

The Thought of Two Schools: An Essay on Governance in Waldorf Schools

I—Preamble

Governance is a social process. Its history is as long as that of societies which organized themselves by creating a set of operating agreements, oral or written. This history is part of us, our collective inheritance and carried by us at the cellular level. Consciously or unconsciously, it lives in how we form our life as individuals and as social beings; it manifests in the multitude of agreements that make daily life manageable. Grammar governs language; the colors of traffic signals govern traffic safety. The United States Constitution is a body of evolving agreements which frame our rights. Government, or the political state, grew out of governance processes as human consciousness evolved from organizing around hieratic or theological order to the more demotic and secular forms of modern day. This evolutionary development, and the ongoing dynamic between the rule of “church and state”, is a reflection of the evolution of our consciousness as social beings whose needs are both material and spiritual. We recognize the need for governance in the material world, but bridle at governance of matters spiritual. Yet we are bound to work together out of the gifts of our individualities. That is the modern condition and a rising dilemma since the quality of governance which we have inherited comes primarily from ancient Rome. The Romans were masters of the material world. They developed law in the form that we know it—the powerful few creating agreements for the many—and practiced governance imperially, controlling, and centrally directed. In essence, in the Roman Empire, power meant power *over*.

Lost in this narrative from Western history are forms of governance that could be characterized in the lineage of community self-determination and which were based upon circles, collaboration, trust, equality, and, ideally, altruism—in essence power *with*. In this context, agreements are more consensual. Yet, this latter picture is not what comes to mind when one mentions the word governance in most organizational settings. Instead it conjures a force outside ourselves that, at best, protects our rights, and at worst, attempts to control our thoughts. Thus we have a natural tendency to see individual freedom and governance in terms of duality or polarity, or, in the extreme, in terms of conflicting forces. Now is the age of questioning authority. And, why not, when a governing body can be held responsible for creating a “credibility gap,” a phrase coined in 1963 to name the misalignment between known facts about the Vietnamese War and the story that was being told by governmental agencies for self-serving purposes. Forty-five years later the phrase seems prophetic.

It is time for the redemption of governance. It is time to restore it to its rightful function in service to the positive ends of credibility, trust, transparency, and freeing up of

human capacity. And, I believe that the non-profit, independent sector has the capacity and responsibility to lead this way because non-profits are governed by volunteers—and thus out of spiritual rather material motivation, out of love for mission and through the gifting of time. In speaking to the supposed polarity between individual freedom and a body of laws or agreements, Albert Schweitzer wrote the following in *Christianity and the Religions of the World*: “As modern men we imagine the state of the perfect human society to be one of harmony between legal organization and the practice of love. Jesus does not attempt to harmonize justice and love but says to man: If you want to be in the spirit of God, you may not think or act otherwise than in love.” While this is coming from a particular religious viewpoint, it holds much wisdom for the future of governance practice by establishing love, and the trust that attends it, as the ultimate value. In some ways it might be possible to imagine that if we lived in pure love and trust, we would need no governance structures at all. Instead we would recognize and be guided by the highest of altruistic or spiritual principles in community and global life—principles living so deeply in our hearts that we would need no written code except the meeting of human beings—but this is a picture for the future.

II—Origins of Governance in Human Development

Governance is not a thing outside of us. It is a faculty we exercise inwardly for ourselves constantly as we live our lives. Understanding how we come to govern ourselves, that is, how we develop this inner capacity from birth to adulthood has much to offer toward renewing our imagination and practice of good governance in organizations. For the sake of transparency I would like to say that this notion occurred to me during a presentation on child development given by a wise and experienced educator. Her insights were based upon years of observation of children and an extraordinary understanding of Rudolf Steiner’s insights into human development. My addition is the translation of these thoughts into terms of governance with the hope of transforming assumptions about power into a framework of empowerment. I beg your patience as I try my best to articulate these concepts.

The period from birth to approximately seven years old is the time when one learns primarily through movement and play to support the developing senses. Early childhood specialists also note that young children learn through imitation. But there is another aspect of looking at this phase of development. A newborn baby is one hundred percent dependent upon a caring parent or other adult to have its physical needs met. This baby is thus first and foremost an economic citizen and the degree to which the caring adult demonstrates care she or he is also demonstrating or modeling accountability for the natural trust necessarily accorded her or him. So while a child learns through imitation it is, at the same time, taking in a picture of accountability, as demonstrated the parent, on a cellular level.

From seven to fourteen years old, the central theme in development is the capacity for authority through the teacher modeling authority. This is done, for example, through appropriate discipline in the earlier part of this seven year cycle which the children then internalize and transform into self-discipline. From another perspective, in the first and second grade teachers will author stories and other material which the children copy. Over time, authorship for material is taken up by the children as they evolve toward self-authorship, and thus become authors. This is preparation for each child's later recognition that she or he is actually author of her or his own experience and life.

In the third cycle, from fourteen to twenty-one, the key theme is that of responsibility. During this time one learns about one's own personal strengths and gifts and begins to explore the rightful task or profession in life. By the quality and depth of intellectual inquiry, the inspiration of teachers and other adults, and real life experience, one learns how to be responsible for oneself, others, and the world. The culmination of this cycle occurs at about twenty-one. At this time the ego or "I," which has been slowly and steadily forming and maturing through the early years comes to the foreground. Its emergence is signaled by a growing awareness of identity and self in relation to the world. This ego now has a new capacity to manage the functions of accountability, authority, and responsibility, developed along the way and to reflect on them as part of integrity and working effectively in and for the world. This combined visionary and reflective capacity is the ability to govern oneself, to have a sense of purpose and meaning in life, and to make decisions large and small in the context of a destiny path and the agreements one makes with oneself.

I think it is important to realize that non-profit organizations have destiny paths and operate within a framework of agreements. And yet the "ego" can take two paths. One path is the directive path that flows from a singular source and controls the actions and participants in the organization. The other is the collaborative path in which the "ego" resides in the agreements between the participants and frames the limitations of the actions, though it may have a singular manager. This latter is to my mind the way of the future, but it is entirely dependent upon a very highly evolved capacity to develop, abide by, and hold each other accountable to agreements—in love and trust.

Early in the Twentieth Century, Rudolf Steiner, founder of anthroposophy, formulated a social philosophy that identified three co-operative sectors of social life—economic, rights, and spiritual-cultural. He recognized in each sector a qualitative principle that could guide understanding of the human values at work in them. They are: interdependence in economics, equality in rights, and freedom in the spiritual-cultural

realm. This profound view serves as background and inspiration for my views on governance.

III—Governance Framework and the Trustees

Authority, what attaches to it and what flows from it, may be one of the great inner questions and organizational struggles of our time. In the cultural context of our cherished individual freedom, we are our own authority. We work hard to protect that authority and react strongly when others interfere with it. Within this context, I decide who decides, even when I give that authority over to another—who hopefully receives it on my behalf.

And yet, we all live together. We do so within a framework of agreements micro and macro, some unconscious, some conscious, some constitutional, some convenient, some in constant creation. There is one consistent aspect of meaningful and constructive agreements, however: No agreement can be created unilaterally for another party. What begins as freedom for the individual is transposed at that moment into the freedom to create an agreement between two equal parties. This engenders the following questions: How might an organization create a system of agreements that can recognize the authority of the individual and the equality of each in relationship within the system of mutual agreements? How might an organization agree to enforce those agreements in a consequential system of accountability? These questions are contained in a larger one concerned with governance.

Framed in another way, one could say that the constructive purpose of governance is to lay the ground rules for leadership, initiative, authority, responsibility and accountability within an organization, and to advance the purpose for which that organization was created in the first place. Governance is a function not an end. In a for-profit corporate structure, it is very clear that the shareholders are owners and hold the primary authority for the entity. However, most independent Waldorf schools are non-profit, IRS Section 501(c)(3) charitable organizations for which there are no stockholders as owners. The thoughts and principles regarding who decides who decides are relevant to all self-administered or self-governed public benefit organizations. I would like to add that the principles are no more than that, and are in no way meant to be prescriptive of a particular form. In all cases, however, the law of the land is foundational.

All authority for a not-for-profit corporation resides in the incorporating trustees of the corporation. This group, as a group, is granted its authority by the state which charges it with fulfilling the charitable mission declared by the original incorporators, for the benefit of the public. Given this fact which has legal, social, and spiritual implications

for the organization, it follows logically that the Board of Trustees holds and originates all delegation of authority within the boundary of the mission. The trustees are thus responsible for determining the conditions and limitations of that delegation.

The corporation, the primary legal or “physical” body of the school, is entrusted to the Board of Trustees, which serves the public by standing in, so to speak, for the broader “ownership” or “community” of the school. This public aspect of the school is often further defined by who the organization intends to serve, by the articles of incorporation, the by-laws, the mission statement, and even the IRS 990 tax form filed annually. From a governance and economic perspective this aspect of the corporation has a character unto itself that is different than but includes the day-to-day life of school that the children attend. Understanding this distinction is central and critical to understanding good governance. Essentially there are two schools, or a school within a school. The board governs school #1, while the children attend school #2.

School #1 it consists of all the adults, children, students who are drawn to the school community around shared values, all of whom on some conscious or unconscious level are on a life journey, or spiritual inquiry, into what it means to be fully human. The teachers of this school are actually all the members of the community who serve to awaken each other. Thus, School #1 has a cultural/spiritual quality to it as well as its corporate functions. In some ways school #2, the daily reality of a Waldorf school, is a functional crystallization of school #1, but that linkage is often forgotten or ignored because it takes significant awareness and an investment of time to keep that linkage alive, and it requires a different skill set than that needed to teach in a classroom, for example.

As a self-governed, self-administered independent school, that part of the entity devoted to educating the students, the school (school #2), comes into being within the corporation (school #1). From another perspective, the school operates under the aegis of the corporation. In either case, it is important to note that the corporation and the school are not the same forms, though of course neither would exist without the other. Interestingly enough, the parents are connected to the corporation by association membership and finances in the form of tuition (economics), and to the school through its cultural/spiritual service, the education it provides their children. They pay tuition to the corporation and send their children to school!

Given this background, governance, leadership and initiative—all important elements of a healthy and active organization—need a framework of agreements that reflect and serve the mission, and make clear the terms of how individuals, committees, and the public at large are knit together in a community of service.

IV—Delegation, Day-to-Day Management, and the Intersection of the Two Schools

Authority, responsibility, and accountability are the three integral legs of good governance and should never be separated. If one is going to delegate one of the three, the other two are necessarily delegated as part of the package. To do otherwise makes governance ineffective. When governance is ineffective, decision-making is compromised and the organization suffers. There is a threefold picture here. Authority emerges in the sphere of rights and agreements. Responsibility arises from the sphere of individual gifts and capacities (cultural/spiritual). Accountability attends to the sphere of economics, the sphere of meeting needs. In the name of good governance, a Board of Trustees, which receives all the authority, responsibility, and accountability from the state at incorporation, needs to have a clear recipient to whom to delegate in order to manage day-to-day activities.

The delegation of authority in this context is one of the most misunderstood aspects of governance in Waldorf schools. Governance and management are different, but are often confused. The board is a group of volunteers who gather around the furtherance of a mission to ensure that the corporation fulfills its promise to the public. Its purpose is not to manage the organization, but to account to the public for the organization's performance. Since the board is not there everyday (and should not need to be) they need someone(s) to whom they can delegate the authority, responsibility, and accountability [a,r,a]. Where a college of teachers is present, it often receives or arrogates that mandate or delegation—it acts as a collective head of the school. It is often not clear exactly how a college of teachers defines its function—whether administrative, research, or management. However, in the context of school #1, the college then delegates [a,r,a] for the first grade to the first grade teacher, etc., but this delegation gets complicated when it comes to administration. One reason for this complication is that administration is at the intersection of school#1 and school#2. Administration looks different depending on which school you are looking at it from. Often, to state the extreme, the faculty wants a sophisticated secretary to take care of anything they don't want to deal with, and the board wants a head of school. If there is truth to the adage that no one can serve two masters, then it is no wonder that administration is such a challenging and immature function in so many Waldorf schools. It is also not surprising that there may not be that many people interested in serving in such a tension-filled, polarity-defined role.

There are Waldorf schools which have wrestled with this issue successfully, yet each has defined the role differently. If the volunteer board is to govern successfully and to explore and expand its connections to the wider community, it cannot spend its limited time on arguing over delegation, who has authority for what, or worried about whether

the building is safe. They need to know that the quality of program, legal and financial matters, the stewarding of relationships, and organizational effectiveness are being managed. When that is not happening, those kinds of conversations drain everyone's energy, energy that could be much better spent building for the future. On the other hand, once the delegation is made and agreements clear, the board has to fully trust (based on good reporting procedures) that delegation and not act outside its realm by managing the day-to day affairs. Bad governance is defined by everyone doing everyone else's job!

What are the choices around delegation with clarity?

- The board can hire an administrator/head of administration, who is accountable for school #1 and #2. That head may choose to hire a dean of the faculty or faculty chair whose focus is the quality of program—an increasingly popular structure in independent schools. Both the administrator and the “dean” can be members of the college of teachers. Remember the administrator holds the a,r,a, and is free to organize the day-to-day running of the school in any way that he or she determines is effective, works within the agreed upon budget, and accomplishes the agreed upon organizational goals. In this model school #1 & #2 are present and accounted for.
- This is a variation on the above, with a different operating configuration: The board appoints and evaluates the administrator. The administrator creates a management team of him or herself, the college of teachers chair, faculty dean, and chief financial officer or director of development. This executive group is charged with the management of the school, with the administrator carrying the final call for the management team. This might be considered as an interim form as it is challenged on several levels from the point of view of governance.

V—The Landscape of Organizational Discipline

Once governance is in place, and all agree to trust and abide by the delegations and policies, the threefold principles of freedom in the spiritual/cultural life, equality in rights and agreements, and interdependence in economics take on a new and dynamic quality. A well-governed organization is far more likely to maintain its cultural freedom the more deeply it understands and manages its realms of economics and agreements. An individual's exercise of freedom comes at the moment he or she decides to join or leave the community. At the moment when one joins the school community, one is also agreeing to abide by all of the existing policies and thus lives in what Michael Spence calls “half-free cultural life” (*Freeing the Human Spirit*). This is a living body of agreements, which can be changed through orderly process over time. However, each person needs to be, and is, free to fulfill his or her responsibilities as best as possible within the framework of those agreements and delegations.

One of Rudolf Steiner's principles of economic interdependence is: The degree to which I work to meet the needs of others, my needs will be met. As a reflection of this principle, the accountability structure in a school should recognize that each organ is a part of the whole, that the task of each group in accomplishing its work is to support the success of the others—interdependence. For example, success in the classroom and success in parent relations support the success of the development staff. Each person's work affects the whole system and each person is affected by the system. Thus the value of each person in the community is recognized, with the result that there is no unintended (or intended) class hierarchy, for example, between faculty and staff. There is just the exercise of different capacities for appropriate tasks.

The realm of agreements is one of equality, a democratic form, one person one vote. The trustees work in this way, and the college, to the degree that it works on consensus assumes the same principle of equality without the voting process. There are members of the college on the board which can bring about confusion between methodologies, cultures, and school #1/school #2. For example, *if* there is distrust of or a lack of confidence in the board by the college *and* there are 3 college members serving as board members, *then* there are 3 trustees (those 3 college members) who are living with an internal conflict and divided loyalties. College members who serve as trustees are not "representing" the college in their board work, but are trustees equal with all other trustees and share in the duties of care and loyalty practiced by the board as a whole. Every board member is expected to make a fully informed decision on the prepared topic at the time of the meeting. To accomplish this, each board member is free to undertake whatever research, due diligence, or consultation is needed to inform him or herself before the time of the meeting. This is an inclusive, consultative process that truly supports the trustees making timely decisions as a group.

This same consultative process can be used at every level of the administration in the day-to-day life of the school. The person or group authorized, responsible and accountable for making a decision should make that decision in an informed and timely way. This is very different from decisions being made or reviewed by a committee of the whole. There are of course going to be rare occasions when the nature of the decision is of such gravity that it needs to be made by the committee of the whole.

VI—Conclusion

There is much more in the realm of governance that affects the quality of the school and the capacity for self-administration. Managing the "lovely dilemma" between the confluence and conflicts of interest and the function of disclosure; the method and practices of the trustees (whether it chooses to be a managing, strategic, or policy board)

remain to be worked on by the board itself. My hope in writing this document was to set out a clear framework for the schools (#1 & #2) to take its next steps. While this conceptual framework is not meant to be directive or prescriptive, it may be a basis for common language and for imagining of how a Waldorf school wants to go forward. The school will have to determine how it is going to measure progress aside from the more obvious outer “dashboard” economic/accountability measures such as balanced budgets with reserves, full enrollment with waiting lists, or the ability to raise significant funds.

One of the basic principles of RSF’s advisory work is that we will always present an honest reflection of the situation and offer some choices (and you may come up with others), but the school itself has to make those choices as its will and destiny are its own to determine. No advisor can take an organization where it collectively does not want to go. However, I trust that this essay will serve the needs of growing schools as they renew education and fulfill its social mission.

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