



The Tricky Triangle Children, Parents, and Teachers

Dorit Winter

Any school community has three distinct populations. But, in Waldorf schools at least, after 78 years, the relationship among them has changed. There are the children. There are the children's parents. There are the children's teachers. Children—parents—teachers. Why are these relationships so tricky?¹

Inherent in the blood relationship of parent and child is intimacy at the cost of objectivity. In the best of circumstances, a mother's or father's love is unconditional; the parent is strongly bonded with the child. They are united in a tight nucleus. In times gone by this tight bond might have extended to the larger family, to the tribe. Tribal behavior does not concern itself with an individual. Tribal loyalty precludes objective perception of the differences between one person and the next. Much evil has resulted from tribal consciousness, a consciousness which ruled in ancient civilizations when individual development was vouchsafed the entitled few—pharaoh, priest, chief-tain—who determined the fates of their tribes.

Since the Renaissance, civilizations have tended to reward the achievement of individuals. For individuals to succeed, they must leave behind the circumscription of their tribe. Fictional heroes and heroines often take this route. So do real people who must often clash with “the old”—the family, the ancestors—in order to assert “the new,” the individual. We call that growing up.

In a sense, parents and children need to be “tribal” in their disposition. Loyalty, unconditional love, support through thick and thin are requisite. This is a subjective love.

Objective love is quite a different thing. Objective love is not tribal; it does not exclude, it includes. Objective love does not love only its own, does not love only the familiar, but can enfold the separate, the individual.

It may sound simplistic, but that makes it no

less true, to say that the entire trajectory of education consists of transforming subjective love into objective love. We can grasp how difficult this transformation is when we consider that we have been engaged in it for thousands of years. In this sense, education is a microcosm of the evolution of human consciousness.

Objectivity in any form is challenging. We cannot help but see everything from our own point of view, subjectively. Intention, discipline, schooling, and effort are required if we are to overcome our inherent natural inclination for subjectivity.

Pure objectivity is not the ideal. Pure objectivity is machine-like. A machine does not make exceptions. It does not see the individual circumstance, the individual need. Bureaucracies are maddeningly objective; objective to a fault. They care nothing for individual circumstances. A telephone “menu” is perfectly objective. So is the computer.

The ideal is tempered objectivity. Objectivity tempered by love.

But whereas love is inherent in subjectivity, it is acquired in objectivity.

The love of a parent for a child is subjective. The love of a teacher for a child is, or should be, objective. The love of a parent for a child must be subjective.

The love of the teacher for a child must be objective. But neither the sympathy of a subjective relationship, nor the distance of an objective one, can flourish by itself.

In a Waldorf teacher training, the fundamental goal is to enable the adult student to jettison her or his own sack of rocks, so that he or she can approach a child without the distorting weight of personal predilections. Such imbalances are part and parcel of each of us. We have our biographies, or life circumstances, or likes and dislikes, sympathies and antipathies. Waldorf education is predicated on the notion that a teacher aims to

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see through these screens, to see a child as the child is. Such objectivity includes compassion, but it is the compassion of which the higher self is capable. Parental love is, so to speak, a “given”. We are meant to love our families, to stick to one another through thick and thin. But such an attitude does not easily embrace the “tough love” that a teacher must cultivate.

A Waldorf school teacher strives to connect his or her higher self to the nascent higher self of the child or youngster. This objective attitude, if achieved, leaves the child free. The child is not made in the teacher’s image. The child is not there to satisfy a teacher’s needs, certainly not the teacher’s need to love. Yet love the children the teachers do. If they are not conscious of the appropriate form of their love, troubles abound. And parents feel, rightly, compromised.

Thus we arrive at the fundamental reality of the tricky triangle with which we started. The role of a parent is different from the role of a teacher. They play different roles in the life of a child.

It is obvious. But in a Waldorf school community, these essentially different roles can become confused.

Many Waldorf school parents gratefully align their home life with school ideas, with a “Waldorf lifestyle”: no TV, healthy diet, bedtime rituals, daily rhythm, and so on. Furthermore, they are encouraged to become active in their children’s school. Without this active parent engagement in the schools, the schools would likely grind to a halt. In truth, parent volunteers constitute an indispensable asset in any Waldorf school. And that’s where the confusion of roles can easily become an issue. If a parent becomes indispensable to the running of any aspect of the school, how is that parent to understand the limit of his or her role?

Waldorf school teachers are nothing if not committed to their calling. Theirs is not a profession, we are wont to say, theirs is a vocation. Many graduates of Waldorf teacher training programs will tell you that they became Waldorf school teachers in order to do something meaningful in the world.

They are, generally speaking, passionate about their work. “Teachers-as-artists,” theirs is more than a job. The danger for them is that they identify too much with the children they teach.

They become subjective. They lose their objectivity.

Seventy-eight years ago² there was still some formality in the relationship of parent and child to teacher. The teacher was endowed with some inherent authority. In the 33 years that I’ve been involved in Waldorf education (45 years if we start when I entered the 10th grade at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York City) this authority has gone the way of most formalities. It has evaporated, along with all sorts of expectations, which in that bygone era were considered normal. Dress, language, behavior... all have become informal. In all that informality it’s little wonder that parents and teachers are confused about their roles.

But if we don’t clarify these roles, if this confusion persists, Waldorf education will also become confused, vitiated, and porous.

Waldorf teaching is a profession. The Waldorf teacher has skills and knowledge that are specific to the Waldorf teacher. Any teacher must have skills, must know what she or he is talking about, have the knowledge she or he is mandated to impart. But, in addition, the Waldorf teacher is schooled in self-knowledge. And this self-knowledge comes through the Waldorf teacher’s study of anthroposophy. Anthroposophy informs a Waldorf school curriculum, but it also provides the framework for the Waldorf teacher’s inner striving, without which she or he will not become a Waldorf teacher.

And this striving is largely hidden from parents. Parents may catch glimpses of it, but essentially, they are shut out from it, unless they take the trouble to engage in such a schooling themselves.

Thus the parents may find themselves looking at a scene they cannot quite penetrate. What are those teachers up to? Why won’t they “open up”? Why do some of them act as if their classrooms have an invisible threshold that parents may not cross? Parents feel that something mysterious is going on. Some parents join the teacher training or a study group in their school. But others may start to criticize, to complain, in an attempt to make comprehensible what is otherwise not comprehensible. In so doing, they unwittingly weaken the very thing that makes a Waldorf school what it is.

As anyone who has tried it knows, a good marriage requires a good measure of independ-

ence by both parties. Two strong individuals are more likely to last in that relationship than two needy people who have joined forces to overcome their loneliness. Strength in the individual, independence of the individual, will mean less suspicion, more trust; less imposed restraint, more acceptance of the other as he or she is. Generally, it's a long path to reach that goal, a path strewn with boulders of our own making. Most of us have not had "marriage training." When we fall out of love, we either find a new foundation for the relationship, or cause one another endless grief. But what would "marriage training" be? One of its goals would have to be self-reliance. For only when we are self-reliant can we have a healthy, free, and independent relationship with the other.

Parents are never "free" of their children. Theirs is a lifelong connectedness. But a teacher must always be "free" of the children. If parents and teachers understand the difference in their relationship to a child, then parents and teachers will be able to have a self-reliant relationship to one another. They will not fear encroachment by the other on their own territory. Then a true collaboration can support the growing, maturing, developing child who must master so much, learn so much, cope with so much.

"Love," says Rudolf Steiner, "is the experiencing of another being in one's own soul."³ Such surrender, if it is not to result in maudlin and co-dependent sympathy, requires strength. Waldorf teacher training is not a panacea, but, through the study and schooling of anthroposophy, it can provide a means for garnering this type of strength so that the teacher can, by experiencing the child in his or her own soul, recognize what the child truly needs in order to gain access to his or her highest self. This can only work if the child is in no way being used by the teacher. Selfless compassion in the teacher can educate the child for life.

This is a noble calling. And a challenging one. It is an ongoing process. A Waldorf teacher is never a finished product. If a Waldorf teacher is a finished product, she or he is no longer a true Waldorf teacher. Of course, self-development cannot be undertaken at the cost of a healthy relationship to the children, but it really is the case

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that just as continual evolution is inherent in the picture of the growing child, so it is also inherent in the picture of the teacher, who must also continue to grow. The rate of growth is slower for the adult. And the adult must become his or her own best teacher, always striving, striving especially for true self-knowledge, which cannot easily lull itself into complacency, especially as regards selflessness. Without understanding from the parents, a teacher's achievements are much harder to accomplish. And without understanding from the teacher, parents' achievements are much harder to accomplish, too.

Support from a strong partner is not blind support. But if both parties, parents and teachers, can meet each other through the security of their very different roles in the life of the child and in the life of the school, Waldorf education has a much better chance of flourishing into the future.

Knowing that the role of the parent in his or her relationship to the child is fundamentally different from the role of the teacher in his or her relationship to the children can help us recognize that the role of the parent to the life in the school must also be different from the role of the teacher to the life in the school. Because every Waldorf school is its own independent entity, each school will have to find its own way to the practical details of parent-teacher collaboration. What, for instance, is the task of the College of Teachers? What is the task of the Board?

These questions vex us in our Waldorf school communities because we are unable to delineate our roles clearly. Any decision regarding the welfare of the children should be in the hands of those working with the children, the teachers. Any decision regarding the welfare of the institution should be in the hands of those legally responsible for the institution, namely, the Board. But simple as this sounds in theory, it seems endlessly complicated in real life. In real life we get confused about our mandate, we lose sight of the common goal, we get polarized. Our great striving is to keep the whole child before us: head, heart, and hands; thinking, feeling, and willing; spirit, soul, and body. Only by recognizing the true task of each of these three will we be able to educate the child to withstand the storms of life.

And only if parents and teachers recognize their distinct tasks will schools withstand the fracturing forces loose in the world. Then parents and teachers can all be proud of the amazing work, the daily miracles that grace life in Waldorf schools.

Endnotes

1. In the greater San Francisco Bay Area, five Waldorf school teachers, including several long-time teachers, from four schools have been dismissed since Easter 2006. One teacher officially resigned—but that may be a case of splitting hairs. In each case, serious concerns about the process, and in particular about parent influence on the process, have been raised by teachers and parents alike. What follows is an attempt to find some clarifying thoughts. Ultimately each school, as an autonomous institution, will have to find its own method of dealing with this ever difficult question, but clearly the phenomenon is now so widespread

that we might consider facing it together.

2. The Rudolf Steiner School in New York City was founded in 1928.

3. Steiner, R. *A Road to Self-Knowledge and the Threshold of the Spiritual World*, Ch. 9. Steiner Press, London: 1975.

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