

Background: “This War is Not Inevitable”

by Bob Froelich, Member, Board of Trustees, Waldorf School of the Peninsula

“This War is Not Inevitable”

The Threefold Social Organism in Two Acts

November 7 at 7:30 pm

Second Stage, Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts

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Have you ever wondered what led up to the founding of the first Waldorf School in 1919? Here’s your answer:

On November 7 there will be a performance of “This War is Not Inevitable,” a play written by New Zealand actor Michael Burton and currently on tour in the United States. In the play Michael and his co-actor Christian Peterson take on a dozen different roles, including that of Rudolf Steiner. (This is perhaps the first play ever written with Steiner as a character, speaking words from his writings and letters.) The play concerns the time in 1917-19 when most of the work on what was called social threefolding was attempted.

What is social threefolding, where does it come from, and what does it have to do with Waldorf? To explain, I must turn your attention to the time of World War I. It has been almost exactly 100 years since that war ended by cease fire at 11:00 AM on November 11, 1918. World War I, known then as the Great War, had been a tremendous shock to the people of Europe. Since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, they had witnessed almost no protracted warfare. But in 1914 there began a conflict which grew, for no clear reason and with no clear ideology at stake, into a war involving the whole continent and even parts of Asia, from the United Kingdom in the west to Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the east. The eventual death toll, geographic extent, and horror of World War I were far greater than those of any previous war in human history, and only in World War II have they ever been exceeded.

One can read elsewhere about the futility of World War I, of how carelessly the various governments entered into it at its beginning and of how many soldiers and civilians died in battles over small slivers of territory during its course. One can also read of the war’s consequences, including how the defeat of Russia by Germany led to the Bolshevik Revolution, how the punitive terms of the Versailles Treaty contributed to the rise of National Socialism in Germany, and how the division of the Ottoman Empire according to the wishes of western countries helped create the conflict-ridden borders existing today in the Middle East.

During World War I many people thought about how the world might look after the war ended. Surely changes could be made so that such a thing would never happen again! Some politicians described the Great War as “the war to end all wars,” a bitterly ironic phrase from our perspective. One of the more famous concepts of a post-war world was expressed by Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points.” These included grand-sounding ideas like freedom of the high seas, reduction of armaments, and free trade, but today one can wonder whether they really would have changed the world in any fundamental way.

Less famous, but also receiving widespread international attention, including high-level discussions in Europe and an article in the *New York Times*, was an idea from Rudolf Steiner. He suggested that societies reorganize in recognition of three categories or spheres of social activity. Recognized or not, they are in any case already present: the sphere of law and human rights (human equality); the sphere of economics and interdependence (human sisterhood/brotherhood); and the sphere of culture, education, and religion (individual human uniqueness and freedom). His idea has been referred to as Threefold Social Organism or social threefolding for short. One can notice a parallel to the motto of the French revolution: Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité!

Steiner’s idea, first put forward in 1917, leaves many details open to each individual case, but it generally envisions three independent but cooperating social spheres. Their independence would naturally tend to produce a healthy balance among the three. This is in contrast to the case of a single central government where the three spheres quite naturally come into conflict and imbalance. Every person would participate in all three to a greater or lesser degree. War might become next to impossible, as, for example, the economic spheres of two countries might cooperate extensively even as their legal spheres tend to hostility. Threefolding is not a utopian idea, Steiner stressed, but one that grows organically out of what already exists in human society. In principle, almost any existing form of government could gradually transform toward it.

Within a few years it became clear that, although social threefolding was getting serious attention, postwar Germany would be organized in a more conventional way. Threefolding did, however, achieve at least one local but very important application: the first Waldorf School. Emil Molt, a German industrialist, was one of the supporters of threefolding. He realized that he could bring one piece of such a society to reality: a free school for the children of workers at his factory in Stuttgart. Supported by factory proceeds, the school would be “free” in two senses of the word. First, there would be no cost to the families whose children would attend. Second, with no government support, the school would not be subject to government regulations. It would be free to operate as it saw fit. Here was an example of livelihood generated in the economic sphere and flowing to an institution of the free cultural sphere. The school was established in 1919 under the guidance of Rudolf Steiner. Emil Molt’s company was called Waldorf-Astoria, hence the name given to our approach to education. The factory’s product was, of all things, cigarettes!