Multiculturalism and Waldorf Education[1]

A Call for an American Curriculum

Linda Williams

All right, here is the scene: one of the newer, more generic Detroit suburbs. I am standing at a bookstore counter, a thirtyish African-American woman with burgeoning dreadlocks. The clerk waiting on me is young, female and Asian-American. While my books are being totaled, I sneeze. The clerk looks perplexed and is not sure what to do. Hesitantly, and with an apologetic smile, she says, "I was going to say 'Gesundheit'," and her voice trails off as she looks down. I realize the source of her embarrassment and smile, and offer in my best, accented German, "Danke." She laughs and the tension of the moment is relieved for both of us. The situation, however, is a typically American one: an Asian-American, an African-American, a European language. Does it all fit together? Of course it does—in America. But the clerk's embarrassment is certainly a sign of the great sensitivity that currently surrounds the issue of multiculturalism.

There are many reasons why the discussion and debate over multiculturalism have taken hold of America. We are today more conscious of each other because of shifting demographics; the increasing immigration of people of color; the civil rights and feminist movements; and the rising prominence of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the changing global economy. But multiculturalism is almost synonymous with America herself. Even before the Europeans arrived, America was a multicultural place, containing many, varied Indigenous tribes. Our task has always been to find some way to "jus' get along," as Rodney King expressed it.

The current debate is also a response to "anticulturalism," or what I call the "Wonder Breading" of America. With the advent of and the rapid increase in the use of technology, mass production, and mass transit over the past seventy years, "culture" in America is becoming homogenized. Regional differences are disappearing under the influence of the mass media. Cultural mores are being shaped by standardized images of what we should aspire to. We are all being assimilated into a culture of automation, speed, and efficiency that leaves little room for individual expression. No wonder the multicultural question has arisen. Sometimes I call it the "anycultural" question. What culture, if any, do we, can we have?

The educational world is particularly concerned with this debate. On the one hand, "inclusive" curricula seek to incorporate and recognize the contributions of frequently ignored minorities in American culture. On the other hand, many, such as E. D. Hirsch, advocate a return to the basics, the fundamentals of Eurocentric Western thought as a way to acculturate the "unacculturated."

The Waldorf school movement in America, interestingly enough, was conceived and born in an era that was similarly fraught with cultural controversy. In 1925, a group began working to bring forth the first Waldorf School in America (the Rudolf Steiner School in New York), and the school opened its doors in 1928. Those years in America were filled with irony. It was the time of Prohibition, gangsters, jazz and flappers. The heights of the Harlem Renaissance contrasted with the sobering picture of lynched African-Americans in the South. "Rugged Individualism" was a popular slogan and aspiration at a time when membership in the Ku Klux Klan approached five million. (President Harding was inducted into the Klan on the grounds of the White House.) Americans were entranced by the mobility offered by the automobile and the growing network of paved roads, while the nation, in an isolationist mood, closed its doors to the world. Native Americans finally gained citizenship, but many important socialists and communists were deported. In the arts, it was the time of Chagall, Klee, Picasso, Fitzgerald, Hughes, Cather, Woolf, Ellington, and Gershwin. In the mid-1920s, motion pictures began to feature sound, and the first transmission of recognizable human features was achieved by something called television.

Within this milieu, the American Waldorf movement was born. In order to preserve its independence, Waldorf education had to join the private, independent school movement. By doing so, it joined ranks with the elitist schools that educated the Vanderbilts and the Carnegies. But it also became spiritual partners with every independent Freedman's school that helped newly emancipated slaves learn to read and with every privately sponsored settlement school for newly arrived immigrants.

During these first seven decades, American Waldorf schools have often resembled their European

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counterparts. But the stamp of the American experience is helping to shape our schools into truly American institutions. Clearly, Waldorf schools have a cultural mandate, a charge to preserve, enrich, and transmit a cultural heritage. But at this point in history, our cultural imperative cannot be realized in small, private enclaves where only middle-class European-Americans are educated. Our doors will have to open to more people of color (and to people of more economic classes) because integrated education is now American education. According to a 1990 *Time* magazine article: "By 2056, most Americans will trace their de-scent to Africa, Asia, the Hispanic world, the Pacific Islands, Arabia-almost anywhere but white Europe." A clear majority culture will no longer exist in America within the next generation. "Meeting the other" is becoming a basic component of education today.

The Waldorf curriculum is an ideal curriculum because it has the potential of being multicultural. It can be a medium through which students meet each other and come to understand the diverse cultures to which they belong. Behind the guidelines and indications stands the picture of the human being as an integrated organism of body, soul and spirit, and of humanity as a single, interconnected reality. It is a universal view that includes rather than excludes, that embraces rather than rejects.

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Also, within the Waldorf curriculum, with this all-embracing image of the human being and of humanity as a guide, the complexity of the human condition is approached in a basic way, through the arts. It is through the arts that our full humanity is affirmed. And it is through the arts that multicultural differences can be understood and appreciated.

Traditional African education was a socializing process, not an individualizing one, and one in which mind and spirit were considered inseparable. Current research on African-American children often calls for an education that de-emphasizes a Eurocentric, paternalistic, top-down format, and that encourages an experiential, hands-on, inquiry-based learning format, a cooperative education rather than one based on competition and survival-of-the-fittest.

This, of course, is exactly what Waldorf education is. Thus, we in the Waldorf movement have the means to carry out effective "multicultural" education. Our holistic, synergistic, all-embracing approach is what is needed. We lack however, the content. Our stories, songs, verses and historical vignettes—the expressions we use of the archetypal experiences and pictures of human development—have been drawn mostly from European and European-American sources. Only now are we beginning to find the archetypal pictures that live in other cultures.

In the various ethnic and national cultures, there are many different expressions of the same archetypal truths, of the same universal human experiences. How can parents, teachers, and other adults decide what particular stories, pictures, music and crafts to bring to the children?

First we must find out what is essential in our own being. One effect of the homogenization of North American culture is that few of us know about our ethnic background. We need to become aware of what we have received from our heritage—be it Thai, German, Czech, Yoruban, Chinese, Sioux, or a mixture of two or many traditions. We need to become aware of the physical attributes, the qualities of soul, the world views that form the "group soul" or "folk soul" (a term used both by Rudolf Steiner and Carl Jung) of our own ethnic group.

As well we need to study and understand the unique qualities of the other ethnic groups in our culture. Exploring our own history and culture gives us the necessary framework to explore others. Also, examining the reality of "white privilege" and of the class system in America is necessary if one is to understand one's past and future paths.

When these steps are consciously taken, in faculty and/or parent-teacher organization meetings, a school or organizational culture is established that encourages real interest in "the other." This creates an atmosphere in which work to diversify the content in our schools and to answer some of the myriad questions facing our movement can begin.

And the questions are tough ones:

- How can we consciously attract and keep more children, parents and teachers of color in the Waldorf school movement?
- How will our training programs help prospective teachers meet the challenges of teaching in a multicultural environment?
- How can we become more sensitive to cultural differences and the different approaches to pedagogy these may require?

Those of us within the American Waldorf movement need more opportunities to investigate and to discuss what is going on in our classrooms, schools, and in our larger Waldorf community. Some individual schools have undertaken particular multicultural studies. We need to discuss the fruits of that research. Parents, friends, students, and teachers need to be able to share their own exciting and worthwhile experiences and knowledge and to ask questions.

To that end, all are invited to respond to this article, and to the issues that multiculturalism raises. Waldorf education is born out of experience and dialogue. Issues such as multiculturalism cannot be relegated to a few. The more voices the better.

To stimulate discussion, some colleagues and I have drawn up a list of what we call “Essential Reading for Americans." This is not intended to be a list of clear, pedagogical sources, but rather some readings that can contribute to an adult's (or high schooler's) view of what it means to be an American. Of course, this is not a conclusive list by any means—it features only the favorites of a few folks. Additions are welcome, and I hope the blatant omissions prompt readers to respond. Titles not normally available in bookstores or libraries are listed with mail-order addresses.

Suggested Reading List

Nonfiction

Adair, Margo and Howell, Sharon. *Breaking Old Patterns, Weaving New Ties*. Alliance Building: 1990.

Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands: La Frontiera*. San Francisco: Spinster's Ink, 1987.

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Vintage Books (Random House), 1962.

Delaney, Sara and Elizabeth A. Delaney with Amy Hill Hearth. *Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters' First 199 Years*. New York: Kodansha International, 1993.

DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet Books, 1969.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*. New York: Harper, 1989.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1970.

Hale-Benson, Janice E. *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

Haley, Alex. *Roots*. New York: Doubleday, 1976.

Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1991.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

Lorde, Audrey. *Sister Outsider*. Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984.

Matthiessen, Peter. *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*. New York: Viking, 1983.

McIntosh, Peggy White. *Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies.* 1988.

Niehardt, John G. *Black Elk Speaks*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1961.

Peterson, Bob. "What Should Kids Learn?" In *Rethinking Schools: An Urban Education Journal*. Winter 1993, Vol. 8.

Staley, Betty, ed. *Multiculturalism in Waldorf Education, Vols. 2, and 3.* AWSNA.

Steiner, Rudolf. *The Universal Human: The Evolution of Humanity.* Anthroposophic Press, Hudson, New York: 1990.

Steiner, Rudolf. *The Mission of Folk Souls in Connection with Germanic-Scandinavian Mythology*. Garber Communications, Inc., 1989.

Takaki, Ronald. *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1993.

West, Cornell. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* New York: Grove Press, 1964.

Fiction

Cooper, J. California. *Homemade Love*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

Ellison, Ralph. *The Invisible Man.* New York: Modern Library, 1952.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *Woman Warrior.* New York: Knopf, 1977.

Mohr, Nicholasa. *Rituals of Survival*. Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1985.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eyes*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

Naylor, Gloria. *Mamma Day*. New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988.

Shange, Ntozak. *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Storyteller*. New York: Seaver Books, 1981.

Storm, Hyemeyohsts. *Seven Arrows.* New York: Ballantine, 1972.

Walker, Alice. *The Temple of My Familiar*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.

Wright, Richard. The Outsider. New York: Harper and Row, 1953.

30 Years Later

Diversity and Waldorf Education

Oh my, oh my. I always found the daily review – *die Rückschau* – the most demanding part of my own inner practice, and doing a public *Rückschau* is even harder. Pushing aside the creeping feeling of mortification, I would like to thank the fine editor of this publication for bringing to the fore one of my public writings about Waldorf Education and what was then called "multiculturalism" in the Waldorf movement. Now, nearly 30 years later, I am asked to reflect on this essay and perhaps give an update from the vantage point of this moment in history. So here it goes, leaving the authority and hubris of my 30-something public self and slipping into the more reflective waters of my more private, melancholic 60s.

Oh my, oh my.

Context is necessary. I first want to acknowledge that I wrote this article for *Renewal* during the mid-1990s, when I was teaching for a short three years at Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee, the first public Waldorf school in the country. I had joined an engaged group of Black and white colleagues who were willing to meet and educate the mostly Black children in their care through Waldorf methodology and curriculum. The fact that the school existed at all was the result of the larger education reform conversations in the country around schools of choice, charter schools, and multiculturalism. Waldorf schools across America were also grappling with these conversations and much about multiculturalism in the curriculum is recorded in the essays contained in "Multiculturalism in Waldorf Education," a compendium of the booklets published in the early 1990s by the Waldorf Multicultural Committee.

The first thing that strikes me about this essay is how much has changed culturally in our country and in the Waldorf movement. I won't try here to enumerate those enormous changes, but suffice it to say we are in a new moment in our history as people on the Earth and, consequently, in our story of Waldorf education. The cultural conversation has deepened and expanded and so has the educational discussion. The understanding of the homogenization of culture spoken about 30 years ago has expanded in both palpable and nuanced ways and is now labeled white supremacy. My own awareness continues to swirl and deepen as I engage with the fluidity of concepts, feelings, and experiences and how we are all racialized, gendered, and colonized in classification systems ignited by a logic so pervasive, it feels invisible to many. However, this logic is not going unchallenged, and I am grateful for the voices in the human choir that have stepped up presently to share the lead in confronting our assumptions, beliefs, and ideas that form the very bedrock of our identity as human beings, as spiritual beings. You won't need a list from me to find these voices (although the previous list, appended to my 1990s article, still has some gems). You can find their writings on any book aisle; their voices on innumerable podcasts; their faces broadcast in webinars, conversations, and talks. There is a grand conversation happening right now, drawing forth manifold healers, warriors, shamans – artists of being in every genre. As we celebrate this new cultural engagement, grieve the many lives sacrificed, and rededicate our will to at least bear witness, we are called upon to participate. And I think every child in our care requires our participation in these conversations in order for us to fully realize our mandate to look squarely at what we are doing and how.

In the earlier essay, I tried to paint a brief picture of the cultural environment within which the American Waldorf school movement was born. I have come to believe that biography work – both individual and institutional – is essential to helping us understand how the interaction of an individual school or person and the surrounding culture creates a particular field of action for the human soul and the soul of the institution. I think it would behoove every Waldorf school to examine its own birthing gesture as it situates its biography in the cultural milieu – and it probably goes without saying – that every member of a school community would benefit from such biography work too. It is important to me now that we also really interrogate the picture of "the human being as an integrated organism of body, soul, and spirit" and of "humanity as a single, interconnected reality" in much more meaningful ways. It is too easy to assign a rather generic picture of the human being that teachers can hold without examining themselves, their cultural roots, and their own predispositions, prejudices and assumptions. I have found myself having to unpack even my own generic picture of who a Waldorf teacher is (or even a Black Waldorf teacher)

in order to arrive at a more truthful sense of who I am and who I am becoming individually and in community. When our anthroposophical terms get too overused or too generic, they can tend toward what I think may be termed "spiritual bypassing," which I have experienced in my life as a coping or defense mechanism to deal with dissonance or trauma. The interrogation being called for includes antiracism work—but can also be called "further humanizing" work as we recognize the fields of action souls engage in to make sense of this human experience of the I. My experience of the process is both painful and liberating, as most births are. The space must be prepared carefully and lovingly and the activity takes place both in solitude and in community as trust is built over time. The goal (if there needs to be one) is to deepen connections and rejuvenate practice. The process is uncomfortable, tearful, and humbling, and can invoke rage. But I also find moments of revelation, gratitude, and joy. The key is to stick with it and keep plowing the fields together.

I do believe we have made progress over the last 30 years toward expanding our vision of humanity in our curriculum. I am grateful to hear and see the work of many of my younger colleagues who, in service to the children in their care, have researched festivals, biographies, literature, and artistic varieties that help create vessels for the developing I. Although I sometimes hear the voice of Tevye's "Tradition!" raised, I hear more voices committed to the research and practice of listening out of the future. I am also grateful that the conversation I keep imagining across our schools is happening not only in places like this journal, but especially in the Community Hubs and across many regions and sectors.

Retrospection reminds me that we are a very small movement. With fewer than 200 independent schools in North America (including 40 high schools), and sixty or so public Waldorf-inspired schools, we have not managed to keep up with the American metric of progress: growth. We all have felt the contraction with the shifting economic crises of the last 30 years, and I am afraid that private education is no longer possible for huge swaths of the North American public. I have the feeling (and I may be wrong) that our schools are often ensconced in suburban, urban, or rural enclaves born out of housing segregation policies of the 20th century, thus limiting our engagement. Even my own beloved Detroit Waldorf School is feeling the effects of the decline of the Black and white middle-class, increased gentrification, and income disparity in Detroit. While our social mission may be resonant with cultural renewal, we have as a movement only limited affiliation with communities of various classes or abilities or where the majority of residents are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, or immigrant. The paucity of Waldorf teachers in general, and Waldorf teachers who are people of color or with various abilities, point to the possibility of even increasing isolation. I know in my bones it is okay to be a small movement, that it is alright to "mend the part of the world that is within our reach," as a recent quote by Clarissa Pinkola Estés reminds me.

But bell hooks and adrienne maree brown, two Black feminist seers, also remind me about the importance of community, of how identity is not the same as community, and how learning to be in community is the task for this (Consciousness Soul) age and the task our students are already taking up. So, I will leave it at that. The conversations continue in the many voices heard in this issue of the *Research Bulletin* and throughout the movement. And maybe more importantly, as we participate in the pointed and potent conversations happening all around us in our community of colleagues outside of Waldorf, I feel my earlier prayers have been answered. I look forward to our engagement even more.

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