

The Common Vision: Parenting and Educating for Wholeness by David Marshak

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COMMON VISION, UNCOMMON SENSE

What does the common vision of Rudolf Steiner, Aurobindo Ghose, and Inayat Khan offer us now? This *common vision* gives us much more than "common sense" understandings about who we truly are as beings. It tells us how we can raise and educate our children so that they can become more and more of their potential—and so we can evolve as a species through and beyond the dangers of our current paradoxical condition.

Applying the Common Vision

How should we apply the common vision today?

Surely, even if we wanted to do so, we could not enact the *common vision* in its every detail today, because social conditions have changed so greatly during the past several generations. Nor, I believe, should we wish to enact this vision in its every detail as articulated in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan all described an evolutionary process that included interrelated spiritual, mental, vital, and physical aspects. Human beings have continued to evolve since the years from 1910 through 1925 when Aurobindo, Inayat Khan, and Steiner offered their teachings, if not in the physical being then certainly in the other three. Were they alive today, these three teachers would be the first to note the critical significance of this ongoing evolutionary process and its inevitable impact on their own teachings.

The task of applying the *common vision* to our times requires that we distinguish between that which largely transcends historical time and place and that which is rooted in the historical and cultural moment of the early twentieth century. For example, when asked if children should not begin school until they are 7 years old as Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan advocate, Vera Corda replies, "That might have been right for England in 1910. It might even have been right for America then. But in our time— It's a different time. Children need to go to school because of how our society is. And we make the school feel like a family. The child comes to feel that it really is another family for him." The essence of this particular aspect of the *common vision*, as Mrs. Corda explains, the part that transcends historical time, is the child's need during all of the first era for the emotional and spiritual qualities of a stable group of committed people who can create a feeling of family for the child. This need can be met by the family itself, or by an appropriate kind of pre-school in addition to the family.

So, we must consider the *common vision* in its original form, understand which of its elements transcend the historical and cultural moment of their origin, and learn to apply these elements to our own times. Given this understanding of the task, the question is: What are the major lessons from the *common vision* of Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan that we can learn and use, today and tomorrow, and how can we apply them?

Major Lessons for Parents and Teachers

First, here are the major lessons for both parents and teachers, for child raising and for education.

- *The common vision's descriptions of human nature and of the course of human becoming in childhood and youth are as valid today as they were in 1920.* They provide us with an understanding of who we and our children are as beings—and of who we and our children can become. They also help us to understand the relatively predictable course of our children's and youths' unfoldment through the first twenty-one years of life.

However, we need to recognize that the timing described in the *common vision* of unfoldment is not absolute. Today, at least in North America and Western Europe, the onset of the third era of childhood and youth, the beginning of adolescence, seems to be earlier than was described by Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan. Whether this is the result of spiritual or cultural changes, or some combination of both, is not clear.

Even with this change of timing, the three eras of childhood and youth continue to exist as they are detailed by the *common vision*, as do all of the many interrelationships among the unfoldment of body, emotions, mind, and spirit. As parents and teachers, we need to master an understanding of the nature and challenges of each of these eras of unfoldment and then use this understanding to inform the ways in which we parent and teach children and youth. Each child is unique, yes; but each child also moves through a relatively predictable course of becoming through the three eras. The more we know of this course, the more effective we can be as parents and teachers in supporting the unfoldment of the child.

- *The most profound element for child raising and education within Steiner's, Aurobindo's, and Inayat Khan's common vision is the understanding that we must have faith in the child's inner teacher to guide her own becoming.* Thus, we must provide the child with a safe environment and, within that zone of safety, as much freedom as possible to express and fulfill her own needs. While these three teachers agreed about this fundamental guideline, they differed considerably when they came to its implementation, particularly within the context of school.

Steiner espoused this principle in his teachings, and yet he created and supervised a school in 1919 in which the teacher both organized the learning environment and much of the child's activity within it. Indeed, as illustrated in Chapter Four, Steiner's pedagogy included a teacher-centered classroom and a detailed curriculum plan for every age. For example, this plan calls for children to learn, within the category of history and literature, about fairy tales in the first grade, fables and the legends of saints in the second grade, Biblical stories in the third, Norse sagas in the fourth, and so on. It contains similarly detailed subject matter for many other categories, including reading and writing, mathematics, science, geography, drawing and music, and handwork.

Steiner explained that although the teacher worked with a specified curriculum, she could learn about the needs and capacities of each child and engage each student in activities that were appropriate for that child's needs. Using her knowledge of her students as unfolding beings, she could help them to draw out their inner knowing and encourage them to experience responsible freedom.

In contrast to Steiner, Mira Richard and several of Aurobindo's students followed Aurobindo's guidance about the role of the *inner teacher* from principle to practice in a more direct and literal manner. They created the "free progress system," in which the role of the teacher was never to act directly on the child but only upon her environment. It was never to teach directly but only to suggest and guide. Yet, as described in Chapter Six, educational practice at the International Centre of Education at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram has evolved over the past five decades, for much of that time under Richard's personal direction, to give the teacher a more active and directive role in her interactions with the child.

While Inayat Khan did not start or direct any actual schools for young people, he did address

the questions of educational practice in his teachings. He asserted both the child's need for freedom to evolve and the teacher's primary role as helper and guide. While the teacher should not control the child, it can be appropriate for her to take a leading role at times in organizing and directing the child's activity within the learning environment. Inayat Khan stressed that when the teacher does take such an initiating role, she must be careful not to compel or manipulate the child. Rather, she must obtain the child's involvement by engaging her interest, while always allowing the child the choice not to be so engaged.

How do we make sense of this diversity of educational practice in relation to the very same principle of freedom and self-direction? We do so by seeing any contradictions as generated not by the ideal of freedom itself but, rather, by the attempts of limited, imperfect human beings to enact this ideal. What makes sense of these apparent contradictions is the understanding that we can only enact the teachings of the common vision with integrity to the extent of our own unfoldment as whole and integrated persons, and no more. We can only give the child as much respect for her inner teacher, as much freedom for her becoming, as the state of our current unfoldment empowers us. If we extend beyond that limit in our enthusiasm or pride, we will inevitably betray the understandings of the common vision and act out hypocrisy or contradiction, most likely through indirect or unconscious authoritarian behavior.

Thus, we must understand the *common vision* both as an ideal, a goal toward which we strive, and as a practical map toward achieving that goal. As a map, the *common vision* informs us of the steps that lead toward the ideal. Each step that we can enact successfully brings us closer toward the manifestation of the whole. In taking these steps, we must always stay aware of the intimate connection between our own growth as unfolding persons and our ability to nurture the growth of children and youth. The more we unfold, the more we will be able to move toward enacting the ideal of the *common vision*.

My belief is that it was this understanding of the relationship between the freedom of the child as an ideal and each teacher's own unfoldment as a limitation that led Steiner to develop the original Waldorf School as he did. The teachers in his school in 1919 needed a teacher-centered pedagogy and a detailed curriculum, given their levels of unfoldment, and Steiner provided them with both.¹ This same understanding also helps to make sense of the movement toward a more teacher-directed pedagogy at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education. Over time the teachers in the school learned about how much freedom they could offer to students, given their own levels of unfoldment.

In summary, the *common vision* tells us today that while each parent and teacher must seek to give the child as much freedom as possible for the child's *inner teacher* to guide her, a parent or teacher can only provide the child with as much freedom as that adult's own unfoldment allows her to enact and value with adequate comfort. Only through a parent's or teacher's own spiritual evolution can she increase the amount of freedom that she can give to the child. Every step the parent or teacher can take toward the ideal, every motion toward greater trust in the *inner teacher* and greater freedom for the child, is worth taking. Every step in this direction is a significant step in the evolutionary process. So, the issue is not all or nothing: freedom or its absence. It is as much freedom as possible, with clarity and integrity and enough comfort. This is our most important lesson from the *common vision* as parents and teachers.

Just for a moment, draw up an image of a 4-year-old you know or have known who is an engaged, determined, focused, creative, confident, and excited learner. Now imagine what children in the second era of childhood, or youths in the third era, could be like if they could bring this same energy for learning into their lives. If we don't limit or push or mold or direct or confine or terrorize children, there's no reason they can't be as whole, or even more whole, at 10 years or 15 years as many are today at 3 or 4.

- The timetables of the *common vision* are not absolutes. They are guidelines and norms. *All children and youth unfold at their own rates, and some do so much more slowly or quickly than most.* In addition, it is very common for a child to unfold at different rates in different aspects of her being.

- *Each era or stage in the unfoldment of the child and youth must be lived fully.* Each must be explored for what it can be and valued for itself, not rushed through quickly or seen only as a step on the way to somewhere else. Each era or stage has its own ultimate value. The principle that guides human growth is not haste or acceleration but the completeness of the unfoldment of the individual's potentials in each era of her life.

As parents and teachers, we must understand this principle of becoming and respect its mandate. Sooner is not necessarily better. Each child has her own timetable. What is best for each child is the opportunity to live each era or stage fully, without pressure or compulsion to move on before she is ready to do so.

- *The common vision explains that children learn most profoundly from who their parents, care-givers, and teachers are as people, from the wholeness and rightness of these adults' qualities and actions.* To nurture our children more effectively, to help them grow and unfold, we need to work on our own growth as much as that of the next generation. We must strive to become as good examples for them as we can be, for the future is born in the present.
- *The common vision tells us explicitly that everything that children and youth experience has an impact on who they are and who they become.* The system is a seamless whole; nothing experienced by the child is without influence. This understanding informs us that children's experience of media matters tremendously. If children watch thousands of hours of violence and advertising on television, these images and messages affect who they are and will become.

As a society we have acted with profound irresponsibility in terms of the electronic media experiences that we create and allow for children and youths. If we seek to support the healthy unfoldment of young people, we must transform our media so that they support growth and becoming, not pervert it. In the short run parents and teachers must act to shield the child from destructive media experiences. In the long run we need to transform our electronic media so that they promote our ideals, not our greed.

- *We must always recognize our children as beings who have the potential to—indeed, who are likely to, if we are successful as parents and teachers—evolve beyond us.* Given this understanding of evolution and unfoldment, we must truly be open to learning from our children, from the very moment of their birth and in every subsequent moment, as well as helping them to learn.

Lessons for the First Era

Here are the lessons in particular for parents and teachers of children who are in the first era of life.

- The *common vision* tells us that the child in the first era belongs not in school but in the family. And yet, as noted earlier, we live in a culture in which more and more of our young children spend considerable amounts of their lives in daycare and preschool environments. How do we reconcile this teaching with our social reality?

There is nothing ultimately natural or necessarily desirable about the isolated nuclear family, or even about the multigenerational family. For most of human history, children grew up in tribal or clan groups, interacting intensively with other children and adults within the group. So, the central element offered by the *common vision* in its essence is not the nuclear family as such, or even the multigenerational family. Rather, as noted before, it is the description of the child's need in the first era of life to be in a family-like context, a social setting of love, safety, stability, consistency, and a high quality of care. Within this context, she needs to have as much freedom and opportunity for self-direction available to her as possible, with little competition or

pressure to achieve. This teaching of the *common vision* gives us a model for the kind of day-care and pre-school settings we need to create for our children.

- The *common vision* tells us that every child and youth learns from her interactions with the adults in her life. We need to understand clearly that the child in the first era of life, the first seven years or so, learns most profoundly from an often explicit imitation of those around her. If a child spends most of her conscious time in day care or pre-school, she will learn profoundly from her caregiver(s) or teacher(s) in that environment. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but it is a reality that so-called *quality time* cannot change. *Quality is important in the relationship between adult and child, but quantity is undoubtedly more powerful with a child who learns through imitation.*

The *common vision* requires this of us as parents: if we put our child in day-care, we must place her with an adult who will provide her with as good a basis for imitation as we can find and who will stay in relationship with the child over time. This is a minimum requirement. The step beyond this requires social change so that both mothers and fathers can spend much more time with their young children without sacrificing their prospects of obtaining satisfying work. This change demands a more flexible workplace in which the needs of children and parents are more highly valued. It also calls for a society less concerned with material goods and more able to find satisfaction in human relationships.

Lessons for the Second and Third Eras: What Schools Can Become

Here are the lessons for teachers and parents of children who are in the second and third eras of life, particularly in relation to the nature and role of the school.

- The *common vision* speaks clearly and powerfully to the needs and potentials of the child and youth in the second and third eras. It tells us that much of what goes on in our schools today is antithetical to the growth and unfoldment of the child and youth. Conventional schools work primarily for the purposes of limiting consciousness and reality to the current norms and defining power relations among the next generation. If we wish to nurture and educate our children more effectively and more profoundly, we need to transform our schools: to align them with the needs and potentials of the child and youth as revealed by the *common vision*. We can accomplish this transformation only if we change the goals, structures, and processes of schooling as teachers engage themselves in growing and evolving as persons and educators. Both of these kinds of change, change in goals and structures and change in people, must come not only at the same time but as integrated elements of each other.

As a start, let me suggest three relatively simple steps that any school could take to begin its transformation:

1. One step we can take is simply to change our cultural expectations about when children will learn to read and write. Right now most parents and elementary teachers expect children to learn to read and write by the end of first grade. Yet a glance at the normal distribution of when children enter the second era of childhood informs us that somewhere from 20 percent to 40 percent of the children are not developmentally ready for reading and writing until some time during second grade. Indeed, perhaps 10 percent to 15 percent are not ready until third grade. Nevertheless, we label millions of 6- and 7-year-olds as failures when they arrive at the end of first grade without initial reading and writing skills. The simple remedy of pushing back our expectations to the end of second grade or even beyond would profoundly transform millions of children's experiences of school—and their ability to learn effectively and feel good about themselves.

2. A second step is to free ourselves from viewing education as an industrial process in which we must ship the child from one teacher to the next, either every year in the elementary school or every forty-five minutes in the secondary school. If children and youths learn more from the teacher as a person through her example than from what the teacher knows, then we must organize the school to facilitate the growth of enriching relationships between young people and adults.

Perhaps keeping a class with a single teacher for eight years, as Steiner suggests, is too limiting for our society. But there is absolutely no reason why a teacher in elementary school cannot teach the same group of children for three or four years, or co-teach a larger group of children with another adult(s) for the same period of time. At the secondary level, teachers can work together in teams to teach the same group of youths for two or three or four years. When we create school structures that support the development of strong, caring relationships between young people and adults, we'll find that teachers become much more able to support the unfoldment of their students in personal and individual ways, because they will both know them much better and care more about them. As both Steiner and Aurobindo explain, the teacher must have a vision of the child as a process, in the past, present, and future. Only multi-year relationships allow the teacher to gain that kind of sense of who the student is as a person and who she can become.

3. A third step is to direct more focused, systematic attention in the education of young children to developing the senses, compassion, and the control of awareness. The development and education of children's senses is already a goal in many pre-school and primary grades programs. So is the development of children's awareness of and compassion for others. What could be done within existing school structures to begin the work of transformation is to place far more emphasis on nurturing these capacities and qualities in young children.

Helping children to develop control of their awareness is more problematic, both because little is done now with this task in most schools and because there are some in our society who object to these kinds of activities as being religious. Learning to control one's awareness really has nothing to do with religious belief or practice. When parents and teachers understand more about this, the vast majority of them will support these educational activities. Gaining control of awareness involves the child's mastery of concentration and attention and her recognition that she is not her thoughts or feelings but, rather, is a being who has thoughts and feelings. It is a key step in the development of self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-discipline. Learning these disciplines of concentration and attention also helps children to think with greater clarity and creativity.

Transforming Schools

Beyond these three steps, each of which leads in the right direction, the *common vision* tells us that we must literally transform schools. The key to this task is the recognition and honoring of the child's and youth's *inner teacher*. First, teachers of young children need to gain an understanding of and faith in the integrity and efficacy of the child's *inner teacher*. When they do so, they will create learning environments of freedom, self-direction, and self-discipline. Once we have such learning environments all across North America in which young children are motivating and guiding their own learning and growth, with the support and nurturance of teachers, we will extend this approach—indeed children and their parents will demand that we do so—to these same children as they grow into older children and youths.

In the free school movement of the late 1960s, some teachers tried to begin this evolutionary process by giving freedom to high-school-age youths. This is the wrong way to start. While we can certainly encourage adolescents to reconnect with their inner knowing and to become self-directed, we are much more likely to be successful on a broad scale with young children who have never experienced repressive, authoritarian, adult-centered schools. So, our transformational efforts must begin with the very young—and we must change the systems for them as a cohort as they move up through the years.

For many, many teachers to understand the true nature of human beings and to teach

accordingly will require the beginning of an evolutionary leap. Any teacher who understands the *common vision* and values it must commit herself to beginning this task of transformation in her teaching and to communicating the common vision to her colleagues.

Three Final Lessons

Here are three final lessons from the *common vision*.

- The *common vision* of Steiner, Aurobindo, and Inayat Khan is founded on a spiritual understanding of reality. If you accept the spiritual character of human beings but do not believe in the fact of reincarnation, do not reject the *common vision* for this element alone. I am an agnostic when it comes to reincarnation. I have no way of knowing if it is literal truth, mythical truth, truth beyond my understanding, or fantasy. And yet I am convinced that even if there is no truth at all in reincarnation as a mechanism of evolution, the transcendent truth of the *common vision* as a description of human nature and unfoldment retains its essential validity. Why? Because I have directly experienced the truth of the *common vision* as a description of human nature and human becoming and as both an ideal and a practical guide for parenting and teaching.
- Those of us who understand the truth and power of the *common vision* for parenting and education need to make a commitment to sharing this understanding with others. During the past several decades most of the conscious, spiritually based growth work undertaken by people in North America has focused on ourselves: on our own healing, on our “inner children,” on our own spiritual unfoldment. Undoubtedly, we adopted this focus because we needed to do this work. But now it is time for us to reach out beyond ourselves and make a commitment to educating many, many parents and teachers about what the *common vision* can tell them about children and youths and how they can use these insights to support the unfoldment of their children and students. Our evolutionary crisis demands that we take this new path, now.
- The *common vision* is not perfect or finished or complete. We can always learn more. We must draw on our knowledge of the *common vision* but always in relation to our own insight, discrimination, and common sense. We must not make it “an answer” but keep it as an ideal and a guide in relationship with our own unfolding selves.

The Common Vision and the Role of Culture

The *common vision* speaks about the nature and potential of all children, all human beings. Yet culture also plays a significant role in the growth and learning of children and youths. Culture gives each child a set of understandings for making sense of her world and powerfully affects each child’s perception, meaning-making, and behavior. In the United States, despite the historic image of the “melting pot” as the forge for a single mainstream culture, many racial, ethnic, social class, and regional groups continue to embody and enact their own distinct versions of American culture—for example, African-American, Chinese-American, and Appalachian cultures—which exist along with mainstream culture. In addition, both mainstream culture and the various ethnic, racial, social class, and regional cultures define and create roles for young people based on gender.

As parents we must become as conscious as we can of our own cultural values and norms. We must honor and offer to our children the elements in our own home cultures that enrich life and

unfoldment. At the same time we must identify cultural elements that inhibit or remove our children's exercise of appropriate freedom and self-direction, and if we truly seek the unfoldment of our children's potential, we must abandon these inhibitory cultural elements as much as we can.

As teachers we must recognize that each child brings her own home culture to the learning environment, a culture likely to be influenced greatly by her ethnicity and race, social class, and gender. We need to educate ourselves about the values and effects of the various cultural heritages of our students, so that we can understand the role that home culture plays in each child's experience. While we as teachers must respect the home culture of each child, we must also bring the insights of the *common vision* into our work with each child's unfoldment. Often the child's home culture and the *common vision* will be in harmony and will support each other's goals. Yet it is likely that a child's culture will also be in conflict with at least some aspects of the *common vision*, since many elements in our mainstream culture and in various ethnic, racial, social class, and regional cultures are repressive to the unfoldment of children and youth. In the case of such conflicts, teachers must act from a place of paradoxical or dual consciousness. We must respect the child's home culture, *and* we must nurture the child's unfoldment. We must hold both insights, both perspectives, at the same time, just as we must feel compassion both for the child and for her parents.

Of course, it is much easier to articulate this concept than to embody and enact it. The key to appropriate and effective action, I believe, lies not in a set of rules for oneself but rather in a quality of consciousness. When we can simultaneously understand and respect the child's home culture and her membership in that cultural group *and* support her unfoldment as a unique individual with a unique potential for becoming, we can often, though undoubtedly not always, know how best to serve her growth as her teacher.

The Common Vision: A Path to Coevolution

The *common vision* of Rudolf Steiner, Aurobindo Ghose, and Inayat Khan is a set of directions for coevolution, for our conscious participation in the process of ongoing evolution on this planet. It is also a set of directions for human survival if we choose to recognize and act upon it. We must grow and evolve, or we will surely perish. The *common vision* gives us a path to follow that will nurture this growth for ourselves and our children, a path that leads both to survival and to coevolution.