

Cape Ann Waldorf School and David's Passing

Anita Brewer-Siljeholm and Jenny Helmick

Anita:

Our son David died in an accident while bicycling to the Cape Ann Waldorf School in October 2004. Quite soon, the school became a guide for me between daily life and the place where our beloved son had gone. I didn't recognize this until recently. I write this as a parent of two children who attended a Waldorf school for most of their elementary educations but one who is not trained in anthroposophy.

In the days and weeks after that devastating morning a series of questions arose involving the school and ourselves. Eventually each answer became a choice. Jenny Helmick, David's main lesson teacher, and I have reflected on how these choices guided the way one Waldorf School and one family together chose how to respond after a child died one morning on his way to school.

David was 14 years old when he entered eighth grade in 2004. He was 5'10" tall and blond, with a ready smile and a kind, thoughtful, cheerful disposition. His stature in school was that of a 'senior diplomat' known to most of the children as a fair minded and generous boy. That morning, his 10-year-old sister and I were bicycling a short distance behind him on the flat, 2 ½ mile route to school. He died ahead of us when passing through the confusing construction zone of a public works project. The rear wheel of his bike was knocked aside by a train and he died instantly.

Later that morning, as well as I can understand those moments now, I wanted to complete David's journey by telling to the school in my own words what had happened. Accompanied by the mother of David's best friend, I left the hospital briefly to visit the school. I met, standing together in the Main Hall, a group of shocked faculty, staff, and middle school students. We spoke quietly and exchanged what comfort we could; I remember explaining that David was not coming back, but that he had not been "squished" by the train, instead that his head was hit so hard that he died. I asked for permission to speak with my daughter's 5th grade class, which was granted. The young children upstairs asked a few questions, solemnly, which I answered, and then I left to return to my husband and children at the hospital. This was the first, unplanned interaction with school and it began a special journey.

Soon after the news settled in, in the following hours, a question arose about services. Our family planned to begin the services a week after his death, and the school said it would like to include its own ceremony for David, phrasing their intent respectfully. I agreed to this. Jenny, David's teacher, asked if I would like to read one sentence for each of David's years in a candle

ceremony; there would be fourteen. I did so, and my family and I attended. It was a solemn, beautiful hour with music played by the faculty, a gospel sung by the middle school students, and words spoken by David's best friend and his teacher.

As plans went, the day before the school service a public wake was held. This may not be based in Steiner but it was related to Waldorf in my mind, for the following reason. Shortly after David died, I came to understand that his classmates wanted to see him one more time to say farewell. Interpreting this as a wake, which I had only seen once, I decided to plan one. In settling the arrangements with the funeral parlor, I requested that they open one hour ahead of the public so that students and their teacher could come and leave in privacy. Instead, the students chose to stay, clustered along one wall of the open room near David's body. They remained for hours, as many people did, quietly chatting and moving about. The image of their unity and loving courage has never left me.

Around the same time, I made a request of David's teacher: did she know of any guest books that were closer in appearance to the main lesson books created by students with their intricate, colorful borders? Traditional guest books felt cramped and sterile. A few days later, to my immense surprise, two large format, hand stitched books were handed to me. Every page was differently bordered in color, some were hand ruled and others left open, and David's name was inked on each spread. The sturdy paper and clear design offered space for people to write names, essays, poems, short notes – anything at all. The books came to every event, and later on I copied or pasted more messages into them. The attention and care implicit in each colored page have stayed with me and I continue to refer to them.

As the weeks stretched on into winter another avenue opened within the Waldorf community. Immediately after the tragedy, a meals delivery system had been set up at school, probably with our permission though I cannot recall. Every afternoon from mid-October until Christmas a meal was delivered to our door by a school family. It was an extraordinary gesture which had unexpected consequences. Since evenings were when we found that friends helped most, they often came by. Having the complete meals – usually everything from appetizer to entrees to salads, desserts and even wine – meant we could share food without a constant round of shopping and cooking, which I was not able to do.

One particular evening meal stands out. What became known as the Monday night dinners started about three weeks after David died. The basketball season had gotten underway, and practice took place after school on Mondays. Remembering how hungry David had been, and how long a drive home it could be for many families, I suggested a meal at our house which was located closer to school. This weekly meal became part of our life from then until graduation in June; any students, coaches, parents, and friends were all welcome without advance notice. Many brought food but it was never expected. Being together on a regular schedule was

extraordinarily helpful for us and the delivered meals unwittingly contributed to our ability to start such a gathering.

In another way the school and our family moved forward together. Each year, in every Waldorf school, the class performs a play which is chosen by the teacher for those students. Ordinarily parents are not involved in the selection. That year, I was asked for my opinion of the choices: “Antigone” for my daughter’s class and “Death Takes a Holiday” for David’s. Both scripts directly addressed the subject on all our minds. Trusting the teachers, I agreed. By choice, David’s sister shared the role of Antigone, a young woman in ancient Greece who begs the king to allow her to retrieve her dead brother’s body, a role my daughter accepted and learned with energy. It would have been unimaginable at any other school. In the second play, Death “visits” mankind over a weekend to learn why he is not beloved. Because a play is for both actors and audience, witnessing the children recite such lines strengthened our ability to live with David’s death.

Sometimes the gestures just arrived, without notice. Shortly after David died the grading quarter had ended. To my surprise, one day an envelope arrived from the school containing his Progress Report, something I had quite forgotten. In full awareness of David’s life and of his death, his teachers had summoned the grace to write of his final weeks, their hopes and aspirations for him as a student, and their deep sorrow at his passing. Such words remain an extraordinary gift of the highest and deepest order.

Fall and winter passed, and some months later the school and I discussed acknowledging David’s presence with a memorial on the wall. I assumed they meant a photo. But an image was declined; the anthroposophical idea was different. Just after David died his teacher had brought me the last two watercolors he painted which were strangely among his best. Both had been painted for a meteorology block in which images of “stormy weather” and “calm weather” were assigned. David chose the tropical setting he remembered from a family trip earlier that year, so in his works, palm trees slant and bend under a deep blue-grey sky in one image while the same trees stand quietly in sunshine in the other. Fine copies were made and incorporated into the display.

In early June, the graduation of David’s class occurred. A question then arose: could there be an empty chair with a rose on its seat in David’s place? Would I agree? The ceremony went forward beautifully. David’s sister attended with her grade and I sat with parents of the class. It was one of the hardest ceremonies of my life because of the joy implicit in such a ritual and the terrible sadness I felt looking at the chair while I listened to many moving words that referred to David’s presence in the class. At the graduation, as at the plays, I requested permission to have a videotape and photos taken for my own memory, and the school granted this request. I am glad now to have them to watch.

In the seven years that have elapsed since David left, people keep on living. His classmates are scattered to colleges, his sister is graduated from Waldorf and high school, and the school purchased its first permanent campus, among many important changes. To inform the increasing number of faculty who did not know David, each October the school reprints the cogent and moving remarks from his teacher in 2004. When the school identified a prospective new campus in 2010, David's family released and augmented his memorial fund to assist with the purchase and renovation costs. During the expansion of the building, a dodecahedron was placed within the poured concrete foundation containing four special items; among them was a sheaf of grasses wrapped in silk representing David. They came from the home he grew up in and his gravesite.

It is Rudolf Steiner's view that when a loved one passes, the relationship continues, but of necessity it must change. There is no sentimentality to this belief; no matter how much I want to hold an object representing David, he cannot reappear. It is our spirits which reconnect in the ways that Steiner understood. I believe that the faculty and Waldorf community have guided me well on this journey.

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***Jenny:***

Just as Anita Siljeholm writes of the community and faculty of Cape Ann Waldorf School guiding her on her journey, so have David and his family guided us on ours.

On the evening of October 12, David Siljeholm called me and another teacher at home, inquiring about his homework. As always, David had a way of talking that was ageless: not as an adult, but not at all as a child... and not "in between" those two states, either—something else, out of the ordinary.

We discussed the homework assignment at some length. Our eighth grade class was studying the American Revolution, and the week before I had assigned each student a figure from that period to research. They would present these biographies on Wednesday, October 13. I gave David suggestions about how to approach the work. "But I don't really have time," he informed me. He had a similar conversation that evening with his math teacher.

During main lesson the next morning, the eighth graders were uneasy. They could not understand why David was not there. His best friend and his girlfriend were both in the class; they thought they should have known the reason for his absence. We proceeded through the regular morning activities, and the students began presenting the biographies they had prepared.

A knock came at the classroom door, and I was asked to come to the office. There, with great care, the office staff gave me the news that David had been struck and killed by a train on the way to school. My first thought was to run back downstairs to my class, to protect them from people who might be crawling through the windows to talk to them. As it turns out, local

reporters had indeed been sent to the school to get “reaction shots” and were walking around the school grounds. Being decent people, they were relieved when we asked them to leave.

I told the class what had happened. “I have terrible news. David was hit by a train on his way to school this morning. He is gone.” Uppermost in my mind were two thoughts: their world has changed forever, and their world will continue. My husband had died three years earlier, and I called on that experience to try to accompany young people now. In the moment they received the news, some of the students looked to me for how to respond; others retreated into private grief.

It was not long before, to our amazement, Anita appeared at school to talk with us. The eighth graders and I surrounded her as she calmly described what had happened. She was intent on helping and comforting us. “His soul is smiling,” she told us. Her gesture in those first hours after David’s death paved the way for the family and the school to work hand in hand, throughout the year, to support each other and to honor David’s memory.

One of the families in the class offered their home for the eighth graders and their parents to gather that afternoon. The gathering quickly turned into a story-telling event, with all of us sharing anecdotes and memories of David. So many stories to tell: David’s passions, his sense of justice, his antics, his gallantry, his offbeat way of looking at the world. One latecomer to the house was astonished to find us laughing. It was the beginning of our new way of experiencing David’s presence.

As we navigated the days, weeks, months, and now years that have followed, I came to rely on and trust in two things. The first was the outpouring of support that came from those around us, and from far and wide. Within the school community, people took it upon themselves to attend to the needs they saw: parents wordlessly setting up the hall for a memorial event, a student offering words of reassurance to a younger student, the whole community organizing meals for the Siljeholms, colleagues checking in with each other continually to gauge what the children needed. Expressions of condolence came from other Waldorf schools, other schools in our area, from AWSNA, and from many individuals. These expressions have incalculable meaning, and last forever, as all who have lost loved ones know.

The second thing I came to rely on was my own instinct about what to do. I had a powerful lesson on the first day in this regard. Our Board chair asked me if she should do anything. I replied that perhaps we should call in grief counselors—not because I thought they would be particularly helpful for the eighth grade, but because I had observed this to be a standard procedure at other schools, and thought our parent community would appreciate it as a professional step to take. It was a mistake; the counselors came immediately and with good will, but chastised us for allowing the older students to “congregate” together—these children who had been connected, many of them, since the age of three. Moreover, the eighth graders resented being asked to share what they were going through with total strangers.

On the other hand, I pursued some activities that might seem outwardly strange, but that ended up hitting the mark. Remembering how fairy tales are stories close to the spiritual world, I chose one each night to tell the eighth graders. They drank the stories in. Similarly, I trusted my own sense of how quickly to resume the normal pace of schoolwork, as well as how to acknowledge our new journey with David that year. We kept his desk in the classroom, adorned with flowers, and agreed to add a new verse to our day's closing:

*What we bury deep  
In the grave to sleep  
Mantle of Earth must be  
What we love  
Abides above  
All through eternity.*

My approach with the students was to be sparing with words about death, but to work from the knowledge that we were forming a new relationship with David—a relationship that would evolve as we all did. This knowledge was part of every choice during the eighth grade year: from what our class play would be, to how we would acknowledge David during graduation, to what we would do on our class trip.

Through this all, David's parents inspired us as they remained active in the class and school community, through the basketball dinners which Anita describes so beautifully, and through the many other acts of courage, grace, and generosity that they and their daughter Marian bestowed on us. It is no exaggeration to say that without Anita, our school would not be in its beautiful new home on Moraine Farm today. And those of us who knew David remain grateful to have known him, and sense his presence in the blessings the school has received since his death. We understand that we have an essential task—to stay connected. This is the leitmotif of the closing verse for the College of Teachers' meeting each week:

*May love of hearts reach out to love of souls  
May warmth of love ray out to Spirit-light  
Even so would we draw near to you  
Thinking with you Thoughts of Spirit  
Feeling in you the Love of Worlds  
Consciously at one with you  
Willing in silent being.*

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