

THE ST MICHAEL STEINER SCHOOL, WANDSWORTH, LONDON

At 4pm on 11th September 2001, a bike messenger arrived at West Hill Primary School in Wandsworth, London, with a draft lease for the renting of the empty top floor of the building. He sat silently, looking rather stunned, and didn't even take off his helmet. I signed the document and he took it away. Until that moment, my two colleagues and I could not have been sure if our plans to open a new Waldorf school in London would actually materialise. Even so, we had interviewed and accepted children, hired new teachers, painted the classrooms, bought materials for the coming year and invited friends and colleagues to celebrate the opening of the school the next day. As it turned out, overshadowed by world events, it was not so much a celebration as a taking stock of our intentions and responsibilities. Suddenly we were living in a different world and our thoughts were focussed, soberly, on the future of humanity.

In the time that has passed, our plans and preconceptions have changed; almost nothing has turned out as we imagined. Between us, we had many years' experience of working and living in London, and we had a very clear vision of what we wanted to establish – as well as, perhaps more clearly, what we didn't want to do. But then the empty space began to fill with real people – children, parents, teachers, staff, officials, neighbours – all with their different needs and expectations. That was when we really began to found the school. Like an incarnating human being, preparing a body for itself from inherited material, we set out our neat plans like a row of pearly milk teeth, based on what had gone before. Then the forces of the world and the individual began to grapple with that old material and mould it into something new, unexpected and unique. Now we are shedding teeth like mad and the school is like an 8-year-old's mouth – strong new growth is showing at various levels amongst the old in an ad hoc arrangement with gaping holes here and there. We realise we may need braces later on....

Our guiding vision for The St. Michael Steiner School remains, however; it was that our children should feel part of the community, not that they were living in a sheltered oasis. People – from every background and part of the world – are one resource that is plentiful in the city and we don't want our children to feel isolated or, worse, elite. By sharing a building with a state Primary school, we are immediately close to the mainstream. Prejudices and myths on both sides are challenged when you meet each other face to face on a daily basis. We can't think of them as ruthless instructors who wilfully burden children with homework and exams, and they can't think of us as hopeless idealists whose children don't learn anything useful. The teachers recognise each other as professionals who want the best for the children. The children recognise each other as children. We have different ideas about how to do things, but there has already been some opportunity for sharing between the two schools.

For two years now, the children from the Nursery at West Hill primary School have taken part in our Kindergarten Advent festival, walking the spiral to light their candles. Our beautiful Waldorf festivals are often what draws people to us. A Martinmas festival in the city, however, is necessarily different. Our children make lanterns, like children in Waldorf schools everywhere, and walk with them out into the local streets or commons as it begins to get dark. In 2002, when we had finished our procession and singing, we were struggling to draw the group of excited children and chatting parents together for a moment of quiet before we went home. It

seemed as if it wasn't going to happen when suddenly, Concord flew over on its way to land at Heathrow. Children and adults alike fell silent and just gazed in awe at this beautiful piece of human creativity in a spontaneous expression of pure wonder.

If only our lessons could inspire such reverence, but events like this can inspire us to renew our teaching. We try to make a programme that is relevant to the lives the children are actually living. In the first four Class teacher years, we are dealing with the child's immediate surroundings and trying to help him relate to them. Traditionally, this means nature stories, and there are many parks and gardens here, but a child's immediate surroundings in London could also be a high rise block where he has a bird's-eye view, or a street with a constant flow of traffic. These are also part of his experience. A story about a mouse that lives behind Michael's fridge might be more valuable to him than one about a rabbit who lives in a field, if Michael has never seen a field. Then we also have to take him to see a field. Trips out of the city are vital; there are many children here who have never really seen the stars.

As well as telling stories about the things they see around them, we are also resourcing materials locally. Wood from local parks has been whittled and carved by the children and the clay in class 3 was dug out of a pile of excavated earth on a building site. A small yard which we have taken on to turn into a walled garden for the Kindergarten, now has a deep, soft layer of woodchip and some logs for sitting on and building with, all from a Plane tree which some parents saw being cut down outside MacDonalds in Wandsworth High street. It was delivered to the school, completely free and with the promise of plenty more in the future, 'now that they know someone wants it'.

We also live with the sounds and smells of the whole world all the time; to some of the children, a mango is as familiar as an apple. At the moment in our school, almost half of our children are bilingual. In one class there are 9 different languages spoken. Once, when I used an unfamiliar word in a story, a Japanese boy said "What's that?" and the answer came back to him in 4 languages! Sometimes you have to try to stand back and assess what all this does to the children. It's more difficult to make sense of the world when it comes to you in such a jumble of impressions. But that's the way it is, and we have to try to find meaning in all of it; there is no matter that is not a manifestation of spirit, "even a Pokemon card?" someone asked recently. Well, yes.

The particular difficulties of establishing a school in London have been experienced by many people over the years, yet it is still puzzling that there is no full Steiner/Waldorf school in the Capital. People from other parts of the world are usually amazed, especially when they know that the first Waldorf school in the English speaking world was founded in London in 1925. There have been many initiatives since then, and there are now four schools and several independent Kindergartens, but all of them have struggled to survive, and there is still no Upper School. It is hard to pinpoint what exactly works against them, but perhaps not all of our adversaries come from outside.

Our literature describes the ideal environment for young children – we all know what it is – and so we begin by making parents feel guilty about even trying to bring their children up in the city. Many people pack up and leave for schools in the country while their children are still in Kindergarten. So who is left? The ones who want to leave but can't, the ones who are going to leave one day and the ones who like it

here. The first two groups possibly make up the majority, but their commitment is always undermined to some degree by their wish or intention to leave and the feeling that the present situation is temporary or a compromise. Then there's the third group, the ones who enjoy the culture and cosmopolitan life of London. What do we do for them? We ask them not to take their children to the cinema, or to museums, we tell them that being driven around in cars is not good for them, that being left with childminders will harm them, that their children must go home at lunch time at least some days until they are 10 years old, but they shouldn't watch television, use the computer or listen to recorded music when they get there, but go for a walk or play in the garden. Not very helpful if you're a single parent who lives in a 10th floor flat 45 minutes drive from the school and you work full time, but also just too much for modern people who love the modern world. We ask them to give up the things they find exciting and then we ask them to pay for the privilege.

I'm not making any judgement about this kind of lifestyle, and I believe parents should be aware of the consequences of everything they do with their children, but we have to look at it from their point of view, otherwise we can never understand what it is about what we offer that doesn't work for some people. The question is: can this education work for – and appeal to – people who like living in London, or will we always see it as a compromise – a kind of Bohemian Brigadoon - for people who would rather move to the country but can't? Do we – people in the Waldorf movement – actually believe that a Waldorf school in the city can never give the children what they really need? Of course the city is a harsh place for small children, but nevertheless, we can easily fill our Kindergartens, if not the rest of the school. It should be the other way around, but it's not, and so we have to demonstrate how children can be brought up in the city in a healthy way and then make it practically possible for those children to have a Waldorf education.

Not everything is made harder by the environment – the child with the bird's-eye view from his window won't have a problem understanding maps and the child with lorries passing her door all day will appreciate how her food gets to the shops. For Upper School pupils, London can offer theatre, art galleries, museums, architecture and the train to Paris or Brussels in 3 hours. In many ways it is an ideal place to educate adolescents. Clearly, many of the assumptions about childhood, and about what children must have in order to grow up into healthy human beings, have to be challenged if we want to help them live harmoniously in this environment, but above all, we must educate them to live in this world without making them feel that we disapprove of it. We have to learn to love it too. If they think we disapprove of their world, they will reject us, not the world. The ultimate goal of education should not be to create model human beings, but to enable children to find their paths in this world, whoever they are and wherever they live. This is what we are trying to do.

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