Reflections on Diversity

~ Anjum Mir

With the brilliant colors of sunset fading into a clear night sky, our community convened in the courtyard to send light into the longest nights of the year. Our school's Festival of Lights was a much-anticipated yearly celebration of diversity. Songs celebrating Christmas, Hanukkah, Diwali, Las Posadas, Santa Lucia, and Kwanzaa were carried up by the seaside air. The Athan, the Muslim call to prayer—a simple, a cappella chant archetypal of the entire Muslim world, would close the evening as an invitation towards unity. The crowd fell silent as our friend, an exquisite reciter, slowly raised his right hand to his ear and sang out his first notes—clear as a bell, reverberating into the night air. It was breathtaking, and I felt delight for my sons who finally had a chance to share of themselves with the community. It was then that a giggle erupted from the circle and began to spread. My sons looked towards me with hurt and then left the company of their friends to find comfort in my arms. "Why are they laughing, Mama? It's not funny." There in our little huddle, the lovely ululating sound enveloped us and lifted us above the crowd. For a moment, behind closed eyes, I imagined that my community was floating up there with us in the same way that I had floated the whole evening with every song and chant. I know it was the unfamiliarity of the sound that inspired the giggles; but for my sons, it was a tender reminder that they didn't quite belong.

Children live in the archetype. For most of my career as Waldorf teacher, I subscribed to this belief—not blindly, but comfortable in the wisdom that stood behind it. It was this same wisdom that allowed me to slip into the pedagogy twenty years ago even when others, steeped in it for years, felt me to be out of place. With the poignance of a childhood tribulation, I remember the moment when a renowned pedagogue looked me directly in the face and asked me "How can you stand to be here?"

How could l not? It was my children who led me here. Even before they were born, they were leading me. The mere possibility of them inspired me to seek out an education that would keep them connected and grow them into moral, self-knowing human beings. What's more, in my studies to be a teacher, I found that anthroposophy supported me in understanding my own Islamic spiritual tradition in the same way that a well-crafted pair of lenses defines and sharpens what we perceive in the world. It was an unexpected gift that came out of my striving for my children.

Early on, my children taught me that to know themselves, they needed to be connected to their higher self—the one that is housed in their body and to whom Waldorf Education is ultimately directed. They intuitively understood that to master the opportunities of this life and to progress through it, they had to acknowledge, learn, accept, and command the sheath and circumstance into which they were born. To support them in this was my work as a parent. To support them in this must also be the purpose of a good education and the commitment of a devoted teacher.

When my first child was four, I realized that he needed more than the archetype. In fact, he told me so. The morning of my first doll-making workshop, he took my face in his able hands and looked me straight in the face and said, "Make her Khaki like me!" I've crafted many dolls since then, but his, my first, was a sandy-beige skinned, brown eyed, raven-haired sister that we named Baby Mona. I knew my children needed more, but there was a time when even my dearest colleagues assured me that the archetypes were enough to support their development. Yet I witnessed their repetitive struggle to locate themselves somewhere in the curriculum and the community. I also saw occasions like the Festival of Lights, when they perceived that others were uncomfortable with their differences. And then there were times where

I saw the deep and limiting effect of not finding yourself in the classroom such as the occasion when my daughter opted for knighthood over princess-dom because she understood from the fairy tales that princesses and other goodly royalty were golden-haired. The same daughter told me that during the "Mother Holle" dress up, she wanted to be the girl with pitch or the brown loaf of bread. Crestfallen, I went directly to my kindergarten colleague. After an earnest conversation that challenged what we had always thought about archetypes, she made an effort to include stories and puppets in which my daughter could see herself not just in the characters who struggled, but in those who triumphed. And believe me, it was not lost on my daughter, who shared those meaningful, self-affirming moments with me.

Self-acceptance is a necessary step towards self-mastery. For children to experience themselves reflected positively in their immediate world, especially by the people that they love and value thus becomes imperative. Even as a mother, I constantly question whether my sons and daughters meet themselves in our family culture. Their world is not the world in which I was raised, and their struggles are unique to their time and their circumstances. I strive to know my children better so that I can continue to welcome them into their task of incarnating and so I can establish the connection through which I can deliver the nourishment and inspiration that will encourage them to know themselves. But it is teachers who hold children for most of their twelve waking hours a day during the school year—almost twice as long as children are home with their parents. Thus, the responsibility of making sure that students see themselves in the classroom is great.

In me, my children could always see a clear reflection of themselves at school. But what of the students who do not have this, who find themselves alone in their difference and in classrooms where the teachers are not prepared to consciously weave them into the fabric of the class? Their journey of incarnation becomes more challenging because at a time when they should be growing into their bodies and learning to command them, they are unsure that their bodies, the ones that look so different from the others and don't fit in to the culture of the class, are the ones in which they wish to be. When we incorporate the uniqueness of these students in our classroom and curriculum, we assure them that they are in the right body and the right place and thus facilitate the self-acceptance that is necessary for incarnation and spiritual evolution.

In our efforts towards diversity, most of us are still focused on the obvious: Do I have reflections of diversity in my classroom? But beyond the dolls with different skin color and the images in the décor, are the stories, the rhymes, the chores, the meals, the sounds and the music. Going further, the more important questions for the teacher are self-reflective: What are my experiences of diversity, am I open, where is my judgement, am I willing to change, how comfortable am I with what is unfamiliar to me, how can I become more familiar with what I don't know, who can help me in this task, what do my students perceive from me? To those of us who feel resistance to or trepidation towards the new impulses and the re-imagining that we must do in looking for the kernel of Waldorf education that can inspire us forward—this work is necessary because it serves the children in their journey towards being a free-thinking human being.

When looking at Diversity and Inclusion work, we are no longer just speaking of changing practices, we are talking about changing paradigms and frameworks and, thereby, hearts and minds. Many schools have had long-standing diversity committees and many teachers have made sincere efforts towards inclusion and equity, but our understanding of the needs of the children of this day is evolving and calling for a different approach that is about having the courage to break from what is comfortable to meet the children where they are. Inclusivity practices such as calling upon parents to bring traditions and festivals of cultural significance into the classroom work to some degree, but can also have the opposite effect from the desired one. Over the years, there were a few occasions that I was invited into the kindergarten to bring a Ramadan or Eid story, just as other parents were invited to share Hanukkah or Chinese New Year. My children later told me that the out-of-the-norm experience was unnatural in the rhythmic life of their kindergarten. It would have been a true kindergarten experience if it had come from their teacher, who brought so many other festivals and stories with love and reverence. For my children, the disappointment continued into grade school, where despite the celebration of a rich array of historical cultures traditionally included in the curriculum, there was no acknowledgment of any days that were significant in Muslim culture. Most dispiriting for

them was that while many blocks received two to three weeks of study and attention, the Islam block in grade six was given a week at most or overlooked entirely if time was short. Personally, I was frustrated that on the occasion that Islamic history did make it into the sixth or seventh grade curriculum, I was often the one that was invited into the middle school by my colleagues as an afterthought to give a speedy overview of a faith tradition that is over 1400 years old, spans almost every country, culture, and race, makes up a significant percentage of the world's population, and which is currently one of the most misunderstood religions in the world. My preference at any stage of my children's schooling would have been to be a primary resource or a partner for their teachers. I would gladly have spent time in the summer, before the school year started, pointing the teachers towards authentic materials, teaching them songs, and sharing with them how I wished for my tradition to be represented.

Whether or not we have students in our classrooms that come from backgrounds different from our own or from that of the majority of the class, we must integrate diversity into our curriculum. In every classroom community there are differences, such as gender identity, socioeconomics, family constellation, family history, religion, and learning needs that are not necessarily obvious. Even if your class composition is superficially uniform, students do and will encounter diversity in the world. In order for them to go on to forge meaningful and dynamic relationships with any human being that they encounter, we need to integrate the rich reflection and spirit of as many peoples as we can into our classrooms.

It was once accepted that for teachers to be authentic and truthful in their work, they were obligated to bring only that which arose from within them. This notion is now being deconstructed, but for the first half of my career, I was expected to conform to the Euro-centric standard in the curriculum even though it was not what was natural to me—and I did it because I lacked self-confidence and credibility in the Waldorf community, and I was still learning. Internally, I always knew that I was working with the core principles of Waldorf education, but it was years before I was able to separate them from the symbols that I had inherited from my mentors.

When I finally found the courage and freedom to bring the archetypes in my own way, I had two realizations: first, that we inadvertently construct our own archetypes by integrating the principles with the same practices and preferences over a long enough period of time. While these traditions have their virtues, they can also be responsible for inflexibility, a lack of curiosity, and a rigid adherence to what we come to believe is the way—sometimes even at the cost of our observations of the children before us and their needs in this time. Second, it was out of freedom that I recognized that to invite my students and families to partake of the nourishment and guidance that I wanted to provide and to give them the inspiration to meet me, I had to extend a bridge built of symbols that were familiar to them and to invite them into a space full of stories and traditions that were familiar and made them feel at home. Once they felt like I was striving to know them, they made efforts to know me and my offerings. And finally, whatever we bring out of striving for our students is authentically our own. We can make anything our own—a story, a symbol, a song, or a rhyme—in the same way that we learn a story before bringing it in the kindergarten; we seek it with the intention to nourish a need in our students, we commit it to memory, we digest it, and when we have metabolized it, we bring it to our students so that it flows from us to them just as the sun warms us with its rays. I have taken months to learn songs in languages that are not my own in order to create a space of belonging for parents and children in my class—a space where they feel that I am weaving them into the rich tapestry of our community, where they feel that their absence would make a fundamental difference, and where their presence is necessary. How I had wished that for my children.

Grasping our own identities, experiences of diversity, judgements that we hold, and frameworks for interfacing with the world can form a solid foundation from which we can begin to work with our students and their families—flexibly, consciously, and full of curiosity. We are called upon to ask ourselves how much we know about the diverse families that we hold in our care—on both obvious and subtle levels—and to what lengths we are willing to go to prepare the space for those children and their families in our community. Equally important is the source of our knowledge. Parents should be the first resource, as they are the ones who have already been supporting their child's journey, and the ones who have the right to establish their own cultural narrative. Building trusting and respectful collaboration is a necessity in

creating a space in which children and families can see and experience themselves. Sometimes this is a simple as asking the parents, "What would you like me to know about you and your child that can help me in creating an authentic and self-affirming space?" Other times, it will be a longer process that requires an invitation for participation where that parent can be in the classroom and witness their child in your care and where a child can experience their family participating.

To truly serve the children, our first task is reorienting ourselves to their fundamental qualities. Young children have sensory empathy, and thus learn and become through imitation. What they sense and experience becomes defining, lens-building parts of their world view, incorporated as capacities for connection and growth. Thus, if experiences of human diversity are absent or negative, even in the attitudes and judgements of the adults and community around them, children will spend their adult lives struggling, as many of us are, to reconstruct their perspectives once they find themselves in the world. Ideally, we would prepare children for their forging into the world with a diverse group of classmates. After all, studies have shown that for a child to integrate another child—different from them in some area of diversity—into their world view, they must engage in regular free play with them before the age of seven. In the absence of diversity in many of our schools, the responsibility for building this capacity in our students must then be taken up by the teacher and curriculum.

We also know that children are keen observers. Their ever-seeking senses stretch forth into the world looking for cues in the colors, sounds, and patterns that they observe as stimuli for their growth. They notice differences in humans in the same way that they notice flowers in a garden. They don't judge them, but they notice them with clarity and honesty, and we must acknowledge this. My daughters and sons noticed that their skin was different from that of their friends. They also noticed a pattern when all the puppets and dolls in the classroom looked the same and when those observable physical traits were echoed in the language of stories and songs that they heard. And while they may not have articulated it or seen anything wrong with it, they took it in and made connections and defined themselves accordingly just as my daughter, the knight, did.

Children want to be seen. They want the humans who mean the most to them to truly recognize them and reinforce their existence by making them feel at home. As parents we naturally do this by making time to observe our little ones, to understand their needs, by being responsive when they struggle, by acknowledging that they are individuals on their own journey. We first acknowledge their earthly identity by gifting them a name and calling them by it until they learn it and finally embody it with their own characteristics and biography. It's a simple thing, but how I wish that my children's teachers had made the effort to correctly pronounce my children's beautiful Arabic names—the ones that I first gifted them as a symbol of their individual journeys. Hearing the true sound of their names would have been one beautiful reflection of them in the classroom and maybe even made the beautiful sounds on that day in the courtyard so familiar that all of the children could have soared with us in the night sky. ◆

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