

## 'Teens and Screens' - London 2012

Over the summer, while people from all over the world are running, jumping and playing together in East London, The St Michael Steiner School will be moving ten miles west, from the building it has shared with a state primary school in Wandsworth for the last 11 years, to a Georgian house on the edge of Hanworth Park, standing in three acres of its own land.

The white portico, built exactly 200 years ago, in time to see Wordsworth turn 42, presides over a modest piece of history, preserved for posterity. But now it is the doorway to a modern Waldorf school, where, not preservation but renewal, must be the theme.

Until now, our children have had only six classrooms and a tarmac playground where their play and work has been limited by the rules and timetable of the school with which we share. The opportunity to move to Hanworth Park will give them a beautiful environment in which to play and work freely, and enable us to expand the school and develop the curriculum to include a host of practical activities that were not possible in Wandsworth, but which children in the 21st century desperately need.

Since the school was founded in 2001, our children's lives have been transformed by electronic technology. Eleven years ago, television was the burning issue, and we urged parents to keep their children away from that box in the living room. Now, screens are in people's pockets (in their hands!), on the backs of car seats, clipped to buggies, in shops and waiting rooms, everywhere we go, the world is presented to us through screens. I was particularly struck by this at an exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci's inventions. The room was full of models and notebooks, but there were also three 'interactive' screens in the room with a group of school children, every single one, glued to them. The real thing was there in front of them, and yet they preferred to look at it through a screen.

Why? What does the screen do? First, it renders things in two dimensions, so that you only see what it shows you and you don't have to really look yourself. (This is equally true of 3D images; you can't actually look at them from any other point of view - it's an illusion.) Secondly, what appears on the screen is carefully designed to keep your attention by constantly switching from one arresting image to another, accompanied by dynamic sounds or music, all contrived to stop you switching off - to keep you hooked. (This happens in all media now - I recently heard a Radio 4 Daily Service where the blessing was given, accompanied by guitar music!) Then there's the authority of the screen; it lends everything a certain veracity; some part of you believes that what it tells you is more reliable than what you can discern for yourself, so that you eventually stop *trying* to discern anything for yourself. Why bother?

Skillfully and comprehensively, the screen can entertain, mesmerise, delude, seduce and sedate our children. (I say 'can' because I don't think this is the whole picture. There is a new world of cultural and social interaction being born through the internet that I am not ready to condemn at this point. And I say 'our children' because, although I really mean 'us', whereas we adults have, at least, the *possibility* of becoming aware of how these things work on us, and of using them rather than letting them use us, children do not have this possibility. They cannot help but be overwhelmed.)

Many unforeseen (or perhaps seen but disregarded) problems are arising from our struggle to come to terms with the constant stream of technological wizardry that is thrust at us. As we hungrily consume Playstation and Wii, the space in our lives for developing the finer aesthetic senses through reading, writing, drawing and making things is being squeezed out. The internet has the potential to bring the world - the culture of the world included - to us, in a certain way, but

that's part of the problem - that it is brought to us and shown to us and we are told how to see it and what to think about it; no effort is required on our part and it makes us lazy. The i-Pad is right there all the time, all we have to do is touch it and it comes to life. We all know that, whatever we plan to use it for, however wonderful a tool it may be, the temptation is always to check your Facebook page first. Someone has posted a funny link so you watch a few Youtube clips and google somebody, and before you know it, hours have gone by. We are all distracted by what's easy and entertaining, but as adults, we have a virtually screen-free, activity-filled childhood behind us. Our children don't have this foundation, and they are rapidly losing a connection with nature, with their own bodies and with their culture - with the art, music and literature that has shaped the world. When everything comes ready-made, most children never see skilled craftsmen at work - never come to appreciate what amazing things the human hand and eye and mind can do - and never imagine that they might be able to do those things themselves. There is a real danger that, instead of creative human beings, they may become simply passive consumers. The great figures of history whose ideas and deeds changed the world, who stand as examples of human striving and connect one generation with the next are being replaced with mutant super-heroes, 'celebrities' (once quoted to me as the ugliest word in the English language), people from 'reality' TV shows and comic figures. If our children are not to take these fictional caricatures as their only role models, if the culture of centuries is not to be erased from people's consciousness in a decade, an appreciation and understanding of all this, and why it matters, must permeate our children's education more than ever before.

So we have given up the battle against TV and have no hope of winning, and perhaps no wish to take up, the battle against electronic technology. Yet we see what it is doing to our children; the dependence, the inertia, the movement and co-ordination problems, the inability to concentrate, the lack of resourcefulness, the inability to interact properly with other people, the disappearance of even simple practical skills like cutting with scissors or changing a light bulb. Can we only watch as the next generation sleepwalks into The Matrix? No! We have to make them want to take the red pill! - to engage with this illusory, seductive world, *which will be a huge part of their lives no matter what*, but also to know, understand, love and be inspired by the real world and real people. They have to be able to stand back from all of their experiences and know - and *care* - what's real and what isn't; what's their own idea or feeling and what's someone else's; what they have created and what has been created for them; the difference between a real relationship and a Facebook friend.

This is an increasingly difficult and lifelong challenge for all of us, doubly hard because it's all new for us as well as for our children. We are not preparing them for something we know about, we are going through it together and the children are rushing ahead into things we have no idea about. So we can't teach them about those things - in fact we have to learn about them from the children - but we are older and we can see these things in the context of greater possibilities for human experience. As their teachers, we can give them the opportunity to begin the process of developing independent thinking and independent action so that they can enter fully into the life of the world they have been born into, no matter how it turns out, without losing themselves in it.

This has always been our aim for The St Michael High School, but it has become clear that the work has to start long before Class 9. In a world where it is normal to be driven everywhere, eat easily digestible food prepared by someone else, stay 'safe' in our houses all the time and not take any risks, children in Class 1 - in Kindergarten - need as many opportunities as we can give them to engage with the world, with other people, to work with their hands, to use their limbs to run and climb, jump and balance, to throw and catch, to test their strength, to work things out for themselves, practically, socially and intellectually, *to make mistakes from which they can learn*. It is not possible, I think, to overstate the importance of these simple, human experiences, of practical work and movement in our children's education now. And since we already have the people who

understand the need for it, and we will soon have the space to do it, it is this aspect of the curriculum, above all, that we plan to develop in the school's next incarnation.

The great task we face as teachers is to bring these balancing - ameliorating - forces in such a way that they will be taken up with enthusiasm. The competition for our students' attention has become terrifyingly fierce, but this is our work and we must not shrink from it. A tepid application of the so-called 'Waldorf Curriculum' will not do the job, however much we say it will. We have to ask ourselves what our children need, provide it as far as we can, and watch to see if we got it right. This process of constant renewal based on what is actually needed is absolutely essential now. The Waldorf Curriculum was always meant to be worked with in this way, so that it should not be possible to define what Waldorf practice is. Waldorf practice is anything we think it should be, provided we have based it on a sound understanding of what a human being is and what he needs. Every year, every day, every lesson is a new battle and we must arm ourselves with weapons equal to the task: we must challenge our students' minds, feelings and bodies, inspire them to be creative and enquiring, make them think about things in many different ways, bring them things that will fill them with wonder, amazement, surprise, pity, admiration, revulsion, horror - *move* them, make them want to *do* something. Otherwise the things our critics say about us - that we are old fashioned, dogmatic and not serious about education - will be true.

Amanda Bell