

The Gifts of Waldorf Education and the Ecological Crisis

by Maximilian DeArmon

History is governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe. Creating such a movement might be called the Great Work of a people... The Great Work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner. — *Thomas Berry*¹

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 1.

We are bearing witness to, and participating in, an axial turn in the story of humanity. For the first time in our journey, we are becoming conscious of the fact that we are a global species forming a planetary civilization.² While there are many positive aspects of this turn, including the increasing tolerance of cultural, religious, and individual freedoms, the democratization of information through the Internet, and an emerging planetary awareness, there is also a great looming threat. Some scientists say we are at the brink of the sixth mass extinction event, which could bring an end to the Cenozoic Era, the primary cause of which is collective human activity. To put things into perspective, the last mass extinction event happened 65 million years ago, potentially caused by an asteroid hitting the Earth, killing the dinosaurs and other life forms.

Some geologists say we are entering the epoch of the “Anthropocene”³ in which humanity is a major driving force on the planet. On our current trajectory of endless industrial growth, extraction of natural resources, mass deforestation, ocean acidification, alterations in the atmosphere, and climate change, it seems that total ecological destruction is inevitable; this is being called “the Great Unraveling.”⁴ In the words of the evolutionary cosmologist Brian Swimme, humanity has emerged as a planetary power but has yet to become fully conscious of that power and the responsibility that comes with it.⁵

While many people are aware of the ecological crisis we currently face and its dire consequences, there is a complementary narrative of ecological resilience and hope that is gaining traction in our collective consciousness. Joanna Macy, an eco-philosopher and activist, refers to this phenomenon as “the Great Turning.”⁶ Emerging out of our current crisis, capturing the imagination of millions, and catapulting people to take action, the Great Turning is the greatest opportunity of our times. In his book *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken claims we are witnessing the largest social movement in human history, in which more than ever, grassroots organizations are working towards positive ecological and social change, and the number is growing exponentially.⁷

2 Sean Kelly, *Coming Home: The Birth & Transformation of The Planetary Era* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2010), VII.

3 *Ibid.*, VIII.

4 Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014), 5.

5 Brian Swimme, *Cosmological Powers*, DVD

6 Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Ibid.*

7 Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the largest social movement in history is restoring grace, justice, and beauty to the world* (New York: Penguin Books,

In the face of all this, what role do Waldorf education and Waldorf students play in the Great Turning? As both a former Waldorf student and someone who was home schooled with a Steiner education, I have identified four main skills that give Waldorf students the ability to grapple with the enormity of our situation and that strategically place them in a position of leadership.

First, an active *imagination* is required to ignite the creativity that will give rise to solutions for the global problems we face. The power of the imagination created ancient civilizations in China, Babylon, Greece, the Indus valley, Meso-America, and Egypt. It created the world’s great mythologies of the Olympian Gods, the Norse Gods, and the Hindu Pantheon, which influenced most of the world’s literary traditions. It created modernity; great economic systems; Paris, London, and New York City.

The power of the imagination will be the driving force behind creating a new world beneficial to all life on Earth. Children in Waldorf education spend years cultivating the imagination through mythological studies and personalized main lesson books created by the students. Most public schools and other educational institutions do not put strong emphasis on the imagination.

Second, *biospheric consciousness* seems to be naturally developing across the planet,⁸ but Waldorf education places an especially strong emphasis on the individual’s role within the Earth community⁹ and within the cosmos itself. This expansive form of consciousness is required for our society to rebuild so that all life on Earth can thrive and human activity can be in harmony with the natural rhythms of the cosmos. Without this type of global consciousness, any rebuilding of civilization will fall short of fully integrating our social systems with the greater ecological and cosmological systems.

The third skill is the *practical application of abstract ideas*. Steiner believed that students should learn abstract ideas through tactile activities. I remember woodworking, crocheting, eurythmy, and the Olympic games as enjoyable activities that stay in my memory to this day. Science is taught with a hands-on, applicable approach,

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2008), 2.

8 Jeremy Rifkin, *Empathic Civilization: The race to global consciousness in a world in crisis* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 593.

9 Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 6.

and the history of math and science is taught during those subject periods, giving proper context to the lessons. Now as a doctoral student wading through an ocean of ideas, I can clearly see how these activities opened up certain neural networks in my brain, expanded my consciousness, and allowed me to process these abstractions with ease. This skill is essential in dealing with the ecological crisis because our brain's neural plasticity has a limited or expanded bandwidth based on past experiences, and our perception of reality, and cognitive ability, is in part shaped by these neural networks.¹⁰ Having years of intentional cognitive and creative development working on these neural networks gives the brain the mental capacity to handle more complex abstract philosophical ideas such as re-imagining civilization and re-inventing the human in alignment with a living Earth.

The fourth skill I identified, cultivated in Waldorf education and necessary for dealing with ecological devastation, is that of *developing an ecological sensibility*. Steiner's development of biodynamic farming could literally be what shapes the future of agriculture all over the world.¹¹ As the dangers of mono-cropping become ever more present, biodynamic farming seems to be a major solution to healing our relationship with domesticated animals and with the growing of our food. Most Waldorf schools go on field trips to biodynamic farms, and some have a biodynamic farm or garden on the school property, or at least close by. This type of education and connection to the Earth is priceless and exactly what is needed to reconnect to the life-sustaining principles of our ancestors.

As a former Waldorf student, I feel a moral obligation to use these skills to help our world in this time of great crisis. Because of the care of our families and communities, we were given a gift of a liberated mind and the freedom to develop ourselves to our highest potential through transformative education. Steiner developed an education model that is not only beneficial to unlocking latent potentials for individual growth and development, but also is beneficial to the greater community, and the natural world. We are now being called upon to utilize these skills for the benefit of all beings and to join others who are already committed to the mission of the Great Turning. The Earth needs us to participate. Humanity needs us to participate. There is no more time to sit on the sidelines

and contemplate a better world while we criticize the fall of industrial society. A new world is gestating and a fully formed planetary civilization is on the horizon. Will we be part of its creation or merely bear witness to its birth?

Steiner was well versed in the battle between good and evil on subtle planes and his revelations about these polarities reverberates through his philosophical and educational writings. One could argue that the battle is now playing out on the world stage, and we are facing the greatest threat to our own survival, as well as the survival of countless other species. My Waldorf education has convinced me that we have been invited to join the battle and for what is good in our world.

The task at hand is making sure that the Anthropocene does not continue down the path of the Great Unraveling, where the collective power of humanity is the primary destructive force on the planet. By re-imagining humanity to be intricately interconnected with the entire Earth community, as part of a "communion of subjects" (Thomas Berry's phrase), we have the opportunity to transform this destructive power into a positive regenerative force where the Anthropocene could turn into the epoch of the Great Turning. Steiner's dream of a better world, a more creative and ecologically harmonious world, is also a dream of humanity—and a dream of the Earth.

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¹⁰ Thomas Luckman and Peter Berger, *The Social Foundations of Human Experience* (New York: Oxford, 2007)

¹¹ John Paull, "Biodynamic Agriculture: The journey from Koberwitz to the world, 1924-1938," *Journal of Organic Systems*, 6(1), (2011): 27