told to wait, and he disappeared for an anxious 20 minutes. When he returned with a doubtful look on his face, I feared I would not be granted entry.

Just what is this school? he intoned seriously.

It’s a Steiner school, I said.

Well, why didn’t you say so?

And *smack* went his stamp on my passport, and I walked through the gate into my future. To this day, I simply cannot fathom what had happened at Customs, but I now see the destiny connection all the way back to that book in the library in Kansas.



I am grateful to a colleague, adept at contributing thoughtful and insightful writing on education and adolescent development on his blog, for the following. One of his own inspiring high school teachers had written an article for the New York Times, in which this gem appeared: *Mostly what you’re teaching is your own enthusiasm and how you learn. The best classes are about the public education of the teacher.*

Steiner prioritized the quality of enthusiasm in his work with teachers. In meeting some of the first Waldorf teachers in England, I would say that it is this quality that shone through, and what learning they carried was carried lightly behind this enthusiasm. One told me of how, during a chemistry lesson in the upper school which he had come to observe, Steiner was drawn out of his seat in expectation of what was to happen as the experiment neared its conclusion.

Being a trained scientist himself, Steiner surely knew what the result would be, and yet I doubt that he was play acting. I leave any conclusion as to what was happening in that chemistry lesson and how it connects to the above quote to the reader.

What spoke to me decades ago in Detroit was the simple phrasing of *education as an art*. To what extent art can be codified, formalized, and administrated, I withhold my judgement. I have become the type who must be in an empty classroom at least an hour before the students arrive for their main lesson. In those alone, quiet moments, as one speaks out a verse into an empty room full of possibility, practices a bit of eurythmy, prepares the seating to better reflect the content of the lesson (rows, a square, straight lines or angles), it is not unlike preparing a canvas to be painted upon. The first student enters: another evolving human being expressing a stage of their development on that particular day in the way they walk, what they carry, the expression on their face, their greeting or lack of it. Maybe it is similar to the morning before, maybe quite different—the teacher can make this a felt experience that continues to shape the inner preparation of what is still to come.

Then that moment at the end of the morning verse, spoken communally, a moment of silence and portent; I have found it a *felt communion* when the art of education can be said to begin. Whatever the subject, it is always the challenge to bring the living spirit alive in all that happens in this world before one's students. And that, dear readers, is anthroposophy.

Hamlet was right: "*The readiness is all.*"

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