

“A Still Small Voice” : Three Tools for Teaching Morality

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“And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.”¹ Despite perturbations in the world around us, morality for modern human beings does not arrive from somewhere outside us, but speaks within us as a “still small voice.”

A generation ago, the magazine *Highlights for Children*, in addition to stories, activities, and crafts, had a regular section called “Goofus and Gallant.” These names of two brothers always proved prophetic. Goofus did the wrong, impolite, or uncivil thing while his brother Gallant always did the right, kind, or moral thing. This section was one of my favorites because, even at the ripe old age of nine, these little vignettes struck me as hilarious. As Gallant held the door for people and Goofus slammed the same door on others, the contrast was made funny because somehow it was obvious that if someone were depraved enough to actually make the choices Goofus made, he or she would not be aware of the mistake, and would not be moved to change his or her habits because of the “Goofus and Gallant” section of the magazine. If someone on staff at *Highlights* felt that writing “Goofus and Gallant” was a good way to teach morality, children knew better. Already having an innate sense of rightness, my heart knew that this way of showing right and wrong was more humorous than educational.

My reaction as a nine-year-old to “Goofus and Gallant” could be termed “youthful cynicism.” Cynicism results whenever the teaching of morality, or right and wrong behavior, is overdone. Any lecturing seventh grade teacher knows

this. Preaching incites cynicism. Each heart and soul has in it a “still small voice” which knows the truth and advises our actions. To lecture to this innate sense of truth and morality is to insult its owner into feeling neither trusted nor recognized. But when we call to this “still small voice” in the right way, especially as a teacher or beloved adult, a child’s response is relief. The child is recognized as moral and so responds with happiness to such a call.

In Waldorf schools, teachers use daily this practice of recognition and calling to prompt a response from a quiet voice deep within a child. The following describes three tools for effectively encouraging morality in children.

Stories

Stories fill the curriculum of the elementary grades in every Waldorf school. Waldorf teachers search for and invent stories that have inherent in them a quality of transformation. All true fairy tales, to offer examples from a classical story

form, have in them moments when swans are returned to their forms as human beings, the youngest brother unexpectedly wins the princess, or a young maiden awakens from death-like sleep. Teachers understand that children know in their hearts that this transformation is their most precious capacity as human

beings: the power to do something right or wrong and the strength needed to make right what has been done wrong. Every time a child listens to a story, the capacity to think clearly about rightness and wrongness is exercised.

It has always astonished me how children know—in every story—when something is about to go wrong. We all love stories, children most especially, and we will go to great lengths to hear a story. The most rambunctious children will sit quietly in the hope of hearing a story. This element of transformation lifts up hearts and offers

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1. 1 Kings 19:12 *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

instruction in how to change, to correct things, and to strive. As a class teacher in a Waldorf school, one learns to use these constants in children's aspirations to become an adept storyteller.

Any skilled teller of tales will explain that it is essential to anticipate those parts in each story that will rouse the listener to inner reaction. In every tale of transformation there is a moment, a critical action, that causes everything to go terribly wrong. All children recognize these moments instantly, without fail. A classroom full of first graders can become electrifyingly quiet when, for example, in "The Nixie of the Mill Pond," a Grimm's tale, the Nixie guarantees to make the Miller, whose prosperity has dwindled, rich as a king if he will only promise her the first born thing he finds when he returns home. There is at this moment in the storytelling an inevitable and audible intake of breath throughout the classroom. All the children's little faces express the same thing, "No. Don't do it. There's something wrong with a bargain like this." They are, of course, right. In his desperation for wealth, the Miller speculates that it could be nothing more than a kitten or a puppy. He agrees to the Nixie's plan, then finds, on returning home, that he has promised the Nixie his newborn son. A mixture of anxiety and hope then rises as a mood in the class from the thinking hearts of the children. What will the Miller do to redeem what he has done? Consider some of the many moral issues for a child to ponder in such a moment in a story: greed dims clear thinking; some deeds have dire consequences; bargaining with living things is not a good idea; and seductive forces should not be succumbed to quickly.

More important than speculating on the mystery of how children can recognize these moments so consistently is observing that children grow strong in moral judgment when they have the chance to practice the measuring of right and wrong inwardly in the course of their days. Again, stories offer abundant opportunities. Through the grades, tales of Aesop, tales of mythology, tales of the lives of great men and women, stories of alchemists who forged the science of chemistry,

and stories of the earth and its mountains and waterways, all give the growing human being a chance to exercise his or her moral muscle.

Truth Offered in Artistic Experience of the World

Anyone who has had the good fortune to sing in a choir or a chorus knows that when there is consensus on a tone, and everyone recognizes this, a larger experience of the tone occurs to everyone singing it and the tone is enhanced, deepened, enriched. Painters will acknowledge that when a color or a mix of colors on a canvas or paper is clean, unclouded by accidental or poor mixing, the result on the painted surface has that same quality. The painter's heart follows the color, knows what to paint next, and is at peace. Sculptors in wood, when they have acclimated to a piece of wood, may describe a similar "tone" of being one with the wood and knowing which pieces to chip away. They go with the wood and enter a zone of steady work and a loss of the sense of time in the satisfying feeling of comprehending the wooden substance. Each artist experiences the truth of artistic work. The artist comprehends "rightness" in tone, color, wood, and feels satisfaction in this experience of truth.

In Waldorf schools, children explore all subject matter artistically. Children paint, draw, sing, play musical instruments, knit, sew, sculpt, carve, weave, work metal, strive for grace in athletics, embroider, and dance. They do all this not to prepare to be artists. Among the many reasons to work creatively with children, such work strengthens moral intuition in a developing human being. In the arena of artistic work, there are no formulas that lead to success or to beauty. The person engaged in the artistic activity, whatever it may be, must know when something is "right," or "complete." A soul that has struggled artistically becomes strong in a sense of right and wrong. This artistic sensibility is directly transferable to many decisions in daily life regarding friends, acts of kindness, family, civic responsibility, and moral dilemmas. The "muscle" exercised is that of a sense of truth, rightness, or completeness.

In addition to the cultivation of moral sensibilities through this experience of artistic work, a student experiences profound truth in using the

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materials of the earth for artistic pursuits. Pure color, pure tone, the grain of wood, the warmth of wool, the movement of the human body, all have in them truth and beauty. The child, the student, learns the truth inherent in the substances of the earth by using them, handling them, finding the possibilities and limitations in them. In successful artistic work, finding the rightness of the substance and transforming it into something designed by the artist honor the truth of the substance and the will of the artist. Something beyond the artist is made and the artist grows.

Cultivating the wish to make something beautiful schools the soul, heart, thinking, and will of a child to something beyond the self, honoring both material substance and the world that will view the artistic piece.

Artistic work also builds sensory skill and integration. These develop the elegant tools of sensory perception, built into the wisdom of the human form, to the highest and best they can be.

Again, these skills are transferable to life situations. A student who has developed artistic capacities through daily practice, not necessarily in order to become an artist but to achieve deeper levels of comprehension, works in all situations in life to grasp the truth beyond the individual and the obvious, to make the world as beautiful as he or she can make it, and to experience all things completely. These are moral skills.

The Admiration and Emulation of Moral People

The most potent tool for calling children to moral activity is the last addressed here. After all is examined and evaluated, the goodness of adults who teach children is the most powerful influence on the moral development of the young. Much educational thought is focused on content and testing. In Waldorf schools, teachers take up their own self-development with vigor because this work on self-transformation is the most powerful tool available to shape a lesson, a class, a young human being. Discipline is most effective in the presence of the self-disciplined. Children who work, play, and live around adults who work assiduously on themselves will inwardly imitate,

emulate, and aspire to do the same. In the words of Rudolf Steiner, whose philosophy and educational ideals are the teachers of all Waldorf teachers, "It is not so much what you teach but who you are that matters."

In a culture preoccupied with material proofs, this last is the easiest to forget or to dismiss. Content and test results usurp the attention of teachers whose vocational task is to encourage children to love the world and participate in it. Young people need adults to forge the way for them on the path of life. Teachers can give children models of self-discipline and the practice of truth.

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Conclusion

Stories full of powerful and beautiful images build a child's imagination. Artistic practice in digesting experiences of the world builds a child's idealism with inspiration and a yearning to make the world more beautiful. Moral adults, who work on inner strength and self-development, give children these activities of self-discipline and self-development to emulate. As they emulate they build their intuition and sense the rightness and beauty of life on earth. These three—stories, artistic practice, and self-discipline—make a gallant start in understanding the teaching of morality to children. These can build the moral capacity of children more deeply and effectively than any lesson on moral living or cartoon about "Goofus." They speak to a child's developing awareness of his or her own "still small voice" and engage a child's yearnings to be good.