Opening the Conversation on White Privilege and Racial Justice

~ Marieke Duijneveld

When Nancy Blanning asked me to write something that could work as an avenue to open the conversation about white privilege and racial justice in the Waldorf Early Childhood classroom, I was willing to try. I wish I could write something with answers ready for you, giving you a perfect outline of what to do. The only thing is, I do not have those answers. I am struggling with this huge dilemma of how to bring the topic of white privilege and racial justice in a Waldorf, age-appropriate way into the classroom.

What should one do with comments of children, in moments when you are the least prepared, regarding racial injustice? Like that one autumn morning in my classroom. . .

The sunbeams shone through the apple tree under which the children were playing intensely. Some were still humming the mood-of-the-fifth songs we had sung during circle time. In my rocking chair, making felted balls, I was sitting next to some boys who were working on a building project. The healthy oatmeal was bubbling on the stove, spreading a smell of cinnamon. We were in our lovely kindergarten bubble, and the world was good, so good. . . Next to me, the boys had a conversation about their building project. One boy didn't agree on the place where the garage was built. He looked at me for help and I told him that sometimes things do not go the way you want them to go. "Yes," agreed the other boy.

"Life isn't fair, like the police who are killing all the BLACK people. Right, Ms. Marieke?"

POP went the bubble.

I hesitated. Could I ignore this comment? Of course not! I didn't want to ignore it and yet, I had no idea how to react. Where's the list of dos and don'ts? Shouldn't I keep the world a good place? Did the other boy know that the police had killed Black people? Should I focus on the good people and the good police officers? But I didn't want to ignore the truth. I didn't want to do injustice to people of color. We, as a society, have been doing that for too long.

But wasn't I, as a Waldorf teacher, supposed to create a world that is good and beautiful and true? Killing innocent Black people certainly doesn't fit in that picture. What does it mean to create a world that is good in a world that feels—and is—not always good? How do we acknowledge what has been said, the reality and truth and the seriousness of it, and give reassurance that the world is good and beautiful and true? How do we say that it is true that bad things do happen, and how do we find our own voices to speak up about them?

I remember the kindergarten teacher of my children telling the children about a child who was in the hospital. Yes, it was not going well with the child *and* there were so many good doctors helping him. And she focused on that, but didn't leave out the hard part. She was finding goodness in a situation that seems not good at all. Was that the way to go for this comment? In Waldorf early childhood we often talk about the bubble we are creating, the safe heaven where life is good, beautiful and true. We think of the children as too young to be confronted with the outer world. But wouldn't it be much more helpful for them and the world (the Black community in this case, who is not represented in my class) to bring the outer world into the bubble in a safe, good, true and beautiful way? What does it do to our children in these new times if we ignore what is living in them and what is living outside their world?

Meanwhile the boy was still looking at me for confirmation on his comment. I stumbled over my words: yes, some policemen have forgotten to be good and true, but there are many people who know this and try to help. Being a White woman with little experience regarding this topic, I managed to say something like, "Indeed, some Black people are being killed by the police, by White people who still need to learn a lot about why they are on earth." And I added that there are a lot of people who are standing up against this unfairness. Done, this should do it! Or?

Here I am, a White woman, and from Europe, very innocent about race in the US. Raised to be colorblind (well, there wasn't any other color than White in the town where I grew up, to start with). But I have learned a lot since moving to the US. I attended trainings that I thought I didn't need, but found out I needed very

much, like the course, "Undoing racism." This was eye opening to me. I read articles and books, talked with colleagues. And our school started working together with Alma, a consulting group on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion issues, to try to tackle this topic together.

In our school we worked on our classrooms, looking at our pictures on the wall, dolls, gnomes, angels, books for children to read. Often only white people are being represented. So we changed that, brought in dolls with darker skin tones, books that represent white and black people joyfully together in normal circumstances (not in traditional costumes or in Africa, but here in the US, hopping on a bus for example). I changed my angel into a brown angel after I heard a discussion between two children (Black and White) if angels are white or black. I am careful if I tell a story to not use black as being bad and white as being good. A dear friend told me: Children of color need a mirror—to see themselves reflected, and white children need a window—a window into the world of people of color.

After the comment of the boy and my answer, I felt I needed to do more. But what? Bring up the conversation to the whole class? There would certainly be a lot of children who hadn't heard of this, and wouldn't it be too harsh to suddenly hear this? Weren't we Waldorf teachers supposed to not discuss things, but bring topics in stories and puppet shows, preferably with pentatonic lyre music?

Later that week, having had some more time to think about the subject, I wanted to create a story, maybe using symbols, that would certainly be very 'Waldorf'. But I have learned to not use symbols regarding this subject because, when we use animals or inanimate objects, it alleviates adult discomfort about discussing racism and prejudice and the harm they cause. In this case children learn best through concrete experiences. So what could I say?

I ended up creating a story about a Black woman who went to the bakery to buy a loaf of bread. But the baker didn't want to sell a loaf of bread to a person with Black skin, so he shut the door. Maria, in heaven, who was waiting to come down to earth with her child of light, had seen this. She asked Saint Nicolaus to go down to earth and open the heart of this horrible baker, so later, the child of light could fill it with love and light again. And so it happened. And when the heart of the baker was filled with light again, he apologized to the Black woman and opened his door for her. Snip, snap, snout… Well, the story is, of course, not all told out.

Was it right to bring in Saint Nicolaus, Mary, and the child of light as helpers? Besides being religious figures, they are also clearly White people. Would I do even more harm with that? Couldn't I find a person of color who would change the heart of the baker? I have also learned that we (White people) should not ask people of color to find the solution to the situation we are in. White people should stand up and work on this. Additionally, while telling the story to the children, I forgot to mention that the baker was White, a very important detail! I wished I could ask someone: Is this the right way to do it? I don't want to make any mistakes! But my dear colleague said: "It's better to make mistakes than to do nothing!" With that comment in mind, I am trying to find answers to the many questions I have, as a White woman in an almost all-White classroom.

The words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. warn: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." We are being called to break the silence for Waldorf early childhood education. Asking questions is a beginning. ◆

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Alma Partners is planning to publish an e-book of pedagogical stories on DEI issues, written by early childhood educators, in late Spring/early Summer 2021. The intention is to help early childhood educators and parents within and outside the Waldorf movement answer children's questions about race, gender, sexuality, learning differences, and other kinds of diversity, with greater ease and clarity. Please send inquiries about publication guidelines to ***connect@almapartners.net*** *no later than April 30.*

Alma Partners is a consulting group of Waldorf-connected teachers and administrators who offer support to schools and communities to work with issues of diversity as described above.