

An Ode to Eurythmy

Reflections on eurythmy in our schools and in teacher education programs

My first experiences with eurythmy occurred when I was three years old. A small group of children in Spring Valley, NY, were given the opportunity to enjoy some stories, verses and songs in movement with Lisa Monges. She taught us in her large living room (the space that is now the Fellowship Community for the elderly) and I remember the unusual experience of being in a larger group wearing red overalls and funny slippers, and meeting new children through movement. As a dreamy Waldorf student in the years that followed, I had eurythmy twice a week throughout the grades and into high school, even doing some additional individualized therapeutic work to help with back problems one year. I remember in particular the experience in seventh grade when we were asked to write poems and then the eurythmy teacher did them with us in class. Much to my surprise, my poem was better in movement!

Eurythmy classes continued in a European Waldorf high school, but often my peers and I took more joy in tormenting the instructor than anything else. I cringe when I look back on how we hid her watch, scarf, and other items.... driving her to distraction (that particular teacher had some personality traits that made our antics ever so tempting). Then there was a break from eurythmy during college, and it was with mixed feelings that I encountered eurythmy again in my Waldorf teacher training in Garden City, NY. Much to my surprise, here everyone loved our Friday afternoon eurythmy classes! This was in large part because our teacher charmed us with her joy and light-hearted approach. We did some amazing work, and the relationship with that particular eurythmist has since lasted a lifetime.

As a faculty member at the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School we often did eurythmy before our business meetings. Our discussions were much more successful when preceded by movement. Then, in my first decade at Antioch University supporting Waldorf teacher education, I started a Collaborative Leadership Program which we took to schools around the country. Two gifted eurythmist colleagues took turns leading a particular aspect called "Eurythmy-in-the-Workplace," a social form of eurythmy that helps teachers, parents, administrators, and board members develop group skills, communication, leadership and much more. We did a series of three institutes in a half dozen schools in the 1990s. In 2014 we continued this work, now under the auspices of Antioch's Center for School Renewal in a program for Waldorf school administrators and leaders.

Over the years, eurythmy has been a vital component of our Waldorf teacher education program at Antioch and Center for Anthroposophy. In fact, both the founder and the second director at Antioch were themselves eurythmists. Many, many students in our elementary and high school teacher education programs have become better teachers because of our inspired eurythmy instructors. Just recently we did an alum survey, and eurythmy ranked way up there as one of the most successful aspects of our teacher education program over 40 years.

During Renewal 2019, Eurythmy Spring Valley Ensemble came to our summer site in Wilton to share a marvelous program on the Pine Hill stage. It was exquisite, one of the best I have ever seen. But my joy was ever greater when I started to feel how the audience around me was moved. Laughter, sadness, tragedy through story-telling, poetry, music.....all transpired before us in living color with veils and amazing lighting. At the end, as with one accord, the entire audience gave them a long standing ovation. In a way that seldom happens any more in this cynical world, the audience was transported through the beauty of the art.

Of course I am not a eurythmist (although both my mother and sister-in-law were), but I have had an experience as a teacher educator over three decades that I wish to share here: When I teach my courses, mostly research, administration, and evolving consciousness, my classes are ever so much more successful when my students do eurythmy and the other arts *before they come to me*. It is hard to describe why. When they walk into the room without the artistic experience ahead of time, they are still good people seeking to learn, but the cognitive work only goes so far. Things can easily stay intellectual and abstract, and I have to work ever so hard to "warm them

up” and lift them into imaginative, participatory spiritual work. But when they do eurythmy for an hour or so first, they are ready! They come in smiling with a healthy glow, they take up with work holistically, they seem integrated and truly open to new ideas. Learning after artistic experience is exponential rather than just summative.

Why does this happen? From the perspective of this one lay-person, I offer an observation: We each have a higher self that strives to move us forward in life. Our deepest intentions as an individual on this earth hover as potential within us, waiting to be realized. If we can connect with archetypes that are true, helped if we can recognize the ever-present reality of the spiritual world, and it can happen through music, painting, poetry, story-telling and many other ways even by those who are not overtly spirit seekers, there is an opportunity to let the spirit self work ever more actively with our more earthly oriented Self or “I”. In the experience of eurythmy, this growing incarnation of the self aware “I” can work more actively with our consciousness and begin a transformative process. There are many spiritual paths that work with the transformation of consciousness. But what happens in eurythmy, at least in my experience, is that through consciously willed movement, the experience does not just remain in the one sphere, but delves into the vast ocean of life forces and right down into the physical. In short, *the whole human being in all dimensions is engaged when doing eurythmy!* The deepest soul experiences become visible through speech and tone.

If teacher education is all about transformation, becoming the person our children need us to be, then I cannot think of any better way to accelerate the process than working with the arts, eurythmy, speech, music, painting, spacial dynamics, drama.

For decades now, may educators have been subjected to standardized testing, pre-packaged curriculum plans, learning outcomes, and more and more online instruction. Many have told me that *they know these methods are not in the best interests of their children*, but they feel they have to conform as “employees” in a hierarchical system that often fails to listen to teachers. Now out of necessity due to Covid-19, almost all children are at home doing lessons online week after week. Of course, as in times of war and famine and other catastrophes, one has to do certain things out of necessity. But I predict we will have a new challenge to deal with after this is all over: *online deficit disorder*. Yet that goes beyond the scope of this article....

As for Waldorf teacher education, there are of course areas where zoom and other tools can help. Valuable content and some methods work can be done reasonably well. If one has established a good working relationship with students, one can even do individual practice with virtual prompts (I recently did the alleluiah in a webinar, led by a eurythmist). It was, at least for me, all front space but no “back space”. The totality of the experience of the exercise in the past was simply not there, not to mention the joy of experiencing others in the circle. Just as stay at home families can have fun playing monopoly and yet cannot bring those bills to the store to buy groceries, so one cannot pretend something is what it is not. We may watch movies about walking the Appalachian trail, but it is not the multi sensory experience of actually walking the Appalachian trail. In this time of “alternative facts” it is ever so important that we are truthful, truthful to ourselves and our students. Let us distinguish between reality and semblance, and let us not use the same name for both.

Also, as a scholar and writer, it is deeply ingrained in my being that the work of others needs to be fully acknowledged with accurate citations. It is a matter of integrity. The practice of eurythmy is also a matter of authenticity and professional standards. It is not to be overlooked that the training to become a eurythmist requires 4-7 years of work. If we do not hold to authenticity, the substance we offer (in any profession) becomes dissipated and may no longer have much value.

Our world needs fully integrated teachers who are able to work with multiple intelligences and teach holistically. Eurythmy develops social/emotional intelligence, helps us engage all the senses, helps with aesthetic judgment formation, lifts us to that which is noble through visible music and speech, and helps us become integrated, healthy human beings. These

are the things humanity needs now more than ever. I urge all my readers to summon the courage to stand up for the arts as never before, and to stand for all that is beautiful, good, and true.

Torin Finser

Chair of the Department of Education and Core Faculty in the Waldorf Teacher
Education Program at Antioch University New England, Center for Anthroposophy