

# being human

personal and cultural renewal  
in the 21st century

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*Hilma af Klint, SUW/US Series: Group IX/UW,  
The Dove, No. 1 (1915), oil on canvas*

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## IN THIS SECTION:

Meristem is a new program offering unique support for young people on the autism spectrum.

“Inclusive Social Development” is the new umbrella term for a wide range of Steiner-inspired social initiatives.

Anthroposophic Prison Outreach celebrates 20 years of service.

At White Feather Ranch in California indigenous wisdom is honored, and truer stories of this continent are told.

Two “Sacred Gateway” conferences have been opening minds to a great transition.

## Awakening the Possible

Meristem is a unique program dedicated to preparing young adults on the autism spectrum for a life of greater independence and fulfillment. Its flagship campus is located on 13 beautiful acres in Sacramento, California near the American River, integrated with Rudolf Steiner College. As Meristem enters into its fifth year of instruction, the question many still ask is, What was the inspiration behind this innovative program? **Mackenzie Foy**, a Meristem graduate student, talks to the founders to get an answer. **Maureen Curran-Turtletaub** is the Founder and Director of Orcas Institute. **Marc Turtletaub** is an Award-Winning Producer and Director. **Aonghus Gordon** is Founder and Executive Chair of Ruskin Mill Trust (RMT) in England.

**Mackenzie Foy:** *What was the inspiration to create Meristem?*

**Maureen Curran-Turtletaub:** I was inspired by a workshop I did with Aonghus. It focused on a therapeutic program through land and craft. During that workshop, a participant asked, “This is amazing! Why isn’t there something like this in the US?” That question was the spark.

**Marc Turtletaub:** It began with my wife who heard about Aonghus and the trust. I began to hear her experiences with the trust, how ASD is so prevalent and only increasing. I was intrigued by the way she described the method. I spoke with Aonghus and went over to see what they were doing. Meristem is an evolution of that.

**Aonghus Gordon:** I came to the US at age 24 and fell in love with the people and landscape. I always thought I would do something here, but I didn’t know what that meant. When I came back at age 58, I realized there were few facilities in the US for people who had different ways of learning, as there were in England. And when you meet people like Maureen and Marc, you think, well, everything is possible.

**Mackenzie:** *How is Meristem similar to RMT?*



Aonghus Gordon

**Maureen:** Emphasis is on connection with the natural world, outdoor workshops as much as possible. Craft is vital. Landwork is vital. Movement is vital. We strive to see students as whole persons, to engage the student and instructor so the student does not feel “taught at” or “taught down-to;” instead, it is a partnership and a symbiotic relationship.

**Aonghus:** Both centers have beauty around them, wonderful gardens and the world of nature. Students contribute to the beauty and productivity. The staff of Meristem have similar qualities—they are compassionate, kind, and informed about student needs; they always want to step in and help. Program development—one year is connected to the next. You graduate and can discuss challenges and gifts of the journey. And thank your parents! Without the parents, there is no Meristem, no RMT. Finally, Movement is the foundation at both.



Maureen Curran-Turtletaub



Marc Turtletaub

**Mackenzie:** *How is Meristem different from RMT?*

**Marc:** Having to thrive in an American economy and social system so students can get jobs and live independently. The heavier focus here on helping students become fully independent, and our foundation of spatial integration.

**Aonghus:** Climate—In England, 80 degrees is the hottest. In England, the central government pays the students 100% to come to RMT. In the U.S. you pay privately with some government help. That makes it challenging for parents to send a student. Those students are very fortunate.

**Mackenzie:** What have been the accomplishments since Meristem began?

**Maureen:** The Meristem experience has shaped an emergent and responsive leadership model. This model exists at all levels within the organism, from staff to students to parents to board. The curriculum is becoming more fine-tuned. Practitioners are part of a team, not siloed. The parents now have a place inside Meristem instead of being on the outside. They have a voice and feel supported.

**Marc:** Seeing how you graduates all thrive is incredibly satisfying; this is your accomplishment, not ours. Seeing the faculty grow. They may not have known what the program was getting at initially and now they are attuned to the vision of the program and development of themselves.

**Aonghus:** To help young people realize they can change and they have a potential future they did not know before they came. They had thought, before Meristem, “maybe this is how adulthood is.” Those who come to Meristem are given a new opportunity to imagine and do things they did not know are possible. Each has to find their pathway along with their reimagining of themselves.

**Mackenzie:** A lot of accomplishments have come through the students. For example, by planning weekend events together, students feel we have grown into a community and developed close friendships. We feel we can trust.

**Mackenzie:** *What have been the challenges since Meristem began?*

**Maureen:** Finding practitioners that have the resilience and skillset to work with youth holistically. The method we use at Meristem differs a lot from traditional methods of behavior analysis and modification. It can be a challenge to change their practice to see the whole

human being and not just change behavior. Because our method was new, it was also challenging to attract students. Trying to message who we are and what, why, and how we guide Meristem.

**Marc:** It is always a challenge starting a new nonprofit, communicating what you want to do and how you want to do it. It takes a while to hone your ability to say what it is that we do and being able to live up to that. Another challenge to make it the best nonprofit serving ASD requires a lot of teachers to a smaller number of students and that makes it expensive so there is a challenge to make it affordable to everyone. That is our goal.

**Aonghus:** How does Meristem get more widely supported by the community and those who want to find Meristem? Make a wider community of funders. For parents and youth to advocate a Meristem experience with politicians, psychologists and specialists in autism and convince them it is worth it.

**Mackenzie:** What intentions do you have for the future of Meristem?

**Marc:** To keep growing. To meet what students now need and students to come--independence, finding their voice, finding employment, using Breaking Barriers to achieve these things. Build out our food program from seed to table so students appreciate the land they live on, and the food they prepare, and eat a healthy diet. And to listen to you, the students, because it is very easy to assume we know what you need.

**Aonghus:** I would like to see developments for work training so that you have more experience of work so when you leave you are prepared for the culture of work and have the support structures to have that transition.

**Maureen:** Mackenzie, I now have a question for you, what in the program helped you the most?

**Mackenzie:** In my second year, I communicated with my student advisor that I wanted to master social communication, small talk. I used to just say, “Hi. How are you?” But now I keep the flow. At my country club job, I chat with regulars and co-workers all the time now. I feel comfortable. I also feel relaxed with my own family and extended family. At a recent family wedding, my family members came up one after another to my folks and exclaimed how impressed they are with how chatty and open I am. I also communicate with my peers and other tutors at my tutoring job at college.

Meristem is online at <https://meristem.pro/>