

## A LIFE WORTH LIVING

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*In two previous articles in this magazine (Autumn and Winter 2008) we have followed the battle in the twentieth century for personal authenticity amongst the youth of Europe who were born in an era of self-realization and how the forces of de-individualization that have been partly successful in hindering it. At the aftermath of the First World War people saw new possibilities to start afresh also in the field of education leading to the founding of the first Waldorf school.*

*In this article the author explains one of several stances that characterize Waldorf education in an attempt to provide a method to meet the challenges of our time.*

In the East the good life is based on self-discipline and contemplation. In the West it is based on 'vita aktiva' – virtuous action. This is by no means new. Aristotle's concept of 'eudaimonia' is based on the theory that the goal of an individual life is to achieve *happiness by fulfilling one's potential*. In modern times the German psychologist William Stern (1871-1931) talked about happiness in life as being forged by the uniqueness of each individual who collectively would build a wealthy nation. A wealthy nation, in this use of the term, is a happy one because it is healthy and has a collective feeling of worth and respect. These values are the foundation for all other aspects of education such as knowledge, skill and innovation.

This is completely in tune with the two of the ethical principles of the Waldorf school. This is reflected both in the curriculum and method.

Today there is a constant demand for change. Generally speaking education is in a state of chaos plagued as it has been by an increasing frequency of political reforms in the last decade intended to suffice the changing needs of society.

In 1969 Norman Bradburn wanted to call his book 'The Psychology of Happiness' but at the time the academic climate was such that the title was thought not to be serious enough. It was published as 'The structure of Psychological Well-Being.' Such censorship is no longer necessary. This is due to the fact that since the late 1990's there has been an alarming growth in anhedonia in young adults (i.e. lack of contentment) in Central and Western Europe. Since the turn of the century the age range 9-19 years have also become disillusioned. In an article in 'Der Spiegel' in 2001 it was said that only 17% of youngsters in the age group 16-34 were content with life. In a gallop in 2005 in Scandinavia in 2005 parents were asked what they most wanted from their children's education. 93% answered they wanted them to be happy in life. The general consensus was 'If they are happy so are we'. Any values in education are determined by an educational philosophy. This involves a conception of what the ends and motives of life are in relation to the needs and demands of

our time coupled with a science of psychological dynamics as we find in the Waldorf school in the idea of a developing consciousness from the kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> class.

People do what they do in order to fulfil their potential as individuals. Almost without exception everyone has an idea what they would like to do before they die. How close we get to this aim is often a measure of the quality of our lives. If it is beyond our reach we are resentful. If it is partly achieved we experience a sense of satisfaction and we are content. The school of today is not only a place where you learn to be a learner, a writer, an artist, a scientist, a lover or a carpenter but a place where the individual should be guided to develop a unique personality in an unrestricted way.

Many of the older generation tell us that “everything was so much easier before.” Perhaps this is true. But what they are really are talking about is the pace of change in modern society. Undoubtedly earlier we lived with fewer resources, now we live in a society of abundance and choice.

Post-modern society is based on *socialization and individualization*. In education we are taught to melt into a system of social laws for the common good and, on the other hand, we need to learn who we are. This is a difficult combination. We want to live in an ordered society but at the same time want to be autonomous. When there is too much freedom we want external regulation. Youths want rules but they also want to break them. A school without a deeply founded philosophy that addresses this question hampers both socialization and individualization. If there is no barrier it is difficult to express myself. Therefore the great educational challenge is to devise a method and curriculum whereby the pupil can discover his own unique identity and find a place for it in the existing pattern of society. It is not a question of growing up but of maturing. When I talk to youths anno 2009 in my native Norway they talk of a society that demands more and more of them. This means they feel more and more controlled externally and under constant surveillance. Self-control is part of becoming an adult but they feel that the more complicated society is the greater is the possibility of non-achieving in school. It is said that the level of self-esteem amongst the younger generations in Norway is high and the opportunities for the creative individual to succeed are also high but at the same time the PISA tests show a lower level than competing countries.

With this in mind I would like to describe some essentials of Waldorf education that are meant to contribute to the building up of self-esteem and confidence in a resilient individual who hopefully will become invulnerable in an ever-changing society and find his or her place in the world.

## *Worlds Within and Without*

Our time can be characterized as being dominated by outer realities. It is a task, deeply rooted in the curriculum and method of the Waldorf school to see that externalities do not limit the development of an inner world. It is an aim of the school to ensure that these two worlds are in equilibrium.

Worlds within and without involve processes of connecting to the world (socialization) and connecting to one's own innate possibilities in that world (individualization).

The word 'individual' means 'that which cannot be divided'. Until the seventeenth century the word meant the same as 'indivisible', that that cannot be broken down into smaller units.

Before 1650 the term was purely theological and was used to describe the Holy Trinity as an indivisible unity. In Shakespeare's 'Timon of Athens' it was used to refer to married couples as also in Milton's 'Paradise Lost' book IV. In the eighteenth century the meaning of 'individual' changed and in English from an adjective to a noun. The word became compliant with the 'self', there where a personal authenticity is embedded. In the twentieth century the word was used to denote a unique and separate human being. The need of our time is to construct a coherent narrative of one's own life so circumscribing identity. To be an individual is to own a narrative self.

On the other hand socialization involves the nurturing of conversation and the dialogue with other individuals and the world in general.

Within the auspices of Waldorf education both sides of our task on earth are taken into account building up one of our aims to address the needs of the up-and-coming generations. The main lesson takes this into account following a path from a general impression at the start of the lesson through three different processes until it is presented to the world as an individual expression. This unique signature serves as the guardian of the ego and is an all-important factor in confidence building and the development of self-esteem. In the Waldorf school this is practised daily albeit with different challenges in accordance with the growing consciousness of the pupils from childhood to youth. The metamorphosis of method is vital otherwise practice becomes routine.

Individualization is not an easy option. The cultivation of the independent mind demands willpower.

The authenticity of the individual requires that all rights are equal and cannot exist there where there is competition. In this respect one can say that society has not progressed very far in the last century. Today we forfeit creativity and original thinking for a stringent system of tests and examinations in schools not only within a class but between schools and indeed between European nations.

It is not easy to stand one's own two feet. De-individualization (as described in my last article in this magazine) is an easier option. Many take this option: there is no need or use both time and energy to try one's best at all times or be creative in what one does. But nations are built on individuals as is the future development of our society in all facets and not on spiritual laziness. We have to practice and we start in school. A task in educating the human being will always be to develop the malleability of the imagination and a innovative, liberal free thinking.

Cultivating the imagination in a time where the level of external stimulation is so high is a prime task of the Waldorf school in order to create a balance between outer and inner realities..

In using the term 'imagination' I describe a human capacity showed by everyone who can perceive and think. Imagination is involved in all forms of perception of the world giving it meaning. Being an image-making capacity it also combines memory of the past with an envisaging the future as well as a middle dreamy state which is neither memory nor prediction. The power of imagination is deeply connected with creativity and well-being but is by no means confined only to these conditions. Those who perceive with heightened imagination long to express in some form what it they perceive. They also have a deeper reflection, noticing more, they think about things more consistently and feel about them

more strongly. This capacity of the imagination needs to be practised, exercised and expanded in schools as it also is coupled to the resultant increase in a personal significance of the world we live in. The way we learn can enhance the powers of imagination. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the English romantic poet, described in his autobiographical 'Biographia Literaria' William Wordsworth, his close friend and colleague in instigating the importance of the imagination, as an imaginative person because he bore "the union of deep feeling and profound thought." In nurturing the pupil's imagination we need to educate partly his or her reflective capacity and partly his perceptive capacity. This can lead to creativity but in any event will lead to the pupil having the feeling of living in a world that is more interesting, more loved and better understood. The feeling of being more imaginative can be likened to that of being more healthy. It strengthens the soul in that it prevents the sudden removal of the will to go on and to overcome. A greater play space for the imagination will lead to an increased enthusiasm and understanding as a deterrent for boredom which is rife amongst adolescents of today.

There is a difference between intrinsic (inner motivation: it is fun to do it) and extrinsic (outer motivation: it is worth doing). The latter stance is adopted with age with the growth of thinking, objectivity and a sense of duty and responsibility. At the same time there is no reason why a pupil cannot adopt such an attitude. It does not rule out the enjoyment factor. Things have to be done properly; that means trying one's best. In this way one can come to an understanding of what pleasure really is.

Here we are able to see the connection between the imagination and work. Imagination is the ability to see possibilities beyond the immediate and to feel what is before one. To work with something, to begin to find it interesting, is to let the imagination play on it. To begin to explore something imaginatively is to begin to see it stretching into unknown, unexplored paths. The task is for us to play on work seeing it not merely as a task to be got through. A challenge in our time, grounded in schools, is to love working for its own during the formative school years. Therefore there is a need for a broadly based curriculum where things can be seen from different angles. One should know something about everything and not everything about something.

The direct experience of natural beauty is crucial to the development of education -the forming of images, retention by the "inner eye", their interpretation, their feeling as an antidote to boredom. The imagination works surreptitiously and quietly. To the "inner eye" one must have peace and quiet. The cultivation of solitude is rare. The growth of teenage culture is against it. Pupils need to experience the freedom to think and feel while the lesson presents a content in a disciplined and orderly way. In the Waldorf method the main lesson provides a learning process which is practised daily and is designed to encompass the balance between outer observation and stimulus and inner reflection and forethought.

The cradle of thinking is when the infant's gaze meets that of the mother. The second stage is the ability to hear a story and convert it into inner images. A third stage of thinking signals school maturity when the child can start learning at seven when it is able to convert these inner images into a drawing. A fourth stage at nine is when a transformation of images from the teacher's narrative to a written text. This signals the gradual development of conceptual thought with a basis in image stimulated thinking. Not only do we see an intention to balance observation and thinking in methods employed in the Steiner school. It can also be seen in the curriculum itself. Part of the syllabus in the 5<sup>th</sup> class is the theme The World of Plants. Here the teacher describes the plants orally, the children envisage them. This teaching takes place in November or January when there are no plants to be seen. This

strengthens the imaginative aspect. Seven years later in the 11<sup>th</sup> class the theme is Botany. (The seven year rhythm is an important factor in growth processes in the human being). Botany is a science and is thus based on observation. Science demands accuracy. Thus the theme is presented in May, the month with greatest plant growth. The task is the recall most accurately observations. The pupils have to use microscopes to observe more than the naked eye is able to do. All teaching starts with an observation whether it be aural or optic. Consolidation is by way of the ability to form inner images and thoughts. Seen from another angle we can see three stages in the mental growth of adolescents and how is substantiated in the curriculum from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> classes reflecting inner and outer worlds. In the first stage there is a common need to connect to the outer world -as seen in the themes of Geography, Astronomy, perspective drawing and other themes that came to the fore in the first stage of modernity, the Renaissance as taught in the 7<sup>th</sup> class. It is the time of the explorer who goes out into the world. The second stage summons an introspective need congruent with the development of thinking as experienced in our history during the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. This stage, at the age of 14-15 years signals an inner striving reflected in a curriculum where the idea and planning is central as in the great inventors or in the leaders of the great revolutions of our time in History teaching. The third stage apparent in the upper grades (10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>) sees an oscillation between these two worlds as exemplified in the curriculum of the 11<sup>th</sup> class: from Astronomy to Biology of the cells (macro-cosmos to micro-cosmos) or from Projective Geometry to the Monastic system of the Middle Ages. In a play of polarities the individual needs to find an equilibrium between a world of Science based on observation and the World of Art based on the imagination.

## *Attention and Distraction*

What is the consequence of not achieving a balance between the two worlds described above?

'Attention deficit disorder' is currently a worry for most teachers and parents. The poet Thomas Stearns Eliot summarized the modern predicament in the following way: "Distraction from distraction by distraction." It has become a vignette for modern life where the human being is harassed by self-inflicted technology. We're all distracted, we're all interrupted. The question, related to the development of the imagination and self-expression is whether children can pay attention for sustained periods or no more than short spasms. The underlying reasons can be physical or cultural. In the 1980's Neil Postman researched on the effects of television on image formation and attention. Today 'attention span' is a common term in education. Studies of musicians, sportsmen, writers and even criminals have shown that it takes a long sustained period of practice to become a master. It is said that it takes ten thousand hours to attain sufficient knowledge or skills to attain tacit knowledge. That means practising for three hours daily for ten years. In Medieval times an apprenticeship lasted seven years with five hours per day of activity in the workshop.

A growing number of pupils today are unable to concentrate on one thing for more than a few minutes. Attention is the golden key to the mystery of human consciousness. The opposite of attention is distraction, an unnatural condition and one that has interested David Meyer at the University of Michigan who believes that long-term distraction is due to many inputs at the same time. Rapid switching of attention means that output deteriorates. Research shows that if you talk on the mobile phone whilst driving in listening and

interpreting language on the phone you lose the ability to take in visual language such as road signs. If your caller is describing something visual such as a room then you lose the sense of the road ahead. Chronic distraction is one cause of burn-out in later life. One American study has found that interruptions take up to 2.1 hours of the average worker's day. It is a process of dehumanization. Mark Bauerlein, professor at Emory University in Atlanta has portrayed a bibliophobic generation of teens, incapable of concentration long enough to read a book. Learning a poem by heart is deemed impossible.

We know that physically and mentally ninety minutes is the optimal time to work on one theme because it is in keeping with the physiological rhythms of the human being, an interval used in the Main Lesson in the Waldorf School from the first to the twelfth grade, albeit in an integrated context. To achieve this level of concentration daily practice is needed to exercise emotional and intellectual involvement.

### *Solitude, Silence and the Capacity to be Alone*

Children today often disappear behind a wall of noise. Bedrooms have become technological laboratories not places of refuge for rest and concentration. In the modern world 'alone' has become synonymous with 'bored'. Quietness is difficult to describe, in many ways it is outside the limits of description. In education today there is a predominant emphasis on socializing and relationships and we are suspicious of the one who sees him or herself apart. We go to great lengths to keep ourselves busy. Noise, distraction, a sense of being companioned, a sense of belonging are things that seem to make people feel happy. Silence, solitude and dreaming are seen as being negative. In childhood there is a fear of being alone in childhood but also there is a wish to be alone. An issue today is the ability and capacity to be alone as a positive force in education. A learning process requires time, solitude and sleep. The lack of concentration is a growing concern in today's classroom. Being alone enables one to come into touch with our deepest feelings and is instrumental in reflection and thinking.

Silence and contemplation has traditionally been linked to religion and with seeking refuge in nature. Gardens are central to many religious traditions as places of contemplation. In the context of the Waldorf school children learn that all organic growth is silent. Things grow in silence. We can call gardening practical religion. There is a silent joy in gardening. As a practical subject it should not be seen as a chore, as a series of unending tasks. Plants grow silently in an otherwise noise-obsessed culture. Gardening in the 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> classes is not working *in* silence but *with* silence. When working with the children in this way teachers experience an intensification of the senses in their pupils. The colours become more brilliant, the smells and tastes deeper. The activity is recreational and can even be therapeutic. Literature is full of examples of the beneficial influence of getting away from it all. Twenty-eight years on a desert island meant that Robinson Crusoe became more resourceful, overcoming his initial despair. Based on the true story of Alexander Selkirk the result was a new morality, happiness and wisdom. Virginia Woolf famously taught us that that every woman writer needs a room of her own. Silence for her was not a lack of something and not a rejection of sociability but is a passionately strong positive source in the making of the modern self.

The majority of artists, composers, novelists and scientists spend a great deal of time alone. Solitude was earlier believed to be the 'school of genius'.

Returning to our theme of socialization and individualization we can note that human beings have two drives in life: the one towards companionship that brings us closer to our fellow

men and the other towards being separate, independent and autonomous. Imaginative and creative people are always striving to discover themselves, to remodel their identities, to find meaning in life. In his book 'Attachment and Loss' John Bowlby states that the child's primary need is a prolonged period of attachment to people or in some cases to nature. A gradual detachment follows in youth as a prelude to a greater degree of independence. It is beneficial for the growing child to feel comfortable in spending time alone.

Solitude is by no means synonymous with loneliness. In solitude we are each of us by our self, but not alone because we are happy with being by ourselves and being occupied with ourselves. Loneliness is desolation in which we not only lose other people but also ourselves. Solitude is connected with two types of silence. There is that of the religious devotee which involves a shedding of the ego and that of the creative artist which involves a shoring up of the self. Both types of silence have a spiritual reality but only the latter is important in developing self-reliance.

Parents and teachers need to be aware of the importance of solitude and gregariousness as elements in the flow of the imagination and its importance in furthering individualized expression. Children, it seems, need to be on their own because it leads to in-depth involvement. It provides the opportunity for reflection and the necessary calmness to incubate questions and ideas.

Rudolf Steiner called solitude (Einsamkeit) "the main characteristic of our age." The poet Rilke also pointed it out to be a factor in our lives. He wrote: "To speak of solitude again, it becomes always clearer that this is at bottom not something we can take or leave, we are solitary." It goes hand in hand with an increasing stronger need for self-development and personal identity.

John Ruskin expressed his educational values in a very simple way using the expression 'No Wealth but Life'. In 'King's Treasures' he emphasizes the preciousness of our educational wealth. Life is short and the number of quiet hours are few. Ruskin believed that children need to learn the value of books that "keep the soul together" in moments of serenity. Happiness depends on how you have spent your day. Reading requires a calm environment. Ruskin's opinion was that the home ought to be a place of peace, of stability. An environment not protected against accident cannot be a shelter against terror, doubt and division. Without these qualities there is no home in a protracted sense of the word. If fear and worry enter into this space they bring with them incoherency, disjointedness and animosity. Precious quiet hours of reflection should take place in a secure sanctuary. The home is a secular version of a spiritual refuge. An interior is closely connected with an inner life. In earlier times the divide between the outer and the inner was not apparent at a time when people were at one with nature. Life was outdoor life in harmony with the natural rhythms of the seasons having a hygienic effect on society.

By balancing inner and outer realities the classroom has the possibility to become to be a haven devoid of terror, doubt and division. The need to withdraw from a chaotic lifestyle is even more apparent now than it was in Ruskin's industrialized England. In his time, due to a greater emphasis on the outer and inner, the home was divided into two: public and private rooms. The living room had an ambience of socializing, the bedroom or study one of quiet reflection. In this way the home mirrored two sides of our soul-life.