The Rudolf Steiner School at 90
Personal Reflections

Carol Ann Bärtges

The following is excerpted and adapted from talks given to the faculty and students of the Rudolf Steiner School on the occasion of its 90th Birthday.

Study the past if you would define the future
– Confucius

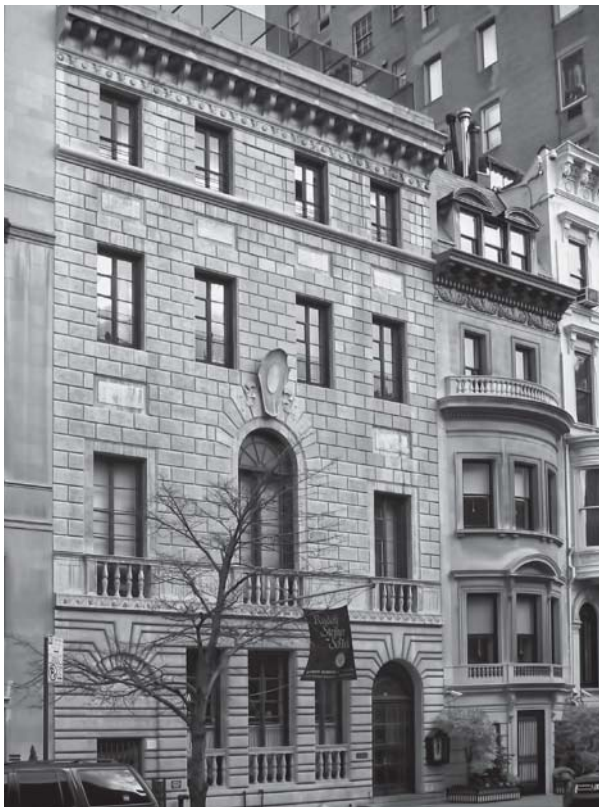
This year, the Rudolf Steiner School is celebrating its 90th anniversary. But the story of our New York City school begins even earlier, a century ago, in Stuttgart, Germany, with the founding of the first Waldorf school under the guidance of Rudolf Steiner, his pedagogical vision and wider worldview.

Like other contemporary great education reformers here in America – John Dewey and his Chicago Lab School, Felix Adler and his Ethical Culture School in Manhattan – Steiner was a progressive thinker who wanted to reform education after the devastations of World War I. Steiner imagined a school that would address the individual development of the children, where teachers could meet the needs of the students through guiding them into direct experience of the world, thus stimulating the imaginative thinking so critical for judgment and responsible innovation.

What I have learned about our school's history comes through six decades of personal involvement as student, teacher, parent, and administrator, as well as from reading the wonderful accounts written by our former Faculty Chair, Henry Barnes, in the publication, *Educating as an Art*, and by our former history teacher, Jann Gates.

In 1923, a young educational reformer and, in my opinion, an early feminist thinker, Virginia Birdsall, found out about the Stuttgart Waldorf School through her friend, Irene Brown, a fellow teacher at a girls' school in Orange, New Jersey. Virginia travelled to England to hear Rudolf Steiner speak about education in a series of thirteen lectures and returned to the United States filled with enthusiasm. She gathered around her a group of bold and creative women and men who were interested in starting a Waldorf school in North America. Irene Brown found a townhouse building at 111 East 39th Street, Manhattan's Murray Hill neighborhood, and raised money to buy it. Thus, in 1928, the first Waldorf school in North America began.

The school moved several times before it found its present two homes: After a year on 39th Street, it moved to the former site of the Dalton School, on West 73rd Street. It then moved to East 91st Street for a few years during WWII, until it lost the lease a few years later. Right at that time, a beautiful, spacious building, designed by the famous architects Stanford and White, came on the market. It was close to Central Park, where children could play at recess; it was near the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where classes could go and learn. But it was going for the enormous sum of $50,000. The whole community agreed that it would do whatever it could to realize this opportunity, and in 1944, the school moved to 15 East 79th Street where our Early Childhood and Lower School still are today.



The Rudolf Steiner School, 15 East 79th St., New York City

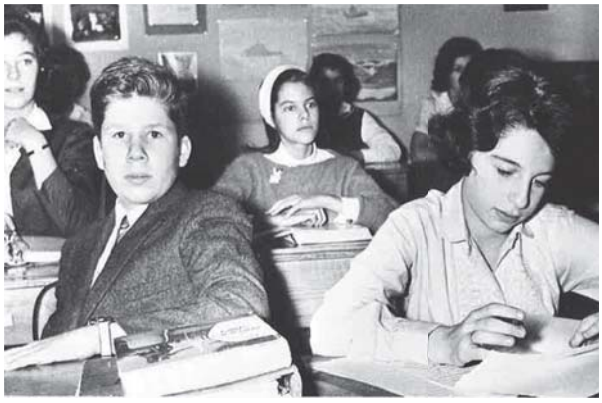
The Rudolf Steiner School had enjoyed good enrollment throughout the 1940s. But when the war ended and

ex-patriot families from Europe were able to return to their homelands, the school experienced a sudden drop in enrollment, which persisted into the early 1950s. The board and faculty considered the possibility of closing down the school, but, as Henry Barnes reports, this option was rejected after each and every faculty member expressed a commitment to the school's survival.

Legendary English Teachers, Christy Barnes (left) and Ruth Pusch.

With the guidance of Karl Ege, who had come to Steiner after thirteen years of teaching at the Stuttgart Waldorf School, the teachers now explored the implications of a faculty-administered school and wrote a constitution that reconfigured the corporation and the Board of Directors giving a central role to the Faculty Council, the name at the time for the College of Teachers. Not only were the faculty determined to keep the school open, it was precisely at this precarious moment that the faculty asked: "Now, how about a high school? We're only K through 8th, and that is not complete." Knowing some of the characters involved, it is not surprising to me that the idea for the high school arose, so at least it seems, precisely when the school was at a very dangerous point of closing. These pioneers felt that a high school was crucial, and they agreed that some of the elementary school faculty, some of whom were serious academics, should prepare to take on the high school grades and create a true upper school. The school community jumped on the opportunity when the 78th Street building came on the market – only one block away from the Lower School. A drive for funds was launched, and very quickly, three months later, the Upper School building was bought in 1955. The first high school class graduated in 1959. Current students, who would take to perusing the high school's various yearbooks, might recognize in the students' photos some of their own teachers such as Renate Poliakine (Sculpture), Rallou Hamshaw (High School, Arts), myself (High School, English), and Ryan Cameron (Lower School, Language Arts).

The core of teachers in the 1940s, comprising such individuals as Henry and Christy Barnes, Karl and Arvia Ege, Thelma Dillingham, Kari Van Ort, Dorothy and William Harrer, Hans and Ruth Pusch, among others, were joined in the late 1950s and 1960s by Patti Livingston, Thorne Zay, Jean Zay, Harry and Almuth Kretz and Almuth's brother, Ekkehard Piening, Danilla Rettig, Amos and Lisle Franceschelli, and Barbara and Keith Francis. Most of these remarkable individuals were my teachers. For these pioneers of Waldorf education, pedagogy was interwoven seamlessly with anthroposophical insights into humanity and the world of nature. The sense of shared endeavor among the teachers and early board members of the school—whose activities encompassed a broad range of cultural and practical undertakings arising out of anthroposophy—was palpable.



Freshmen at the Rudolf Steiner High School, ca. 1965

A further example of how a deep and shared connection to anthroposophical ideas helped the school forward comes from a moment in the early 1990s. I was now a high school teacher as well as a parent, with two young children in the Early Childhood program. The school found itself, again, in dire financial turmoil and a question arose from board members whether it would make sense to cut costs by closing the high school. At the time, our school's by-laws were such that the College of Teachers represented 60% of the board. How wise that was, for when it came to a vote, the college members, who live the daily life of the school and its students, voiced their strong opposition to such a plan. We went to work on the budget – consolidated positions, took voluntary pay cuts, and froze salaries. We were determined to keep the high school of the first Waldorf school in North America open. With a small but highly selective student body (indeed, as advisor to the class of 1993, I had only eight students in the class),

our sacrifice and diligence paid off. The high school was kept open, and with the help and expertise of dedicated parents, alumni parents, and board members, we worked to remediate finances and get the school back on track. When my own children were in the high school ten years later, classes were full. These moments in the school's biography—when the shared vision of the faculty and its willingness to sacrifice for the good of the entire school carried us into the future—are an enduring legacy that I carry with me from the past and into the future.

Through a Personal Lens

The past is never where you think you left it.
Katherine Anne Porter

From the stories my mother tells, I took an active part in choosing the Rudolf Steiner School at the age of four. My mother, a Holocaust survivor, and my father, a first-generation Ukrainian New Yorker, had heard of the international atmosphere at the school and came for an interview. Then, as now, the school's application process involved parents bringing their child into the kindergarten to play. All went well until it was time to leave, when I simply refused to do so, clinging to the kindergarten teacher's legs and sobbing hysterically. It was thus clear that this was my school and that I intended to be here. And I have been here ever since, perhaps because no one has wanted to see me throw another tantrum.

A Waldorf Nativity Play on a New York Stage

The Rudolf Steiner School was of course a very different place in the 1960s, but also very much the same as it is now. Just as we have now, we also had an Advent Spiral Walk when I was in Kindergarten, where we walked in a spiral form created by fragrant pine boughs laid out on the floor. I credit early feelings of self-confidence to that ritual, for it was a real challenge to walk that huge spiral form into the center all by oneself, light the large candle that stood there, walk the spiral form back out into the room, and place your little candle somewhere along the path without once tripping or burning everything down.

As today, there was still a great deal of free play in the Kindergarten, where we didn't sit at desks, but where we learned by doing – we baked bread, we painted, we played with natural toys, and we developed our imaginations through social interaction with our friends. I seemed to have gravitated toward a very particular type of social interaction – as my report card confirms: I got married five times in Kindergarten—all those silk scarves and ropes came in handy for my bridal veils and bridal processions!—and since 'divorce' was not a word in anyone's vocabulary at the time, I simply kept collecting husbands as the year progressed.

Henry Barnes and the RSS Class Teachers, K through 8, 1960

I had one class teacher for eight years; her name was Virginia Paulsen. All in all, she would take four classes through—32 years of class teaching—as well as spend time doing other things in the school. Ms. Paulsen was skilled in all subjects, but she had a special love for literature, history, and drama, and she certainly influenced me deeply in all those subjects. She was also firm about manners and community awareness. She called lateness a "social disease," and neither students nor teachers nor parents were ever late to her classes or meetings. By 5th grade, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher someday as well.

I entered 9th grade at the height of the Woodstock generation's rejection of the status quo. We listened to Folk music, Rock, Motown and Funk. The Vietnam War was going on, and the boys in my class lived with anxiety about the draft for most of high school. The draft ended when we were in 12th grade. It wasn't unusual in our high school common room to hear people discussing what they would do if their draft number came up once they turned 18. You could defer if you attended university; you could defect to Canada; very rarely, you could get a religious exemption or substitute a few years of community service somewhere. There were

candle-light protest marches against the war happening at regular intervals down Broadway. I lived on the West Side, and my parents allowed me to participate in such protests because half of our high school was there, walking arm in arm, holding candles in those night time vigils.

When I entered high school, the dress code still prohibited girls from wearing pants to school. Not only did we have to wear skirts and dresses every day, but our science teacher, Nanette Grimm, stood at the front door every morning with a yardstick, measuring the length of our skirts. They were not allowed to end higher than two inches from the middle of your knee. My class was impatient with this rule, and we fought hard to get it changed. We wrote letters to the faculty, we argued; we got sent home. Finally, the boys in the class came up with an idea to show solidarity with their female classmates' plight. They decided they would wear only skirts and dresses to school until we girls could wear pants as well. The faculty thought the boys would give this up after a few days, but they held on. We girls lent them our clothes and bought more skirts and dresses at thrift stores. After three weeks, the teachers were impressed and had had enough; the dress code was permanently changed.

Virginia Paulsen and the team of Class Teachers, ca. 1965

The Rudolf Steiner Upper School still feels today like the private family home it once was. When I was a student here, a dumbwaiter still passed through an airshaft and could travel from floor to floor. Originally, when the building was a private residence, the kitchen was located in its basement and servants would haul up with this miniature elevator trays and dishes to the dining room, which is now our assembly room, or to the bedrooms on the upper floors. When I was a student, the dumbwaiter doorways were still open on various floors, so when we wanted to cut class, we would hide, two students at a time, inside the dumbwaiter.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, the building's sense of "home" was not just a feeling for some of our Steiner families. Our Director of Maintenance, Hans Kaufman, actually lived with his three daughters on the 6th floor of our Upper School building, where our 7th and 8th classrooms are now located. How I envied their luxury of rolling out of bed and walking one flight of stairs down to their 8:00 am main lesson!

One April Fool's Day, when I was a student, the local police paid us a call. Neighbors were complaining, said the visiting Inspector. He pointed to the flag pole that hangs outside the 3rd floor English room. Gazing in horror, the Upper School Chair realized that someone had taken down the school flag and hung laundry on the pole instead: women's girdles and bras, men's boxers and undershirts, stockings and socks were gaily fluttering in the breeze. High school teachers had to have a good sense of humor in those days, for we were an inventive and mischievous lot. I have many more stories I could tell.

When I was a senior, the school bought an old farm and 500 acres in Harlemville, New York. This would become the Hawthorne Valley Farm. It was originally owned by our school and had very few of the buildings you can see there today. There was no school across the street – just fields and a beautiful river. There was no dining hall, or Community Hall, just the main house. A kitchen was established in an old, red saltbox down the road. Because we were the oldest students, our job was to spend three weeks there, preparing the farm for all the younger children who would be coming for their farm visit. The first thing we did was to make the rope-mattress bunk beds, which remained in the main house for close to thirty years. We cleared fields, drove tractors, dug gardens. We helped renovate the dairy

barn. We created stone paths and built bridges across the river. The farm eventually became a separate association with the grounds and campus you see there today: a visiting student program, a farm store, a dairy and vegetable farm, an EC–12th grade Waldorf school, a bookstore, the Nature Institute, etc. It was immensely exciting to be part of such a future-oriented project, one that we seniors would not have much time to enjoy, ourselves, but one that we were leaving behind for many generations of students to come.

Challenges for the Future

A number of years ago, at an AWSNA summer conference in Portland, Oregon, Virginia Sease of the Anthroposophical Society in Dornach spoke about how the biography of a school was really like that of a human being. I sense that at 90 years, this "first Waldorf school of North America" is ready to shed its skin and rise from its institutional ashes like the golden phoenix it wants to become. Renewal is essential, and I believe it will happen if we experience the same trust in collegueship and shared vision so wonderfully demonstrated by the energetic, early pioneers of our New York City home.

The High School Language Department, ca. 1965

Looking ahead, I see a number of challenges for the Rudolf Steiner School and for Waldorf education in general. The world has changed since the first Waldorf school was founded in 1919 – what once seemed radical is now accepted practice: coed education is the norm, not the exception; music, art, and early exposure to world languages are widely recognized as crucial (public schools around the country introduce recorders in elementary school); the concept of project-based and experiential learning is well-known; gardening and outdoor activities in nature are not infrequent in many schools (a number of private schools in New York City, like the Manhattan Country Day School, own farms upstate where their students spend time). So, what will keep us unique? What will differentiate us from other progressive models of education? In my opinion, we will stand at the forefront of innovative initiative only if we can keep alive the idea that "The image of the human being as a spiritual being informs every aspect of the school."[1] This means being able to learn from the historical occasion of Rudolf Steiner's philosophical impulse and hold fast to our shared agreements to work with anthroposophical insights of the growing child. Our spiritual heritage should not dissipate but deepen and ripen and inform our future with healthy, responsive innovation. We must also then have the courage to speak these thoughts and share these insights with the wider community of the school and the world. This, of course, while sounding so basic, is nonetheless very difficult to do, for it is always challenging to articulate clear thoughts that strive to move beyond the empirical and quantifiable. Without this trust in our shared understanding of the spiritual realities underlying human development, we remain "apologists," and neither curriculum nor school practices will compellingly change to meet the future. The pressures and expectations of a dynamic society require a solid foundation. As we celebrate ninety years of our school's biography, we might ponder what the author of *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler, once wrote:

> The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

The author in her High School English classroom, Rudolf Steiner School

Carol Bärtges' *roots run deep in the Manhattan schist of the Rudolf Steiner School. She is a graduate, as are her two children, Max and Sarah. Holding undergraduate and graduate degrees in English and comparative literature, Carol is a full-time English and drama high school teacher at the Rudolf Steiner School; her long association with the school includes serving as a class teacher, Chair of the College, and Chair of the Upper School. For ten years, Carol was a member of the AWSNA Leadership Council as the representative for the Mid-Atlantic region, and her deep interest in mentoring and faculty development continues in her work with the Faculty Development Committee of her school.*

1 AWSNA Core Principles, #1.