

“What are the treasures of your culture for the future?”

Reflections on Cultural Diversity and Waldorf Education

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“The experience, the possibility for something to happen to us or to touch us, requires an interruption gesture, a gesture that is almost impossible these days: it requires us to stop to think, to stop to look, to stop to listen, to think more slowly, to look more slowly, and to listen more slowly; to stop to feel, to feel more slowly, to linger in the details, to suspend opinion, to suspend judgement, to suspend the will, to suspend the automatism of action, to cultivate attention and gentleness, to open eyes and ears, to speak about what happens to us, to learn slowness, to listen to others, to cultivate the art of the encounter, to not speak much, to be patient and give ourselves time and space.”

-Jorge Larossa Bondía in *Notes on Experience and the Knowledge of Experience*, 2002

Over the past few years, the IASWECE council has been striving, along the lines of an “interruption gesture”, to gain insight into diversity, by consciously exploring the many wonderful and diverse ways that Steiner/Waldorf education manifests in the world, as well as by discovering what it is that is common to us all, and to formulate what the essentials of Waldorf education are. We tried also to see the different ways we give expression to the universal human

being in our different cultures, countries, and even hemispheres. We have felt that Anthroposophy has much to offer us in the world today, but what ultimately counts is how we practice it, how we bring it into the world through our deeds, our choice of language and our interactions with each individual.

The IASWECE Council elaborated on this broad outline in a brochure for the Transitions Conference in April 2015:

“ . . . The International Association for Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE) provides a meeting place for early childhood educators from the many countries striving to uphold, deepen and renew Steiner/Waldorf early childhood education. Our shared task is to ensure that Waldorf pedagogy becomes neither a theoretical system nor a collection of outer methods, but a wellspring of living insight.

To serve the healthy development of childhood is to develop the potential to perceive, through our own self-directed inner activity, not only the physical nature, but also the soul and spirit of each child. Through this ongoing study and research we deepen our

appreciation of the spiritual individuality of all human beings as distinct from, but working within and through the sheaths of their given gender, temperament and personality, as well as through the traditions and values of their particular family and cultural community.

Every culture contributes uniquely towards the evolution of Anthroposophy and Waldorf education, and we honor the way Steiner/Waldorf early childhood educators work within their specific cultural contexts. At the same time, we would like to express our hope, that by encouraging the autonomy and initiative of each individual, Anthroposophy and Waldorf education may contribute to the evolution of the 'whole,' such as family, community, nation, and humankind.

IASWECE gives us, as educators from diverse nations and cultures, the opportunity to meet and get to know and understand one another on an ever-deeper level. Developing relationships of trust, openness and reverence among colleagues, with the young child always at the centre of our vision, is the starting point for educating the child in freedom and toward freedom.

Out of this ideal comes our intention to participate in the dynamic and artistic process that will enable the universal human spirit of Waldorf pedagogy to light up in the hearts and creative will of educators of all cultures. Only then can we give children in every corner of the world the opportunity to develop their true and full humanity."

As an international council we recognize that part of our responsibility is to feel the pulse of the Waldorf early childhood movement – to be a sense organ, hearing how different cultures experience aspects of their relationship to Waldorf/Steiner education; perceiving the challenges, strivings and questions.

With this intention we formulated a range of questions to IASWECE Council members, inviting them to share the questions with colleagues from their own countries. We recognize that these questions could be difficult and that they could be expressed in different ways:

- 1) What treasures of your culture could be a seed for the future?**
- 2) Is Anthroposophy helpful in understanding your traditions in a new way?**
- 3) What is for you personally the essence, the heart, the core, of Anthroposophy?**

Additional questions to work with:

- 4) What makes you feel a sense of belonging to a culture, and what makes you feel a citizen of the world? Do you feel more at home in one than the other?**
- 5) In your early childhood setting, are festivals from other cultures celebrated in addition to the ones from your own culture? Which ones and why?**
- 6) Do you feel yourself in an evolving process within anthroposophy? How?**

These questions were intended not only to encourage deeper conversation and exploration, but to help us awaken to certain aspects of our work from our unique perspectives, and perhaps to make conscious certain thoughts, feelings and deeds which we perform each day without really being awake to their power to heal or harm.

Many colleagues from around the world

have begun to share their responses to these questions, and this will ultimately help the IASWECE council in its deliberations, guidelines and work in the world.

With gratitude, we would like to share a few cameos of the responses to the first three questions from individuals in various countries:

1) What treasures of your culture could be a seed for the future?

Finland:

- *Nature, nature elements and the four seasons*
- *The connection between human beings and nature, responsibility to protect it, feeling of trust*
- *The richness of the Finnish language in poems and songs*
- *Traditional handicrafts and tools, traditional work songs*



Nature table in a Waldorf kindergarten in Finland

Israel:

- *I hope that Martin Buber's idea of the strongly developed power of the individual, which today must seek to come into relationship to the community, the universal, and to the whole earth, can be a seed for the future.*



View of the eastern part of Jerusalem

Japan:

- *Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (Renunciation of War). Determination to renounce war, as the only country that was the victim of nuclear bombing. Hope that this idea would be a seed for world peace. The Japanese people's view of nature, as gods' spirits dwell in everything.*



Outdoor play in a Waldorf kindergarten in Tokyo

Poland:

- *Love and need for independence.*
- *Rich traditions, especially for festivals. Folk artists.*
- *The ability, influenced by high ideals, to undertake heroic tasks. This can lead to independence in thinking and doing.*



Movement session in a Waldorf training course in Warsaw, Poland

Brazil:

- *Our country is made up of many different cultures that enrich our way of living; one learns to be more tolerant. From a religious point of view as well, the Christian faiths have blended and adapted to cultures and religions more connected with nature beings. Music is a factor that is very present and it brings something light in our soul in general.*



Autumn festival in a Waldorf kindergarten in Florianopolis, Brazil

South Africa:

- *Caring and sharing.*
- *Openness and acceptance. Openness and acceptance. It is a sign of how we grew up in our celebrating of Ramadan and Eid. When we celebrated our festivals together we were all one community, and we celebrated all traditions and cultures within our community (including Christmas, Easter, etc). Our culture is inclusive and we believe whoever knocks on your door is sent by God – we cut out all judgment. This is our sincere greeting (and the seeds for the future). We always try to truly see the person.*
- *Music is a universal language and unifying element and has always been a big part of our culture and traditions, and is always used in our ceremonies, whether to celebrate or mourn. This has a place in our early childhood centers and kindergartens, in uniting our children and communities.*



Festival with the students at the Centre for Creative Education



Children in an « Educare Centre » in the Townships

2) Is Anthroposophy helpful in understanding your traditions in a new way?

Finland:

- *It helps to understand the spiritual way of our festivals and our traditions, which were built through spiritual experiences.*

Israel:

- *Anthroposophy offers new ways of looking at the relations between man and the universe. It reminds us of the religious attitude and the gratitude as a 'state of mind' that are needed if we wish to live our lives in awareness, and not only practice (or refuse to practice) traditional rituals.*

Japan:

- *The observation method of Anthroposophy (by consciously regaining a lost sense) helps to see the essence of the things.*

Poland:

- *It gives outer forms deep meaning. Our country traditions become universally human.*

Brazil:

- *Due to the study of anthroposophy one enlarges one's point of view.*
- *Being in a country in the southern hemisphere colonized by Europeans, most of the time one has to 'translate' the festival according to our seasons and this is a challenge that encourages us to be more conscious of what we are celebrating.*

South Africa:

- *Accept one another.*

3) What is for you personally the essence, the heart, the core, of Anthroposophy?

Finland:

- *The spiritual path of development*
- *The spiritual expression in every phenomenon and every human being*
- *The connection between humans as an ongoing movement.*

Italy:

- *Anthroposophy is like a good pair of shoes for the one who takes consciousness along on their way, in fording rivers, climbing mountains and crossing deserts. In it everyone can find a key that gives deep meaning to life, in the vicissitudes, the achievement of new goals and overcoming trials. An evolutionary path that bridges,*

for consciousness, between matter and spirit.

- *The inner work, understanding this tool through my very being.*

France:

- *It gives you so many tools to strengthen your soul, your inner force, your creativity, and it gives you suggestions and ideas how to develop these qualities also in the children.*

Israel:

- *This is a very difficult question!! But I feel that I am drawn to Anthroposophy because it invites me to wake up, be aware, but also to be tolerant and patient with*

other people. It has a very wide 'panoramic' view of mankind and the universe, and it gives a way of searching for the meaning of life.

Japan:

- *Seeing divinity in individuals, understanding others and the world as free individuals, knowing love and regaining a connection with the world.*
- *The idea that the human being experiences the process of cosmic evolution. Every individual has a role on earth for the sake of cosmic evolution.*
- *Love, sensitivity, encounter of soul / awakening the sense of love and responsibility.*

Brazil

- *The point of view that relates man and cosmos, that sees the essence that unites us, that goes beyond what is diverse.*
- *The core of anthroposophy has to address the universal human being.*
- *To understand the world through the heart, the mind and the will.*

South Africa:

- *Bridging the chasm between matter and spirit.*
- *The path of getting to know myself a little deeper, a little clearer, a little more consciously, every day. The more I understand myself, the more I understand the world and the more I have to bring to the world.*
- *"In Love lives the seed of Truth In Truth seek the root of Love."*

Anthroposophy has taken root all throughout the world in so many communities and societies, enlivening personal development and supporting work with the young child. As an international council we strive to understand and to be open to the different ways and contexts that Steiner/Waldorf schools develop and take root. We ask ourselves: How do we support the active involvement, in their various communities, of educators and parents in the protection of children and childhood?

How do we foster self-reflection as a tool for good pedagogical practice and as a guide for improving day-to-day rhythms and work with the children?

The work on cultural diversity has led us to reach deep within ourselves to ask - "Where am I awake, where am I asleep?" "Have I become more aware of my own prejudices and fears?" "What has changed in me?" In the world today where there is so much strife, hatred and conflict, it is our task to celebrate our differences and to celebrate what we share in common. It is our responsibility to engender love for the other, to practise gratitude each moment, and to be awake and open to every encounter – with discernment, yet without judgement.

“The encounter with the unknown is a nutrient in life, as essential as certain vitamins – without it, the soul falls into sleep, depression and despair. The trick is how much to admit the random, chaotic, unknowable, into our lives. It is always a matter of balance. The child at the mercy of an incomprehensible world requires reassurance; the adult, stalled in the familiar, may require an opposite prod. “

-Jane Hirshfield in Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise, 2008

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