

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: WHEN YOU ARE YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER

School at home with the Waldorf Curriculum: to some this is a contradiction. The Waldorf Curriculum was originated by Rudolph Steiner in answer to the question of how school could be provided for all students, at that time specifically for children of workers in Emil Molt's Waldorf Cigarette Factory. The school begun for that purpose was in Stuttgart, Germany and continues today. In these times, especially in the United States, many families realize that for various reasons their children will thrive better through an education at home rather than in an institution. Some see the strength of the Waldorf curriculum in its intimate connection with a deep understanding of the human being and of child development in the context of body, life, soul, and spirit. When a parent is their own child's teacher, one individual fulfills two roles in a child's life—it can be done!

When I look back over fifteen years of teaching our children at home with the Waldorf curriculum, I am reminded of the book *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* by Arthur Ransome. This children's book tells the story of four siblings who are left tending a sailboat anchored in a river at its mouth into the English Channel. The captain leaves to get supplies, and for some unexplained reason, does not return. The tide rises, and through a series of events and decisions, the children, who are experienced sailors, find themselves crossing the North Sea at night in a storm. (They *do* reach the Netherlands safely.)

When our children were born, we had no thought of homeschooling; we didn't even think of the possibility. When our first daughter was born, a friend, who had attended the Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School, gave me the book *Education Towards Freedom*. I knew immediately that such an education would be right. A Waldorf education for our child became a given for me. When we moved to Connecticut, where there was no Waldorf school, I worked with a group of parents who had a play group and who were interested in starting a school. When we moved again, this time to Southern California, now with two daughters, we were headed for a crisis.

The drive to the nearest Waldorf school was forty-five minutes on a crowded freeway. My daughter was a child who needed afternoon naps and long nights of sleep. She was also an introvert who needed plenty of quiet time to herself, and also liked people, especially other children. My strong intention that she should have a Waldorf education, and my equally strong intention to protect her from the life-draining aspects of modern living led to a crisis for me that I could only resolve by deciding to teach her myself at home using the Waldorf curriculum. We began in kindergarten the year she was five turning six, knowing that we would decide about schooling one year at a time. We taught her and her younger sister at home through Grade 11 with the Waldorf curriculum. At that point they each went into a high school (a Waldorf High School for the younger sister) and graduated from there. It seems we did make it to the other shore.

Growing up meets coming down: The curriculum as guide

Just as flowing water alters the form of the earth, and shapes even the hardest mineral, the currents of change as a child's physical and life bodies grow up while their soul and self come down are quite powerful in shaping their constitution and even the events and people around them. When currents flowing in opposite directions meet, a vortex results out of which many forms and possibilities may arise. The indications Rudolf Steiner gave teachers about what to teach, and how to

teach, grew out of his insights into the developing human being combined with the deeply held questions that the teachers brought. This curriculum, as it has been developed and elaborated for over 80 years, is still answering deeply held questions.

A curriculum is a course of classes or study (Latin “*curricula*,” a little running, a little course) and a course is a path for movement, not just a list of topics. Although a curriculum may originate in the context of an institution, as the Waldorf or Steiner Curriculum did, can it function outside the institution? Can the course be taught at home? This book is an extended answer of “yes” to that question.

Rhythms: day, week, season, year, life

How can home life provide the context for schooling? For us, the key has been a certain level of structure—structure for both the space and the time that is school. We have always had a room that is the school room (even if it is sometimes also something else when school is out), with a large free-standing three-panel blackboard, art work, a nature table, and (after kindergarten), the children’s desks. I always ring my copper bell, and greet the children at the door of the room with a handshake to begin the school day. Once in the classroom, we always begin with singing and the morning verse; we always end the day with an ending verse. We all know when we are in school, and when school is out.

Placing or finding ourselves in relation to time has been much more of a challenge than organizing our space, but certain rhythms have emerged. Once we decided not to structure our lives around the schedule of an institution, well then...what? I struck out into new territory and decided to honor sleep (I sometimes feel like Joan of Arc charging into the Battle of Orleans when the subject of sleep comes up). I decided that I would not wake anyone up, that the children would wake on their own. So, coming out of sleep, begins our day. On school days we begin work as soon as breakfast is completed and everyone is dressed.

We have recess and lunch, and end the day when the school work for that day is done—usually about six hours after we started.

Here was the weekly rhythm we developed that lasted fairly unchanged until eighth grade. For the older student the rhythm in high school changed, and I describe that below. (By the time I was teaching sixth and ninth grades we needed Mondays for German class and for practice and main lesson book work.) Monday was a transition day after the weekend activities. On Mondays we had “exploring day,” when we spent three or four hours in a quiet place in nature, away from people or buildings. The children were free to go where they wanted and I sat nearby or followed, saying nothing, like a mother bear going about her business, but keeping an eye on the cubs. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday were structured school days with the consistent pattern of greeting, circle, main lesson, breaks, specialty class, and closing. Tuesday’s specialty class was painting, Wednesday’s was handwork or modeling, and Thursday’s was music days. The three days together allowed for a rhythm of main lesson work that proceeded thus: introduction of material—sleep—review and work on the lesson—sleep—review, elaborate and finish the work. Friday was the day for practice with math and music, and lessons with other teachers.

So far so good, but not all weeks are the same, and this is where the seasonal festivals took me by the hand and gently, little by little, led me into another world. Rudolf Steiner gave many indications on the renewal of festivals, and the relation of festivals to the seasons. We were already part of a family festival group when we started homeschooling, and that has continued into the present. The four major festivals, which fall a few days after alignments with the sun, except Easter, which aligns exactly with sun and moon, provide the structure of the year. Transitions between these festivals may also be felt, and celebrated. Every day is a festival day; one must just work to be conscious of the festival quality present at the time. In relation to the curriculum, the festivals *are* the curriculum in kindergarten but in the grades where topics are taught in main lesson blocks, the festivals are

like the fixed stars in front of which the movable main lesson blocks take place. Each lesson takes on slightly different coloring depending on the season. Teaching about ancient Egypt, with its emphasis on the physical body in relation to the spiritual world, becomes quite intense if it happens to fall during the time around Easter. Teaching botany in the fall when plants are dying has a very different character than teaching botany in the spring when plants are sprouting. Chemistry, with its focus on fire and transformation is intensified in the fall when nature is, in a way, “burning up.”

The seasons provide a spiraling progression, but each school year, and each year in a human life, has an entirety, a completion. Our school year culminates in a class play in the spring and a final assembly the last day of school each year. As with celebrating festivals, class plays take place in the context of community. Every family is part of several communities. One of our communities is other homeschooling families. Every school year, including kindergarten, we have worked with other families to produce and perform plays for each grade that is represented in the group of children. From fairy tales on to the saints, *The Paradise Play*, the *Kalevala*, Greek myths, the transition to awareness of Christ, Joan of Arc, Goethe's *Magic Flute*, and *Pygmalion* the stories progress through the steps of the awakening that takes place as children come down to earth. The plays always involve music, singing or playing instruments, blackboard art for the backdrop, and hand-work on costumes. We all pull together until that magic moment when the audience is seated and quiet, the introduction is over and the first line must be spoken. Each year's play is like a play-within-a-play as the whole school year unfolds in miniature. The end of the year is complete with the final assembly in which the children's music, movement, and recitation skills can be proudly presented.

Finally, there are rhythms that go beyond one year in the course of a life. Steiner has given extensive insights into the seven-year rhythms in life, but there are others. Simultaneously teaching grades that are three years apart (the age difference of my two children) has made me aware

RECIPE FOR A BLACKBOARD

Materials:

32 in. x 80 in. Masonite Primed Smooth Flush Hardboard Hollow Core Interior **Door Slab** (30" and 36" widths are available depending upon your needs and space).

1-1/2 in. x 72 in. Brass Continuous (Piano) Hinge (alternate materials such as stainless steel are available; hinges might also be found in 2" width)

Blackboard Paint, we used Blackboard Slating, Product Number BB-391, W.M. Barr & Co., Memphis, TN

Handheld Power Paint Sprayer, we used a Wagner 305 (sprayers of this type are referred to as Cup Guns); you may be able to find other inexpensive quality models, but they need to be made to handle paint not just stain, look for 1,800 to 2,400 psi. We found that a sprayer produced superior results to a brush.

Construction:

Attach one piano hinge to the first two doors while they are standing face-to-face on their side edges. Then, lay the first door flat on its back face with the other door side upright; attach the second hinge. Finally, stand the two attached doors side upright and attach the third door to the open face of the second hinge.

In an outdoor covered space, stand the set of three panels upright angling the outside two so that the whole piece stands stably. Apply one coat of blackboard paint, let dry, sand with very fine steel wool and repeat three times. The surface should have some texture as a slick surface does not take chalk as well. (See Figures 4 & 5.)

Move to the classroom and season with white chalk rubbed off with erasers (wool erasers work best). When needed, clean with a wet cloth. Enjoy your new blackboard!

of a three-year pulse that beats through the curriculum. Although I didn't plan the coincidence of topics ahead of time, I sometimes found myself teaching the same topic in both grades and I saw how the meaning is intensified and elaborated at three-year intervals.

For instance, I found myself teaching about Thor and his hammer—which he can fling to the ends of the world and it always returns—at the same time as I taught about the circulatory system in which the blood pulses to the farthest extremities of the body and returns to the heart. I was teaching about magma and volcanoes, including a very active watercolor painting, at the same time as I taught how to graph the results of a physics experiment on phase changes in the thermodynamics block. The topic of business math in grade six coincided with the history of revolutions in grade nine, both of which relate to the concept of the threefold social organism. One can experience, through this kind of teaching, how material is deepened and elaborated and made more conscious in three-year pulses.

Every Waldorf teacher experiences moments that clearly reveal the power of the curriculum to meet children at their level of consciousness. One such moment came for me in the eighth grade when my daughter—after having studied Plato's descriptions of God creating the elements using the regular solid forms—herself finished the long process of transforming clay from one solid form into the next, and finally into a dodecahedron. Then, remembering Plato's description of the dodecahedron (which he said God used "in the delineation of the universe"), she declared about the dodecahedron: "It is the human being." At such a time, one wants to jubilate for the forces that shape the growing child and for the gift that is the Waldorf curriculum!

Children are gradually stepping out into the world as they move into High School, and, we hope, taking up their destinies. In High School our daughters were engaged with more teachers: a shepherd and farmer for farm practicum, a horseback riding instructor and intramural basketball for sports, a German tutor for foreign language, a woodcarver for crafts. I taught art and music, as well as sewing. We

also continued our work with other parents and children in festivals, plays, and specialty classes such as music. In High School we could no longer maintain the Monday exploring day in nature; we had German on Mondays, main lesson blocks Tuesday through Thursday, and outside lessons on Fridays. The rhythm of the school day remained much as before. Movement, verses, and singing at the beginning of the lesson, main lesson blocks with a break followed by lunch and free time, and then practice classes in the afternoon. Homework was assigned, and, of course, each main lesson began with recalling what we had done in the previous lesson to provide continuity of lessons across time and sleep. In our case, when I presented two main lessons, I always worked with the younger daughter first; the older one had a separate space where she could work individually on her lesson before her work with me.

When young people wake up to their own individuality, we, as teachers, are called upon to meet them at that level. This type of meeting is beautifully described by Laurens van der Post in his book *A Mantis Carol*, in which he imagines a medal for the “First Class in the Order of Being”:

For valor in the field of life, distinguished conduct in the battle of being and steadfastness in defending its quality and texture against aberration and distortion by the prevailing hatred, malice and envy of our collective time, ensuring thereby an example of how devotion to being for sheer being’s sake and pursuing it to its own end, is the true glory of life on earth and the unique source of its renewal and increase of meaning and light in the darkness ahead.

One could well aspire to teach, especially adolescents, out of such an image—an image so close to the bone.