

# Imagining a Balance

## One Mother's Experience of the Differences between Montessori and Waldorf Education

BY CAROLINA RANDOLPH STEUP



*Waldorf Education was founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) in Germany just after World War I. Montessori education was developed by Maria Montessori (1870–1952) also in the early decades of the last century, as a result of her work with disadvantaged children in Italy. Today Waldorf and Montessori are perhaps the two best-known and widespread of the alternative educational approaches. For that reason, they are often—by the poorly informed—confused one for the other, and also often compared with each other.*

*The two approaches are quite different, even perhaps opposite. Montessori emphasizes early intellectual development and the preschool acquisition of reading and math skills. Waldorf tries to keep the young child in the kingdom of childhood—the world of play, fantasy, and imagination—and places strong emphasis on the arts and handcrafts.*

*In choosing to send our child to a Waldorf or a Montessori school, in choosing to become a Waldorf or*



*Montessori teacher, each of us expresses a preference for one over the other. Assuming that our decision is a serious and informed one, we are saying to the approach that we have not chosen, "I respect and appreciate what you are doing but prefer another approach for myself and my child."*

*The writer of this article has had experience of both Montessori and Waldorf and prefers—for reasons she makes quite clear—the Waldorf approach. We publish this account of her experiences and conclusions not from a desire to criticize or discredit Montessori but to make clear the differences that exist between it and Waldorf Education.*

*We invite those who have had different (or similar) experiences to share them with us for possible publication.*  
R.E.K.

In her article, "Montessori and Steiner: A Pattern of Reverse Symmetries,"\* Dee Joy Coulter argues that Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori formed their respective philosophies in direct response to the societies and eras in which they lived. Thus she writes,

Steiner, a male in a masculine country at the end of a very masculine act of war, was asked to instill the feminine principle of honoring the basic goodness and inner wisdom of the child by reintroducing the arts and reawakening the heart forces.

Montessori, in contrast, was to bring the masculine service of enculturation to the children of her already art-laden, "feminine" country . . . building up skillful means in them so that they could take their place in the society.

Steiner and Montessori each attempted to bring balance to the children, to provide them with an education that, in essence, ran counter to the attitudes that permeated their respective societies.

Given that providing this balance for our children is an obligation with which Coulter charges us all,

it is hard for me to accept her conclusion that Montessori and Waldorf have equally beneficial roles in modern America. My experience has shown just the opposite. Montessori education is aligned with and reinforces our fast-paced, achievement-based society. It is Waldorf Education that, focusing on bringing the spirit into education, in fact provides the necessary counterweight.

My elder daughter, Madeleine, toddled off to a Montessori preschool/kindergarten at age two and a half and blissfully "worked" her way through four years there. Her sister Louisa started at Montessori when she was three. Within six months, she was hiding under a table when it was time to go to school. We took the hint and let her stay home. One day, not long after her release, her godmother stopped by and commented on the cleanliness of my white walls. "Louisa washes them," I said. "It's one of her favorite things to do." Louisa's godmother slapped hand to forehead. "Of course!" she said. "The child should go to the Waldorf school!"

Louisa did go to the local Waldorf preschool/kindergarten and loved it. She happily played her way through another three years, leaving only when she had crossed the rainbow bridge and could no longer stay.

My two daughters are about as different as peas and giraffes. Madeleine is emotionally tempestuous, quicksilver active, and achievement driven. She loves to draw and to write but seems uncomfortable playing with dolls or entering into other overtly imaginative play. Extremely verbal, she started reading at four and has never stopped.

Louisa moves at her own stately pace—somewhat slower than a snail's—and is remarkably even-tempered and peaceful. She began speaking late and with poor pronunciation, and even now her speech can be difficult to understand. She learned to read at four, but with little motivation, and at five declared it to be a waste of time. Occasionally she reads, but mostly she is involved in a world of her own making—a realm where dolls and stuffed animals,

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and even she herself, have several different names and personalities.

My daughters' differences in temperament made it easy for me to rationalize their different preferences in schools. Madeleine was happy at Montessori because she could move quickly from one activity to the next, now learning the continents, now parsing out simple sentences, now doing mathematics drills. Dreamy Louisa was much happier polishing brass and baking bread than learning to multiply. Naturally one school couldn't fit the needs of them both. I congratulated myself on finding the right school for each of them, said a prayer of thanks for having both options available to us, and let it go at that. All was well.

I might have been able to stay in this state of ignorant bliss if life had not stepped in and rerouted me. But Madeleine graduated from Montessori and needed an elementary school to attend. There were not many options: I had large public schools or small Catholic schools to choose from. There was no Montessori or Waldorf school, or anything even remotely alternative.

After much waffling and whining, I settled on a small Catholic school with multigrade classrooms, figuring it could best handle her needs. Madeleine was settled. Then came dilemma number two: Should I make life easier for myself and move Louisa from Waldorf to the Catholic school for her kindergarten year? Common sense said yes, unless I wanted to spend all day in the car. The Waldorf teacher said no, and promptly subjected me to an avalanche of books and articles on why Waldorf Education was important for young children.

This was my first brush with Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy, and the fundamentals of Waldorf Education. Until that point, since my girls were both quite content, I hadn't troubled myself with educational philosophy. As I read, however, I found myself confused. How was I going to reconcile the Waldorf principle of protecting the wonderful fairy bubble of childhood, a principle that I instinctively and wholeheartedly embraced, with the fact that my older

daughter, whose fairy bubble had been an early casualty, seemed to be thriving? I couldn't answer the question.

I read more. I attended parent meetings at the Waldorf school. I spoke to Louisa's teacher. Everything I read, everything I heard made me more convinced that the Waldorf way was clearly the best for my children, and, yet, there was Madeleine sitting in a corner reading and grinning. I gave up trying to understand, consigned myself to a life in the car, and kept Louisa at the Waldorf kindergarten.

She flourished, as expected. Madeleine, in her new school, did not. Far ahead of her fellow first graders academically, she soon left the second graders behind as well. By Christmas, her teacher consulted with us about moving her into third grade. She shone; she was brilliant; she was her teacher's dream.

At home, she was a nightmare, beset by temper tantrums, hysterical weeping, and insomnia. The only time she was calm was when she was reading, which she did obsessively and compulsively. The counselor we took her to diagnosed school anxiety and suggested an

Independent Education Plan, which would effectively take her out of the classroom entirely.

Finally, the ideas I had absorbed from my reading of Waldorf theory kicked in, and we removed Madeleine from both the school and the counselor. It seemed clear to me that she was suffering, not from school anxiety, but from a complete lack of balance in her life. Her academic drive, encouraged and nourished by her Montessori teachers, had completely distanced her from her peers, who treated her more as an interesting curiosity than as a friend. The atrophy of her imagination and faculties for play had only exacerbated her isolation. What she needed was to relearn how to be a child.

Here Rudolf Steiner's notion of "reintroducing the arts and reawakening the heart forces" came in. Since we had taken Madeleine out of school and were homeschooling, we went back to the Waldorf basics. We derived the letters of the alphabet from fairy

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tales, studied the qualities of the numbers 1 through 10, and introduced the four processes of math through gnome stories. I bought her a doll, taught her to knit, and painted with her as often as we could. Twice a week she went with Louisa to the Waldorf school, where she sewed and baked and, yes, played. After a month, she had color in her cheeks again and her insomnia was basically gone. By the end of summer, she was once again fairly happy and healthy. And now after eighteen months of an education based on using her head, her heart, and her hands, rather than just her head, her imagination has begun to flourish.

My point is *not* that her Montessori preschool education caused Madeleine's breakdown, for obviously other factors came into play as well. Perhaps a larger elementary school would have been able to offer her more balancing activities. Perhaps a more experienced teacher would have known how to challenge her without isolating her. Perhaps more experienced parents would have seen the warning signs earlier and known what they meant. Perhaps a different child would have been able to bend with the breeze, instead of snapping.

Regardless—the important lesson to be learned here was that surrounding Madeleine with rhythm, imagination, and beauty allowed her to heal. I could no longer dismiss Waldorf schools as unsuitable for academically driven children; in fact, it seemed as though they might be the most suitable of all.

Madeleine's difficulties are not, unfortunately, unique. I have been astonished at how many mothers, on hearing her story, say to me, "Oh yes, I noticed the same thing about my child. When he gets home from school he's unbearable."

These mothers invariably continue by attributing the behavior to overtiredness and boredom, but apparently they see nothing wrong with their children coming home every afternoon worn out and spiritually drained. And the children—instead of spending the afternoon and evening relaxing—typically are engaged in a bewildering after-school parade of music, dance, sports, and religious activities. Children today, from elementary school through high school, rarely

have a block of time when they can sit back and just relax.

The lives of our children, of course, only imitate the lives of their parents and teachers. We adults suffer the same deprivation and accept it as normal. We place more and more emphasis on achievements and possessions, on what we can do and what we can get. As a result, we have no time, or energy, to sit and be quiet, to daydream, to play, to replenish our souls and nourish our spirits. Gradually these things have become less important than having a big car and nice house, or belonging to a new organization. No wonder the Montessori method of guiding children from one type of work to another with no "wasted" time in between appeals to us. It duplicates precisely what we do in our own lives.

Coulter writes that Montessori's educational methods were designed to "diminish the excessive imaginative life of children who used that realm as an escape." Few, I think, would argue that today's children suffer from an excess of imagination, just as few would claim that ours is a particularly art-laden society. Rather, it seems that present-day North America has much more in common

with the Central European culture that called forth Steiner's Waldorf school.

If we want balance in our lives, we should follow his lead and "rekindle" our imaginations.

## REFERENCE

\*Coulter, Dee Joy. "Montessori and Steiner: A Pattern of Reverse Symmetries." *Holistic Education Review*, September 2002. <http://oakmeadow.com/resources/articles/coulter.htm>

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*lives with her family in St. Cloud, Minnesota, where she attempts to find the balance it's so easy to write about. Though not short on imagination, she does tend to forget to allow space in life for just sitting and being. She credits her husband and daughters for patiently teaching her—in a myriad of ways—the necessity of slowing down and regrets that she is not a quicker learner.*

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# A Review of Two Books

REVIEWED BY  
RONALD E. KOETZSCH

## Developmental Dynamics in Humans and Other Primates Discovering Evolutionary Principles through Comparative Morphology

BY JOS VERHULST

Adonis Press • Ghent, New York, 2003 • 412 pages • \$39.95

The Spirit in Human Evolution

BY MARTYN RAWSON

AWSNA Publications • Fair Oaks, Calif., 2003 • 318 pages • \$22.00

Darwin's theory of evolution has been a primary shaper of the modern secular, materialistic consciousness. It holds that the human being is the end product of an evolutionary process based on impersonal chance, genetic mutation, and the survival of the fittest. The human being, rather than being the crown of creation, formed in the image of the Creator, is the Johnny-come-lately offspring of the primates—the gorillas, chimpanzees, and baboons. Most of us have been so indoctrinated into the scientific and political correctness of this theory that we can hardly imagine an alternative, other than a literalistic Bible-based Creationism—"This is day six, so that must be a human being."

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), the founder of Waldorf Education, himself a trained scientist, offered an alternative view. All animal forms, he said, are based on a cosmic human archetype and are divergences from this archetype, usually emphasizing one or another of its characteristics. What the fossil record reveals is the gradual development, driven by this cosmic human archetype—by the human spirit—toward the manifestation of the full human being in physical form:

When our earth came into existence, man was a purely spiritual being; he began his career by building for himself the simplest of bodies. The whole ladder of living creatures represents the outgrown stages through which he has developed his bodily structure to its present stage of perfection.

(Rudolf Steiner, Lecture, October 5, 1905)

Recently, two books have been published that deal with evolution and this dissident viewpoint. One is by Martyn Rawson, a longtime leading Waldorf educator in Great Britain. In *The Spirit in Evolution*, Rawson explicitly takes Rudolf Steiner's teachings about the origin and nature of the human being as his basis. He then looks at and evaluates current mainstream evolutionary theory in the light of Steiner's view. Rawson's basic assumption throughout is that the human spirit, both collective and individual, is primary and preexistent, and the process of evolution is the unfolding in the manifest physical world of the striving and aspiration of this spirit.

The result is an engaging and accessible presentation of Steiner's view of the human being and of evolution, plus an incisive survey of the latest discoveries and theories in the scientific world. There are fascinating sections dealing with, for example, explanations of the process by which human beings came to be bipedal (walking upright on two legs); the relationship of different methods of making stone tools to different stages of the evolution of consciousness; and the development of language. Chapter 7, "The Ancients," gives a helpful overview of the current hominid fossil record. Chapter 8 is a survey of current knowledge regarding the last 100,000 years of development and of explanations regarding the emergence of modern human beings. A glossary at the end of the book explains important technical terms.

This book is meant for the lay reader with an interest in human evolution and an openness to understanding it in terms of human spirituality.

In *Developmental Dynamics in Humans and Other Primates*, Belgian scientist and anthroposophist Jos Verhulst presents and, in the light of current knowledge, elaborates upon the work of Louis Bolk. Bolk (1866–1930) was a professor of anatomy at the University of Amsterdam who dealt with the question of human origins and evolution. Working independently of Steiner, he rejected the Darwinian hypothesis and asserted that there was an intrinsic driving force behind the evolutionary process that led toward the development of the human form.

In their early stages, the embryos of human beings, mammals, and birds are almost identical. At certain points in their development, the nonhuman embryos, of an eagle or a lion, for example, diverge from the human pattern and go their own way. Bolk observed that the distinctive human form is created in part by a process of fetalization or retardation, that is, the retention of certain characteristics of the embryo, for example, the rounded head and lack of body hair.

Striking photographs in the book show that for some primates, such as the chimpanzee, this divergence occurs largely after birth. The chimpanzee fetus has a round cranium, flat face, and its hair is restricted to its head. At birth, it much resembles a newborn human baby. Within a few months, however, the chimpanzee has taken its own developmental path and has developed a flattened skull, protruding jaw, and a cover of body hair.

Verhulst adds to this the concept of hypermorphosis, first put forth by Steiner. This holds that the distinctive human form is also the result of the further development of certain aspects of the embryo, such as the forebrain, the larynx, and the leg and heel. These developments give us our ability to think, to speak, and to walk upright—capacities that make the human being unique and "human."

For Verhulst and for Bolk, as for Steiner, the human archetype, gradually manifesting in the physical forms of life, is the driving force in evolution. It is the central trunk in the evolutionary tree from which have sprung all the various forms of animal life.

*Developmental Dynamics* is a technical and challenging work. Every part of the human anatomy is included as Verhulst examines changes in the rates and timing of development as the source of our evolutionary heritage. This book will be a delight to the scientist and specialist, but a challenge, albeit a well-illustrated one, to the lay reader.

Nevertheless, its central message, much the same as that of *The Spirit in Evolution*, is an important and inspiring one—that there are scientifically respectable ways other than Darwinism to explain the fossil record and the origin of the human being. We do not have to think of ourselves as a little higher than the apes. We may dare to think of ourselves rather as a little lower than the angels.