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A Perspective on the Educational Value of the 8th grade Trip in Waldorf Education

Not everyone in Waldorf education fully understands the significance of the eighth grade trip. This is understandable, as it is not necessarily an easy concept to describe. After leading seventy-two trips for Waldorf eighth grade classes since 1994, we (Debra and Tom Weistar) have gained a unique perspective of what this moment in the class's life is all about. We are not Waldorf teachers ourselves, nor are we affiliated with the Waldorf movement. We are the directors of a non-profit organization that is dedicated to the wellbeing and education of youth, children and families, and have worked with all ages in unconventional settings for the past twenty plus years. While addressing a group of (Waldorf 8th grade) parents some time ago, we were asked why we lead these trips and how we got started in the first place. It gave us pause to frame an answer that would serve to help all the parents in the room understand the value and meaning of the trip, and the vital role the parents themselves play.

Ordinary Beginnings

As with many things in life that start out unsuspecting and seemingly ordinary, only to turn out to be the start of events that are anything *but* ordinary, so it was with our first Waldorf 8th grade trip. The teacher was familiar with our work with youth in the wilderness and on the ropes course. We worked with her class extensively on our ropes course at the start of both 7th and 8th grade. When she approached us to lead a backpacking journey for their culmination trip, she was going against a long-standing school tradition of increasingly exotic 8th grade trips. The previous year's class had gone to Hawaii, which by then was commonplace. Other classes had traveled to Europe, Mexico, the East Coast. Her reasons for wanting a wilderness experience for her students were simple: she had personally gained so much from backpacking with her husband and sons, and relating with them in Nature, that she wanted this type of experience for her students before she let them go.

The full significance of what we had agreed to take on did not hit us until a few days into the trip, and what that class taught us we have never forgotten. This was far more than a wilderness experience. This was a group that had, by and large, been together since they were young children. Some had joined the class just a year or two previously, but as a whole they conveyed a feeling of long-standing relationship, with each other and with their teacher. They were strong-minded and independent. They had keen alliances and dramatic feuds. In many ways they were like family. And they were inexorably heading toward the end of their time as a class, the end of their time with their teacher, and, in a certain sense, the beginning of the end of their childhood. They were excited and full of themselves--and they were terrified.

So we did the only thing we could do—we responded as skillfully and intelligently as we knew how. We had already designed the trip with the developmental needs of adolescents very much in mind. It included challenge; lots of peer interaction; opportunities to step into responsibility, leadership and independence; mastery of new skills; and a chance to experience freedom as only a trek in the back country can provide. The custom element we added was careful guidance in the realm of relationships--putting old hurts to rest, putting difficult feelings into words, expressing appreciation and admiration. In short, facilitating closure so that each person could leave behind a clean and satisfying finish, and stride unhindered into whatever next step awaited them.

One of the physical/mental challenges on that journey was a peak climb to the top of 9,000 ft. Mt. Eddy to watch the sunrise over Mt. Shasta. We had to get up at 3 a.m. and hike for nearly 3 hours in semi-darkness in order to make the summit before sunrise. It wasn't easy, but it was spectacular. Standing on the top of the mountain together connected us in some mysterious way to each other, to ourselves, to wildness. Eight years later, out of the blue, we received this email:

Dear Tom and Debra,

I was just thinking of the view from atop Mt. Eddy. Thought I'd thank you both for the memory. I hope you two remain wild and well. I still roam the mountains now and then. Maybe our paths will cross again.

L.P. (____ Waldorf class of '98)

Meaning and Purpose

The 8th grade trip is all too often seen as a reward for having “made it” through middle school. Visions of tropical paradise, of relaxing and “hanging out” pervade; attitudes of entitlement surface. One of the most important aspects to keep in mind when planning an 8th grade trip is the pedagogic value. How can a trip enhance the education of the students, both as individuals and as a class? How can a trip hold meaning and purpose for students and teacher, so that weeks and months and years later, they may reflect upon the significant role it played in their learning, and in their growth as a person? What kind of trip will truly serve this class?

The answer to these questions and others resides in keeping the purpose foremost, which is a big part of the parent's role. If the purpose is clearly identified and articulated, the trip basics and logistics will form naturally out of that process. Decisions as to location or specific activities, while important, will be secondary, and will be informed by the purpose. There exists in the young person a longing for new horizons, new territory, new landscapes. That is part of the adventuring spirit of this age and the need to move out of familiarity into the unknown. Young people have their ways of expressing this need: for a student growing up in Sacramento, they may see visions of tropical paradise; for a young person growing up in Hawaii, they long for high mountains and snow capped peaks. What they are saying is that they are ready for something different and new and challenging and exciting.

Parents who are aligned in supporting a trip that will challenge their sons and daughters, support the teacher, and value the educational and relational needs, play a major role in furthering this aspect of their child's education. Parents who learn how to support and guide their son or daughter through the sometimes tumultuous process of adjusting to (the decision to do) a wilderness trip and letting go of materialistic vacation visions, are educating their children in values that will serve them a lifetime. Parents who realize that this trip is a marker for themselves, as yet another opportunity to practice the bittersweet letting go that parenting demands, will take this journey every step of the way *with* their child, though miles may separate them.

Every class trip we have led since that first one in 1994 has only underscored what we learned then. In the years since, we have refined and expanded the curriculum, but the needs of students and teacher to be “held” and guided, challenged and supported, have remained constant. A student that successfully navigates a rapid in a canoe, or climbs a high mountain peak, or lives for days without the comforts and familiarity of their ordinary surroundings, learns through experience that life can be met successfully, that skills can be mastered, and that one's own capabilities are all one needs.

Our personal mission

And why we do it? We live in a fragile world, and our ability as humans to successfully live together, love one another and take care of our environment seems to be our biggest challenge. David Brower, one of the last century's most ardent and committed environmentalists, wrote that we come from wilderness, that wilderness is our true home. Our children are growing up in an increasingly technological and mechanistic world. When we contact a part of ourselves that is so essential as wildness and wilderness, then a piece of our wholeness remains intact. Our ability to take care of one another is dependent on our wholeness. Offering these trips is one way that we choose to serve humanity through working with and teaching young people.