



Wellsprings of the Art of Education: Three Reversals in the Work of the Waldorf Teacher

Christof Wiechert

From the very beginning, much depends upon our ability to correctly address our work and to understand that we must give ourselves a particular direction appropriate to our time,” says Rudolf Steiner in the first lecture of *Foundations of Human Experience*.¹ He then gives a picture of the prevalent role which egotism has to play in the development of humanity now. At this point in evolution, he explains, inner attention and self-realization are necessary. At the end of the lecture he returns to this, painting an unusual situation: “There can be a great difference, and it does not depend simply upon whether one teacher is more clever than another in superficial pedagogical techniques. Rather, the main difference in the effectiveness of teaching comes from the thoughts the teacher has had during the entire time of his or her existence and brings into the classroom.”² He goes on to point out how thoughts which are directed towards a child’s development, for example, work differently on the child than thoughts which do not.

What happens when a teacher forms such thoughts? “At the moment you have such thoughts, something within you fights against everything that is merely personality. At this moment everything that forms the basis of your personality is dampened. Something of what predominates in people because they are physical human beings is quelled.”³ We could say this basically brings us to the question of inner substance. The strength and quality of the Waldorf impulse depends on whether we confront ourselves inwardly or not and are able to engage in an inner struggle with “mere personality.” Are we

as Waldorf educators able to give ourselves that direction? Viewed this way, we simultaneously deal with the question of the contemporary relevance of the Waldorf school, for this does not depend on systems or new forms (although they certainly have to be there as well), but on ourselves. The way we relate to ourselves and to the world is what counts. This can give rise to some confusion. An attempt will be made here to characterize different types of this confusion.

Three types of confusion

A first type of confusion lies in the temptation to interpret the Waldorf impulse as a system: a set of actions, established forms, habits, and even a body of convictions or anthroposophical knowledge. We may call it anthroposophy, but that may only be true to a certain extent. There is a certain manifestation of anthroposophy which is rejected more and more by younger colleagues and parents. An example of this is the use of anthroposophical knowledge as a weapon to argue a *personal* point. Many people instinctively recognize this as a form of ideology which needs to be questioned, no matter who the person representing the ideology is.

A second type of confusion arises because Waldorf schools have taken on certain forms, for example, a fixed curriculum. This is necessary, otherwise the

This is a translation of an article that appeared in the German journal, *Erziehungskunst*, Vol. 11 (November 2003) and is published here by permission of the author.

4 • Wellsprings of the Art of Education: Three Reversals in the Work of the Waldorf Teacher

schools would not be able to exist. The confusion comes about when the outer form is taken for the thing itself, even when the original impulse no longer has anything to do with it. For example, when a colleague does not want to do the class play in the eighth grade but in the seventh grade, this sets up conflict with the traditional form: “without an eighth grade play it is not Waldorf.” This is, of course, an innocent example. There are certain forms, right into matters of pedagogy, which are no longer the expression of a true impulse of the art of education, but of a habit which can often not be traced to a specific origin anymore. When this is the case, people will have a hard time recognizing the true intentions of the Waldorf school.

A third type of confusion arises because anthroposophy rightfully values individual freedom very highly. Without the free human being there would be no anthroposophy at all. This “freer climate” is exactly the reason why many new colleagues find their way to Waldorf schools. In practice, however, it can easily happen that this freedom is confused with license, or even stamina, in pushing something through. Waldorf schools offer a lot of opportunity for this. We pay dearly for this confused notion of freedom because on average we are more prone to social conflicts than other schools. Put in a different way, the potential for conflicts in our schools is high, not because of anthroposophy, and also not because of the way we are organized, but because of ourselves.

Three reversals

In the final analysis, these areas of confusion stem from the way in which we do our inner work. How do I take myself in hand? How can I help myself in such a way that I come closer to my true self? I need help. A first way to bring about a reversal is to start asking questions and become a seeker instead of someone who has the answers and is all-competent. This is actually a first step on the path towards anthroposophy, whether one wants to recognize it as such or not.

Not so long ago many Waldorf teachers were led towards this question by destiny and had started this process of inner transformation. It was a time in which the inner path was not so much spoken about in schools, but individuals actually did walk the path of self-development and this, moreover, was a private matter.

Nowadays, many colleagues find their way to the schools without destiny having brought them to this point (and we leave aside here what the cause of that may be). It is part of being a teacher, however, to arrive at the realization, “*I can only teach when I learn to change myself.*” People may stick to

the opinion that this is everybody’s private business. That is true in the sense that nobody can demand of me that I go on a path of inner development. But I must honestly demand this of myself when I practice the profession of Waldorf teacher. At the beginning of the first lecture of *Foundations of Human Experience*, Rudolf Steiner puts it this way, “Dear friends, we can accomplish our work only if we do not see it as simply a matter of intellect or feeling, but, in the highest sense, as a moral spiritual task.”⁴ This implies a second reversal. But how does one go about this?

By way of example, let us look at the way the teachers’ meeting is structured. The structure of the meeting can itself be a source of confusion, as we all know. But this meeting is also the heart and soul of the school. The heart perceives, gives impulses and direction, and is an organ which is always learning. The same holds true for the teachers’ meeting. Rudolf Steiner calls it “continuously evolving education.” Today that implies that colleagues not only take up the question of continuing education together, but also that all colleagues get the opportunity to discuss these questions of transformation. Specifically, questions such as the following would be asked: How does a new colleague learn about the teachers’ meditations? Is the way one practices these professional meditations a scheduled topic of conversation? Is it possible to talk about this theme in the meetings?

This will obviously only be possible when the circle of teachers has practiced establishing the right *mood* in the meetings. Such a mood can only come about when colleagues agree to look upon the meeting as something which is just as important as the teaching itself. It is necessary to remind one another to practice the virtues of real listening (What does my colleague really want to say?) and of active silence (not being silent out of a lack of interest) and of keeping one’s speaking in check. (Is it really necessary for me to say something now? Do I speak to the point or do I automatically raise my hand to speak?)

When this happens, a space will be created in which all colleagues can feel safe, because their contributions will be heard and taken up. When this safe space is established and when one can talk about inner questions, it will also be possible to find a fruitful way to deal with anthroposophical content within the meetings. This is the third reversal: When the periphery creates a center which will radiate out again to the individuals, a common instrument for a common aim will have been created.⁵

A circle of teachers which strengthens itself in this way will break down the first type of confusion and anthroposophy will actually be something living,

working between individuals. Next to all the important things a circle of teachers has to achieve together, a *new commitment* is asked of us.

Renewal through Re-enlivening

Let us now look at the second category of confusion. Schools are by nature conservative, and Waldorf schools are no exception. This is, of course, a general judgment which needs to be qualified.

When we survey the development of the past twenty-five years, we see that considerable progress has been made in many areas. Movement education has experienced a strong impulse, ranging from juggling to complete circus shows. Strong developments have arisen through various attempts to connect schools with the world of work by means of doing practica, and also by other means. The artistic quality and craftsmanship in the handwork subjects have attained nearly professional standards. Steps have been taken to introduce experiential studies. There are schools which devote a whole evening every year to show the work done in eurhythm. Education in technical subjects has seen many outstanding achievements as well. Special-needs teaching has undergone several developments, ranging from various tutorial arrangements to the founding of independent, special-needs schools. Initiatives have been taken towards more integration and diversity. In connection with that, a particularly promising initiative is the founding and recent opening of an inter-cultural school in Mannheim, Germany. The search for alternative ways to do final exams and grading has resulted in various new forms. Furthermore, models have been developed to tackle the middle school anew, and new forms for high school are being created by many circles of colleagues. This list is by no means complete, but it demonstrates a strong power of initiative, worthy of the Waldorf schools.

Most of these initiatives are extensions of Waldorf pedagogy. In and of themselves they are very valuable, but they have not essentially touched the *core work* of the Waldorf school, the education in kindergarten through high school. The question arises: how can this energy, which is obviously there, also be turned inward? To a certain extent, the core work is at a disadvantage, because existing tasks have to be performed anew every day. In this case, one cannot speak of renewal. But one *can* speak of re-enlivening, which is an inner renewal.

Let us return once more to the topic of meetings. One often hears that what happens in the Thursday meetings takes teachers' last strength. It behooves us to look into the causes of this, and we must find solutions for this phenomenon.⁶

It is not our task here to answer these questions in

depth. But one phenomenon should be described. Rudolf Steiner often pointed out the necessity of self-knowledge as something which continues to build strength when one is on the path of self-educating. "Picture yourself rightly." One often experiences that the energy which enables one to know oneself (or criticize oneself) is actually there, but gets directed outward and becomes criticism of people or the world in general. It is as if we are dealing with a shadow thrown by the prevailing mindset. The result of directing criticism outward onto others, however, is that one is no longer capable of really meeting one's fellow human beings, and this applies to both colleagues and parents. Our ability to meet others becomes shrouded, and, as a consequence, colleagues become estranged from one another.

We have many opportunities to turn this situation around. Such a reversal can be brought about when we inwardly activate our *powers of recognition and appreciation*. Without this, a college of teachers will never become a community which gives energy and orientation to the individual. When that has been accomplished to a certain degree (something which is definitely the case in a number of schools) the way is open to the real questions which concern our daily interaction in the classroom. Then one can tackle questions such as: "How are we doing? Where do our strengths and weaknesses lie? What can we improve or change? Where do we fall short?" In this way our daily tasks will come to stand in the light of development. Teachers and school will become a living and developing organism. Here, too, we see a reversal. A reversal of direction away from the ordinary. That is what anthroposophical practice actually is. It demands self awareness and conducting oneself morally, and it is up to each individual to initiate that.

When steps have been taken to establish such a foundation, the need arises to look anew at everyday practice and the application of the curriculum from the viewpoint of pedagogical relevance. We can ask ourselves, for example, if we are able to give our teaching the necessary freshness by the way we relate to the material and the students. Such activity will lead to our students later remembering not only the class trips, class plays, and other highlights, but also the core work: the liveliness of everyday school. Inner initiative enlivens everything and counteracts the second type of confusion. Here, too, a new commitment is demanded of us.

The Search for a New Sense of Commitment

We should now look briefly at the third type of confusion. Teachers who administer a school themselves and who have to use their inner resources in

teaching, standing up for all they do, develop a stronger relationship to themselves. Being involved in an anthroposophical way of working *can* throw a shadow: it may result in a strong form of self-centeredness. And this, in turn, will hinder *community* development in our schools. At the close of the first course on Waldorf pedagogy, Rudolf Steiner summarized the inner prerequisites for being a teacher. Teachers have to work on harmonizing the following four attributes: *initiative, interest, devotion to the truth*, and the imperative *not to turn stale or sour*. It has been pointed out in another article that these four attributes correspond to the transformation of the temperaments, which do not properly serve self-education unless they have been worked on.

There is no mention of a fifth prerequisite, namely, “building a community of teachers.” This may seem strange today, but will become understandable when one looks back and apprehends the historical setting of the founding of Waldorf pedagogy. The personalities whom Rudolf Steiner addressed were practicing inner development. Apart from that, he had pointed out the enormous implications for social life at the opening of the first course for teachers. Furthermore, community building is contained as a seed in the above-mentioned four requirements, because the second one runs as follows: “the teacher should be a person who is interested in everything which concerns the world and the human being.”⁸ Nobody would like to admit to being a person lacking in interest. We experience *interest*, so to speak, as something which every human being is basically equipped with in our time. And yet it is formulated here as a fundamental requirement for teachers. This is obviously something that needs conscious tending. Therefore, there must be some part of us which needs to be educated to develop interest. When I observe what I do at those moments when I find myself not being interested in something, I can notice that I want to stay in my own little circle; I feel as if I have enough to deal with when I keep to myself. I close myself off. But when I persist and try to develop interest, I will experience something like a freeing from the narrow bonds of myself. This happens when I turn towards something else. I open up.

Imagine that one practices this newly discovered capacity with a colleague whom one usually shuns. Something new will open up. Persisting in this will lead to rich and new discoveries. Not only will I get to know myself anew, but I will also gain the sense of how I help to build community. This opens up a new appreciation of the necessity for all colleagues to partake in child study, not just those who know the child or just the “specialists.” One will also

understand anew what a blessing it is for a circle of teachers when the kindergarten teachers take part in the meetings. It should be a matter of course. When this comes about, we will have started to tackle the third type of confusion. But the same thing holds true here also, namely that we have to find a way towards a new sense of commitment.

These remarks cannot lay claim to offering solutions for the way things are in individual Waldorf schools. They merely try to offer a few examples of the *inner practice of anthroposophy*.

REFERENCES

1. Rudolf Steiner, *The Foundations of Human Experience* (GA 293) (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 1996); Lecture of August 21, 1919.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Rudolf Steiner, *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts* (GA 26) (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1998), “The World Thoughts in the Working of Michael and in the Working of Ahriman,” November 16, 1924.
6. Heinz Zimmerman, *Speaking, Listening, Understanding. The Art of Creating Conscious Conversation* (Hudson, New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1996).
7. Hartwig Schiller, ed., *Innere Aspekte der Konferenzgestaltung* [Inner Aspects of Shaping the Teachers’ Meeting] (Stuttgart: 1990).
8. Jürgen Smit, *Lighting Fires; Deepening Education through Meditation* (Stroud, UK: Hawthorne Press, 1992).
9. Rudolf Steiner, *Discussions with Teachers* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1983); closing words.

Christof Wiechert was born in 1945 and went to the Waldorf school in The Hague, the Netherlands. He studied pedagogy and geography and taught for 30 years at the Waldorf school in The Hague after that. During that time he was a co-founder of a state-certified, Waldorf training center. He was also on the board of the Anthroposophical Society in the Netherlands and developed a course on the Art of Child Study together with Ate Koopmans. He has lectured widely both in the Netherlands and abroad. He has been a member of the Pedagogical Section of the Anthroposophical Society since 1999 and became its leader in October of 2000. Christof Wiechert is married and has five children.