

Learning to Learn

ESSAYS WRITTEN BY WALDORF GRADUATES

In 2003, Waldorf Education celebrated its 75th anniversary in North America. To help commemorate the occasion, AWSNA published *Learning to Learn*, a collection of essays written by 26 Waldorf graduates reflecting upon their education. Excerpted here are four of those essays. Copies of the complete publication can be obtained by visiting www.whywaldorffworks.org.

KENNETH CHENAULT, PRESIDENT AND CEO, AMERICAN EXPRESS COMPANY

HARVARD LAW SCHOOL, J.D.; BOWDOIN COLLEGE-B.A., HISTORY; WALDORF SCHOOL OF GARDEN CITY

My parents were looking for a school that would nurture the whole person. They also felt that the Waldorf school would be a far more open environment for African Americans, and that it was focused on bringing up students with values, as well as the academic tools necessary to be constructive and contributing human beings.

During the early years, I was fascinated by the storytelling. I was captivated. The exposure to the arts—even though I didn't consider myself a talented artist—I looked forward to expressing myself. I got a tremendous amount from that. And I was very fortunate to have a teacher who had a keen sense for the needs of children. If you think of the many benefits to a child of the parental relationship, to then have a teacher who spends more time with you than your parents, to have someone you can trust and who will grow with you for eight years, that's a rare gift.

I think the end result of Waldorf Education is to raise our consciousness. There is a heightened consciousness of what our senses bring us from the world around us, about our feelings, about the way we relate to other people. It taught me how to think for myself, to be responsible for my decisions. Second, it made me a good listener, sensitive to the needs of others. And third, it helped establish meaningful beliefs. In all the Main Block lessons—in history, science, philosophy—we really probed the importance of values and beliefs. In dealing with a lot of complex issues and a lot of stress, if that isn't balanced by a core of meaningful beliefs, you really will just be consumed and fail.

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RACHEL BLACKMER, VETERINARIAN, CAPE WILDLIFE CENTER DIRECTOR

TUFTS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF VETERINARY MEDICINE; MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE-B.A. STUDIO ART, ITALIAN; HIGH MOWING WALDORF SCHOOL

When people ask me what I am, I usually answer in the expected way that I am a veterinarian. But, that is such a small part of the whole. The truth is that I am a human becoming. I went to a large public school in Massachusetts until middle school when I transferred to a Waldorf school. That move changed everything about the human I was becoming. I have gone through many different schools, universities, courses and seminars. Most of them ask me for my support and money each year. They all want me to remember them. I do, but not like I remember my high school. All of those schools and seminars taught me only knowledge. High Mowing taught me living.

Waldorf Education is learning in its purest form. It is learning to think, to feel and to act appropriately, completely and with conscience. Of course, the learning of specific knowledge is a part of Waldorf Education as well, the facts and figures, dates, mathematical processes, verb conjugations, physical laws. The difference is that these things are taught in a manner that requires true thinking, not just memorization. The student listens in class and then recreates the lessons while writing them, illustrating them and absorbing them that evening. The student participates in hands-on demonstrations of the principles of physics, chemistry, woodworking, weaving and astronomy. She is asked to experience life and learning through all her senses and faculties.

Coupled with that learning are the moments of learning about our own hearts. What do we feel about the world? What will we feel in the future? If I feel differently than my classmate, how do I reconcile that? Each person understands the world through their own set of experiences and filters. How do we ask another into ourselves so that we may understand him or her and thus get to know the world and ourselves better? Waldorf Education is truly unique in this. It teaches the child to awaken to the bright and vivid world around him. It encourages the child to touch, taste, smell, breathe each moment before him, whether a math problem, a Norse myth, a wood and stone creation of his own hands, or a classmate with a completely different background and experience of the world.

To this day I can remember parts of the morning verse that I learned over thirty years ago. "I gaze into the world in which the sun is shining, in which the stars are sparkling, in which the stones repose?" Do I remember that because I said it each morning for six years? Perhaps, but I would like to believe that I remember it because I still live it each day. High Mowing School still stands out of all my schooling with the most vivid colors, the loudest shouts of joy, the largest stretching of my mind and awareness. I wish that I could share that with the world. If everyone had the opportunity to grow up learning to think, feel and act with conscience and joy of life, how much different would the world be?

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MICHAEL WILSON, PHYSICIAN, EMERGENCY MEDICINE
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Much of my learning and life has occurred in the eighteen years since my graduation from the Detroit Waldorf School, so it may be difficult to separate the life lessons learned at Waldorf from elsewhere; however, some foundation of belief patterns from the Waldorf school is still evident to me.

I like to think that the process is more important than the result or the journey is of greater consequence than the destination. Actually, this is only half true, for if the journey is the destination, as I believe it is, this distinction is artificial. I don't think I could say the end justifies the means for if the end is worthwhile then the means must be as well. If the means is unjust then the end cannot be justified. Waldorf gave me faith in the ultimate good or sensible results that good efforts bring about.

I have traveled much and now that I am more stationary I like to think that my traveling occurs on another plane. Nothing could be sadder for me than to think that I have reached a place in my life where I have no further need of change. The Waldorf Education I received encouraged me to be an active participant in the process of discovery and allowed me to find a joy in lifelong learning that of course my current occupation demands.

I believe I can succeed in life without being ambitious in the ruthless, striving way that so much of modern life seems to demand. Many of the people I know and in fact see as patients are driven; there is an impatience about them, a dissatisfaction. I think that they will never find satisfaction in life as long as they are looking for it somewhere outside of themselves.

In the Waldorf school, we were not supplied with facts, but were given the capacity to learn. My imagination and my curiosity were not killed with facts but were fostered with stories, art, music and the natural phenomena of the world. My Waldorf Education gave me a sense of history and of our current place in history. It gave me the sense that there is in fact meaning in the world. I believe I was given a great gift.

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KATJA RUDOLPH, FREELANCE WRITER/RESEARCHER

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Waldorf Education taught me a particular kind of discipline that is perhaps unusual in schools today. It taught me how to think and feel my way deeply into a subject; one can call that the cultivation of imagination. It taught me how to work patiently, quietly on a project for many hours at a time; one can call that the cultivation of understanding. It taught me how to present school material beautifully and with attention to detail; one can call that the cultivation of artistic sensibility.

In short, Waldorf Education taught me that knowledge in all its forms is conveyed in and through time-that time is required for any subject to come to life. I was able to experience for myself at a very young age that the conscious, respectful use of time results in abundant rewards that show themselves on many levels-imaginative, cognitive, creative.

This sense of discipline has helped me tremendously in my chosen career. Academic studies require above all else a particular kind of concentration and rigorous patience. I knew already when I enrolled in my undergraduate courses that my goals would not be realized fully until many years in the future when I graduated with a Ph.D. I knew already that I would get tremendous pleasure and satisfaction out of practicing this kind of discipline. These were lessons many other students still had to learn.

Since graduating, I am working as a freelance writer/researcher. Any freelancer knows that discipline, coupled with a love of what you do, can determine the difference between success and failure. I feel thankful to the Toronto Waldorf School for having prepared me so well.

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