Individuality and Diversity

Harlan Gilbert

During my first year of teaching at a Waldorf high school, one of the few Black students in the community shared with me his experience at the school.

On the one hand, he said, he was friends with all the students in his class and had friends in other grades as well. His friends who went to highly integrated public schools told him that they had no white friends and never talked to the white students.

On the other hand, each day my student passed across a cultural chasm. For example, at school he played classical music (he was one of the finest cellists ever to attend the school), while in his neighborhood it was all about the hip-hop scene.

In just a few words, Daniel (as I will call him here) precisely delineated a characteristic strength and a characteristic weakness of our school. What we did well and what we failed at then is important, because our problems were and still are typical of many US Waldorf schools, and because, though efforts at improvement have been made, there is still a long journey ahead.

With the benefit of hindsight, I would say that we strove for a universal education that acknowledged and respected every individuality, but we were not conscious of the need for a differentiated education that met the particularities of individual constitutions, communities, and cultures. The following is an attempt to explore the roots of both aspects of our history.

Education as Celebration of Individuality

To start with the positive side of Daniel's experience: From their founding on, Waldorf schools have worked to create communities of mutual respect, in which every individual is treated as significant, and to welcome and integrate students across genders, ethnicities, religions, and (where economics permit—a significant limitation of US independent schools) social classes, even in times when and places where these were often segregated. There is evidence that this effort can succeed to an impressive extent both in the special sphere of racial relations – our students do not separate out in groups based on ethnicity or race, and of other groupings – our students don't separate out into "jocks," "artists," and "nerds." In fact, one of the most consistent reflections by graduating seniors and alumni is how special it was to be friends with *everyone* in their class, and how they became aware that this was not the norm in other schools. Without exaggeration: instead of asking, "*Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?*"[1] people who visit our school sometimes ask, "*Why are all the kids sitting together in the cafeteria?*"

Whereas in most institutions there is no opting out from being placed in an identity box by the surrounding community, our students can, to a much greater extent, choose when and how they frame themselves and be accepted for who they are. A transfer student offered the following metaphor: "At my old school they made fun of me if I wore blue shoes. Here I can wear whatever shoes I want." A group of diversity pedagogy professionals who asked our students how safe our school is for people of color were taken aback when every single student walked to the side of the room that was meant to signify "very safe."[2] The consultants told me that they had never seen this happen before.

It is a blessing to live as an individual in a community without experiencing particularities such as race constantly playing a defining role. Members of majority cultures commonly enjoy this privilege without even realizing that it *is* a privilege. The striving to create a space where all may live without being seen in terms of their external characteristics or group affiliations is a natural outgrowth of the core mission of Waldorf schools: to be aware of and committed to the spiritual individuality of their pupils and faculty. In a way, Waldorf schools sought to realize a glorious and honorable dream.

Education for Inclusion and Diversity

But, as dreams go, it was fatally flawed, and I suspect that when Daniel mentioned the abyss separating his experience within the school from his experience outside the school, he had something like the following in mind.

First: An institution that regards each individual as a sacred entity may be oblivious to the need to reflect each person's constitution, community, and culture. Our curriculum, so carefully constructed to nurture

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1 This is the title of a famous book by Beverly Daniel Tatum, first published in 1997.

2 To be fully accurate: one (white) student felt that she had not been at the school long enough to opine on this issue.

individualities, was largely based upon European cultural norms, as well as other cultures interpreted as precursors thereof, and our school was slow to recognize the necessity of broadening this to encompass other perspectives. Ancient Egypt was thoroughly explored; modern Africa ignored. The history of European settlement of North America was treated in depth, yet it was possible to pass through twelve years of education here without hearing more than a word or two about the Indigenous cultures of this land. Focusing on competently delivering a curriculum developed on another continent at another time, we did little to celebrate the contemporary diversity of America. Though we were aware of the importance of offering, in Emily Style's inspired metaphor, both windows (new perspectives on the world) and mirrors (opportunities for self-reflection), the surface of both were too often, in my own metaphor, lazured white.

Second: Until recently our school was oblivious to the importance of its faculty and staff reflecting the diversity of backgrounds found in its students and families. After all, we were all individuals, were we not? Should this not be sufficient? The answer is obvious: Human encounters do not happen exclusively individuality to individuality. In reality people meet and experience differences, on every level of their being.

Finally: Even if we were somehow able to completely transcend race within our school environment—and perfection is always an unrealistic expectation—it would still be our responsibility to prepare our pupils to encounter, understand, and overcome:

- the reality of racial relationships in America and the world today, which includes both personal prejudice and institutionalized/systemic/structural racism.
- the level of privilege and respect that those identified as white are given in our society and the level of disparagement and disadvantage members of other races and cultures can face.
- the long history of transgressions of rights that has led to current differences in wealth, education, status, etc.
- the experience of not being represented in a school or other institution, particularly in positions of power and authority (e.g., faculty and administration).

Synthesizing the Positions

> "Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world."
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> – bell hooks

How does a school balance the goal of transcending race to allow students to experience each other as individualities and the goal of providing an education sensitive to diversity?

Pedagogically speaking, valuing diversity allows pupils to feel met as a situated person connected to a particular constitution, community, and culture. Focusing on the diversity of identity awakens us to the importance of honoring race as a defining factor of human identity and celebrating the cultural heritages that makes each race unique.

Pedagogically speaking, emphasizing the universality of individuality allows a pupil to feel met as a spiritual being. Focusing on the universally human awakens us to the underlying unity of all humanity and moves us toward a time when people "will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the *content of their character,"* as Martin Luther King, Jr., famously declared in his 1963 speech in Washington, D.C.

Though these two are not necessarily contradictory in all things, they do tend toward somewhat polarized goals. On the one hand, though race may be a series of social constructs, what has grown up around these constructs is real and significant. On the other hand, though we will always see color, we can strive not to see it as something important, allowing the social construct of race to fade into irrelevance.

For centuries, the conversation around race in this country has swung back and forth between these two aspects. Our schools should be safe centers for explorative and mutually respectful discussions to take place and creative centers for solutions to arise. For Waldorf schools are ideally situated to act as nurturing spaces where students can live as individuals with rich identities not reducible or reduced to members of groups, while being educated in the diversity of humanity and the sometimes problematic, sometimes inspiring history of cultural encounters.

Conclusion

> "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist."
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> — James Baldwin

Like other institutions in the United States, Waldorf schools are seeking ways to respond adequately to the country's problematic history of race relations. In the conversation around race in this country, two approaches that appear to be nearly diametrically opposed have alternately dominated the conversation. One approach affirms the unity of all humanity and looks forward to a time when race will become completely irrelevant as a factor in society. (If current sociological and demographic trends hold, the long arc of history is indeed bending slowly but inevitably in this direction, but there remains a long journey ahead.) The other approach focuses on honoring the constitutions, communities, and cultures that make up the various ethnic groups and races.

If you could choose, would you wish future generations to be secure in a racial identification that was also honored by society, or to consider race an outmoded category irrelevant to their lives?

Perhaps this is a false dichotomy. Cultivating individuality and honoring specific characteristics may appear contradictory, but it seems to me that they are actually complementary elements of human life. Would a person securely grounded in their own constitution, community, and culture not more easily appreciate the fundamental unity of humanity? Certainly, disrespecting a person's differences erects barriers for that person to experience such unity. Would a person strongly committed to humanity in general not naturally be more open to and interested in the differentiated ways humanity manifests? Certainly, those who do not see humanity as a unity will naturally tend to elevate their own particular identity over that of others.

Perhaps there is a middle way between overcoming race and upholding a racial identity. Perhaps future generations will have the same freedom with respect to race that we are learning to grant to other aspects of identity. Religious identifications, for example, used to be directly tied to a person's ancestry and community, and people of different religions frequently felt themselves to be on opposing sides of a cultural divide. There is a growing awareness that people might—among other alternatives—have a strong or weak identification with a single religious tradition, nurture varying connections to multiple traditions, be spiritual but non-religious, be uncertain or in a process of exploration, or be completely indifferent to the theme, and also that it is wise not to draw conclusions about other aspects of a person's life on the basis of this one element.

Perhaps we will come to recognize that race, ethnicity, and other group identities are of varying import to different people, and that their meaning can only be determined by the individuals who bear these identities. Perhaps human beings will ultimately be free to relate to these themes at each moment of their lives in whatever way they choose.

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