

# Learning to Read & Write in the Waldorf Schools

*Living Alphabet*

BY WILLIAM WARD

The playful artistry of *Living Alphabet* speaks to the heart of childhood. These lively illustrations, so filled with color, movement, eloquent gesture, and invention, conjure up long-forgotten memories of books from a time when pictures were still alive and spoke with power. Each page is a magical door opening to the bright realm where stories are enacted, a realm of wonders accessible to children, artists, and all those in whom the light of imagination shines.

*Living Alphabet* not only delights, it also has an educational value: to introduce artistically the gestures of the various letters of the alphabet to young children. This is different from the first alphabet book one may have had as a child in which the letter “A” was accompanied by the picture of an apple (a word beginning with the letter “a”). This book instead introduces letters as lively “characters” that bridge from the picture consciousness of childhood to geometric symbols conveying various sounds. In tracing back the forms of our alphabet to their root symbols, one discovers that originally letters were pictorial, for example, an “A” inverted signified an ox with two horns. Prior to becoming fixed symbols for specific sounds that then embalmed the spoken word into written language, hieroglyphs, pictograms, and ideograms designated aspects of the phenomenal world and corresponding attributes. The letters joyfully rendered in this book provide a transition between the picture script of nature, the imagination, and the abstract symbols of the alphabet that children are eager to learn.

The inspiration behind *Living Alphabet* springs from the method of teaching reading in Waldorf or Rudolf Steiner schools. In teaching reading, indeed all subjects, Waldorf teachers are guided by an overarching principle—to integrate intellectual development with artistic creativity and practical skill. As a pedagogic method, this means that the royal road to awaken thinking and harness the will means engaging the feelings. This educational ideal of balance is supported by contemporary developmental psychology that maps the dynamic interconnections between cognitive development, emotional intelligence, and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. Finding ways to balance and integrate thinking, feeling, and willing in education through daily practice has important implications for teaching reading in Waldorf schools.

The twenty-six illustrations in this book offer a mirror whereby we can reflect on the qualitative differences between our utilitarian, onlooker consciousness as adults and the open-hearted, participatory vision of childhood.

Self-observation reveals the difference. Compare the immediate act of deciphering the meaning of

this essay with the pleasure of discovery in searching the illustrations for connections. The text you are reading, whatever information or insight it may contain, is by comparison less colorful and immediately engaging than the delightful spontaneity of the pictures. Following the thread of thought contained in the essay requires critical thinking before it can resonate with one’s own ideas, observations, and experience. In general, unless a text has some immediate relevance or novelty, most readers who are already deluged with information simply opt out. The lively pictures of this alphabet, on the other hand, instantly appeal to our hearts and minds and are immediately satisfying and meaningful. They nourish us by lifting us humorously and imaginatively from accustomed fact into new associations radically different from our habitual consciousness.

Corresponding to their spontaneous delight in these pictures, first grade children of six and seven listen with complete enchantment to a fairytale’s evocation of a concentrated, mysteriously coherent flood of mental imagery as vivid and evocative as a dream. Listening to a story, the children’s outer activity ceases, the walls fall away, and their interior space expands as their mind’s (or heart’s) eye is illuminated with joys and sorrows, trials and triumphs. Their whole-hearted participation is so intense, that most can retell the story the following day after only one hearing—the same story that took days for an experienced teacher to learn to tell. Why is this so? How can their memory forces be so alive and comprehensive? The answer is that there is no gap in their attention. They have lived the pictures of the story with such fullness and feeling that it engraves itself in memory.

With advanced imaging techniques, neurophysiologists of cognitive science may well speak of myelination of neural fields as synapses fire, networks form, and the plasticity of the developing brain is inscribed by repeated patterns in the neo-cortical centers associated with language acquisition. Whatever scientific model is proposed as the physiological basis of thinking, it is crucial for parents and educators to realize that the spoken word, saturated with warm feeling and evocative picture content unlocks the treasure house of imagination and cultivates the ground of future intellectual development. The empathic inner world of imagination, resonant with associations and intuitions, expands soul experience beyond the material world into the world of meanings and ideas.

Storytelling, passing down cultural traditions through the millennia, is the oral stream of folk wisdom, mythology, and religion. The virginal imagination of childhood and earlier cultures is formed and informed by the light of archetypal pictures from the intuitive wisdom of inherited human experience conveyed in living speech through such stories and fables. The children’s unwavering attention to a fairytale testifies to its power and depth. The stories trace the path of individuation from simpleton to king. They nourish the soul, unlike the gimmicky, sarcastic, and banal caricatures seen on television, a medium that

suppresses brain function and exhausts the nervous system. By contrast, authentic stories from the oral tradition engage participation of heart and mind in the search for meaning, provide a road map toward self-discovery, while linguistic intelligence and understanding grow in the most profound and lively way. Meanwhile, adults are reading the news, thinking more in words than in pictures to stay well informed about what we call the “real world.” This analytical, linear consciousness is radically different from the participatory picture consciousness of childhood.

While story telling empowers the will to read, the complicated and time-consuming process of learning to read—if prematurely or poorly done — proves counter-productive to opening the doors of knowledge. How can a child’s picture consciousness be enlisted to learn reading and what tools



must a young child already have in place to surmount this hurdle? Learning to read requires sitting so still that the eyes can be focused to scan, line by quarter inch line, from left to right, an infinitely variable series of 52 geometric forms (the upper and lower case letters) standing for about 48 sounds (let’s leave aside the notorious inconsistencies of spelling in the English language). This highly abstract symbolic system reduces spoken language to written language and conversely deciphers and frees the spoken word heard inwardly from these black squiggles on a white page. These are two related but very different skills.

In reading, attention must be intensely focused to the exclusion of all else. Gratification must be deferred and reading become second nature for thoughts, meanings, to light up. Such labored concentration on the initially opaque medium hampers release of the words’ content and can be sustained by children only for short periods without their becoming exhausted. This effort creates defensive avoidance in a great many children for whom sustained attention is difficult. Could it be that the highly complex level of abstraction in reading is completely alien to early childhood, analogous to how non-mathematician adults feel

when asked to read a page of mathematical symbols. There is a vast gulf in experience for a child between the written word m-o-t-h-e-r and the matrix of feeling-meaning that the sound “mother” connotes. While the imagination takes flight in hearing a story, it often flaps in useless frustration when it attempts to learn the four major sounds of the letter “A” too soon. This effort to enter a world of abstraction before the way has been properly prepared literally can suck the vitality right out of a child. How different is the holistic, picture consciousness of a young child from this step-wise, linear, analytical, abstract construct of written language that is barely 5,000 years old against the backdrop of eons of pre-literate human evolution.

As for speaking, the child’s consciousness is so constituted that a healthy child miraculously assimilates spoken language by the age of three—



without the benefit of school, worksheets, or a dictionary. What sort of miracle is it that sounds, unique to the language family the child is born to, light up as pictures in the mind’s eye? “Dog,” “cat,” “lion.” How does a child grasp words such as “as,” “but,” “if” that we cannot convey by pointing (assuming pointing is understood to refer to something other than one’s finger) or by definition? Recall what an arduous process it is for an adult to learn a foreign language, translating back and forth from his given language, using clever mnemonic associations to imprint (quickly forgotten) vocabulary, foundering on fine distinctions of verb tense... But a child drinks in its mother tongue with its mother’s milk. It is not an intellectual task, but comes from the child’s total attunement, openness, and sensory union with its environment. Meaning is conveyed and intuited through gesture, through the eyes, inflection, body language, emotional tone, warmth—the resonant meaning matrix of the psychic environment. The child, in communion with its “speaking” surroundings, imitates everything down to the refinement of echoing the sounds it imbibes in the vibrations of the larynx. Even in the womb a dance of gestures correlated to the music of the mother’s voice is

forming the neural fields connected with language development.

Is it possible that the cultural pressure to teach children to read earlier and earlier promoted in our monolithic school system is misguided by requiring of the child's lively, intuitive consciousness an inappropriate degree of abstraction too soon? Could linguistic intelligence actually be retarded by leaving the riches of the oral tradition premature? Are the outcomes based goals and behaviorist procedures for achieving the ability to read at an early age well supported by developmental research? Is it wise to get on with the program as quickly as possible, with four and five year olds taking home worksheets from kindergarten? Should we then measure through testing the children's reading progress (disregarding the wide variation of individual developmental differences) and hold teachers accountable for improving test scores? Logically in this approach more resources



and skill development time (“drill and kill”) would be devoted to those children below agreed upon benchmarks, targeting exactly their weakness. The result of this paradigm is that whirlwinds of anxiety, stress, feelings of failure, and avoidance behavior rise from the current system meant to address national goals and standards without an understanding of where young children are in their development. When self-esteem plummets the child believes, “I am stupid” whereas, in fact, there is a “disconnect” between the system and the child's individual rate of development which varies widely. Such negative feelings experienced at the beginning of one's schooling sap the will to learn, the joy of learning, and the ability to learn.

In Waldorf schools, the approach to teaching reading is more gradual and multi-sensory than the pace of the public schools. We consider this “slowness” a virtue, not a deficit. It is based on a radically different conception of child development and a much broader conception of what is important to learn and experience in early childhood. Formal instruction of reading in a Waldorf school begins

in first grade when a child is six, turning seven (older than first graders in the public school). The “reading readiness” instruction and homework that occupies and frequently oppresses five-year olds in public school kindergartens is very different in Waldorf kindergartens. Instead the teachers plan meaningful activities that engage the active will of the children. Through the activities of the kindergarten's daily and weekly rhythms, the children feel at home. The stress-free environment strengthens their language development through sensory integration, movement, gesture, music, art, as well as practical skills like baking and cleaning, social cooperation, and self-initiated free play. For those who understand childhood, the latter are potent educational forces. In addition to puppet shows, fairy tales, and seasonal songs, the children play rhythmic games, and learn nursery rhymes and singing games in French and German. Also the children have weekly eurythmy classes. (Eurythmy



is an artistic movement discipline unique to the Waldorf schools.) Thus, the fertile ground of future learning is prepared through recognizing that the young child is primarily a person of will (movement) not logic, imagination not abstraction. As Rudolf Steiner observed, “Thought is will grown old. Will is youthful thinking in the soul.” Learning by doing and experiencing gradually metamorphoses into reflective thought. Surprisingly, the fine motor skill dexterity required in the activity of knitting—following the thread, linking, counting the stitches, persevering in focused work—which all first graders do in a Waldorf school, correlates with reading readiness and the acquisition of math skills

In Waldorf schools, all the arts that nourish the healthy development and integration of the senses—learning to listen, learning to observe, learning to attend, establishing laterality, gaining the emotional intelligence of sharing, celebrating, and playing—prepare the way for the subsequent sedentary and more isolated activity of reading. This extra year of unmediated, primary experience

of the world—whose every leaf, flower, cloud, bird, puddle, butterfly and seed is saturated with wonder, wisdom, and significance—is of inestimable educational value for the whole of life.

Finally, the kindergarten child enters first grade and encounters a class teacher such as myself. In a Waldorf school, class teachers are committed to carrying the primary responsibility for the intellectual and emotional development of their children for the next eight years, working in cooperation with a team of special subjects teachers and with a strong link to the children's parents. Many of the methods for teaching reading that I employ correspond in general with what public school teachers do earlier. But there are also significant differences—in addition to the more gradual approach described above. To start with, the Waldorf teacher will harness a child's "feeling life" by introducing the letters artistically and imaginatively, as in *Living Alphabet*. For each fairytale told, a consonant character will be derived from a picture drawn to illustrate the tale the following day. For example the big bear from Snow White and Rose Red can be drawn to resemble a capital "B," a dancing Rumpelstiltskin can be drawn to resemble a capital "R," the golden goose works well for the letter "G." It is crucially important that the teacher engage in the playful imaginative activity of finding such correspondences to prepare the way for imagination to come to life in the children. The teacher tells rather than reads the story and draws or paints the illustration in which the letter is embedded. The process of drawing in front of children, modeling and articulating the creative process, is much better than using finished resource material even from such a finely illustrated book as this.

During their morning rhythmic and concentration exercises (will preceding thought), the new letter would be marched across the floor (bodily-kinesesthetic intelligence) before drawing it as a geometric form derived from the earlier letter picture in the main lesson alphabet book. An alliterative verse is recited periodically as one points to the letters now written above the board, i.e. "B." A big, brown, burly bear bumbled through the bush with his basket of blueberries. Words are dictated beginning with letters that have been taught. At first the children write down only the initial consonant. Like all reading teachers, we invite the children to tell us words beginning with that sound/letter and write these on the board or perhaps we even make up simple riddles for words beginning with the letter of the day. Through such a multi-sensory approach, engaging the whole child, the letters become "user friendly" in a playful way. When the children soon come to write simple sentences, some of the pictorial quality may still remain, an "S" with the snake's eye, an "R" with a red cap.

Teaching the consonants in this way, one becomes sensitive, like a poet, to the genius of language's subtle connections between sound, meaning, and the picture forms of letters. Take, for example, the letter "B" again. How many "B" words subtly connect in meaning with the embracing fullness of the letter: bun, bucket, basket, berry, bread, baby, but-

ter, butterfly, bowl, bounty, beauty, big. This sensitivity to sound and gestures as carriers of meaning is heightened in the fairytale movement journeys of eurhythmy class.

While the consonants have subtle correspondences to visible forms in nature, the vowels sounds, the singing sounds, as Rudolf Steiner points out are expressive of feeling qualities and call for a different approach. Perhaps a story of a princess whose song, like that of Orpheus, moves and completes the formed outer world of clouds, rocks and trees would be a fit vehicle for introducing the singing sounds. Compare the feeling gesture of the narrow intensity of long "E" as in tree, stream, green, free, whee, see with the open, round embrace of the "O" as in old, oak, snow, know, grow, glow. A verse acted out in morning circle like this one for "A," written by Henry Barnes, reinforces the several sounds an "A" can make:

I am the letter A, / You find me in Angel, / You run when I play, / You eat me in apple, / You pet me in cat, / You shake me in hand, / You wear me in hat, / You find me in small, / And in large and in tall, / You hear me in "Caw, caw!" / A cuts in a saw, / A sings in a lark, / A rides in a car, / A sparks in the dark, / A shines as a star. / A is a bird with many a call, / Listen with care / Till you know all. / A as in angel, / A as in cat, / Aw as in saw, / Ah as in star.

As the work of learning to read continues, the children will enjoy a song that springs from the story of the singing princess:

*All the vowels I now can sing, "A", "E", "I",  
"O", "U"*

*Let the hills and valleys ring, "A", "E", "I", "O",  
"U"*

*Put an "Ssss" in front of them "say, see, sigh, so,  
Sue" [etc.]*

This song can be repeated daily as part of morning exercises using the visual aid of the letters drawn above the blackboard to connect sound and letter. Tongue twisters and rhythmic repetition of the sounds further inscribe the sounds orally and visually. Like other reading teachers, the Waldorf teacher will systematically build up "sight and see" words and word families (rhyming words) around a single vowel sound—bake, cake, fake, flake, lake, make, sake, take, wake—for choral and individual reading. This reinforces the long vowel sounds first before tackling the nuances of short vowel sounds.

The children also learn to recite poems chosen by the class teacher and practice clear articulation in daily speech exercises. Just as with toddlers, children learning to speak, speech and thought are intimately linked, enhancing one another. All the while the children remain immersed in the richness of the oral tradition, hearing and retelling stories of genuine depth, not basal reader stories built around the five hundred most commonly used words of the English language. The inner aspect of reading, the life of the imagination, which is the ultimate ground of thought and goal of literature, remains vibrant; and the love of language and thirst for stories flourishes. The ability to read in a

Waldorf school comes from reflecting upon what one writes. Children copy the simple content of the lesson into their books, forming it into words they have written themselves, and then read it and re-read as the main lesson books fill up. A writing sample created for the long “I” sound could be, “Five fine mice slide on the ice.” This short text would then be joyfully illustrated providing valuable context clues for the next time they encounter it. So again, will activity precedes and prepares in experience the decoding activity of reading.

The most important thing as you peruse the delightful pages of *The Living Alphabet* with your child is the engaging conversation that flows between you as you search among the pictures for words. In human warmth—woven from old to young and young to old—communication becomes communion. Telling even the simplest stories to your child and listening attentively to their expressions from the living realm of childhood provide the ground of a life-long love of language that grows into the search for understanding and love for literature.

*William Ward is an experienced Waldorf teacher at Hawthorne Valley School in Harlemville, Ghent, in Upstate New York. He is now beginning his third cycle of eight years as a class teacher.*

TEXT © 2003 BY WILLIAM WARD & STEINERBOOKS  
IMAGES © 2003 BY FAMKE ZONNEVELD & STEINERBOOKS

## WALDORF GRADUATES

FROM *UTNE MAGAZINE*

Parents considering Waldorf want to know “What will become of my child?” According to Harm Paschen from the University of Bielefeld, Germany, studies of European Waldorf high school grads show that Waldorf graduates do very well indeed. Kids who go to Waldorf schools are as likely, or more likely, to attend college as students from public and other private schools. And after college, they are more likely to be employed than non-Waldorf grads. They are disproportionately well represented in teaching, the arts, business, medicine, and the social services professions....

On a recent college visit, Donna Badrig, associate director of undergraduate admissions for Columbia University, told one student, “We love Waldorf kids. We reject some students with 1600s on their SATs and accept others based on other factors, like the creative ability Waldorf students demonstrate.” Similar enthusiasm for Waldorf grads was heard from admissions officers at Wesleyan University....

Graduates stress independent thinking, imagination, and the relationships they developed and enjoyed with faculty and fellow students. “That’s what’s so wonderful about Waldorf education,” says actress Julianna Margulies. “You’re exposed to all these different ideas, but you’re never given one view of it. You’re encouraged to think as an individual.”... Mosemarie Boyd, president and CEO, American Women Presidents, adds: “At Waldorf, we are taught to see things from the perspective of others. We saw that doing things together ... was always more fun ... We learned to love learning.”

© 2003 UTNE & RUDOLF STEINER FOUNDATION