

Creating Conscious Community Through Ubuntu

By Mashobane Moruthane



My strong connection to Waldorf stems from its relationship to my personal culture. I was raised in a village in rural South Africa; I grew up working with the earth. When I encountered Waldorf education, I experienced anthroposophy as the intellectual expression of what I had lived in a traditional African cultural upbringing. As a child I absorbed the culture through feeling, instinct, and tradition. I learned it from what was modeled by my elders, what was expected and done in the community, and what was passed down.

I have been teaching children in Waldorf schools full time for my entire adult life. Being a Waldorf teacher is my vocation, my deep calling. It is my lifelong joy and I value it immensely.

And . . .

The whole of my time in Waldorf institutions has been me trying to fit the Waldorf picture, re-shaping myself to fit into a prescribed space. But in all my 22 years doing this work, I have not yet felt the picture trying to fit me. The Waldorf picture seems finished; it is not in an active process of growth. If the picture was in the process of being created, then I could add to it, and it would develop around my addition. Instead, there is a specific space which is given and I must change to fit into it. Just to be accepted I must change who I am.

Last year was a very tough year for the whole world, especially for people of color. There has been much pain, however, I am encouraged to see the collective raising of consciousness that has arisen from this suffering. I now see many Waldorf institutions putting particular focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, which has been sorely needed in our communities for so long. We have come to accept, on an intellectual level, the fact that our communities are not very diverse, that they are not environments where children of color can feel secure enough to truly unfold themselves. They are not places where families of color can fully bring their strengths and gifts to enrich the community.

To make progress we need to deepen our understanding. We need to feel it. It is not enough to simply understand that there is a problem if it isn't my problem. It is for this reason that I started teaching a concept from my culture, that of *Ubuntu*. Ubuntu means "I am, because you are." It is the recognition of the vital role of community for human beings. A person is fully a person only through other people. Ubuntu is the "We" rather than the "I."

To have a strong community we must each see ourselves in the other. If we could let go a little bit of

our "I" and start thinking about the "We," we would move closer to Ubuntu. For example, if I see a member of my community failing, that is my failure, just as their success is my success. I must always ask myself, "What can I do to better support the endeavors of my community members?" Bringing a cup of coffee to an overworked colleague could make all the difference to the success of their teaching and thus our school as a whole. This is the "We" thinking, the Ubuntu mentality.

How do we move from an intellectual recognition of the problem, to an intuitive understanding of it? How can we educate our feeling and create openness in our hearts? Activity! Clear, intentional activity will move our understanding from the intellect into the feeling.

In my village, we lived this idea of intentional activity. Everyone was important and everyone had a role. When I saw that my grandmother was doing something, I knew there was a reason and I looked for what I needed to do in response. She sensed that it was going to rain and took action; she didn't explain or give us instructions. We children saw what she was doing and did our part. The rain barrels were moved under the corners of the house and we created furrows to direct the water to the corn fields.

We are connected to the rhythms of nature, to everything in life, through action. Nature inspires the rhythm of the culture, and the rhythm of the culture in turn supports the nature which nourishes us. The soul and the spirit are nourished and stabilized by these rhythms which enrich the intuition, not through our intellect, but through our engagement with nature. Rhythm connects us as a community and allows us to work together, to amplify the strength of each individual, to move together as one. This oneness is Ubuntu.

Movement in Waldorf

When human beings move together, there is an energy between them. When members of a group make the decision to move together, they think less about themselves and more about others. How you move into the space created by the person next to you, and how you create the space for the one beside you is an active way of building community. When we are open to

“To make progress, we need to deepen our UNDERSTANDING. We need to feel it. It is not enough to simply understand that there is a problem if it isn’t my problem. It is for this reason that I started teaching a concept from my culture, that of *Ubuntu*. Ubuntu means ‘I am, because you are.’ ”

those around us, sensing their movements rather than focusing on our own intentions, we will naturally move towards the space which is created by their movement. And once we enter that space, it is no longer our neighbor’s movement; it is our collective movement. We are all responsible for co-creating it.

If you watch a eurythmy performance, you can see this happening. No individual is initiating the movement; they are all moving as one. Any games concerned with sharing space or moving together build trust and strengthen the capacity for openness. Rhythm activities develop flexibility of soul, teaching us to make constant subtle adjustments to find a communal flow. A drumming circle encourages us to find each other through rhythm.

My Experience in Waldorf Institutions

I was inspired to become a Waldorf teacher by the apartheid regime of South Africa. I wanted to be a different kind of teacher than the ones that I had. I experienced Rudolf Steiner’s work as an intellectual

distillation of my soul experience. He created a system to reconnect the materialistic, intellectualized cultures with the soul feeling and the spiritual life. He was putting into words what I had experienced as the soul wisdom of my culture.

As the Waldorf community looks at our schools and sees a lack of diversity, we ask, “How do we get more families of color to come to our schools?” And here exactly is the problem! We are always looking for something to come towards us, to be added to us, but we aren’t open to receive it.

Expanding our Communities

What is needed to become open? We need to take an interest! We cannot just cherry-pick the fruits of a culture for our own without being willing to go into that culture and risk letting it change us. We need to learn about other cultures and then, let that learning affect us. It is time to create a legitimate connection to that which is outside of our knowledge and experience. Yes, Waldorf schools are open to the wonders and the beauty of other cultures, but if we wish to open the Waldorf community, we must actively seek to understand other cultures in a holistic manner. We must see them as living organisms, whole trees that grow and change as they adapt to their own ever-changing environments. We cannot just consume the exotic fruits of those other cultures. We must learn to cultivate new and different trees, and make space in our orchard for them to flourish.

It is time to develop an understanding of the heart. To build conscious communities, we must progress from an intellectual concept of the community that we want to be, toward a feeling-understanding of the community that we are. The path to awakening and developing this heart-understanding is through active and intentional engagement. Ubuntu is an action. The feeling intuition will evolve out of action—action which is sustained by rhythm. The practice of Ubuntu can strengthen and diversify our Waldorf communities.

Mashobane Moruthane, a 22-year Waldorf veteran teacher, grew up in Limpopo Province in rural South Africa during the apartheid regime and studied Waldorf education for three years at the Baobab Community College before moving to the United States to study at Sunbridge College and Spacial Dynamics Institute. He currently teaches at Emerson Waldorf School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and is the founder of the Mashobane Ubuntu Initiative, whose mission is to build conscious communities through joyful intentional movement.



Photos by Nathaniel Steinruck