

Understanding Waldorf Education

Dedication

For my wife, Carol, who has taught me so much *from the inside out*.

Acknowledgments

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Understanding

Waldorf
Education

TEACHING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Jack Petrash



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Beltsville, MD

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Foreword

The secrets of Waldorf schooling are the prize we're after in spending time with Jack Petrash and his book, but oddly enough the best approach to Waldorf wisdom lies in first understanding the pedagogy of state schooling.

When Prussian one-size-fits-all schooling was brought to America in the middle of the 19th century by Horace Mann and others, this country had already been declared the best educated nation in history by the French essayist, Alexis DeTocqueville in his immortal classic, *Democracy in America*. The America he saw was a place of one- and two-room schools, a place where dozens and perhaps hundreds of schemes of education competed, drawing their strength from local traditions, local values, and citizen oversight, and the Prussian straightjacket was no part of this educational scene.

It's easy enough to hear about the excellent qualities of Waldorf education. Waldorf, invented by a Austrian philosophical genius named Rudolf Steiner, was first employed with the children of workers at the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany after WWI in 1919. But the gulf between hearing of Waldorf and understanding it is vast. That's where the book you are holding comes in.

The Steiner philosophy that drives Waldorf education is a philosophy in which human possibility is seen as infinite. Whatever premises about human nature you start with when you establish a school, the articulation of the system that emerges will inevitably reinforce those premises. In a sense, the shape of any school reflects its social architect's deepest beliefs about humanity, and the best world possible.

Waldorf recognizes the genius in all and sets out quite deliberately to coax the muscles of that genius into play—in a far different fashion than the pedagogical orthodoxy, as you're about to learn.

My own experience with Waldorf-educated children is overwhelmingly positive. Although a public school teacher myself for 30 years, I've been fortunate enough as a public speaker on school reform to have been invited to lecture at Waldorf schools all over the country. What I've seen on these trips has been a revelation to me of what might be possible.

I could launch into a presentation of the actual method, but for the fact that Mr. Petrash has already done that in fine fashion. I think you'll find what he has to say illuminating. I know I did.

John Taylor Gatto,
Former New York State Teacher of the Year,
and author of:
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A Different Kind of Teacher, and
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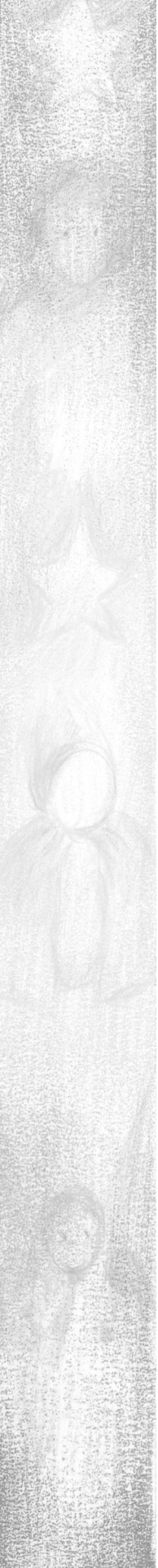
Readers interested in more information about Waldorf education and the location of Waldorf schools in North America can go to the website of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America at www.awsna.org

Introduction

Several years ago, the MacArthur Foundation awarded one of its prestigious “genius” grants to Deborah Meier, a New York City principal from the East Harlem School District. She was commended for making three striking innovations in her public school. First, she recognized that 45-minute classes were not conducive to learning and so she restructured her school’s schedule to create double periods in an effort to intensify and deepen the educational process. Second, she saw that effective teaching could not take place in isolation. Consequently, she instituted a program of inter-curricula instruction, the kind that could allow music teachers to help teach history or art teachers to help teach science and where written composition could be used to teach mathematics. Third, she asked the faculty to be part of the decision-making that would create school policies that would directly affect the work in their classrooms.

Meier’s ideas spawned innovations in schools across the country. The time was right for change. But these ideas were not new. Just as there were environmentalists long before the first Earth Day, Waldorf Schools had been using these three educational principles for more than 75 years. Why was Waldorf the best kept secret in education?

This book is an attempt to make the Waldorf approach more widely known and show how some of the most positive reforms occurring in schools today closely parallel the work that Rudolf Steiner began with the first Waldorf School in the early part of the 20th century. It is my hope, also, that this book will convey some of the fundamental principles of Waldorf education in language that is accessible so that parents, teachers, and future teachers will understand the essential aspects of this delightful, practical, and healthy approach to education.



CHAPTER ONE

Broadening Horizons

“Waldorf education places the development of the individual child in the focal point, convinced that the healthy individual is a prerequisite for a healthy society.”

—The International Conference on Education of UNESCO

Third-grade students have arrived at school early on a Sunday morning. Their suitcases are being loaded onto a bus to take them on a five-day trip to a working dairy farm in upstate New York. On the farm they will help bring in the cows, muck the barn, gather the eggs, and experience a different way of living. This is an important event for the children. For many of them, it is the first time that they will be away from their parents. The students have been preparing for this trip for a long time, knowing that all of the third graders at this school go on the Farm Trip. It is a rite of passage, something that fills the students with anticipation and with a certain amount of anxiety.

Their teacher has also prepared them for this trip. Some of the most important instructions have focused on the meals that the children will eat at the farm. The children are told that they may be served foods that they may never have eaten before, and that they are expected (unless they have an allergic sensitivity) to try

some of everything. This invariably means that many children must expand their culinary horizons. And they do. They will return home after their time at the farm and report to their parents that they have actually eaten lima beans or beets for the first time and “they were good,” or that they ate the crust on the homemade whole wheat bread that they helped make—and liked it. Everyone is pleased—parents, teachers, and especially the children—when this occurs. The idea that children should broaden their horizons and “try some of everything” is an essential part of a Waldorf education.

In a similar manner, the Waldorf curriculum exposes students to a wide variety of subjects, encouraging them to develop in a well-balanced way as it helps children to overcome gender stereotypes and, at the same time, expand their individual interests. Girls and boys take woodwork and learn to knit and sew, and everyone plays a musical instrument. The gifted math student is asked to leave the safe confines of abstract thinking and to enter unfamiliar territory, finding emotional expression through painting and movement. At the same time, the artistically expressive student is asked to experience the clarity and predictability of trigonometry and calculus. Athletes are encouraged to be artistic and artists are encouraged to be athletic. This effort to complement students’ natural abilities begins at an early age and continues throughout their time at a Waldorf school. It is encouraged by the curriculum and supported by the fundamental understanding that a child’s strength should not become their weakness because of one-sided development.

All children have predilections, areas of strength where they are more comfortable and interested. These interests are important and can become pronounced at an early age. Such interests generally reflect unique talents. They usually are the areas where students will excel during their years of schooling and later in the workplace and should never be ignored. And yet, on a personal

level, these strengths need to be “rounded off” and expanded to bring fullness and completion to an individual student’s development. The active child, the one who confidently feels the power of her own ability and is willing to lead, needs to add *thoughtfulness* and *sensitivity to others* to become an integral part of the group. In short, this student needs to add something less intrinsic to her nature, something controlled, measured, reserved, something less impulsive.

On the other hand, the thoughtful observant child needs to add a measure of impulsiveness and energy to his demeanor, something that makes life risky and exciting, and will eventually make him feel fulfilled. Even though most children won’t choose to put themselves in situations that encourage this type of personal growth, it is what they will need and want when they are adults, and it is what they will admire and appreciate in others. Waldorf schools serve as advocates for children by offering an educational program that promotes well-rounded development.

Doing the Right Thing

Efforts to lead children to fullness must invariably be concerned with helping children develop the ability to separate what they *feel* from what they *do*. Education should be based on the understanding that for young children their impulse for activity is intricately connected with their feelings. If a young child wants a toy, he often takes it regardless of whose toy it is. Similarly, if a young child doesn’t feel like doing something, she will often just run away. Gradually through their education at home and at school, children learn that they can’t do something (such as hit another child) just because they feel like it. They also learn that there are times when they have to do something (such as clean up their toys) even if they don’t want to.

For better or for worse, this is an essential ingredient in maturity, a characteristic of responsibility. Most adults stopped asking themselves long ago whether they feel like going to work on Monday morning. Likewise, mothers and fathers don't ask themselves whether they feel like getting up to change a crying baby, or make lunches, or help with homework; they simply do it. If children are to grow up to be responsible adults, both in the workplace and in the home, schools and homes must assist this process by encouraging the development of self-discipline.

Self-discipline is the ability "to do the right thing." A key element that enables self-discipline to develop in a healthy way is the early formation of good habits, habits that become "second nature." When children are young, it is possible to develop these habits by providing good examples and consistent routines. This enables children to learn by doing and is preferable to the reminders and lectures that are often given to older children when these habits are not established early on. When a young child becomes accustomed to hanging his coat on a hook whenever he comes into school, it becomes a natural part of what is done for years. When children develop the habit of clearing their desk and putting things away before they go out, it is easier for them to do what is expected of them even when they are in a hurry. A child's capacity to do what he doesn't always feel like doing will convey to homework, music practice, family chores, and even to aspects of a job. The good practices that children establish at an early age through imitation and regular repetition pave the way for the development of maturity and self-discipline later.

Children need to be responsible and responsive, inwardly as well as outwardly. Students need good "soul" habits as well as good work habits. In short, they need to be emotionally responsive, both to their lessons and with their classmates and teachers. They should not be allowed to erect a wall of disinterest and

refuse to make emotional contact with what they study. I recently visited a sixth-grade class and saw a quartet of boys who refused to allow what they were being taught to engage them emotionally. They were studying geology, but all of their efforts went into acting “cool.” They faced the side of the room rather than the teacher and continually exchanged glances with each other. There was no way they would show any whole-hearted interest in the subject. This type of situation demands immediate attention, resolve, and creative teaching. Teachers must go out of their way to help students, particularly boys, to be emotionally responsible before they do something cruel and heartless (Pollack, 1999).

A child’s inner, emotional life adds vibrancy and color to his or her experience of the world. When students bring heartfelt interest to their studies, knowledge comes alive. This conjunction of feeling and thinking makes students more receptive and perceptive and undoes their natural tendency toward self-involvement. Students begin their education with their feelings melded with what they do. During their time in school, their feelings must merge with what they think. When feelings connect strongly with ideas, idealism is born. Engendering thinking that is warm, vital, and creative is an important goal of a Waldorf education.

Measuring a Student’s Progress

The students in a seventh-grade class have spent the last three weeks studying electricity. They are completing their block study with a test. As they are handed their exam, their eyes fall upon the first question.

1. You are a spy on a secret mission, sitting by a window in a dimly lit Italian restaurant near the Potomac River in Washington, DC. The table is set in front of you. Your salad has been served

*with oil and vinegar dressing and your drink has arrived—mineral water in a tall glass with plenty of ice and a thick slice of lemon. You desperately need to signal your companions to rescue you, but all you have is a low-voltage light bulb and one 18-inch piece of insulated copper wire. Around your neck you have a thin silver chain and a silver medallion, and in your pocket you have lots of change: pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters, and several \$100 bills held in a silver money clip. Describe how you could use your light bulb to signal your friends without getting up from your seat.**

The best education is one that always expects children to be active thinkers and asks them to use their imaginations to produce assignments that show originality and effort and not just a recapitulation of facts.

Waldorf schools are concerned with the development of the whole child, both the inner aspects that are more qualitative and the outer aspects that are more quantifiable. During the course of their schooling, all students will need to master basic skills in math and language arts. These skills are measurable and important and yet, in and of themselves, they do not insure healthy development.

The recent intensification in the use of standardized tests as means of assessing children's educational progress is problematic by Waldorf standards because test scores generally present an incomplete picture of students' abilities. William Ayers, the

* What follows is an actual answer from one student who found a creative, though somewhat extravagant way to make a voltaic cell.

I would take the \$100 bills and soak them in lemon juice. I would alternate quarters and pennies and put pieces of the \$100 bills in between the coins. Then I would take my silver chain and cut it in half with a knife and connect one half to one of the light bulb's terminals and the other half of the chain to the other terminal. Then I would connect one chain to the coin stack and tap the other end against the opposite side of the coin stack. The flickering light bulb would signal my rescuers.

author of *To Teach: A Teacher's Journey*, highlights the limitations of these tests: "The unfortunate fact is that standardized tests can't measure initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity, effort, irony, judgment, commitment, nuance, good will, ethical reflection, or a host of other valuable attributes" (Ayers, 1993, p. 116).

Although the impulse behind standardized testing that seeks to make schools and teachers more accountable for the education of their students is well intended, it leans too heavily on one side of the brain and measures only a portion of human intelligence. This shortcoming is brought sharply into focus by Howard Gardner, the author of several books about multiple intelligences.

Many observers are not happy with this state of affairs. There must be more to intelligence than short answers to short questions...

But what if one were to let one's imagination wander freely, to consider the wider range of performances that are in fact valued throughout the world? Consider, for example, the twelve-year-old male Puluwat in the Caroline Islands, who has been selected by his elders to learn how to become a master sailor. Under the tutelage of master navigators, he will learn to combine knowledge of sailing, stars and geography so as to find his way around hundreds of islands. Consider the fifteen-year-old Iranian youth who has committed to heart the entire Koran and mastered the Arabic language. Now he is being sent to a holy city, to work closely for the next several years with an ayatollah, who will prepare him to be a teacher and religious leader. Or, consider the fourteen-year-old adolescent in Paris, who has learned how to program a computer and is beginning to compose works of music with the aid of a synthesizer.

A moment's reflection reveals that each of these individuals is attaining a high level of competence in a challenging field and should by any reasonable definition of the term, be viewed as exhibiting intelligent behavior... Only if we expand and reformulate our view of what counts as human intellect will we be able to devise more appropriate ways of assessing it and more effective ways of educating it (Gardner, H., 1993, p. 4).

Howard Gardner's book, *Frames of Mind*, has helped to expand our appreciation of children's various abilities and has helped educators see that defining intelligence in narrow terms is counterproductive. According to Gardner, an approach to multiple intelligences (such as the Waldorf school's) assumes a position similar to that held in "classical times (when) it was common to differentiate between reason, will, and feeling" (Gardner, H., 1993, p. 7).

By evaluating children according to a three-dimensional paradigm, one that recognizes the importance of physical and emotional (intelligences) capacities as well as cognitive, Waldorf teachers apply the term *gifted and talented* to all children. It is a Waldorf teacher's responsibility to recognize each child's strength and, together with the parents, bring this strength to fullness through a well-rounded education.

For this reason, Waldorf teachers will assess children in a variety of ways to determine if they are developing a well-balanced array of abilities. The teachers will observe the children in various situations to see how they are progressing physically and emotionally, as well as academically. They will look for the signs of health: attentiveness, enthusiasm, involvement in class discussions, and interest. According to Eugene Schwartz, a well-known Waldorf educator and author, "the portfolio method of evaluation, which has rapidly gained acceptance among American educators, is more appropriate in regard to Waldorf

methodology than are regular quizzes or standardized tests.” Schwartz goes on to say that “teachers will consider things such as the child’s drawings, paintings, knitting, facility of movement, musical skills, and oral expressiveness as no less important than the more easily determined powers of cognition and verbal memory” (Schwartz, 1992, p. 32).

These observations from a wide variety of subjects and situations are refined and distilled over the course of the school year. They provide a complete “portfolio” of a child’s performance and progression throughout the year. They eventually become the essential ingredients in the annual written evaluation that is delivered each June. In this narrative, the teacher describes and characterizes the child’s school performance rather than reducing it to a series of checks in boxes labeled “outstanding,” “satisfactory,” or “in need of improvement.” Symptomatic episodes are recalled in the written report. Moments are described when the child’s very best was evident. These descriptions are presented to the parents, and to the child as well, as an example of the ideal toward which the student can continually strive.

It was a busy morning and the entire first grade was astir. As we passed out the books and took out our crayons, the talking grew noticeably louder. So much so that I had to stop writing on the blackboard and turn to face the class. When I did, I saw E. seated at her desk, working intently. She had already begun her assignment, completely focused on the task at hand. This was an experience of E. that I observed on many occasions this past year—she was invariably ready and eager to work.

Waldorf teachers describe, first and foremost, what a child does well and always mention with appreciation the overcoming of difficulties and the development of any new capacity.

I was so pleased with C.'s accomplishments in grade eight. As usual, his work in math and science was exceptional. However, the moment when I was completely surprised and duly impressed by his performance was during our class' production of the musical version of Narnia. Both his singing and his acting were noteworthy. His self-assured and humorous manner in Act One helped our play start with the right mood and intensity as he set an example for the other members of the cast on how to speak slowly and sing loudly. It was wonderful to observe C.'s presence of mind, his hard work, and his determined effort to overcome his uncertainty and do a good job.

In addition, teachers mention areas where children need to make more progress. All students have places where further improvement is necessary. It is a teacher's responsibility to mention those aspects as well. This can be presented as a wish list, a hope for something that will be accomplished in the future. And when suggestions for overcoming weakness are presented in conjunction with the recognition of strengths, they are always easier to accept.

In fifth grade, L. wrote some of the most interesting compositions in our class. Her assignments were always lengthy and expressive. Because L. is an avid reader, she has an extensive vocabulary that she utilizes to make her compositions sound like written work done by an older student. However, there were times when I found myself unable to read all of the words on the page and that disappointed me. It is my hope that L. will take the time to write more neatly next year. If she were to do this, the other students and I would be able to enjoy her fine written work even more.

The Journey Toward Wholeness

Children and teachers need to work together on the journey toward wholeness. For this to happen students must feel that what is being asked of them is for their good, that these suggestions are not born of annoyance or crankiness, but out of care and concern for their future development. When students sense that their teachers see their best, they will assist rather than resist the process.

Educators should prepare children for life, not just graduate school or future employment. Teachers should be concerned with children's human development and with children's ability to give their own lives direction.

Recently, a mother of a former student told me how much she appreciated a conversation we had about 10 years ago, when her son was in my math class in eighth grade. He was an exceptional student in math and mastered any work that was given him. She wondered, at the time, if he should go to another high school, one that would offer greater specialization and allow his mathematical interests and abilities to develop in a more pronounced way.

She recalled how in the course of that conversation I had encouraged her to consider his emotional and active development as well, and this made sense to her. Her son remained at our school, worked with his hands, played well on the soccer team, was surprisingly good in dramatic productions, and still earned a perfect score on the math section of his Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). He is now a doctoral candidate in mathematics at the University of Texas. What was clear to his mother was that he was a better person because of the fullness of his education and in the process, his extraordinary mathematical ability continued to flourish.

Stories such as this provide the confirmation that teachers and parents need. When you work to prepare children for life, you can't tell if you're doing a good job right away. Children are riddles. Who they long to become is only revealed little by little during their educational journey. That is why Waldorf teachers often turn to inspirational verses to remind them of the ineffable mystery that is each child. The following verse by Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the Waldorf School movement, was given to the teachers of the first Waldorf school more than 80 years ago.

Receive the children with reverence.
Educate them in love.
Send them forth in freedom.

—Rudolf Steiner

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CHAPTER TWO

Head, Heart, and Hands

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

—William Butler Yeats

Ain’t Misbehavin’

Some students fidget. Their hands look for something to manipulate—a pencil, an eraser, a piece of paper, anything. Elaborate events can take place on a desktop with minimal equipment. I have seen students entertain themselves with only their fingers; they check their double-jointedness, bend every finger and crack every knuckle. Still others are more exuberant. If a lesson continues without some sanctioned activity, they will not be still. Their legs begin to move and their knees begin to rock the desk. Feet and elbows begin to explore boundaries, encounter neighbors, make incursions, and defend territories. But all of these behaviors (or as they are often termed, misbehaviors) have one common message for the teacher. These children are longing to be actively engaged in their lessons.

Maybe you were this kind of student. Or perhaps you were more inwardly active, a quiet student who sat still, and then turned away slowly and inconspicuously. And while you stared out into the distance, your imagination got the better of you and you were gone—off to another land, a land more colorful and

adventurous than what your teacher was offering. You traveled to a place brimming with emotion, full of peril, intrigue, and romance. Whether you entered this world of imagination by gazing out of the window or by drawing on your loose-leaf paper or on your desk, you were expressing a strong urge—a desire to be engaged through the richness of your feelings.

There is another type of student, the one who furtively opens a book inside the desk. While the teacher is reviewing a subject of little interest, the child reads. This student is expressing a fervent desire to learn something new each day and is committed to doing so, even if it means “tuning out” the teacher. If an uninspired lesson does not engage this student’s capacity to think and learn, an irrepressible urge takes over and the child will teach him or herself.

Rudolf Steiner designed Waldorf Education around the simple idea that children have within them three fundamental forces impelling them toward physical, emotional, and mental activity. As a teacher I have always appreciated that these three capacities were called *forces*. This reminded me continually that if I did not recognize my students’ need to be engaged in these three ways, these three significant tendencies would *force* themselves on my attention in less appropriate ways.

Understanding that children need to be engaged in these three distinct ways, through head, heart, and hands, forms the primary educational paradigm at a Waldorf school. Rather than focus the educational work solely around the objective of acquiring knowledge, creating a meaningful learning process itself becomes the focus. Through multi-faceted, multi-sensory learning experiences, teachers and students use a variety of intelligences to develop three distinct capacities—for thinking, for feeling, and for intentional, purposeful activity.