To Make Room for Black Lives, Homer Stands Aside[1]

Defne Caldwell

Waldorf teachers and poets love a good metaphor. I'm going to start with the metaphor and then get to my point, another habit of Waldorf teachers and poets.

When I joined the faculty to teach English and drama at Green Meadow in 2005, I discovered that a favorite metaphor there was, *our school is a ship*. I got it right away and even remember using the metaphor myself in a talk I gave at an assembly. It felt good, like we were going somewhere all together with a little bit of danger thrown in because of squalls. Sometimes in meetings, we spoke about the strength of the vessel supported by anthroposophy and by our traditions. Sometimes we admitted or bewailed our inability to turn quickly, but it was all explained by our imagination of this huge ship. I attended Green Meadow from kindergarten through twelfth grade. So, in my mind, the ship looked like a great 19th century whaler I had learned about as a ninth grader in the *Moby Dick* main lesson (which I was now going to teach myself). Green Meadow could stay out at sea for years, it weighed three hundred tons and had thirty-five sails and precious cargo, so… Well, you understand, no quick turns. In the early 2000s, when it came to race, we believed that all people are equal and that blindness to race was a good approach to fostering equality.

I took up a rich curriculum handed to me by my former teachers who had made the high school the inspiring, scholarly, and artistic place it was. I had graduated in 1987 and knew that my peers were doing well as alumni. They were people like Alex Steffen, a leader in climate consciousness; Jessica Stoberock, stock broker; Aicha Woods, architect for Cesar Pelli and now the executive director of city planning for New Haven, CT; Karin Schaefer, painter; Stefan Schaefer, filmmaker; Michael Berkowitz, founding member of Resilient Cities Catalyst; Ciril Hitz, award winning baker; Jennifer Stahl, violist with the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra; and countless others living happy lives as teachers, doctors, writers, and such. Now, in my mind, the high school was even better than in the 1980s. It had all the traditions I grew up with, plus a more rigorous applied science curriculum and an award-winning robotics team, for example. Why would I rock the boat? (I can't resist).

Well, the wind changed.

Towards the end of *Moby Dick*, Starbuck, the upright first mate, begs with monomaniacal Captain Ahab to understand that the winds they are fighting their way into (in Ahab's obsession with catching the white whale) are a sign that they should turn and go home. And indeed, they should. But Ahab's vengeful pride won't let him, and he is all powerful, so they all… well, I won't give it away. But around 2014-2015 when Opal Tometi, Alicia Graza and Patrisse Cullors started #BlackLivesMatter in response to Trayvon Martin's murder and George Zimmerman's acquittal, the winds changed. At Green Meadow, many of us did not fully understand or know what to do, but no one could deny that ignoring racism was not working.

Most of us were and are White, so we knew we had to begin to educate ourselves. At the urging of our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee, the Collegium required every person working at Green Meadow to do the Undoing Racism training, led by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. But it takes longer than a weekend to understand racism and especially where it may hide in oneself, or in a curriculum or in a school, and what to do about it. I started by putting aside my love of authors like Donna Tartt and Cormac McCarthy and began only reading texts by Black American authors like Jesmyn Ward, James McBride, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Paul Beatty, and Colson Whitehead. Those voices, characters, and stories took root in me. I was moved by the artistry, wit, and imagination of these authors, I witnessed the exceptional qualities of the characters I found there, I fell in love, I laughed and suffered with those characters, I was outraged with them about the violence and injustice they faced and moved by their wisdom. I still did not know what to do.

But then, the lifechanging moment:

My husband and I were also seeing as much theater by Black authors as we could, mostly at Theater for a New Audience and BAM. We attended a play by Jackie Sibblies Drury called *Fairview*. It was about a contemporary upper-middle-class Black family and played around with how race is viewed. First, the family appeared to be caught in a strange sitcom. Everything was perfect. They were getting a perfect birthday dinner ready for the matriarch who was upstairs. They listened to music and danced in the living room. The interior of their

1 This article first appeared on the Green Meadow Waldorf School blog at www.gmws.org/blog

home was all startling bright white and shiny. I whispered to my husband, *mark my words, that set is going to be ruined before this is over.* I was right. I remember thinking that the play was trying to elicit racism in viewers who didn't know what to think about Black people who are financially well-off, interested in getting the root vegetables into the oven, their biggest problem: that their teenage daughter wants to take a gap year instead of going straight to college.

Then, the scene played out again, in silence, while we listened to the voices of American and European White people revealing commonly held racist views in phrases containing microaggressions and in playing games like *if you could be any race, what would it be?* There were the voices that may have been living below the surface in some of us.

Our views of race were challenged and tipped over in various ways as the play went on (the difficult grandmother finally came downstairs and was White, and the brother, a lawyer held up at work, showed up dressed like a rapper). The dinner was over the top, insane, and the food, including a giant turkey, went everywhere. I was surprised, moved and thrilled by it all. But being woke enough to somewhat access what was happening did not prepare me for what I never saw coming.

In the final scene of the play, Keisha, the daughter who wanted to take a gap year, stepped up and just started talking to the audience. She asked all the White people in the audience to come up onto the stage; she meant, for real.

I shrink from audience participation, but I recognized that I had to go. We all did. Once we were crammed up there in the bright lights, she turned her back and continued to speak to the Black audience left in their seats. Everything had shifted. As one of the White people on stage, I at first thought I was turned into the subject that I was being viewed. That made me feel like a moth on a pin. Then I realized that we were not important, really. An intimate conversation was going on between Keisha and the Black audience members. It literally had nothing to do with me, except that Keisha was clear that she thought Black people needed a bit more room.

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Suddenly, I realized, I needed to make room. I needed to be willing to be left out, to not matter sometimes – all White people do.

It still took a few years to have the clarity and courage to make large curricular changes like replacing Homer's *Odyssey* with Richard Wright's *Black Boy* for tenth graders. Odysseus is lauded as the everyman who carries our consciousness through temptation and trial to his rightful place. Odysseus makes many mistakes, but, with Athena's help, he finally reclaims his home from the men who have overtaken it through clear thinking, restraint and the sword. It's hard to put him aside. Richard Wright's story carries our consciousness through the hardships of a Black boy growing up in the South in the early 1900s. Instead of storms at sea, he faces crippling poverty, a family in crisis and the real threat of death. In the place of island captivity, he faces the prison of his role as a Black boy who must stand aside, appear to be mindless and laugh away all injustice. Wright's version of 20 years away from home is the withholding of an education, the opportunities to work and to pursue his dream of being a writer. He is victorious and overcomes the power and rage of the White world, more powerful than Poseidon's against Odysseus, through a love for nature, an independent moral compass, and an individuality that draws meaning from all things, even suffering. Recognizing that he needs to wrestle himself free from what keeps him from his rightful destiny, Wright says, "In me was shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed. Somewhere in the dead of the southern night my life had switched onto the wrong track and without my knowing it, the locomotive of my heart was rushing down a dangerously steep slope, heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red lights that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screams that filled the air." My students are riveted and moved by Richard Wright's story, which is a contemporary story and universal one as well. I am fortunate to witness the way literature transforms young people. I am moved now, as I watch my tenth graders becoming better people, inwardly elevated and victorious, travelling through the body and mind of a Black hero. Actually, it doesn't even matter if *Black Boy* is better than *The Odyssey*. Just as the White people in the theater during *Fairview* needed to make room, Homer can make room, and Wolfram von Eschenbach can, any one of them. That is right, now, in this time.

At Green Meadow, we want to understand and transform the way White people dominate the curriculum, the stories that are told, the history recounted, the images displayed, the examples brought, the expectations set, the

rules, decisions, and priorities upheld. It has not been easy to make changes in such a well-established institution. In the high school, we started slowly around 2008 (when we rejoiced in the election of President Obama), when Alix Christofides took over the African-American literature class from Leah Henderson, who had taught it for many years. Previously, African-American literature or Russian literature was offered to the senior class. That way we didn't need to remove anything "important" like Russian literature entirely. So, it was an important move when Alix and I decided to let other things go in order to require African-American literature. As we moved forward, removing some texts did not only have to do with making room. In the past 10 years, we experienced that some of our most treasured texts, like Goethe's *Faust,* Wolfram Von Eschenbach's *Parzival,* and Homer's *Odyssey*, were not moving our students as they had in the past. That is not to say that students were not able to enter into the work and recognize timeless truths and the way they resonated within them personally. Rather, the timeless truths of White men regularly peppered our work with sour bits, outright racism, misogyny, White supremacy and people missing from the narrative we saw in our world, especially Black people.

We are teaching *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in the place of *Parzival* now.

My colleague, Alix, and I kept looking at the English curriculum. In reality, making changes was easy once we landed on something right (it took me a long time to land and decide on *Black Boy*, for example) and it felt like we were enriching the students. In our effort to make things right, the key to recreating the world was our feeling for truth, the courage given to us by our high school colleagues and our imagination for what could more rightly, for our time, meet the needs of our students.

While I saw the ship clearly before, I never saw the destination. I now know that key to a successful sailing voyage is knowledge of destination, wind, tide, and weather. I have a clear destination in mind now: a place where all students are elevated in part because Black people in the United States are recognized and realized as they should be. Wolfram Von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, "a brave man slowly wise," learns that the key to becoming the Grail king is the question, "What ails thee?" And yes, asking this question is a key. But there is also something powerful in just standing aside and making room for all the wonders that Black people bring.

We are teaching *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in the place of *Parzival* now. African-American literature is a required class, not an elective. In what was called *Transcendentalism* and then *American Voices* block, we have added and increased the focus on Frederick Douglass, George Moses Horton and added Harriet E. Wilson. Black contemporary poets like Amanda S.C. Gorman and Gregory Pardlo (one of my favorites!) and many, many Black poets speak the voice of America today to our students of poetry. We study Black lives through film starting with "I Am Not Your Negro," based on the writing of James Baldwin. The eleventh grade study of comparison/contrast was, for 30 years, a comparison of two poems: one an excerpt from the *Iliad* by Homer, and the other a poem by W.H. Auden. In the last few years, students have worked on a comparison of two artworks instead. This allows them to look at western and non-western works side by side, if they wish, and many students have chosen the work of Kerry James Marshall, Kehinde Wiley, J.M. Basquiat, Hale Woodruff, and Jacob Lawrence. This year, Alix changed the art history main lesson to systematically look at concurrent cultures while examining "Western Art." She also spent more time on Native American art. She made sure to include contemporary artists of color and artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds who are being much more recognized, (by the Obamas in their selection of Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald as portraitists) to show how the international/global art scene has changed. And sometimes, I find myself bringing Black voices, artists, and accomplishments that are not well known but *should be*.

In our thoughts, Waldorf teachers look to the spirit of our time for guidance. We have been listening and trying to hear and understand for some time. We are not cut out for rash moves, but we are eager to make progress. Now I feel the wind at our backs. Maybe we can find our collective home.

A Complete List of Texts and Authors used in Green Meadow's English Classes

Antigone, by Sophocles

A Midsummer Night's Dream, by William Shakespeare

A Raisin in the Sun, by Lorraine Hansberry

Moby Dick, by Herman Melville

Red Scarf Girl, by Jiang Ji-Li

Black Boy, by Richard Wright

Inferno, by Dante Alighieri

The Autobiography of Malcolm X, by Malcolm X and Alex Haley

Canterbury Tales, by Geoffrey Chaucer

Hamlet, by William Shakespeare
The Tempest, by William Shakespeare
Essays and speeches by Ralf Waldo Emerson
Essays and speeches by Frederick Douglass
Walden, by Henry David Thoreau
Poems, by George Horton
Our Nig, by Harriet Wilson
Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston
Poems by Emily Dickinson
Short Stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Films

I Am Not Your Negro, by Raoul Peck, based on the life and works of James Baldwin

Malcolm X, by Spike Lee

If Beale Street Could Talk, by Barry Jenkins based on the novel by James Baldwin

Moonlight, by Barry Jenkins

Queen and Slim, by Melina Matsoukas

Black Panther, by Ryan Coogler based on the Marvel comics book *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet, Book 1*, text by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Black Writers Added to the H.S. List for Independent Reading

August Wilson plays
Books by Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, by H. Jacobs
I am Malala, by C. Lamb and M. Yousafzai
Becoming, by Michelle Obama
The Life of Olaudah Equiano, by Olaudah Equiano
Narrative of Sojourner Truth, by Sojourner Truth
Twelve Years a Slave, by S. Northup
The Beautiful Struggle, by Ta-Nehisi Coates
Americanah, by Chimamanda Adichie
Between the World and Me, by Ta-Nehisi Coates
Native Son, by Richard Wright
The Twelve Tribes of Hattie, by A. Mathis
The Invisible Man, by Ralph Ellison
The Known World, by Edward Jones
White Fragility, by Robin DiAngelo

Black Poets Read in the Art of Poetry and African American Literature Classes

Gwendolyn Brooks
Lucille Clifton
Langston Hughes
Paul Laurence Dunbar
Claude McKay
(and other classic Black writers)
Joy Harjo
Terrance Hayes
Tracy K Smith
Jericho Brown
Hanif Abdurraqib
Tina Chang
Natalie Diaz
Martin Espada
Kimiko Hahn
Nathalie Handal
Saeed Jones
Kofi Awoonor
Assetou Xango
Zeina Hashem Beck
Chimako Tada
And others

Defne Caldwell *graduated from Green Meadow Waldorf School in 1987. Before joining the Green Meadow faculty full-time, in 2006, she taught English and humanities for six years at Ramapo Indian Hills High School, in Franklin Lakes, NJ. She also taught literature, college writing, and creative writing courses at Ramapo College in Mahwah, NJ, for four years. Defne completed independent Foundation Studies under Signe Schaefer and trained as a Waldorf teacher with John Wulsin. At Green Meadow, she teaches high school English and drama and is advisor to the Class of 2023. She currently serves as High School Co-Chair and Humanities Department Chair. Defne is also the parent of two alumnae daughters who attended Green Meadow.*