

Reflecting on Character

by

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In my initial preparation for exploring general educational trends and contrasting and comparing these trends with those found in the Waldorf school movement I began interviewing TWS graduates and parents. There was immediately something pronounced in these early interviews that seemed to stand out above all the other comments made by those I interviewed. That was this sense that Waldorf schooling had somehow given them the opportunity to develop as a human being and not only as a student. Their humanity had been touched and in that touching had grown or stretched in some way.

They described feeling that the school and the teachers had held them in such a way that they could ask deeper questions and develop a social conscience or awareness they felt was not present in others they met. The graduates expressed how these qualities were noticed by others when they reached university. Qualities that would not end up being measured on the multiple choice exams but that were worthy of comment by colleagues and professors.

I feel that Waldorf provides an environment where students are encouraged to speak out and develop different ways of doing things. I think Waldorf teaches students to be independent thinkers. The way that you are learning, the way that you learn everything from the ground up- literally how to do things. If you can't attack the problem this way there has got to be another way. (Ellie Hariri interview)

Part of it was the shelter and the safety of Waldorf, just being able to build as a person. The foundation that I took with me to university was exacting thought and the desire to explore more than just my focus subject. To maintain an interest in other areas. (Stephanie Brenhan interview)

They (Waldorf students) have a deeper concern for people, for other people. They have a compassion they can connect to much quicker than even some of the adults in my life. Their intuition is sharper. Their senses are sharper. Their appreciation is sharper. With all three of my kids it shows in different ways depending on their disposition. They are all markedly different than other kids. They are stable, they have a lot of discipline. (Karen Similas-Catala interview)

I think critical thinking is what I attribute back to the development of social conscience. When you read something you don't just accept it as fact. You may want to challenge its source, you may want to challenge the substance of what it is, challenge the interpretation that a person may have when reading something. That was something the professors thought I was excelling at vis a vis other students and I think that you get that from Waldorf. (Krishan Doodnauth: interview)

I puzzled for a while about what they were referring to. It occurred to me that they had come out of the experience feeling enriched and stronger as a person. It was, I believe, their character that they were referring to. Their character was what distinguished them as ethical individuals. According to Webster's New Collegiate dictionary (1973) character is one of the attributes or features that makes up and distinguishes the individual. A complex of mental and ethical traits marking and often individualizing a person. It was their character that had been nurtured

and shaped by the education and been challenged to grow and develop in many different ways. They also spoke of the fact that the most intangible aspect of the schooling was a feeling that they had been cared for by their teachers and by the rest of the community. People had taken a genuine interest in them. This was to be a profound lesson in their lives. They were happy to be who they had become and had felt a certain freedom in expressing who they were.

This led me to wonder how character is developed and whether Waldorf education sets out to build character or if it just happens as a matter of course. I wanted to know how character development takes place in the public school system and how they imagine their role in fostering character.

Before formally researching the issue of character in the public school system I contemplated what I had been observing in the regular high schools I came across in my work. For the past two years, high schools I visited seemed to be in the midst of what I can only describe as “character campaigns”. These campaigns involved rallies, promotional materials of all kinds, workshops, guest speakers and detailed curriculum. Speakers were brought into schools professing the need for teens to take up positive character traits-to become more generous, respectful, attentive, compassionate, tolerant, diligent, responsible....In one local high school the Guidance Department renamed the school hallways with street signs like Integrity Blvd, Courage Drive and Optimism Ave. “Character Matters” signs filled the halls as an ever present reminder to students to remain vigilant and watch themselves in case one of

their key character traits slips and they find themselves bereft of character. I wondered where this impulse had come from and if it had made a difference in shaping youths’ attitudes toward virtuous behavior or left them insolent and resistant.

The original impulse for Character Education in the Public School System

Five years ago the world was rocked by a particularly tragic event. Two teenage men had gone on a shooting frenzy and killed and wounded twelve of their peers and one of their teachers. Was this a freak event or was this an expression of the deeper dysfunction in the lives of young people in general? How pathological were these two young men and how desperate had the problem of youth become. A few months later a similar incident happened in Tabor Alberta.

The Columbine and Tabor tragedies caused significant questioning among parents and educators alike about what had gone wrong. It was felt that something had gone drastically wrong in these schools and in many other schools where students were experiencing increasing violence on a day to day basis. Weapons had entered the school setting. The cause of these tragedies was fiercely debated and analyzed in the mainstream press and among religious institutions.

Initially the debate was centered on determining whether the youth involved were defective or pathological in some way. Were they victims of intense bullying that could have and should have been prevented? Later the societal questions emerged including questioning

whether the moral basis of the family nucleus had disintegrated to the point of no return, and whether families have abdicated their role as mentors for teaching values and morals. According to some of the literature I read these were a few of the seminal questions that proved to really launch the Character Education movement five years ago shortly after the Columbine disaster. It seems to have arisen out of a need for religious institutions and school systems to fight back and respond to the escalating threat of violence in the schools. There was a desire to fix something that had gone wrong.

In Canada and the United States, the character education movement has taken hold in both elementary and public schools. The movement seems to have been inaugurated around the religious themes of moral failing and family breakdown. In an article by Garry Nation of Probe Ministries “the problem” that character education addresses is what he calls “character deficiency”. He defines disorder in society as a symptom of crisis of character and those lacking in moral character. He then delineates a new syndrome in youth- the “character deficiency syndrome” and in so doing makes the issue of youth and violence appear to be a personal pathology. (Probe Ministries, Garry Nation)

The National Centre for the Fourth and Fifth Rs in New York states, “Character education holds that there are universally important ethical values such as respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, courage, self-control and diligence. Character means living by these core values- understanding them, caring about them, and acting upon

them.” (National Centre for the fourth and fifth R’s) It is hoped that by infusing moral and ethical teaching into the culture of the school they will eliminate violence. They quote David L Davenport in the following:

It is character that will conquer materialism, demonstrate respect for life and property, and stem the tide of violence in our land. And it is character that will search for truth and demand diligent scholarship.

For others, the character education movement is viewed as a means to an end. It is a way to inculcate values that will produce employees that are highly sought after and students who are engaged in school and community life as good citizens. The theme of employability is peppered throughout the literature suggesting that “building positive character qualities is essential to attaining and maintaining successful relationships and occupations”. (Character Concepts, Website) It may be helpful to read how the Kawartha District School Board in Ontario defines its goals:

Character education is a deliberate effort to cultivate positive personal attributes, civility, ethical behaviours and objectively good human qualities that individuals possess and that our society values. It represents a consensus on the attributes desired in school graduates and members of the larger community, and the qualities that employers want in their future employees.p.1

We in the business world do not want young people coming into our employment and into our communities that are brilliant, but dishonest; who have great intellectual knowledge, but don’t really care about others; who have highly creative minds, but are irresponsible. All of us in business and

the entire adult community need to do our part in helping build young people of high character. There isn't a more critical issue in education today. Sandford McDonnell, Former Chairman of McDonnell Douglas Corporation. P.5

In studying some of the curriculum that was available on the internet through numerous websites and national clearinghouses it was interesting to note that there is widespread agreement that there are 49 character traits that need to be cultivated among youth. These traits are often broken into broader classifications, however the focus of the work of teachers is to create an awareness of all of these qualities that should be present in an upstanding individual.

The curriculum is based on consciousness raising and attitude change. Presumably, if you change the attitudes of youth towards these character traits they might be more interested in taking them up in their relationships. Most if not all of the resources, posters and curriculum outlines were prescriptive rather than dialogue based. In other words, for children of all ages beginning in kindergarten through to grade twelve curriculum focused on giving concise definitions of each character quality and laying out the do's and don'ts of each. The student needs only to memorize what "thou shall and shall not do" when one is trying to demonstrate a particular character quality. Take loyalty for instance: Below is an example taken from the "Character Counts" curriculum:

Loyalty:

Do:

- stand by and protect your family, friends, school and your country.
- Be a good friend
- Look out for those who care about you
- Keep secrets of those who trust you

Don't:

- Betray a trust
- Let your friends hurt themselves
- Do anything just so others will like you.
- Ask a friend to do anything wrong or spread gossip that could hurt others.

The National Centre for the fourth and fifth R's advocates that teachers see themselves "as caregiver, model and mentor, treating students with love and respect and setting a good example and supporting pro-social behavior and correcting hurtful actions." It claims that the teacher's responsibility is to:

create a moral community, helping students respect and care about each other and feel valued within the group and a democratic classroom environment where students are involved in decision-making. They practice moral discipline, using the creation and application of rules as opportunity to foster moral reasoning, self-control, and a respect for others, and teach values through the curriculum by using academic subjects as a vehicle for examining ethical values. (National Centre for fourth and fifth Rs)

How does this prescriptive approach support the student to build an inner picture of how he/she might respond to varying circumstances and dilemmas that are posed in every encounter and with every decision? Do rule based

models of moral or ethical behaviours leave the student limited in his ability to act freely out of his interest in being good and doing the good?

How is character development dealt with in Waldorf schools?

In questioning how character is formed and what the conditions are for moral and character development in Waldorf education I interviewed two teachers at opposite ends of the educational spectrum- kindergarten and Grade twelve. Sue Martin, a kindergarten teacher, gave picture after picture of how early childhood educators intentionally build a strong sense of rhythm into the classroom context in order to support the young child to feel that they are safe and that they can predict what will happen next. It is felt that this high level of predictability assists the child to begin more and more to focus on exercising his imagination and strengthening his physical body. Feeling safe and having close and trusting relationships with the adults around him allows him to experiment with different responses to life's annoyances and develop ways to take control of his natural impulses. In Martin's interview she explained the ways in which rhythm supports the development of the higher brain, the part of our brain where moral and ethical reasoning is made possible.

We know that the more activities a child does in a repetitive way the more he is strengthening the neuro-pathways in his brain, the part of the brain that we refer to as the higher brain. When we have more well developed neuro-pathways what we are actually doing is helping the human being access a higher type of learning. We are overriding the lower brain, the reptilian brain, which is

where the fight and flight responses originate. It is so easy to see the reptilian brain's responses in the kindergarten where they are just beginning to access the higher responses. For example a child has just built a tower and another walks by and accidentally knocks it over. How is that going to be handled by that child?. The first reaction is to just burst out crying or to get up and punch the person who walked by and knocked it over. Through a lot of learning alongside the teacher we want the child to learn to override that first impulse and in a higher more refined way say "You knocked my tower over," and the teacher will be there to say, "I saw that, let's help him to build it back up again" so that there is in a very consistent way of modeling how we work out of the higher brain. We want to help all the way through school –certainly to 21-to ask how do we overcome the first instinct the first impulse. Throughout the school years we are laying down this foundation of how to become problem solvers outside of this little box of our lower brain that tells us run or fight. The tower example has easy answers. Society is bringing very complex situations towards us now and we must ask how we can find our way through that. By the time the child is seven going on to Grade one, we expect there to be some significant impulse control capability. If that foundation has been laid then you don't have a child who has to shout out the answers to the question when the teacher asks and cannot wait or the child who tells the secret word to the game because they have not been able to master their impulse control. (Sue Martin interview)

According to Martin, moral development in the kindergarten has to do with the rightfulness of doing things in rhythm, doing things in season, doing things in a wholesome way. An example of that in kindergarten is

baking the bread, so that the child sees and participates in grinding the grain, that they see the grain go into the flour then into the bowl and then the yeast is added, we knead it, we bake it, we eat it. There is a rightfulness in that this little seed, this grain fed us and there is a whole cycle of life. We try in all that we do to offer that whole cycle. I think in that wholesomeness the child begins to look at the world in a different way and in a reverent way because they can understand where things came from and where they could go. It is their first real bodily experience of past, present and future. I think to lead a moral life you can't forget the past, you need to have some view of the future but you have to live in the present. Every time we bring that experience in a microcosm to the child it feeds them for the bigger experiences that they will meet in the world when they are on their own.

Strong daily and seasonal rhythms are fostered throughout the Waldorf curriculum and serve to strengthen the student's sense of security and ability to take risks among their peers. It deepens the student's resolve to bring order into their own lives and rhythms.

Perhaps the most powerful strategy for character development that Waldorf education employs at all stages of development is the use of story. Student's imaginations are taken up with rich accounts of characters from all kinds of literary forms including fables, legends, myths and biographies. They hear time and time again of characters whose virtues and vice are pitted against each other's. They listen to how characters from all periods of history have struggled between the impulses for good and evil. They hear in the biographies of historical figures that which set them apart in their humanity. They assimilate through story the character traits that stand out as enduring

and worthwhile. In all of that students build a wealth of inner pictures of what they have heard about the battle to overcome inner weaknesses and temptations and how to take a stand for truth. They also begin to build an inner sense of tragic flaws of character and what they can mean for one's life. Stories with their rich picture making possibilities and capacity for metaphors assist the children to build this inner life where they can begin to decide how they will act out of freedom.

Another foundation for character that is built in the early years has to do with the development of humility and initiative. Children need to know in a deep way that they will be forgiven. That they do not have to be perfect in any way and that things can be fixed and mended and situations transformed: Martin gives concrete examples of how this is manifested in the kindergarten classroom:

At our snack table, the first time a child knocks over their water (this usually happens within the first week of school) there is dead silence around the table and they all look at me as the teacher with this sense of dread and I say, "oh accidents happen and now we mop it up". You hear a big sigh because I have just said that they don't have to be perfect and we get on with life. Things fall, they get broken and we mend them. We fix them together and they become contributors to working the world. In the kindergarten we try to have things in the classroom that are mendable. So that is why we don't have plastic things because usually when they get broken they are gone. We have wooden things that can be glued together. The children have to help us get the clamps, the glue and see the whole process unfold. Some things might have to be sent to the workshop but on the whole we try to mend what gets broken. They see things get ripped and I mend them, I

sew them together again. Or maybe a dolly's head gets pulled off and it gets put on again. I think it is a very important message that it is the human being who will intercede, who will reform things, who will make a difference in the world. We try to impart this message that they can be co-creators. They can take what the world gives them and they can transform it and make it work. They see that because they see us do it.

This capacity for humility and forgiveness is particularly important in adolescence when the question arises Where do I fit in the world? If I am not perfect, where do I fit? Teenagers seem to need to know that adults can admit their mistakes and move on. They need to feel that they are loved and accepted even while they make mistakes.

It is felt that within the Waldorf movement "children who feel empowered to make a difference will choose to do good. They can believe that their human involvement will transform things."(Martin interview) Here is where Waldorf education strives to make a difference. The child is educated with a particular reverence for life. The child experiences this reverence and is capable of retaining a sense of wonder and awe. Over time the child comes to believe that the world is fundamentally good. Waldorf schools are concerned about having the child choose to do the good not out of a set of moral rules or guidelines but out of an inner knowing of what is right and good and a desire to make a difference in the world.

The development of character is an inner exploration of what is possible. It begins as a private striving, an inner gesture or desire at first. Eventually it becomes a stance towards life. It is a summoning

of the individual's forces to bring order and rightfulness to their encounters with others. It is not an overnight phenomenon. We do not as human beings suddenly become tolerant or discerning. These traits build slowly, partly as a response to the way we are being treated ourselves and partly out of our desire to act rightly. We need experiences to learn from and to reflect upon. We need to be challenged by those around us to stretch, to be more than we feel we are or can be. And most importantly we need relationships that are faithful, that are there over time so that we can take risks and experiment with who we are. Character is fashioned in the mirror of the other person. For this stretching to happen students need an educational environment that believes in fostering an inner life and a reflective stance to ones life. Waldorf high schools are committed to this very principle. A parent of one of the alumni puts it well by saying:

He had a really good social grounding as well as an academic one. This is a kid who had been taught to reflect. Experience doesn't teach us anything if it isn't reflected upon. He certainly had class advisors that encouraged that. I think they did a very good job at guiding them on an emotional spiritual level as well as an academic one. I thought he had a good grounding as a person. (Barry Marynick interview)

If character development lies within the domain of the inner life it is not surprising that Waldorf high school teachers are committed to asking themselves what it means to have an inner life and how it can be intentionally fostered in the high school student. Leed Jackson, a Grade twelve teacher, explained in his interview that what he finds most astounding about many of the

graduates is “their ability to reach in and hear their own thoughts, identify their own feelings and to act in an effective and transformative way for themselves and for the world.” Essentially he is speaking to their capacity to maintain an active inner life in the face of external chaos.

Jackson asks a broader question about the nature of development itself by asking, “What is this impulse in the human being that goes towards higher and higher development and how does that happen in terms of education in a free way?” Freedom is at the base of character development in that it takes a free inner life to make connections with the world and then to choose how to act in any given situation.

My goal as a math teacher is to ensure that each individual discovers for himself the truth of that which is. And that is true whether it is in math or biology or literature. You want to keep an openness an interest in trying to hear and allow the phenomenology itself to inform the student. Whether that is a workplace later on or whether it is a plant or whether that is a colour or whether that is a scientific theory you want the student to be free to be able to hear and then free to weave the tapestry of their own inner life and thoughts together. Because if you are not allowing the student to put together the perceptual content then who is putting that content together?

Another outstanding feature of the way Waldorf approaches the task of character development or in a sense the development of an inner life is in the searching, even questing for balanced development and self determining behaviour.

An individual must become self aware and come to know themselves. For

instance I can be very successful in the world by using tolerance and patience but if I am missing other qualities like humility then I can create a monster.

The student hopefully by the end from Grade nine-twelve needs to be able to be free enough in their own thinking to create how they wish to balance the forces out in their lives. I can be a very patient person. I have taught Japanese students in metalwork and what they have had to learn more than patience because that wasn't their problem -they actually had to learn stepping forward and asserting themselves, taking initiative. In that particular situation where there are 16 individual projects that student's responsibility is actually to put themselves forward and be more assertive. Because that is also a necessary quality. By meeting various activities hopefully they meet themselves and then in dialogue and discussion with the individual teacher taking hold of the pedagogical moment they see a window to offer the student some assistance or discussion or an image for them to take a step forward in meeting themselves. Where the student themselves is seeing the positive and the negative and then they can be free to figure out how to balance that out and move forward.

Jackson states that he believes that “character development depends a lot on self confidence, self awareness and self-knowledge” He reminds us of the relevance of the maxim “To know oneself one has to know the world and to know the world one has to know oneself.” This is one of the pedagogical principles within the high school. That the curriculum constantly breathes between the microcosm and the macrocosm. He refers to the tension created in Grade nine while they learn joinery, bringing two pieces of wood into alignment. In so doing “they meet the wood and they meet themselves and they see that if they force it they will

lose it and if they don't have enough force they lose it." In order to find the balance these efforts evolve later on towards inner qualities inner subtleties and sensitivities."

A graduate describes this phenomenon from his own experience:

At TWS I had an experience of going on exchange to Germany, going to a different society and learning how to co-exist in a different society. Waldorf was the same thing. There are people from different walks of life and so you learn how to co-exist and how to be interested and take interest in other people's lives and take an interest in other people's wishes and dreams. That is what I found has been quite renowned in my life. As I am now practicing in the working world I realize that there has to be a balance in life and you sort of look on the micro-level and you also look on the macro-level of things when you are doing things and what you are doing may affect other people and you should be conscious of that.. (Krishan Doodnauth: interview)

In Waldorf schools, as students go through the grades with their class there are more and more intense experiences of group work. They have plays, camping trips and outings of all kinds where conflict is inevitable. " In those encounters of conflict their advisors and teachers remain intensely interested in their development. The teachers assist the students to move that conflict to a higher level of resolution as opposed to a polarization or a I hate you or I hate this." (Jackson interview) Of course because the school is relatively small and students remain together over the years they are continually having to meet each other – creating an intense opportunity for self awareness and awareness of others. They get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses not only between students but between

teachers. They see hopefully among the teachers a willingness to recognize their own shortcomings and continue to work on them.

The art of education is also seeing inner development on the part of the teacher and the parents to continually move toward greater awareness of self and service. Waldorf Education is a kind of inner modeling of individual striving to be free human beings. The students learn although maybe not consciously that at any given time there are more than one ways to view the world and at any given moment there are different tools with which to approach something. Sometimes you need to use a hammer if you want to drive a nail in but if it is in a social context there is another skill set.(Jackson interview)

Jackson concludes by saying that in Waldorf education there is a fundamental trust that in the end you can have a free individual who will do the good out of the love of the good and not out of duty of the good. Some of the students come there out of a path of thinking and others come there through a path of feeling or willing or all sorts of manifold ways. Waldorf's approach to character development is then to safeguard the individuals freedom to take their own path on the road to building those character traits that come to define their unique individuality.

Interviews:

Thank you to all those that agreed to be interviewed and for sharing their insights.

Ellie Hariri - Graduated grade 8 in 1990
Corporate Software Trainer- Axiom
Software

Stepanie Brenhan: Graduated 1994
Computer Software Technician for
Alias- a 3D Graphics company that
created Image Studio a software for
Industrial and Car designs.

Krishan Doodnauth: Graduated in 1992
Lawyer in Civil Law specializing in
family law, accidents and civil litigation

Sue Martin TWS Kindergarten Teacher

Leed Jackson TWS Grade Twelve
Teacher

Judith McGill is a parent at TWS. She
has two daughters, Meredith in Grade
seven and Rebecca in grade eight. As a
consultant on school integration and
participatory theatre she works with high
schools across Ontario.