

# **PERSONAL AND UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY IN EDUCATION: FORMING A SCHOOL**

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Is it possible to value and actively work with spirituality in a non-sectarian school setting? And if so, how can balance be established between individual freedom on one hand and the desire for institutional cohesion on the other?

Independent Waldorf schools face this difficult challenge in every community in which they operate. Each school is born out of the unique efforts of local people to meet the educational needs of their children: body, mind and spirit. They have to balance the essential respect all people desire for their religious and spiritual choices with the overarching needs to build a spirit-filled and unified school. Each community, geographic region and culture requires a unique spirit of education to serve the needs of its children and their families. A Waldorf school must respect the heritage and beliefs of its members and seek for ways to bridge differences between people.

It is a complex balancing act especially as Waldorf schools now exist in countries whose spiritual/religious outlooks include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Animism, Judaism and Secular Humanism. Needless to say each school must adapt to its circumstances. While respecting individual freedoms they also need to build fellowship within their communities as well as with other Waldorf schools. Finding this delicate balance between personal and universal aspects of spirituality strengthens Waldorf school communities. Members must necessarily take an interest in and learn about one another and will inevitably face conflicts. These cannot be avoided. In fact, conflicts are only made more intractable through avoidance. Developing and maintaining a spirit-filled educational community requires conscious effort and effective strategies for working through the challenges that arise.

To illuminate these ideas I would like to share a process I recently employed in working with the newly forming Saltwater School in Courtenay, BC. I was invited to help them identify and develop the pedagogy and unique spirit of their new school. Over the course of a week, I met with their faculty, board and broader community. Each member brought a personally unique worldview and yet had a strong desire to create an educational community that openly nurtures the whole human being: body, soul and spirit.

I spoke openly with them about potentially difficult and divisive issues connected with spirituality in Waldorf education. Experience has shown that it is best to try to work together through challenging differences. This supports peoples' ability to stay open, thus, withholding judgment and assisting their process of building a

tolerant and creative learning community. No one has to agree with anything someone else says, but it is essential to talk openly about spirituality and to actively listen to one another. Tolerance alone for another's viewpoint is not enough; interest in others' ideas and beliefs and seeking for an overarching spirit for the school are essential to building a spirit-filled school community.

The founder of Waldorf education, Rudolf Steiner, spoke to the teachers of the first Waldorf school (Stuttgart, 1919) about the central spiritual role of "the Christ" in the development of human consciousness. He did not mean the person Jesus, but rather the unique spiritual being and impulse that found its way into incarnation and entered (mostly unconsciously) all the world's peoples and the earth itself. He termed it variously the "Christ Impulse", the "Deed of Christ" or the "Representative of Humanity." He emphasised that this universal spirit represents that which is highest and best in all humanity and impacts all people regardless of their religious persuasion or belief. This spiritual being is our potential, our inspiration, a universal teacher in our striving to be human.

This notion is challenging for most people as it runs counter to aspects of what most religions teach. Therefore, it often stirs up a wide variety of difficult feelings. Nevertheless, Steiner asserted that the Christ, the spiritual potential of all humanity, is working at the core of Waldorf pedagogy. So, while being non-denominational and open to people of all persuasions, Waldorf school members have the difficult task of also finding their own relationship with the Christ. Rather than denying this fact or trying to avoid it, it has proven most fruitful to explore the potential significance of this spiritual/religious/cultural hot-topic with eyes wide open.

At the Saltwater School, the faculty members and I began our process by listening to one another's experiences concerning our spiritual and religious upbringing and beliefs. Each faculty member was given time to share her story. All were remarkably different, yet each contained universal elements of wanting to belong, wanting to find meaning, wanting to connect truthfully with the divine.... No interruptions or comments were permitted. When dealing with questions of spirit and peoples' personal relationship to spirit and religion, the principles of freedom, tolerance and interest are paramount. Having established this foundation of openness and trust with one another, we read some of what Steiner had to say about the Christ Impulse to the first Waldorf teachers and then paraphrased how we each understood those ideas. We then discussed our own responses to these thoughts. The conversations were rich, open and wide-ranging. We drew from our hopes and fears and successfully wove together the strands of our lives into a robust warp that could then serve the cloth of the whole school community.

We built a collegial vessel of trust by following a process of listening, speaking, studying and then discussing guiding thoughts, questions and concerns. As our work unfolded, the teachers felt more and more united, that they were all pulling in unison. They created a sound foundation of openness and trust. They then decided to work together to create their first school festival, the autumn celebration of Michaelmas, in a way that would both strengthen the unique spirit of the school and respect the spiritual

faiths of their community. Coming to their newly found unity gave them the requisite courage and insight to design a festival appropriate for their school community.

These teachers stand at the core of their new school as both its founders and guiding lights. The manner in which they choose to teach, govern the school and communicate about their work each day impacts the healthy development of their school. Their deeds individually and as a group either support or challenge this development. Their courage to take interest in one another's beliefs as well as their willingness to work towards an understanding of spirituality and Waldorf education has helped facilitate a healthy collegial atmosphere. Furthermore, their example lives as a guiding inspiration for the entire school community. The rigorous process they went through demonstrates that it is possible to work with spirituality in a non-sectarian school to foster trust, improved communication and collegueship. Their honest quest for knowledge has strengthened not only their collegial work but also the very heart of their school. Their living example inspires trust and communicates the courageous vision of their initiative to the world. The school community will in turn benefit not only from the care and guidance these professionals offer their children but also from their earnest human striving they have exemplified to understand and work through potentially contentious issues. These colleagues have demonstrated a way to balance the essential needs each individual has for freedom and respect with a community's need for cohesive vision and action. Their dedication to working through differences has strengthened their ability to nurture the unique spirit that guides their school.

*Waldorf Education arose as an impulse for personal, cultural and spiritual renewal after the tragedy of the First World War. The school was founded in Stuttgart through the generosity of Emil Molt, a wealthy industrialist in collaboration with Rudolf Steiner, a scientist and philosopher. Their aim was to provide a well rounded, holistic education for the children of the workers at the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory. This was not an elite private academy, but one founded for all children of workers and those from the surrounding community. Since the successful founding of this first school, Waldorf education has spread creating over 1600 independent Waldorf schools on five continents.*

## **Bibliography**

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