Bridging the Vulnerability Gap
A Review of Betty Staley's *Tending the Spark*

Stephen Sagarin

Betty Staley's new book, *Tending the Spark: Lighting the Future for Middle School Students* (Waldorf Publications, 2019), is important for understanding the healthy development of a critical period in youth and how teachers and parents can assist this development. It is particularly important if Waldorf schools lose students in increasing numbers during middle school, or if students get to the end of middle school and announce that they are "done" with Waldorf, that they've had "enough" Steiner. In visiting more than a dozen Waldorf schools in the past year, I observed that such middle school attrition is all too common.

The health of a Waldorf school's middle school is a key to the health of the whole school. If the school doesn't have a high school, the middle school represents the goal, the culmination of the school's endeavors. If the school does have a high school, the middle school is the necessary bridge to it. A Waldorf high school relies on a strong, well-enrolled middle school, and that includes converting willing 8th grade graduates into eager 9th graders. Without healthy, happy middle school students, the school itself cannot be fully healthy.

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Here is where Betty Staley's book comes in: it takes a large step toward helping teachers and parents to ensure the health and happiness of middle school students and, therefore, the well-being of middle schools. And there is little doubt that these students need our help. As Staley writes in the Introduction: "[I]t feels as if we are in the midst of … a battle with powerful negative forces specifically aimed at this age group—through sexualization and violence in movies, overload of internet information, video games, cell phones, and commercials…"

What challenges particularly this age group is well summed up in a concept around which the book is centered: a "vulnerability gap" in the lives of young persons between the onset of puberty, beginning around age 11, and the maturity that comes with adolescence, forebrain development, and the "civilizing mind," beginning around age 15. Their physical bodies are preparing for the possibility of procreation and the emotional depths that comes with that, yet their emotional lives are still immature. As the gulf between these changes has widened over the past century or so, it has become increasingly challenging for teachers, parents, and young persons themselves to bridge this gap. Staley's book sensitively and intelligently addresses how we may assist the healthful development of persons roughly between the ages of 11 and 15.

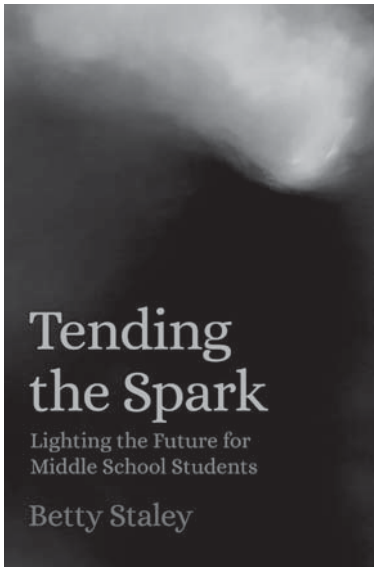
Primary here is the idea of genuine protection—protection from digital addiction, unfiltered Internet content, and the many other social and technological influences for which students of this age are not well defended.

"Protection" opens a space within which healthy development may occur, and, in this context, Staley emphasizes the necessity to address, maintain, and encourage young persons' idealism. Here, she recommends three distinct avenues. First, adults should strive to be genuine role models. Teachers and parents can also introduce heroes—not in old-school, hagiographic ignorance of the fact that we are all human and have our faults and fallibilities, but in a mode that recognizes the achievements of individuals worth emulating, while emphasizing the challenges that many have had, faced, and overcome.

Second, we assist students in making it through the vulnerability gap with stories and narratives. We make sense of our existence through storytelling and the construction of narratives. (That these are inevitably partial and even flawed does not detract from their value.) Hearing, reading, writing, and telling stories, their own and others, immerse students in worlds of meaning that help them make sense of their own maturing experience.

And, third, we guide students through this period by engaging them in service to others. Research shows that middle school students are acutely aware of moral and ethical questions and dilemmas, and beginning to engage with the moral world in a practical way is helpful to them.

Staley has chapters on "The World of Middle School Boys" and "The World of Middle School Girls," a binary view that might not sit comfortably with some readers in a society in which more and more individuals let us know that they don't fit either of these two boxes, or these boxes alone. Still, using the categories of "masculine" and "feminine" to describe the polarity within which each one of us exists provides a useful explanatory scheme. And, developmentally, hormonally, emotionally, the tension between these poles is often experienced and expressed more extremely in this period.



I've said the book is a large step in the right direction, and I'll add three more small ones, based on my own experience as both a middle school and high school teacher. First, I wonder if Staley has underestimated the range of the vulnerability gap. In my experience, students don't begin to leave this gap, so to speak, until around age 17, following a (potential) crisis of individuation around age 16.

Second, although the need for protection is real, so is the gradual work of emancipation, the work of liberation. We can no longer rely on a mature mind, a civilized mind, to develop and guide a young person without teachers' and parents' efforts to assist with liberation or maturation in the face of pressures from advertisers and demagogues that aim to maintain us as immature consumers and pawns.

Third, although it is implicit throughout Staley's book, we should make explicit the principle that work with middle school (and high school) students involves setting appropriate intellectual, emotional, and physical challenges. Without a sense that they can meet hard challenges and, with appropriate support, succeed, students will not be effectively assisted by the tools of role models, stories, and service.

These considerations can remind us that our concepts of "middle school" and "high school" are historical artifacts. Other nations structure schools differently. In Australia, for instance, lower school ends after grade 6, and upper school begins in grade 7. (Australian Waldorf schools usually receive a variance from the state so that class teachers remain with their classes through grade 7.) Developmental stages and individual manifestations of them exist separately from the divisions we impose through law, custom, and history.

Regardless of the grades and schools in which young persons find themselves, however, or into which we put them, these students deserve our conscious attention as parents and teachers to assist them in their growth and development. Staley's book carefully, conscientiously, and clearly sets us on a path to doing this.

Stephen Sagarin, *Ph.D., received his doctorate in U.S. History from Columbia University and his B.A. in Art History and Fine Art from Princeton University. He is a graduate of the Waldorf School of Garden City, NY, where he taught for 12 years before moving to Massachusetts, where he is co-founder, high school teacher, and faculty chair at the Berkshire Waldorf School. He is associate professor in Waldorf Teacher Education at Sunbridge Institute and former editor of the Research Bulletin. Stephen has taught at Columbia University's Teachers College, at the City University of New York, and at Berkshire Community College. His blog is called "What is Education?" and his most recent book is The Story of Waldorf Education in the United States: Past, Present, and Future.*