

# SAN FRANCISCO WALDORF SCHOOL

2938 Washington Street • San Francisco, CA 94115 • (415) 931-2750

## Cultural Diversity and Waldorf Education

Dr. Robert McDermott, President of California Institute of Integral Studies,  
Interviewed by Ewai Eva Chan and Henry S. Dakin,  
Wednesday, February 6, 1991

*Dr. McDermott:* The question is whether Waldorf education has an open and positive relationship with symbols, images, and stories from other cultures and other religions. Some ways of putting the question can be easily answered. For example: if you say, "Is this like a Catholic school which would not have a picture of the Buddha, Krishna, Lao Tzu or Mohammed, or another image except one that is in the direct line of Judaeo-Christian tradition?" No, it is not like that. Waldorf education is much more global, intercultural, and pluralistic in working with the child and with respect to the entire history of the human community.

Does a Waldorf school have a stronger relationship to Christianity than to other religions? The answer there is quite easy: yes, there is a much stronger relationship to Christianity than to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or to some kind of humanistic naturalism, which is a fairly significant part of public education.

How does the Waldorf educational system actually work in the process of educating the child? Here you get a variety of answers, depending on where the school is, and how the teachers are trained and what kinds intellectual and spiritual materials are available to the teachers.

What do the Waldorf schools do?

There is no one thing that they do. Waldorf education is not a set of dogmas, of requirements, or prescriptions. Waldorf education is an *approach* to education. The approach has to do with creating schools that enable teachers to enable children to grow in freedom, love, and creativity. And therefore, in some schools—for example, if you had a Waldorf school in the People's Republic, in Tokyo, in Australia, or in São Paulo—these would be very different from each other. Put a Waldorf school in Africa, it would be very different from a Waldorf school in London. There isn't a set curriculum that Waldorf schools have to use. But if you based a school on Rudolf Steiner's understanding of the child (which is what John Dewey and Maria Montessori were working on) in the sense of what he *thinks*—not only what he thinks, but what other people think—teachers can develop the ability to relate to the inner life of the child, not by dogmas and not by beliefs but by an ability.

If there were eighteen children in a class, and I'm the teacher and you're one of the children, then I would have to say to myself every day and every night (that is very important—I would have to take it to sleep with me at night), "What would Ewai need for her development? How can she learn to play?" Because if she plays as a child, then

she won't be violent and nasty and depressed when she is thirty or forty. Then in third grade, how could I help her relate to these great mythic figures? And in seventh grade, how could I help her relate to history, geometry, and language study?

Now, this is an approach—it is not a system, not a set of techniques, it is an approach—to teaching based on a deep spiritual, practical understanding of the child. And you can say, "That's very nice, but should we have a Madonna in the classroom?" All right, yes or no? I don't know exactly what Steiner would have said, but from what I understand, he would say, "Who are the children, who are the teachers?" Now, if they are in the West, they have chosen to come into that cultural spiritual stream. They are in that tao. Now, in that tao, this figure, the Madonna, is very important, and will have an important, positive effect on the inner life of the child. Notice what he wouldn't say. He wouldn't say, "Christianity is the true religion, Buddhism is not a true religion. You should have the Madonna and you should not have a boddhisattva." He would not say that.

Then you may say, "Suppose we get into history. Should we study the history of Tibet, or should we study, say, the history of Europe and America?" I hope and assume that

Waldorf education, we have to remember: we are not talking about this curriculum or that curriculum, we are talking about "these children." Education doesn't exist for societies and for teacher trainings, or for some abstract system. All education exists for children. That's what they are here for.

From what I understand, and I have certainly had an active interest in these questions, Waldorf as an approach has to do with children and the training necessary for teachers to be able to help children to realize their true destinies, their true way in the world. And if that includes a hefty segment of Chinese, or Japanese, or Korean culture, it would be wrong for those teachers to say, "Well we have all these Chinese children, but they are in America, so we're going to teach Europe and America." I believe that would be wrong, and I think it would be against the spirit of Waldorf education.

But, if we now say we have three hundred students, and three of them are Chinese, what do we do to the curriculum for these three children? I don't think the school should do very much to the curriculum, but the teachers of those classes attend to every child, even if it is only one out of twenty, and make sure that that child has what he or she needs for his complete cultural life. I don't know exactly how the teacher does that, but that's the teacher's job. The teacher has to teach *those* twenty children, not *some* twenty children. It doesn't matter what the teacher says about twenty children in general. It matters what the teacher does with those children who that teacher is responsible for in the deepest possible way—similar to a parent.

If you have a Chinese student in your class, and you never touch on anything Chinese in eight years, I think you have probably done some spiritual damage. On the other hand, I don't think that a teacher who has eighteen children, one of whom is Chinese, should be obliged to change the whole curriculum if there is some

other way to do it. I am not a teacher so I can't answer that. But surely there are ways to bring in Chinese language, Chinese festivals, Chinese stories, Chinese thought, Chinese stories, lots of stories, tons of stories, work that in, so that the child then experiences Chinese in the setting that he or she takes to be home. Here cultures should be experienced in a healthy respectful way. But I am not good at this, I am not a teacher. I just know that if they are good teachers, their curriculum is constructed in response to the children, not in response to a formula.

*Ewai:* I am getting the picture better now. Once the student population changes that will bring about the change in the classroom.

*Henry:* This year the Parents' Association of the School started a Multi-Cultural Concert Series, with concerts of Himalayan, Asian, or Latin-American music. It is an attempt to promote an atmosphere of active encouragement of cultural diversity.

*Dr. McDermott:* Then we need to see teachers not just as performers, when they tell a story in the morning. Now they have to tell the story of Ping, not just the story of blueberries, or the fairy godmother, or Little Red Riding Hood. They now need to bring in those stories of the Yang-tze River, stories of the child's homeland.

Traditionally in the sixth grade of a Waldorf school, they follow Hannibal. They need to follow some great journey. They have to study a Maoist journey and the relationship between the north and the south, and the Tibetans come in. All those things now have to become real to those children going through their eight years together. So instead of one child looking different, we now have one child who has a special relationship to those stories that the other children all respect and share. And it is not "his" as opposed to "theirs," but it is his in a special way. That is what I

would try to do in a classroom with a Waldorf approach. We have to keep saying, "Who are the children?" not "What should the curriculum be?" The curriculum must follow what the teacher and the children can do together for the children. That's the criteria.

*Henry:* I wonder if a Waldorf school could exist in the Middle East and promote tolerance between Arabs and Israelis.

*Dr. McDermott:* If it can't, it's not because it is a Waldorf school. It's because what happens outside of the Waldorf school prevents the school from being a Waldorf school. But if it is a Waldorf school, then you have to teach not some abstract respect, but the respect that comes from recognizing that each person has an authentic inner life. The reason this country we live in is able and willing to send these incredible missiles into Baghdad is because we don't have a sufficient imagination to experience the fact that those people who are dying this minute are mothers, and fathers, and children who have the same sufferings, same aspirations, same love life, same struggles, as we do. But we make them into foreign objects.

The whole Waldorf approach to the child is to enable the child to make a direct relationship to a flower. That is a very Buddhist approach—the Buddhist vow is to develop: "I take a vow of compassion for persons, animals, and plants." That's very Waldorf, but it is the opposite of what we are doing in the Gulf, where we are not living out our compassion, we are living out our aggressive fantasies that turns human beings into blips on a video screen. It is like a video game. We can't see the pictures of the babies being blown to bits.

*Ewai:* How does one fight against propaganda?

*Dr. McDermott:* By having healthy imaginations. By seeing that when

Steiner would say they should study both, but it is also true that these children have to work out their destiny in relation to this culture that they have chosen and that is now influencing them. And from that strong base, conscious and unconscious, they then can reach to other cultures in a positive constructive way. You say, "That is fine for the children, but what about a Waldorf school in Tokyo, Beijing, Taiwan?" Then we have to get Waldorf teachers together, we have to now step into the inner life of the children. And their inner life may be different from the inner life of children in New York, or children in South Africa. Now we need perhaps the same images, perhaps different. Perhaps the same myths, perhaps different. That is all an experiment that we need to work on, not by looking it up in Steiner's writing, but by developing the same power of intuition to see into our own lives and lives of the children, see what we need to grow in this culture spiritually. Then we can work with the intellectual and the physical, and it all gets held together. The teachers have to be trained and schooled and deepened, so that instead of teaching little heads, they are teaching whole persons. Little persons, but whole. That's what they are trying to do. They get to each child individually. That's why they meditate on each child every night, and every morning they begin the day meditating. They carry the inner life of each child. The teachers are not teaching Steiner, they are not teaching religion. They are teaching literature. In the beginning children are taught stories, and then they are taught stories in books, and then they are taught the principles behind the stories in books. Then they are taught the historical basis behind the stories. And then it goes on, right through the curriculum according to their age, according to the inner unfolding of the child's intellect.

*Henry:* One of our visitors today told about her experience as an Asian-American parent wanting

her child to have a basically Asian self-image and self-identity. With that in mind she talked to her child only in Chinese for the first three years, not because it was the most valuable language in American culture but because it was a conceptual part of the child's Asian-American identity. Then her daughter learned English as a second language, but retained a strong devotion to Chinese language and culture and she is now in college learning Chinese again in a more advanced way. I can see a certain conflict there, when an Asian-American parent sends a child to Waldorf school and is expected to accept a European (basically Caucasian) culture as a central identity from which to experience and relate to the world.

*Dr. McDermott:* Of course, you are right, that is troubling. I don't know if it is possible to have a school that is not rooted in the culture in which it lives. I don't know of examples of schools that are so multi-cultural. In other words, we basically educate, and the children learn from us. They are 90% Caucasian, on the West Coast of the United States—that is the circle from which the child's awareness radiates out. The Asian-American, like the Mexican-American, like what used to be the Irish- and the Italian-American, had this problem in every school and on every street corner. That is not a peculiar problem for Waldorf education. And I would like to think it is even less of a problem for Waldorf education, because in Waldorf education the center is not some social political agenda—which all public schools and most private schools accept.

It is socialization that is getting the children to be able to cut it in our society, to pull the levers that give us opportunity. The working class have one kind of lever, and the upper-class kids have another kind of lever. That's the name of the game. Now, the Waldorf schools are not teaching levers, ways of opening

cups and goodies. They are teaching the child to be in touch with deep, creative sources, that is part of his and her birthright and capacity, not given by the society, but as given by imagination, by the inner life. I would like to think that an Asian-American child would be given the kind of affect that would enable him or her to love two cultures, instead of being so dependent and atavistic and clinging that he doesn't really love any culture—he only is tied to and by a culture because he is holding on to his little part of the world. The trick is to make the child free to go into any culture

*Ewai:* I noticed in the curriculum it didn't actually go into Chinese culture. The closest was Buddhism, which was started in the fifth or sixth grade. So the visitor was concerned about why Waldorf education does not start it at a very early age. I have done some reading on Rudolf Steiner and realized that his philosophy originated in Europe. During Steiner's time the history of the esoteric literature stemmed from the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Babylonians, which I noticed was incorporated. So I thought it might be interesting to reconsider this, especially here in San Francisco, which has such a vast multi-cultural population. You are talking about being in a certain culture and a certain environment, but the reality is that here in San Francisco it is definitely multi-cultural.

*Dr. McDermott:* I think you are right. In certain cities on the East Coast, there is a similar problem with a high percentage of Jewish students. So they all want to know, "Why are my children not learning about Moses, the prophets, Chanukah, and Passover?" I believe that Waldorf education does not exclude that. It clearly should take very seriously and include in appropriate ways the cultures (or using Steiner's language the "karmic destiny"), the spiritual path, the spiritual history of those children. Because always, with

Bush says that Saddam is like Hitler, we have to know a little history. We have to know that we have supported this guy for ten years. All of his weapons are from us because we wanted the profits from the sales. We have to know that there is a big difference between this power monger (he is a terrible guy but we knew that) and the innocent people being killed. We have to simply recognize that that propaganda is coming from a very sick, macho war machine that feeds on itself with our tax dollars. So you need to have confidence in your thinking. You have to learn that in school. You don't learn that from watching television. You only learn it by putting together your thinking with your heart.

*Henry:* A direct relationship with the environment, not mediated via electronic input-output devices.

*Dr. McDermott:* Waldorf schools are not the only schools that do this, but they do it in a very well-developed, very sensitive way.

*Ewai:* I guess that one is cognizant of this and sensitive to it, and yet you know that there is this war machine, that it is out there. And I find that many of us feel a sense of hopelessness because we are aware of these innocent people who are out there—children and family people—and you have this one individual who feels a sense of injustice also. It seems to me that it is a majority here in this country who may be aware of it, and yet how do we go about fighting this propaganda without using the same tactics that they use.

*Dr. McDermott:* We mentioned that you have to think right, and you have to have your thinking connected to

your heart. But the other part that is very important to the Waldorf educational system, and very important to this conversation is "will." That it is not just enough to understand that we are being lied to. It is not enough to be depressed, and guilt-ridden, and emotionally overwrought from this horrible carnage that we are visiting on innocent people. Then, we need the *will* to act. We have to trust that our life can be an expression of real moral principles. And therefore, a child in a Waldorf school learns to live a consequential life. That actions have consequences and non-actions have consequences. So if a child is a product of a healthy Waldorf school, then he or she will have these three things—thinking, feeling, and willing—together.

So then when it comes time to act, there will be the will to act, but the individual will act in the manner that is appropriate, because he or she thinks clearly, and has a warm, affectionate, sympathetic compassion.



### About Dr. McDermott

In February 1991, Dr. Robert McDermott was inaugurated as President of the California Institute of Integral Studies. He comes to San Francisco from New York where he was Chair of the Philosophy Department and Assistant Provost at Baruch College. He was also the Acting Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Dr. McDermott has worked with anthroposophical endeavors such as Rudolf Steiner Institute in Maine and edited *The Essential Steiner* published by Harper and Row in 1984. He has published and lectured widely on the life and work of Sri Aurobindo. His most recent project is a seminar, funded by Laurance S. Rockefeller, entitled "The Recovery of Thinking." This is an innovative project "attempting to show the need to replace the poverty of imagination in modern western thought with a robust and effective training in imaginative thinking." Dr. McDermott is an eloquent spokesperson for the ideals of Waldorf education.