Developing a Culture of Leadership, Learning and Service in Waldorf Schools

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This essay was adapted from a talk given at a Leadership Symposium at Camphill Soltane, January 26-28, 1996: "Leadership in the Culture of Anthroposophical Organizations." It will also appear in a book, *Partnerships of Hope: Building Waldorf Schools and Other Communities of the Spirit*, to be published in 1998.

I can summarize my experience working within and outside the Waldorf movement in a provocative way by saying that within the Waldorf movement we have new social imaginations and new social forms, but we often don't work with them out of a new consciousness. Meanwhile, the conventional world has old, hierarchical forms and old imaginations, but, in part because of economic pressure, works at changing them with a new consciousness. It is a compelling experience to work with United Airlines pilots practicing communication skills, paraphrasing, and consensus, and to see a dedication I seldom experience in our own institutions. For them, the experience of meeting in new ways is so deeply moving because they can experience each other as human beings for the first time, rather than as roles within a bureaucratic structure. For us such a meeting is assumed, and because it is often not worked at consciously, it falls into habit and drudgery.

I am quite uneasy and concerned about the state of many Waldorf school communities. Despite many accomplishments, mature Waldorf schools and other institutions connected to anthroposophy often exhibit a tiredness, a lack of energy and direction, an absence of leadership and a lack of joy that is worrying. As individuals and institutions inspired by the work of Rudolf Steiner, we have a rich legacy of new social and community forms that are collegial, non-hierarchical, and spiritually based. These forms encourage us to create institutions in which positive working spiritual beings can participate, and they are forms which encourage us to meet at deeper levels, to experience that we are brothers and sisters on a path of mutual development.[1] Yet, this rich tradition of new social and community forms does not appear sufficient to sustain us or to lend to our work the health and vitality we would wish for at this time. And so we need to ask why, despite this rich social legacy, is there a sense of tiredness, of drifting?

In reflecting on this question, I see a number of interconnected issues. The first has to do with the question of leadership. As a culture, Waldorf Schools do not seem to understand, value or support leadership. Secondly, despite the growing complexity and maturity of our institutional forms, and the multitude of meetings and committees in which we participate, we tend to have a limited commitment to learning the social and administrative skills necessary to make our non-hierarchical institutions work effectively. Reluctant leadership, poor decision-making forms and limited social skills haunt our efforts to create community. Connected to the resistance to learn the social skills necessary to help our institutions work well, is the reluctance to meet humanly at deeper levels, to work on our relationships truthfully so that disagreements can become the basis of karmic healing and transformation. Lastly, while we think of Waldorf Schools and other institutions connected to the work of Rudolf Steiner as being committed to service, I am not convinced that we have developed a deeper understanding and commitment to being a service culture, with the important exception of our commitment to children and to child development in the classroom.

In pointing to these limitations, I do not intend to minimize the real accomplishments of many individuals and groups, but rather to call for a rededication of effort and a shift in awareness.

A Cultural and Generational Reflection

In order to better understand these observations, I believe it is important to review the cultural norms of Waldorf education and of anthroposophy as they have evolved in the last decades and to reflect on the attitudes which the present generation of people in their forties and fifties bring to questions of leadership.

A factor affecting the nature and experience of leadership in our communities is that many of our institutions have entered the "administrative stage" of their development. Management, administration, and leadership have become important because we no longer share the youthful, pioneer days when the spiritual world was working overtime to help us, and when we had charismatic founding personalities such as Carlo Pietzner of Camphill, or Werner Glas and others to inspire and lead. The question in more mature, established organization is not how do we survive and acquire the people, land and buildings to do our work. It is more how do we manage what we have? How do we improve administration and how do we develop a new style and a new generation of leadership? The shift of many of our schools, institution, and communities to a more mature phase of development comes at the same time that a new generation in their forties and fifties has entered into positions of responsibility, but reluctantly. Many of us are members of the 60s generation with strong anti-authoritarian and anti-leadership biases reinforced by our experiences with our often-charismatic predecessors. So at best we are reluctant leaders, and at worst we shy away from accepting the responsibilities that our age and experience place upon us.

I believe the reluctance to acquire the knowledge and skills required to make our institutions and communities work more effectively has a number of cultural origins. One of these is the culture of anthroposophy itself. Perhaps Rudolf Steiner provided us with too much knowledge and insight in his 6,000 lectures and forty books. While he encouraged research and learning, the sheer brilliance and magnitude of his work can lead his students to not ask their own questions and do their own research. Without a deep spirit of inquiry and a commitment to self-development, we can become true believers stating anthroposophical and Waldorf maxims without real understanding and are not interested in learning the skills required to make our communities work more effectively.

I also experience a psychological issue that works against developing a learning culture in our communities. Being on a path of inner development increases an individual's awareness of the gap between what we could be and what we are. If we add the pressures of time and responsibility and the millennial urgency of the times, then we can easily be led to dogmatism and to an anti-psychological orientation, both of which defend us against our own insecurities.

Another essential aspect of the culture of Waldorf school communities and of anthroposophical institutions is that anthroposophy is a cultural movement. We're largely a movement of teachers, thinkers, and artists, with the exception of the biodynamic and curative movement. If we look at anthroposophy as an incarnating being of head, heart, and limbs, or of cultural life, social life, and economic life, we are by and large a cultural movement in North America. Many business people who meet us 'are not comfortable and don't feel welcomed, a feeling shared by those individuals who carry a strong concern about questions of social justice. The consequences of our cultural orientation as a spiritual and educational movement are quite far-reaching. Leaders are heads that talk well. The. Anthroposophical Society has the purpose of creating true meetings between human beings, yet the main form that we have chosen to do this is the study group.

As I am primarily a teacher, perhaps I can ask some questions which make our cultural and vocational one-sidedness visible. Are teachers strongly interested in learning from others and sharing? Are teachers interested in administration and economics? Are they interested in group process, or leadership, or management? Are they interested in a deeper heart meeting between people? Yes to some degree, but the

vocation is primarily one of individuals working with their students to awaken an interest in a particular subject, to pass on knowledge already acquired. I think many of our strengths and weaknesses as a movement stem from the vocational orientation and one-sidedness of the teacher, thinker and artist.

If these cultural reflections are largely true, then we face significant challenges in developing the insights, attitudes, and skills necessary to promote a more conscious culture of leadership, of learning, and of service within Waldorf Schools and within the broader anthroposophical movement.

Encouraging Leadership

As a first step in developing a new culture of leadership, we can raise to consciousness what our image of leadership is and then search for a conception of leadership that fits the needs of self-administered schools and communities. I think we mostly carry an old image of leadership - the charismatic male leadership of the founders, or the more manipulative command and control leadership of the corporate world. Not wanting this, we retreat into an ideology of collegiality - of everybody needing to be involved in everything - and fall into a morass of meetings, inadequate decision-making, chaos and conflict. Leadership may be present, but people exercising leadership functions such as Faculty Chair, Board President, or Personnel Committee Head feel undermined and regret exercising initiative.

If we could embrace the notion of leadership as stewardship or understand the concept of servant leadership as developed by Robert Greenleaf, perhaps we could breathe more easily and acknowledge both that we need leadership and actually have leadership capacities within our circle of colleagues. The central notion of both stewardship and servant leadership as Peter Block notes in his excellent book. *Stewardship*, is "to choose service over self interest."[2] Robert Greenleaf writes that servant leadership "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first - the best test is do those served grow as persons, do they, while being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants."[3] The qualities of the servant leader for both Greenleaf and Block include listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, and stewardship."[4]

In addition to having a broader and more conscious conception of leadership appropriate to the values of Waldorf education, we need to delegate leadership responsibilities consciously. This is often not done in our institutions. We usually let people volunteer because everyone's tired. Leadership then is given to those who are willing to serve on four committees rather than on one, and if they serve long enough, they will have the experience and the power to be effective leaders. The result is that leadership is not explicit and that the best people may not be asked. The type of leadership desired is not discussed, and people are not freed up from other tasks to provide effective leadership.

The inability to define and consciously give leadership responsibilities based on competence is a great area of weakness in our schools. It may be due to our not wanting to limit people's freedom, or because of a certain reluctance to enter the realm of administrative clarity. In any case, the tendency towards unclarity leads to undermining leadership and to the hidden exercise of power or to what I think of as the hidden but absolutely real power of the "work horses" within the school community.

Toward a Culture of Learning

How do we become more of a learning culture in our schools and communities? The further development of the Anthroposophical Society and the School of Spiritual Science with a renewed focus on research is an important beginning because it encourages a modest exploration of where we are with our inner and outer work. If this beginning can be further strengthened, it has the effect of sanctioning a deeper explorative research orientation. A second dimension of developing a learning culture is to recognize that our collegial, non-hierarchical institutions require a high level of "practical social understanding," to use

Rudolf Steiner's phrase, a high level of social skill.[5] This means learning from experience, reviewing committee forms, decision-making procedures, the exercise of leadership, and learning in an ongoing way about group process. Why do these forms work? What should the function of a chairperson be? Do we also need a process coach? How do we improve listening and communication skills? How do we work with disagreements and conflicts? To be interested in community building, in the art of social creation, means an ongoing commitment to learning from our social experiences; it means weekly and monthly and yearly reviews to assess what is working well and what isn't.

In addition to learning from our experiences, it is important to avail ourselves of the many fine psychological insights and community-building methods of other groups. What comes to mind is the work of M Scott Peck, and the Foundation for Community Encouragement, the approaches to servant leadership developed by the Robert Greenleaf Center, decision-making by consensus stemming from the Quaker tradition, or the many insights of humanistic psychology. We can also learn from the field of management and of non-profit administration, in particular about the realm of Board responsibilities.[6]

Developing this kind of learning and sharing means overcoming our aversion to psychology, being interested in what other groups and institutions have done and developing a learning network among Waldorf Schools, curative communities, CSAs, adult education centers, and cooperatively-run businesses. This is an exciting challenge for the Waldorf movement at a time when it has entered a new stage of institutional maturity.

Part of the challenge of learning in our institutions is to encourage conscious mutual development Many conventional organizations ask their employees to meet with their superiors and their peers in quarterly and annual performance reviews. While such practices can be punitive, they have the virtue of creating a conscious assessment process. In our institutions we could create annual individual development plans that each individual writes down, based on conversations with colleagues. In addition to a description of work responsibilities for each teacher, receptionist or development coordinator, it could include three basic aspects:

> Our aims and goals regarding inner development for example, working with Steiner's six exercises, observing nature twice a week, developing a deeper knowledge of the stars, having 15 minutes of quiet every morning.

> Our aims as social beings: for example, improving our facilitation skills, working on listening, working through our difficulties with colleagues, speaking more in co-worker meetings, acquiring mediation skills.

> Our vocational goals: for example, improving presentation skills, enhancing computer literacy, learning more about adolescence, improving time and project management skills.

Such development plans could also include courses or conferences we plan to attend in order to acquire particular insights and skills. These plans can be shared with a personnel committee, a care group, or with a smaller group of colleagues, they can be reviewed annually as well as being looked at more briefly during the course of the year. A development plan of this kind can then be the link to a review of how well we are carrying out our particular roles or functions. It can encourage learning and growth.

Waldorf schools are profound learning communities for children, but seldom conscious learning communities for adults. Could every school establish a committee to foster community learning, asking each school group to assess their approach to learning and development? How does the individual teacher, how do the faculty as a group learn and develop? What about the Board, the parents and the various

committees? Do we learn from crisis, from successes and failures? Where and how does institutional learning happen? A learning committee or mandate group could organize an annual learning festival in which all the parts of the school community could share their successes and their learnings from the past year. Such a festival could be a joyous community celebration of the recently completed work

A Culture of Service

In addition to becoming a learning culture, we can become a more conscious service culture in our institutions and communities. Part of becoming a service culture involves being more aware of our partners in our activities, whether as teachers, parents, and children in a Waldorf school, or as co-workers, staff, residents, and parents in a curative community. How does one make the nature of that partnership conscious? For me this is a central aspect of the service culture and an important part of community building. How do we actually do what many businesses do internally and externally? Who are our clients, how do we serve them better, and how do we explore with them what kind of job we're doing? Can we make it a virtue to learn from our partners more actively and to relate to them as true partners? Waldorf schools have developed a deeply caring culture of service toward children. How can that be extended to the relationship between adults?

An aspect of partnership is accountability. In most non-profit organizations it is the Board that is legally responsible, and it is the Board which represents the public interest. In collegial-run institutions with limited hierarchy, the question of accountability is critical. In Waldorf schools, in what way are faculty accountable to Board and parents, and what accountability does the Board have and do the parents have? To spell out mutual expectations between Board, faculty, staff, and parents based on a clear understanding of roles helps greatly in avoiding misunderstanding and conflict.

This can be done in the school or parent handbook, but it is more than a task description because it also needs to state how the Parent Association, the Board, and the Faculty are involved in key decisions such as tuition increases or other matters which involve all or most of the members of the school.

Part of developing a service culture is for each decision-making group to have clear criteria for evaluation and a transparent process of review. If the faculty have responsibility for all pedagogical decisions and the hiring, evaluation, and dismissal of teachers, how is this done? The same applies to the Board. Is there a process for a Board audit or evaluation every year or two? Are criteria for Board membership made explicit and adhered to?

Underlying the notion of service is valuing competence. While volunteerism has its place in the childhood period of all initiatives, the need for professional skills and competence grows as the school enters maturity. Can all positions of responsibility from the Christmas Fair Committee Chairperson to the hiring of the Kindergarten Assistant be based on a clear understanding of the task and the skills and attitudes necessary to fill those positions? Volunteerism needs to be replaced by a conscious selection of people and groups based on competence and a conscious review and thanking for all the work done on behalf of the whole. This is the essence of republican leadership and of a service culture, for it suggests we have a concern about quality and a gratitude toward people who give so generously of their talents and time.

Building Community Consciously

I have described the need to deepen and broaden the community-building impulse of Waldorf education by developing a more conscious culture of leadership, learning and service. In developing a more conscious culture of learning and of leadership, we deepen our connection to the spirit of the school and of Waldorf education by serving higher ideals. In becoming more conscious and skilled in meeting, we enliven the souls of our institutions, and in being more conscious of our partners, of those we serve, and

of how we serve them, we expand the culture of service. Developing a stronger culture of leadership, learning and service asks that we recommit ourselves to community building, to making our network of institutions healthier, more joyous places to live and work This is the social challenge for us at the end of the 20th century so that our communities may give hope to the 21st. The powerful imagination of what it means to be human - carried in the Waldorf curriculum - needs to be brought more fully into our social architecture, into our practice, so that our communities can be places where people can more fully experience the light and blessings of the spirit.

Notes

[1] See Rudolf Sterner, *The Inner Aspect of the Social Question*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1974. For description of the rich spiritual perspective Rudolf Steiner brings to social questions of community life, see also 'Social and Anti-Social Forces in the Human Being,' Mercury Press, 1984, and R. Steiner, 'How Can the Soul Needs of the Time Be Met?', Zurich, October 10, 1916.

[2] Peter Block, *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self Interest*. Berret Koehler, 1993, p. 6. This is an excellent book.

[3] In Larry Spears (ed.), *What is Servant Leadership?* Robert Greenleaf Center, p. 4.

[4] Ibid. pp. 5, 6. Also the excellent book by Stephen Covey, *Principle Centered Leadership*. Simon & Schuster, 1990.

[5] R. Steiner, How Can the Soul Needs of the Time Be Met?

[6] For example, Peter Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*. Harper Collins, 1994.

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