

INTRODUCTION

My title owes a debt to one of my favorite quotations from Rudolf Steiner's educational work. It refers to a paragraph from the last lecture of his *Education as a Force for Social Change*, given on August 17, 1919. Three days later, Steiner traveled to Stuttgart to conduct the training for the first teachers at what would become the first Waldorf school. But since there was no Waldorf school by that point, nor a "Waldorf education," Steiner may be seen addressing the education of teachers everywhere:

We should not allow teachers to teach before they have gained a concept of the selfishness that strives toward the nearest god, that is, toward the angel. We should not allow teachers to teach before they have achieved an idea of the non-egotistical forces that determine human fate and exist spatially distributed over the Earth, that is, the nature of the archangels. *Nor should we allow them to teach before they have gained an idea of how the past and the future affect our culture...and how that undefined rebel of the future can save us.*

For Steiner, each of us is accompanied through life by an immaterial existence that tradition calls an angel. Our angels, according to Steiner, give us strength. And yet we may mistake our own angel, and its influence, for a larger god, and selfishly seek to inflict what is meant for us alone, what is true for us alone, on the rest of the world. "Angel," for Steiner, was a category far beyond the image of a winged, gown-clad being. An angel is a "set of powers," an immaterial

mediator between our individual human lives and the spiritual, supersensible world that we also inhabit but of which we are largely unaware in our day-to-day existence.

For Steiner, human fate, larger than that of an individual, is associated with beings and powers he names the archangels. When we work with other human beings, we engage with the work of archangels.

Education prepares us for an unknown, uncertain future. Conformity, convention, and a lack of creative thinking and action will not serve us fully to face this future. We cannot know, and can only guess, what the future will bring, and we educate truly when we educate for inspiration—for insight and creativity—in the face of the unknown. We aim not to define our students, not to pigeonhole them according to our own inevitably partial and too-narrow view of the world they will inhabit and make. We aim to educate them while leaving them free to rebel, not for no reason, but for a reason, for a cause.

Who was Rudolf Steiner? We could say, in his call for a transformation of education in order to honor human creativity, that he was a “rebel with a cause.” Who do we wish our students to become? In the best sense of the phrase, we hope they, too, will be rebels with a cause. And, in teaching them, we, too, may choose to become rebels with a cause.



This book is about twenty years in the making. Following my dissertation, a history of Waldorf schools in the United States, I turned my attention to Rudolf Steiner’s educational principles, methods, and curriculum. As with the history, I did not and do not see these as static, but, taking Steiner

seriously, as living ideas with which we must continually engage, as we do with living beings, in order to understand, make sense of, and implement them for the healthful education of children.

Writing the history had awakened me to the various ways in which what we call “Waldorf education” came into being, slowly, over decades. Sometimes Waldorf education hews closely to what I understand were Steiner’s intentions; other times, “Waldorf” practices seem actually to contradict what Steiner wished for education. Gradually making sense of what we do in Waldorf schools, piece by piece and point by point, led me to the creation of many of the essays in this collection.

At the same time, I was acutely aware that the needs and constitutions of students in the twenty-first century were different in significant ways from those of Germany in the 1920s. I am fortunate to be both a full-time high school teacher and administrator and a part-time teacher of teachers. These endeavors are mutually reinforcing. Teaching adolescents makes me a better teacher of teachers, and teaching teachers makes me a better teacher of teens. And, together, these jobs allow me to live with the tension between what Steiner said and did and what today’s students require. Many of the essays in this collection examine this tension.

In 2008, I started a blog. Initially, I did this in order to share some of my ideas with my adult students and others in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere who were thinking about similar questions. Engaging students on my blog has been successful; engaging others, not so much. Regardless, as I worked through Steiner’s education lectures—in

order to teach them in faculty meetings, in study groups, with teacher education colleagues, and on my own—I wrote responses to what I found, and many of these found their way to the blog. Most of this book consists of what were initially blog posts, updated and rewritten as necessary.

My imagined audience for this book is primarily Waldorf school teachers and teacher education students who are working or will work to bring Steiner’s education work to practical application in schools. I will also be happy if other teachers—those teaching in public and private schools that have no official connection with Waldorf education—appreciate this book. Independent of venue, my concern is almost exclusively with teaching and learning, not with schools. Although I have worked in private schools my whole career, I don’t believe Steiner was particularly interested in founding lots of schools. His interest was in transforming education to make it practical and healthful for students in the industrialized world, particularly, in the aftermath of World War I, so that they could grow to make the world more peaceful and more just.

I can also imagine parents reading this book, particularly if they want to know more about Steiner’s educational work, or if they are contemplating using “Waldorf education” in a homeschool. My hope is that they find an open-minded, thoughtful approach to Steiner’s work that demonstrates the intensely creative but nonprescriptive mode in which he thought, spoke, and wrote.

And, finally, I can imagine former students—adults, high school, middle school, and those of any Waldorf school—reading this to learn more about what their education actually contained.

Readers who do not already have some familiarity with Waldorf schools and Steiner's work will still get a lot out of it—I hope—but may also scratch their heads at some points, as if to say, “What is all the fuss about?”

To this I would reply, “Exactly.”

By inference, these readers will be able to tell that something is going on in Waldorf schools with which I take exception. To these readers, I say, take what you can and count your blessings if sometimes you don't really know what I'm talking about. For instance, if you've simply never heard of “math gnomes,” your life is just fine.

My wish is that any who read this book find inspiration in their own ways to imagine an education for a future that's better than the present—more peaceful, more just, more humane—and to become rebels for this cause.

I also want to acknowledge that this book challenges conventional wisdom about several practices and components of what has become a somewhat standardized “Waldorf” curriculum, such as circle time, math gnomes, main lesson books, blackboard drawing, and Norse myths. And I believe it's important to be clear that by calling these into question, I am not asking anyone to stop teaching, in freedom and with insight, as they believe they ought best teach. I have worked in Waldorf schools for more than thirty years, and my wife and I sent both of our children through Waldorf schools. We have the deepest respect for anyone who devotes a life to teaching in a Waldorf school or tries to bring Steiner's ideas to students. But that does not mean that there's only one way to look at what we do in Waldorf schools, or that we cannot continually, conscientiously examine and alter and improve our practice.