

Waldorf Humanities?

The Trivium, Non-fiction, and Organic Thinking in Contemporary Waldorf

Does the Waldorf humanities program need new life, fresh thinking? The goal of this essay is to point out three aspects of Steiner's work that are rarely addressed. I do not intend to answer these questions definitively, but to raise awareness about issues important to the survival and relevance of Waldorf education.

Waldorf Schools are influenced by society's materialistic constructs and socio-political trends especially those emanating from our dominant educational institutions: television, public schools, and cultural Marxist colleges. As a result, the movement has trouble defining itself and Waldorf education seems to have two schools of thought. One camp is happy where Waldorf is today as they see its current manifestation as "good enough" despite the fact that their school may be a completely spiritually sanitized version of Waldorf. The other camp quotes Steiner 'chapter and verse' in order to maintain the spiritual roots of Waldorf against those forces that are gradually leveling Waldorf into a universally 'likeable' alternative school. It is impossible to talk with either camp as one is always happy with compromise or the other seems to be looking backwards thereby keeping the ideal alive.

It may be a good time to reconsider the entirety of the Waldorf curriculum to *redefine it for our age*. I challenge both camps to go back to Steiner's original curriculum suggestions (in particular the nonfiction selections for upper elementary grades and high school) and from there look at what is being taught in your school. It is impossible to have an objective, high-level discussion about Waldorf education when it is not presently clear what was prescribed by Steiner, what has evolved, and what has been neglected, and what has been overemphasized in the universal Waldorf curriculum and method guides. This may be a very revealing experience for a person who loves Waldorf education but who has also taken its current expression for granted.

As a Waldorf graduate and former teacher, I have always wondered why the organic trinity of grammar, logic, and presentations (rhetoric and forensics) are so neglected in the pedagogy. There is also *a ferocious lack* of non-fiction books in the American Waldorf curriculum, - a problem which may have its roots in the translation efforts of the English-speaking Waldorf pioneers who possibly simplified Steiner's educational work for America. The final consideration is how Steiner used a rarely mentioned four-level organizing principle in aspects of his pedagogy, called "organic thinking."

Waldorf claims that it teaches a thinking based in life and in organic connections. How does one neglect the organic connection of grammar, logic, and rhetoric and their essential place in thoughtful education? Secondly, why do Waldorf schools mainly teach novels while leaving out Steiner's suggestions for philosophy, theology, and history books? Finally, I ask my reader to explore Steiner's organic thinking method so that further atomization of the curricula and pedagogy do not take place. I believe that if schools address these three concerns for their own program, a new vigor can be brought into Waldorf education. Let us look at the Waldorf Humanities with the eyes of renewal.

Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric:

My first question is about the building blocks of the humanities. In terms of Waldorf pedagogical literature, one finds several teaching guides for grammar, but nothing on logic and rhetoric. Steiner himself was not indifferent toward the trivium as he gave a lecture series on the *Art of Lecturing* and on Aristotle's categories and logic. One would think that Waldorf founders, emulating their master's lecturing prowess, would have taken rhetoric more seriously by giving it a prominent position in the Waldorf school.

Why is the trivium so little discussed in both public and private education? (American schools do have the tradition of forensics and debate teams but Waldorf schools rarely participate.) The trivium is an essential trinity for artful self-expression. These subjects are not difficult to teach. Aristotle's syllogisms could be easily taught to students starting in 7th grade and the rudiments of rhetoric could follow.♦ Waldorf students learn speaking skills by imitating the careful speech/storytelling of their class teacher in recalling the lessons of the previous day. Storytelling is organizing one's thoughts into a coherent, chronological, cause-and-effect thinking stream; and thus, an excellent precursor to becoming aware of the laws of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Classical models such as the 5-paragraphs essay, or oral presentation format is a fine way to get students to communicate clearly and with confidence. *The form carries the content* as the students simply need to fill out the blanks in their first paragraph: grabber, background/context, thesis, the three points to be argued. (Compare this model with Steiner's in his *Art of Lecturing*) Protestant pastors use it as well as President Obama, so why not Waldorf students?

My feeling is that our generation has little feel for the spiritual benefit of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. As a student at the Rudolf Steiner School in NYC, I was never required to write, think, and argue/present in an organized fashion. While I was teaching at a Waldorf high school, some of my fellow teachers thought if our students organized their thoughts into a 5-paragraph essay, learned how to use quotes/footnotes, and were required to *type* their essay assignments, then their creativity would be stifled! I personally think there is a false polarity between 'structure' and 'creativity' since grammar, logic, and form are in fact vessels for communication, not obstacles. Instead of de-emphasizing the teaching of footnotes, why not teach all three modes and compare them, thereby seeing the virtue in each - the Chicago manual, APA, and MLA? *Form*, better said *method*, births creativity as is in the case of music, Eurythmy, art, and the sciences.

Grammar, logic, and rhetoric are a living whole. Waldorf by reinvigorating this trinity with pedagogical ingenuity could make a real splash in the educational world. But a change of thinking is in order, that is, thinking organically and with a sense of Schillerian play. Ultimately grammar is an art, and punctuation, for example, can be used artistically in the form of colons, semi-colons, dashes, brackets, parentheses, and the tricky English comma. When taught in the right spirit, logic can also be quite fun by playing with the "truth" and limitations of the syllogism of others. Because Waldorf students practice the retelling of stories in their main

♦ Steiner did refer to teaching of logic in the Waldorf school program, unfortunately a quote I no longer have but which must be in the "Conferences." But does the obvious importance of the trivium even need a quotation? When Steiner talked about the importance of the overview in main lesson blocks, teachers could give an overview of the trivium at the beginning of each school year ever deepening the students' knowledge with each grade.

lesson blocks, they should have an easy transition from linear storytelling to logical and formal writing to public speaking. In other words, the trivium is a natural progression and the inter-relatedness of these three pillars will grow with experience.

If Waldorf schools presented the trivium in a lively way, they could build the reputation as a school that teaches classical subjects in a dynamic way. The Waldorf high school curricula have always been considered “weak”, proven by the sizeable exodus of students at the end of Waldorf eighth grade who opt for more rigorous schools. Instituting a healthy public speaking program would reenliven the dreamy Waldorf high school. Grammar, logic, and rhetoric are their own arts and need their rightful place in holistic education.

Fiction and Non-Fiction, the Balance:

In the 1990s, I picked up a copy of *The Waldorf School Approach to History* by Werner Glas. I started to write down quotations from Glas and other curricula guides that were based on direct quotes from Steiner’s lectures: Stockmeyer, German “subject guides” from the Pedagogical Section, and Teachers Conferences. It dawned on me that Steiner’s non-fiction selections for the Waldorf curriculum were missing from my own Waldorf education as well as from the recent curriculum guides published in Germany and English-speaking countries. Why do so few Waldorf people seem to care about this aspect of Waldorf education? Some might say that the books are too dry or difficult to read. They are not, by the way, too difficult.

There has been a historic trend in the United States to take philosophy, history, and theology out of public and private schools and to replace real books with so-called teenage angst novels, victim studies, and dumbed-down textbooks.* A counter force to this cultural Marxist trend is the classical Great Books movement that has grown exponentially in the United States. Waldorf in my opinion should be neck and neck with the Great Books movement if it could just recognize its own genius and embrace nonfiction in its curriculum including Socratic teaching. What books are missing from Steiner’s suggestion list?

- Schiller’s *Thirty-Years War* (7th grade)
- Herder’s *Also a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (8th Grade)
- Buckle (8th grade) and Lecky (9th grade), the famous historians whose books made it on Mortimer Adler’s Great Books list
- Plato, Nietzsche, and Hegel selections (12th grade)
- Augustine’s *Confessions* (10th grade) and other German classics

Universally absent from American Waldorf schools is Steiner’s “Free-thinkers religion” curriculum. If instituted, this class could serve also as an ethics/debate class since it has some stimulating spiritual topics. Some might argue that certain high school blocks were anglicized, and therefore not deleted, such as the German thinkers main lesson block that was replaced by the ever-so-popular Transcendentalism block in 12th grade.

* A relative attending an elite New England boarding high school told me he is missing great books in his English and History courses. None of the important books I read in my Waldorf education are covered in his English classes: Parzival, Faust, Emerson, Thoreau, Shakespeare, Orwell and so on. Amazingly sad education. John Gatto, author of the *Underground History of American Education*, has been the most insightful critic of this situation in American schooling. Gatto’s declaration that EVERY human being should read Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, at least twice during elementary school, (once in English and once in Latin) should shame any educator into silence who thinks the classics are repressive and somehow misinforming our youth about life and human nature. Caesar teaches how a smaller force can consistently outwit a larger opponent, a lesson in courage and overcoming opposition.

When nonfiction great books are missing from the curricula, Waldorf students lose an element of universal literacy and intellectual gravity. To simply have novels as the main reading material for the four years of Waldorf high school seems to be a very one-sided form of education. Let students have experience in all subjects: including real historic thinkers (not textbooks); pure theologians like Saint Augustine and Luther; or authentic philosophical texts such as Plato, Herder, and Nietzsche. How would the eighth-grade history block look if Steiner's suggestions were included, and for example Herder's *Philosophy of History* were read and discussed?

Some may argue that great fiction already covers important philosophical and theological ideas, so why worry ourselves with nonfiction. However, I believe it is the very struggle with challenging non-fiction books, often only digestible one paragraph at a time, that elevates us into the "etheric realm of concepts." It may be that many of today's teachers unfortunately cannot grasp Plato because in their four years of college they used only textbooks. But it is often a great pleasure to be challenged as teachers with materials one is not used to reading.

As Waldorf expands its notion of what types of great books might be read, it will move from an "artsy/hippy/LD" reputation into one where students are nimble thought-artists in all disciplines of the liberal arts. The skills of the trivium - ownership and flexibility with grammar, the health of logic, and pleasure in rhetoric - mix well with the wisdom of Herder, Emerson, and the Gita. Did Steiner not say in his *Education of the Child* that the goal of high school education is to help students to move freely between thinkers? "Goethe said this, Plato argued that, but Taoists say that too."

The suggestion here is to reconsider what Steiner outlined in his original plan. Looking at the curriculum as a living totality, the faculty should see if they are able to extract the principles behind Steiner's choices and decide how to enrich Waldorf by bringing in *great* nonfiction. To continue sweeping Herder, Schiller, Lecky, and Saint Augustine under the carpet is not a healthy idea. A strong non-fiction program would be an opportunity to bring Waldorf to a new level of liberal excellence.

The What? How? Why? and Who? of Waldorf Education:

The organic formula of what? how? why? who? was Rudolf Steiner's method of organizing. We see its application in the way Steiner organized his ideas, curricula, lesson plan, and even aspects of the world. In anthroposophy, it is a way of seeing the world according to the categories of physical, etheric, astral and ego.

Steiner used this model clandestinely, but its reality can be found in all aspects of his work from the *Philosophy of Freedom* to the *Calendar of the Soul* to the Waldorf curriculum to the morning verse. It is also part and parcel of Steiner's whole-to-the-parts method for example in the fact that all four mathematical principles are taught at once in Waldorf first grade but not in other types of education.

Addition is physical, subtraction is etheric, multiplication is astral, division is ego. The functions are in order of complication and follow the physical, etheric, astral, and ego level! In first grade all functions are taught at once, a whole-to-the-parts process combined with the four-level organic thinking of Steiner. These colors represent the physical, etheric, astral, and ego bodies as given by Steiner in *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*.

Melancholic, Phlegmatic, Sanguine, Choleric according to the predominance of the physical, etheric, astral, and ego bodies.

In a more creative way, Steiner structured his curriculum based on the qualities of the four bodies. In the curriculum we see What? **Fairy tales**, How? **Animal fables**, Why? **Hebrew law**, Who? **Norse myths**. Thus, Fairy Tales speak to the physical level, animal fables to the lively etheric, Hebrew law to the astral, and Norse Myths to the will of the ego.

Noun is ego level, **Adjective is astral**, **Verb is etheric**, **Adverb is physical**. Why is the adverb at the physical level? Because it limits the sentence, thereby making it static like the physical level, whereas the etheric, the verb, comes into movement. The other parts of speech are self-explanatory. When teachers see how each part of speech corresponds to the archetype of the fourfold human being, doors open for new ways to approach lesson plans organically.

Look at the history curriculum in the high school. We have What? **Modern History in 9th grade**, How? **Life of Ancient Cultures in 10th**, Why? **Medieval History and Parzival question in 11th**, and Who? **Synthesis of history in 12th**. Why is this curriculum not chronological? Why do 8th and 9th grade have the same themes? Does the subject matter correspond to the age? Is the topic of ancient culture good for 16-year-olds and Medieval History best for the 17-year-olds?* Or did Steiner purposely arrange them in an order that uses another organizing principle such as:

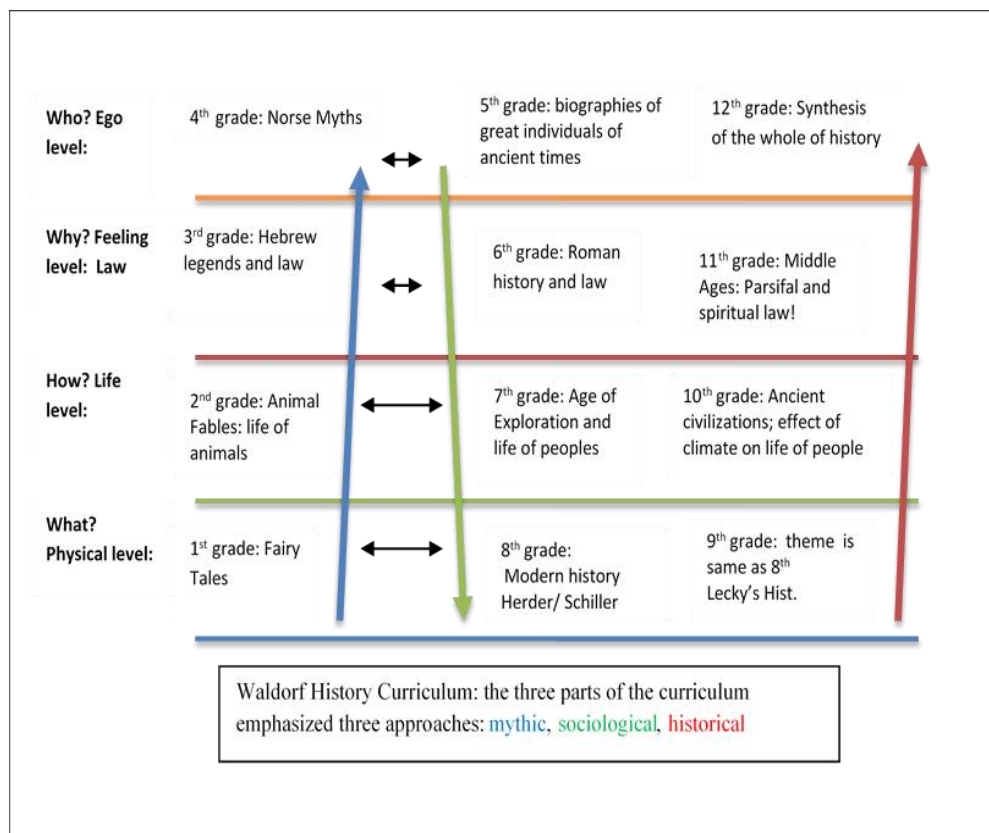
Physical Level: **foundations of modern history**,

Etheric Level: **the life of ancient peoples**,

Astral Level: **the inward culture of Medieval Europe and Parzival**,

Ego Level: **synthesizing the whole of history**.

* American Waldorf schools cannot claim that the subject matter fits the age group because the children enter school a year too early, at age 6. Thus, the entire argument of age and subject matter is not true in the United States. Ideally Parzival is taught at age 17 which is in the middle of the seven-year cycle or the ego year, the most inward year for the student. This does not contradict Steiner's curricula choice according to what how why who?



Quite a different perspective when seen from the big picture. Steiner follows similar patterns in his physics, art history, math curricula. Steiner is consistent in using the what? how? why? who? as an organizing pattern.¹

Organic thinking can be easy to see in the big picture but what about in the simple things Steiner did. There is little that Steiner did that does not have organic form. Study the Table Blessing, written by Steiner, and you will discover the levels of the human being:

The seeds quicken in the night of the Earth, (Physical quality, earth)

The green herbs sprout through the might of the Air, (Etheric quality, air)

The fruits ripen by the power of the Sun. (Astral quality, Sun)

So the soul is quickening in the shrine of the Heart, (Astral quality, soul and heart)

So the power of the spirit is sprouting in the light of the World, (Etheric, power and light)

So the strength of man is ripening in the glory of God. (Physical, strength and all Being)

Or does this one work better?

The seeds quicken in the night of the Earth,

¹ *An Outline for a Renewal of Waldorf Education* covers Steiner's organic thinking and the Waldorf subject matter. Or go to www.organicthinking.org for the article *The End of Waldorf Education*.

The green herbs sprout through the might of the Air,
The fruits ripen by the power of the Sun.

So the soul is quickening in the shrine of the Heart,
So the power of the spirit is sprouting in the light of the World,
So the strength of man is ripening in the glory of God.

The German Version:

Es keimen die Pflanzen in der Erdennacht,
es sprossen die Kräuter durch der Luft Gewalt,
es reifen die Früchte durch der Sonne Macht,

so keimet die Seele in des Herzens Schrein,
so sprosset des Geistes Macht im Licht der Welt,
so reifet des Menschen Kraft in Gottes Schein.

The question stands what is the best way to speak the table blessing? 1-2-3 3-2-1, or 1-2-3 1-2-3? If you say them out loud, you can even hear the levels and polarities. Did Steiner write this way on purpose? Does praying this blessing aloud *resonate* with the three-fold structure of the children at lunch?

Waldorf teachers may look at their work from the point of view of Steiner's what? how? why? who? methodology.♥ Whether it is the structure of your lesson plan, faculty meeting, curricula, a fresh understanding of Steiner's organizing principle may uncover many subtle connections one has felt to exist but did not have the vocabulary to express it. One could imagine that Steiner's organic thinking will someday be the unifying member of the Trivium and Quadrivium.

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Waldorf cannot speak of having a true humanities program if it is missing the trivium, nonfiction, and organic thinking from their curriculum. Waldorf should look to other models that have evolved in recent decades. Although there should be a real kinship between Waldorf and the work of Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Program* (based on Socratic teaching of the Great Books), one finds that Adler and his partners drew from Waldorf, but not the other way around.

Waldorf, despite its leftist tendencies, was never good at Marxist self-analysis whereby it might healthfully critique itself. For example, Waldorf tends to be teacher- and lecture-centered whereas the Paideia Program is coaching- and discussion-centered. In this sense Paideia is a freedom-based pedagogy (which is the Waldorf ideal) because students are encouraged to read carefully, discuss politely, and share regularly their *intuitive* insights into the great books. The constant encouragement of intuitive insights is heading toward Steiner's ideal of freedom.

Paideia, however, is missing Steiner's brilliant understanding of the arts, child development, and the spiritual vocation of man. The "Great Hearts" Paideia schools (charter schools in Arizona following Paideia Education) lack multiple arts, theater, Goethean science,

♥ For a full account of the Rudolf Steiner's method look at *Das Erwecken des Herzens* by F. Lowndes or *The Logik of the Heart: the organic templates of spiritual writers, Rudolf Steiner, and The Philosophy of Freehood*. Also check out www.organicthinking.org.

and some of the soul warming literature that Waldorf offers. Of course, Paideia is without Waldorf's most important subject: Eurythmy! (Reader do not be confused by my call for a great books program for the betterment of Waldorf. I still believe the spiritual aspects of a true Waldorf school is a burning necessity.) When both schools of thought are brought together, the one-sidedness of Waldorf's teacher-centered, novel-dominant program could be balanced out by the Socratic discussion of mindful great books. ♥♥

Where Paideia has clarity in terms of the goals and activities of the teachers and students, Waldorf is confused about their teaching methods in the middle school and high school. The Waldorf movement seems hazy about the importance of writing clearly vs. writing creatively; the difference between the limits of grammar/logic vs. their advantages; the power of thinking about fiction vs. the power of thinking historically, philosophically, theologically, biologically, scientifically (physics). Thinking organically and holistically about the big picture will help Waldorf evolve into a type of education that does justice to our consciousness-soul.

♥♥ The Mortimer Alder's booklist is derived out of French Idealist philosophy. Waldorf's booklist should be derived out of the world view of Anthroposophy and German idealism. Thus, we see Faust, Transcendentalism, the free-thinkers religious class, the idea that history is epoch-based like Hegel and Fichte said. In short, a Waldorf great books list should deemphasize the materialistic authors and Greco-Roman culture and replace it with German idealist and spiritualist notions and readings.