Respecting Diversity and Finding Unity in a Waldorf School

~ Jeffrey Kane, PhD

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As a new class teacher in a Waldorf school in the mid-1970s, I had only one child of color among my students. He was an affable, curious child, but found himself on the social fringe. As an educator well aware of the circumstances, I made every effort I could to close the gap between him and the other children, but the struggle continued. His mother raised the issue in one of our first parent-teacher conferences, and I replied with all my idealism and naivety that I saw her son as neither black nor white. Without hesitation, she took me to task saying, "You had better see him as black because that's what he is! That's what he has to deal with! That's what you have to deal with!" Her words echo within me ever more forcefully to this day.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "We are all inlets to the great All." Beneath all our differences, we share our common humanity. Waldorf schools will rightly vary from one place to another and one time to another, but all begin with Emerson's insight. They also recognize that the story does not end there. In this world of flesh and blood, we are, individually and in our communities, diverse in more ways than we can imagine. These differences are far more readily apparent in our daily lives than in the common core of our humanity. And these differences are often significant in creating and sustaining the communities essential to our development and survival as human beings. They are often so essential to us that they become the basis for defining ourselves as "ourselves" and others as "other." Rather than seeing ourselves in the "great All," we can come to see ourselves as a separate "I" or "we."

The simple and vexing truth is that we are at once spiritual beings and human beings who live on this earth with distinctive identities. The two poles form a critical dynamic tension where we can uniquely create ourselves, individually and collectively, and can create who and what we will be. The more complex picture is that the dynamic tension between our unity in our diversity and diversity in our unity plays out in a world made small, in good measure by advancing communications technologies. The very power of information technologies to connect us across the globe—to open dialogue and to discover that, beyond our differences, we share common interests and hopes—can also threaten the very existence of local cultures and communities as the foundations of identity.

Argue as we might that technology is content neutral, it encourages certain types of thinking and renders others near irrelevant. Consider that the great virtue of communications technologies is that they make immediately available unlimited sources of information and enable us to express ourselves to massive audiences across the globe as easily as we can to an intimate group of friends. As a consequence, the web carries massive and continuous cycles of information that compete for our attention, and we experience urgency in moving from one to the next. The flows of information thus come and go in short bursts that require only momentary attention. The technology is designed to drive our attention to our screens and prevent the "distraction" of thinking with depth, nuance, or creativity. Furthermore, these same technologies do not merely allow but demand that we choose the sources of information that we will use to frame the world, which thereby encourages the growth of self-affirming communities that circulate their own beliefs and versions of fact. The advancements of communications technologies have not and cannot open the door to an Emersonian transcendence; rather they create only the homogenization of cultures at the possible cost of identity. Whether exploring the roots of religious extremism, radical nativism, or incessant consumerism, we find that the driving force is fear—a fear of a loss of identity. The result: security is sought in a declaration of difference.

The point here is that we often define cultures by customs, foods, racial and ethnic makeup, religions, familial patterns, economics, etc. While these are valid as means of identifying and sorting cultures, they do not convey cultures as they are lived. Cultures are less important for the specifics we see in them than they are as the means by which peoples learn to see themselves and the world. The content of specific

practices and beliefs are only the public expression of the way we learn to experience and interpret our experience of life in each moment and as a totality. Cultures shape our understanding of how we ought to live our lives as well as of our individual and collective identities. We human beings are One, but we often see ourselves in our differences.

I learned, as described above, that the effort to look beyond difference is folly. Emerson's insight remains a beacon of light, but just as our ultimate unity is essential to understanding ourselves and educating the generations to come, so are our differences. Viewing ourselves and the responsibilities placed upon us from this perspective, we can complement Emerson by recognizing that we are all outlets of the Great All. Beneath all the differences in our abilities and proclivities, we are effluences of but a single source.

Think of the sunlight being broken by a prism into the colors of the spectrum. Each band of color is different from the others and is in some sense incomplete. When that light is projected out into the world, all that can be perceived will be to that hue. Much will be missed. Similarly, we as spiritual beings share in the full light of the All. Our very physicality acts as a prism, making each of us and each culture appear separate and distinct from all the others. And all that we see in the world, including ourselves, is limited and partial. When we as human beings share our portion of the light with others, the world, including all of us, reveals greater dimension and meaning than we could otherwise ever imagine separately.

Each culture brings its own expression of the eternal and the struggle to bring that expression to life against all the competitions inherent in life on earth. Cultures that have arisen by the sea and those rooted in the mountains pose different challenges for survival. They require varied forms of social bonds and relational patterns with nature. Different skill sets form, and unique modes of understanding yield insights into the world and ourselves that might otherwise remain deep beneath the waves and mountains. Although individual cultures may hold their truth to be unbounded, each culture captures but segments of the spectrum of the light that shines within and through humanity.

Take, for example, how we as adults view thinking itself. During our years in schools, we have been taught that learning is a rational process. That is, when we learn, we integrate information into a rational framework bound by the rules of reason. We learn that we ought to be able to reason from one idea to another, so that all the knowledge we acquire fits together in a way that can be made publically understood. In a word, we learn to think rationally and to demand the same in others. However, not all cultures agree that knowledge need be so restricted; in fact, many believe that imagination can reveal truths we might never be able to find through rational deliberation. Hasidic Judaism, which has a deep commitment to exacting intellectual rigor, interestingly provides a case in point.

It includes Midrash, a robust literary tradition of revelatory insight in the form of imaginative story. One rabbi was said to put on his glasses when he wanted to stop seeing. When he looked at the world with his glasses on, he saw the physical world. When he took his glasses off, he was not deceived into believing he was seeing reality.

This tradition is concerned not with what is said and how it may be analyzed but with what is left out of the story that cannot be seen or understood in a rational way. When we write a letter on a page, we think of it as a black form on a white background. But we can think of the totality of the page as a broad and deep context in which letters take their form. Instead of focusing upon the letters, Midrash calls us to look at the spaces between them and connect them. Imagine that a story we might read is not placed on the paper but rises to the surface of the page. Viewed in this way, the mystery of our existence and all of creation serve as the foundations for what we may make of them with our rational minds.

If this sounds bizarre, think about Sigmund Freud; think about Carl Jung. They saw dreams—that space between periods when we are awake and, hopefully, rational—as filled with images and imaginary events that speak to greater, deeper truths than we can find through empirical inquiry or logic. When dreaming, we, like the rabbi, take our glasses off to see. This dream-like consciousness is not exclusive to Midrash. It is found in fairy tales, myths, legends, folktales, fables, parables, and religious texts. As representatives of the varied cultures of the world, these dream-like stories pass from generation to generation and offer us the opportunity to illuminate meaning, order, and purpose in the world, especially for the children we teach. They challenge us as educators not only to share these stories but also, and much more broadly, to include cultures from across the world to serve as a

source of illumination rather than as mere objects of study. The lessons learned will create not only greater tolerance but greater appreciation of other cultures and peoples. At the same time, the children we teach will learn to see beyond the limitations of our own deeply held and often unnoticed cultural assumptions.

Our respective cultures enfold within us unconscious methods of understanding about who we are, what the world is, how the world is to be known, and what it is to live as a human being. In this context, we can expand the depth and scope of the minds of the children we teach through creative activities in the arts and through stories, myths, histories, ideas, insights, and religions from cultures from around the world. Each of these experiences can reveal unique aspects of our humanity, ones that teachers understand align with their students' stages of development.

Teachers have to ask, "What aspect or aspects of their humanity are my students ready to explore?" And they might find that it is an aspect that is best expressed by African literature or by Middle Eastern history or by Buddhist religious beliefs. If Waldorf education is successful, students will have the opportunity to achieve their own humanity in fullness.

The mother who insisted I see the difference between her son and the others in the class was absolutely right. Rather than focusing on the abstract notion that we are all united in our humanity, I could have celebrated the diversity he offered to help him and all the children in my charge quicken to the deeper truth of their own identity and shared humanity. ◆

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