Waldorf Education: Transformation Toward Wholeness

Vladislav Rozentuller and Steve Talbott

Researchers studying human speech have shown through careful analysis of slow-motion film that in normal conversation both speaker and hearer perform an elaborate dance, rhythmically moving their bodies in synchrony with the speech. The movement is not isolated to particular parts of the body, but is harmonious and whole. We speak and listen with our entire bodies.

Moreover, infants mimic and move with speech well before they actually give voice to words. And not only do they respond to the *sounds* of speech, but they also imitate the *visible gestures* of the mouth. In this way, the four-month-old child already displays forms of movement characteristic of his culture. By analyzing bodily behavior, researchers can identify children according to class, culture, region, and gender well before they have learned to speak. So, in the words of Peter Lutzker, whose summary of this research we have drawn upon: when a child finally utters its first words, "we are not witnessing the beginnings of language acquisition, but a relatively *late* stage in an ongoing process."[1]

A Speaking World

We find here a paradigm for all education. The infant responds to—you could almost say "resonates with"—the speech of its environment, and in so doing internalizes that speech as a new capacity for speaking. Moreover, the infant's engagement with the world occurs through its entire organism. The powers of expression that flow from the world into the dawning consciousness are gestural and laden with inner significance. This is why the child's language is so little abstract, so full of meaning.

Patients with damage to the right hemispheres of their brains illustrate the importance of what one might call a gestural and artistic approach to the world's speech. While identifying words correctly in some narrow sense and following grammatical constructions exactly, they lose awareness of everything expressive about a voice. Because they perceive speech to be flat and emotionless, they become wooden and literal-minded in their understanding. Deeply meaningful or passionate speech becomes confusing and contradictory to them. Oliver Sacks, in fact, asks whether the aphasic patient (who is unable to understand words as symbols of ideas due to a damaged left hemisphere) might not be much better off than the right-hemisphere-damaged individual—and, in some respects, even better off than many "normal" individuals:

> One cannot lie to an aphasic. He cannot grasp your words, and so cannot be deceived by them; but what he grasps he grasps with infallible precision, namely the *expression* that goes with the words, that total, spontaneous, involuntary expressiveness which can never be simulated or faked, as words alone can ... [Aphasics] have an infallible ear for every vocal nuance, the tone, the rhythm, the cadences, the music, the subtlest

> modulations, inflections, intonations, which can give—or remove—verisimilitude to or from a man's voice.[2]

So we can recognize in the above description of early language learning that the infant is engaged—perhaps more intensely than will ever again be the case—in a whole-body, whole-soul acquisition of language. We can, further, surmise that the intensity of this undertaking has a lot to do with the profundity of the result. And contributing to the intensity, as Waldorf educators are well aware, is the fact that not only the human environment but the entire world speaks to the child through all his senses, penetrating and filling his being with images possessing the power to shape life.

Of course, over time, as every parent and teacher can observe, the center of gravity in the exchange between child and world shifts away from the environment and toward the child. Where at first the surroundings seem to work on the child from without, speaking new capacities into him, he progressively learns to speak his own intentions into the world. Learning is less and less something done to him, more and more something he does. Correspondingly, the language of interaction becomes less will-centered, less a matter of imitation, less mediated through the senses, and instead becomes more centered in consciousness. True exchange begins to require initiative and struggle.

But this shift in center of gravity never severs the connection between human being and environment. The surround that once spoke to the child does not cease speaking, and the maturing youth does not cease responding. We are speaking beings engaged with a speaking world. However, we may choose to attend less and less to the world's expressions, ceasing to resonate with them out of our entire being. We then exchange meaning for abstraction by emptying the word of its movement, feeling, and imaginative content. Our thoughts become head thoughts, no longer warmed by the heart's sensitive revelations and no longer given muscular form by the will. If we are to continue hearing the world's speech, we must work at being imaginative, flexible, and active in listening and responding.

The Dynamic of Wholeness

Part of the widely recognized mission of Waldorf education in our day is to prevent the progressive rigidification of speech and thought by attending to the whole human being. Wholeness and the continuing metamorphosis it requires are two keys for a living education.

Wholeness in the classroom is provided, on one side, by the teacher who must represent within herself all the different subjects. From the other side, these subjects are seen, not as a collection of curricular requirements, but as mutually interpenetrating reflections of one living world. Only within such an integral context can the student experience the connection of mathematics with music, of poetry with movement, of projective geometry with biology.

But there can be no wholeness without transformation. It is the process of becoming and the active interpenetration of qualities that make a whole. Without these you have a mere inert collection of things—objects, thoughts, impulses—existing side by side. The progressive transformation of the student's relation to himself, to his social environment, and to the natural world is an obvious fact, the foundational condition of any live education. The familiar sequence from imitation to respect for authority to free-thinking—from will to feeling to thought—is just one movement within an all-embracing metamorphosis.

All this makes clear the central connection of education with art. Art, too, as a defining element of human spiritual life, is founded upon creative transformation, the perception of wholeness, and processes of integration within the individual. Only through art can we overcome frozen abstraction and reckon with the full, gestural engagement of child and world.

The role of art may become clearer if we consider drama, which so naturally incorporates all the other arts.

The School as a Stage

The theater stage is not only a physical space, but also a soul space. The actor has to do with imagination, feeling, and will impulses in close collabora-

tion. In acting, he reveals an inner, imaginative world; in storytelling, he brings feeling and movement into speech, radiating images into his surroundings.

Every inner image summons fitting movements, and every movement invites corresponding fantasy. Epic (descriptive), lyric (expressive), and dramatic (action-oriented) speech offer different modes of interaction for the forces of the soul. Epic speech requires us to bring our descriptive images alive—to bring movement and will into them until they are as real and forceful within soul-space as are the images of nature. At the other pole, drama requires us to bring our imaginations, feelings, and thoughts to outer action. In epic we take the outside world into us, revising its images and ensouling them; the gesture is from outside to inside. In drama we take the inner realities of soul and render them visible in the world; the gesture is from inside to outside. This polarity embraces the two main functions of the teacher: to tell and to act.

The actor has to do with the entire qualitative world—the world of perception—which includes colors, sounds, forms of movement, even smells and tastes. These are united because they are all experienced within the soul. Thus, a character can be dark or bright. Feelings can be bitter or sweet. (Rudolf Steiner mentioned that ancient Greek actors partook of bitter or sweet substances in order to stimulate certain feelings in their soul—which illustrates the connection between the outer world and soul qualities.) A scene's atmosphere can be red or blue, heavy or light. Every inner process, every inner action, can truthfully be imagined in perceptual terms—for example, as if someone were falling into an abyss or ascending to the top of a mountain. Even the spatial qualities of the stage become the qualities of soul space. Distances, the configurations of objects and persons, the dynamics of movement and posture—all become a language expressing inner realities.

Moreover, the dramatic work on images, on life situations, and on character biographies develops the "I am" sense of individuality, the importance of which can hardly be overestimated in pedagogy. The teacher who would understand the psychology of the child must be able to transform herself into the character and concrete living situation of the child. Practice in drama provides a basis for understanding the temperaments, for gauging the rhythm of activities, for presenting lessons artistically and dramatically, for experiencing one's own bodily movements and how they speak, and for dwelling spontaneously in the present moment.

And so, through an aesthetic sensitivity, the teacher learns to speak to this girl with one feeling and to that boy with another, transforming herself into a different "character" depending on the needs of the student before her. In addition, she is a kind of stage director creating an artistic community, with each person responding to the other through improvisation. She arranges complementation throughout the community, with different individuals balanced against each other. The teacher can manage all this only through her own powers of transformation and by getting rid of everything hardened in her character.

Drama in Relation to the Curriculum

Apart from the development of purely artistic skills, we can see direct profit to the curriculum from art in general and drama in particular.

In the area of science, it is already recognized within Waldorf circles that a phenomenological, or Goethean, approach to nature is an approach informed by art. Goethe himself was the consummate union of scientist and artist. Reading the gestural language of nature is not an altogether different task from reading the gestural language of a painting, sculpture, or dramatic performance. And learning to create appropriate gestures on stage trains and disciplines the imaginative faculties that are required by the scientist. Through artistic exercises we develop the ability to see creative forces not only in ourselves, but also in the world—and to recognize that they are the same forces. All our understanding of the world then becomes an artistic understanding, and our science becomes a truly humanized science.

The relevance of drama to social studies is immediately apparent. The challenge on stage is essentially a social and creative one, requiring intuitive action grounded in the present moment. I must learn to

receive what comes to me from my partner, and adapt my response in a creative, balanced, and constructive way—which is also to say, in an artistic way. Social action (for example, participation in a town hall meeting) is always an exercise in improvisation. Furthermore, appropriately chosen literature and dramatic performances can encourage sympathetic understanding of other social groups, bringing alive different cultures and historical periods in a way no mere textbook description can. In addition, rehearsing, making decorations and costumes, and managing the production are complicated, interesting, and important social processes. They can bring out special capacities in a student and are excellent occasions for social education.

There can also be a strong therapeutic element in drama. Because children are so soft, they are more easily transformed through soul activity. It is a commonplace that the child with a cruel streak who plays the role of a caring, gentle character may find his own life changed by the experience. Similarly for the proud or arrogant student who must enact the character of a deeply humble person. In general, the more characters or scenes a student can act, the healthier the soul life he can develop. But beyond this, the experience of artistic transformation itself—quite apart from the particular character being portrayed—works as the best therapist. On the teacher's part, such work can become more conscious, enabling her to break up her "feeling clichés," or fixed forms of feeling. These are then caught up within a living metamorphosis.

The Unity of the Curriculum

These brief indications illustrate how the arts are key to elementary education, while offering to the high school teacher many possibilities extending beyond the intrinsic value of the artistic activities themselves. They provide a basis for cross-disciplinary projects that encourage creativity and a synthesis of perceptions. For example, we can easily combine literature and theater; history and theater; biology and painting; zoology and sculpture; geometry, music, and eurhythmy; foreign language and theater.

To elaborate a little upon this last possibility:

What we saw above regarding the infant's acquisition of a native language applies directly to the student learning a second language. Language is a whole-organism activity, with words naturally finding their embodiment not only in sound and image, but also in physical gesture. This accords well with the modern recognition that we learn language best under conditions of "full immersion"—not translating textbook sentences with little relevance to our lives or with a premature emphasis upon correct grammar over expressive content, but rather through interested engagement with people and our surroundings. Literature, dramatic presentations, and improvisation are thus important not only for learning about the foreign society and culture, but also for learning the language itself.

It is important to understand that these various interdisciplinary projects do not connect incommensurable elements. They are means for bringing the Logos of the world into conversation with itself—a conversation that takes place within the soul of the student and teacher. This in no way diminishes the scientific side of education, but brings feeling and experience into it, thereby making it more intense and qualitative rather than abstract and logical. Feeling and intensity are always aspects of artistic experience—and they can be cultivated throughout the curriculum.

Each subject can, in its own way, become a revelation of the entire world. That is, the world can be apprehended through its colors, or its musical harmonies, or its geometrical and mathematical patterns, or its historical and evolutionary transformations. For example, there are different qualities of sound that belong to every aspect of the world—streams and oceans, mountains, clouds, human suffering. Students can learn to penetrate the nature of these phenomena from the direction of sound, as well as from many other directions.

Everything said here presupposes that students are not just sitting in the classroom, but are fully immersed in the natural and social world around them. The other side of an emphasis upon the artistic element of experience must be the discipline of observation in the Goethean sense.[3] The crucial thing is that in every subject the *whole being* of the student should participate. Getting to know nature should not only be a matter of gaining a body of

knowledge along with survival skills, but also of learning receptivity to the beings and qualities of nature and developing a moral response. Likewise, history should bring not only an intellectual understanding of events and of the overall evolutionary process; it should also engender compassion for the deeds and person of historical characters, along with a sense of personal responsibility within the current historical context.

The unity of the curriculum arises, not only because of the unity of the world itself, but also because the teacher approaches every subject through the gestural language that is the language of the world's becoming—a language uniting imagination, feeling, and movement with the sensitivity of the artist and the systematic rigor of the scientist. In this way, the full being of the student is engaged, keeping alive the intensity of the infant's original conversation with the world, but now with a different balance between giving and receiving. Problems in a student's behavior and learning typically mean that this conversation has somewhere been blocked.

To speak about combining the sensitivity of the artist and the rigor of the scientist is, it might seem, to place nearly impossible demands upon the teacher. But precisely because the language she has learned is one of becoming, or transformation, she can accept herself and her classroom as works in progress. This is the only way to strive for excellence without falling into despair over imperfection, on the one hand, or swelling with arrogance through over-identification with the high ideals of Waldorf education, on the other hand.

Both the despair and the arrogance work against a spirit of true excellence and artistry. The result of abandoning a living and realistic pursuit of excellence is that we tend to encourage in the student either dead intellectualism or a state of naïve innocence. Along a healthier path, by contrast, the crucial thing is how the forces of will and feeling are transformed into a wisdom still alive with these forces. When this is happening properly, the student can be pushed to the furthest edge of his current powers.

A problem with many young people today is that they are not aware of the possibilities of striving. We are too concerned not to overwhelm them. Every production has to be pronounced "good." This may contribute to the passivity of so many high school students, who take the attitude that the world owes them a living. If everything they do is always perfectly fine, why shouldn't they be rewarded regardless of how little they exert themselves?

Teacher Training

Every teacher, you might say, is a Representative of Humanity for the students. She faces a group of children each of whom is a question. Her task, through art, practical skills, and moral development, is to draw out of the world of nature and spirit—and into herself as a vessel—the answer to the child's question.

We have seen that the teacher deals forever and always with the expressive word, discovering it in nature and allowing it to modulate her own expression. In a world received as Logos, the teacher's first skill must be to experience like an artist what speaks through every phenomenon—to resonate with the phenomenon—so that with her help the student, too, may hear, see, and feel its speaking, and then offer his own response. In this way the soul of the student converses with the soul of the world.

Everything we have said so far has radical implications for teacher training. It is no small task to learn to experience the world as word, or Logos, so that one's own words become more deeply meaningful and one can work with the world's qualities like an artist. Nor is it easy to incorporate the arts in the curriculum in a manner that is fully organic to the various subjects.

Of all the arts employed in teacher training, literature and drama are especially valuable as direct bearers of the word. There is a wealth of useful exercises in, for example, the publications of Paul Matthews *(Sing Me the Creation)* and Michael Chekhov *(To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting)*.[4] The teacher must first be trained in the language of qualities that is the basis for all further work. Together with this, the training includes what you might call practical Goetheanism—perceiving the other person, perceiving nature, perceiving the condition of humanity, and enlivening these obser-

vations through art. Knowledge as such, important as it is, is not as important as an ability for vital and objective observation.

Because the school is a social organism—with relationships, for example, between teachers and students, among faculty members, and between school staff and parents—attention must also be given to the social and moral aspects of teacher education. Only a person prepared to engage questions of good and evil—but now on the firm foundation of objective observation and artistic creativity—can be a true educator and Representative of Humanity for students. The teacher must understand the universal problems of life, bringing together knowledge, creativity, and morality. So the training naturally leads to depth psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Human psychology ("Menschenkunde") can become a book of artistic and Goethean exercises for the future teacher.

All this becomes a foundation upon which the teacher can receive instruction in the particular subjects and the year-to-year curriculum. She will now bring to bear upon these her artistic sensitivity, perceptiveness, and powers of full-bodied expression. The subjects will come alive in her teaching because they live in her as a set of growing and metamorphosing capacities.

It is fair to say that something has gone badly wrong with this process when teachers are brought to the point of day-to-day desperation to receive nothing more than aids and helps for the next day's lessons.

Education for a Global Society

When, through artistic training, we learn facility with the language of qualities, we can begin to break down the barriers between disciplines. Qualities that speak in one place are found speaking also in another place. The solidity of a rock is not unrelated to solidity of human character or to the material aspect of our bodies. And the light of the sun or a candle is not unrelated to the light of the understanding mind. Through qualities, the various curricular subjects gain unity and wholeness. One language speaks through all things.[5]

Surely wholeness is the aim of all education. Not only must the student and teacher find a connection to every activity, every domain of knowledge, but the school itself as a community strives toward a wholeness where every individual finds his own place. And the school in turn can become an organ of wholeness for the entire society.

In the end, a proper education will prepare the student to become a citizen of the world. Each school would become a cultural center within a global network—an Institute of Humanity with its own core learning processes, but also in dialogue with the surrounding community and larger world. There would be student and teacher exchanges and the sharing of performances—myths, legends, classics, modern works. A high point of the yearly school calendar could be a festival with concerts, performances, and exhibitions.

In this way the different cultures could move toward mutual understanding, recognizing each other's unique contribution toward the global evolution of humankind. The only way to fight a pernicious, culture-destroying, commerce-driven globalization is by educating young people who can withstand the destructive forces. This requires schools that are artistically creative meeting-places for cultures, where different societies are no longer "foreign," but sources of enrichment. While each culture would speak the Word with its own accent and dialect, all the accents and all the dialects would be experienced as essential to the full symphony of the Word.

In speaking of this imperative, Rudolf Steiner remarked that we need to re-awaken the spirit of language in each of the various languages in order to "counteract the tendency to separate nations from one another according to language":

> We live in an age when, against everything that separates people and nations, we must consciously cultivate whatever brings about unity. Even between individuals who speak different languages, whatever divides them can be cleared away if each experiences the picture quality of his own language.[6]

To arrive at a unifying, spiritual content (Steiner is here saying), we must attend to the "picture quality" of language. But we cannot take into ourselves

the qualities of a picture except through an artistic understanding. And we can hardly restrict this project to the language classroom. After all, the significance of words is that they *mean* something beyond themselves. Their meanings are at the same time the meanings of our world. If we need to understand the picture qualities of words, it is because we need to understand the picture qualities of everything we speak about.

There can be no approach to spirit and truth—to that which unifies humankind—unless it is founded upon qualitative sensitivity of an artistic sort. It is precisely because the reigning notions of truth verge so severely upon the quantitative and logical extreme that the truths of science cannot flower into the diverse riches of a global culture. Instead, they congeal into little more than a common body of global (and largely commercial) technique.

In the face of these challenges, we should neither hew strictly to tradition nor simply replace it. We must find new wineskins for old wine. The only way we can walk this middle path is by experiencing the guiding ideas of Waldorf education for ourselves. This experience cannot be real and vital unless we have a certain freedom to do new things and make mistakes.

Nothing, after all, can tell us what a Waldorf school is. In the end, the school itself is governed by the principle of transformation . Every school should be a place of continuing experimentation. The institution is not an answer, but a question that must be sustained as a living inquiry: what does it mean to be a Waldorf school? This may remind us that to be a Waldorf school is to be in pursuit of meaning—and through the continual transformation of meaning to be approaching wholeness.

REFERENCES

1. Peter Lutzker, "The Sense for Language," in Martyn Rawson and Peter Lutzker, eds., *Language and Learning*, Paideia Books No. 2 (Forest Row, East Sussex, England: Steiner Waldorf School Fellowship, 2002), pp. 18-27.

2. Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat—and other Clinical Tales* (New York: Summit Books, 1985), p. 78.

3. Vladislav Rozentuller and Steve Talbott, "From Two Cultures to One: On the Relation between Science and Art," *In Context*, 13, Spring 2005, at http://natureinstitute.org/pub/ic/ic13/oneculture.htm.

4. Paul Matthews, *Sing Me the Creation* (Stroud, U.K.: Hawthorn Press, 1994); Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

5. As exemplified in Matthews, *Sing Me the Creation*, and in Chekhov, *To the Actor* (see reference 4).

6. Rudolf Steiner, "Language and the Spirit of Language," *Das Goetheanum* (July 23, 1922). Translator unknown.

Vladislav Rozentuller received masters degrees with honors in biochemistry (Moscow Chemical Institute) and Theater Directing (Moscow University for the Arts). He has spent many years teaching in Waldorf schools in Russia and Germany and currently teaches at Waldorf teacher training institutes in Germany and the United States. He also conducts "language of gesture" workshops and leads groups in the spiritual reading of texts—poetry, fairy tales, and literature.
Email: nkalnova@taconic.net

Steve Talbott is senior researcher at The Nature Institute (http://natureinstitute.org) and editor of the online *NetFuture* newsletter, containing numerous articles about technology and education, among many other topics (http://netfuture.org). He is author of *The Future Does Not Compute: Transcending the Machines in Our Midst.*