

A Parent's Passage

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The first thing I remember about Waldorf education was the kid who mentioned the Merchant Marine. Sitting in the auditorium of a strange school in upstate New York, I sat up straight and cocked an ear. My family had left the city for a rural interlude, and the school was Hawthorne Valley.

It was our first encounter with a Waldorf school, and everything about it seemed odd—except for the kids. At this particular event some recent alumni were discussing their experiences and plans, when suddenly a young man started talking about how his passion for the sea had led him to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

I realized there was something special going on here. These kids weren't abnormal or precocious, but there was something different about them. Something about this school had helped them to find themselves. Any reservations about enrolling our older child in the school, and our younger one in a nearby Waldorf play group, disappeared. The methods and atmosphere may have struck us as eccentric, but the results were clear.

That was more than a decade ago. A few years later we returned to New York City. To maintain continuity for our children amid the tumult of moving and change, we enrolled them at the Rudolf Steiner School.

I remember feeling a bit out of place at the first class meeting, a Villager on the Upper East Side. Where were the blue jeans? Who were all these well-dressed people? Had I stumbled into a consular reception? It took me a while to adjust to the city again and to the new school. It helped that it was next door to New York's greatest institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and across the street from a resurgent, resplendent Central Park. But before long the Rudolf Steiner School was burrowing into my good graces. It seemed my kids really liked the place.

Again, it was the confidence and poise of the older students that impressed me, and their rapport with the younger ones—something I had never seen in a school. There was an esprit here—even if the kids referred to it as being “Steinerized.” There was a sense of family.

I also liked the emphasis on music and art. And I'm a strong proponent of eurythmy—for other people. I liked the connections between thinking, feeling, and doing. I didn't mind the occasional Nativity Play—my children were acting

and enjoying it. And never mind all those pictures of faceless angels on the walls—these kids were really learning to draw. It wasn't about religion, I realized, but about reverence.

Besides, I've always been a believer in philosophical systems of all kinds. Someday I plan to better acquaint myself with Rudolf Steiner's. No doubt he was on to something. I learned just enough about it from our kids' class teachers, Lucy Schneider and Dale Bennett, who rightly regard parents as extensions of their children and therefore in need of some education. But I prefer to wait until the goose is cooked before checking the recipe too closely. Some things are best attended to when it's too late. So I avoided the books and just watched my children and their friends grow.

When it came time for my daughter to apply to college, she refused to consider several likely schools because they were "too much like Steiner." Now she loves her college because it is "just like Steiner." My son, on an exchange in Germany last fall, at first exulted at how different his new school was from the Steiner School. But soon he was complaining about how different it was from Steiner.

As the defective product of a prep school, a veritable incubator of white-collar criminals, I can't help wondering how I might have turned out had I gone to the Rudolf Steiner School myself. Instead of becoming an ink-stained wretch of a writer, I might have achieved my early dreams: pilot, librarian, pastry chef, second baseman. (The Merchant Marine was never a strong possibility.) But I'm lucky in the best way: I envy my children.