

A Grandparental View of Tamarack

I remember clearly the first time I visited my granddaughter's kindergarten class at Tamarack. It's known as the Butterfly Garden – Mrs. Rose's room. I probably stayed around for some twenty minutes, just watching what was going on and taking in the contents of the room – what was on the walls, how the room was equipped (including a wonderful two-storey playhouse), a quick census of the local fauna (result: one lop-eared rabbit named Chewy). I remember feeling as I left that I wanted immediately to go down to the office and enroll as a student in the Butterfly Garden.

That feeling is easily dismissed as a light and evanescent flight of fancy. But now, three years later, the more I think about it, the more serious it becomes. A visit to Tamarack helps me to bounce back from bouts of acute depression brought about by our ever more debased national conversation about education and its reform. Why? I have a mental scrapbook of images from Tamarack, specific scenes that have taken up residence in my head. Just before starting to write this piece, I flipped through the scrapbook again, just to experience what might happen after a reviewing. What happened was startling, for what emerged was the idea that a school should enact a vision of what the world could and should be like. Aha! That's why I wanted to enroll in the Butterfly Garden. I just didn't realize it at the time.

A story comes to mind. Mom is in the kitchen making breakfast. Preparations complete, she yells to her son to come down to eat. No son appears so she goes to his room, to find him in bed, covers over his head. "It's time for breakfast; you have to eat and go to school," she says. Comes the muffled reply: "I don't want to go to school." "Why not?" asks Mom. "Because the teachers don't like me and the students don't like me and I don't like going there every day." Mom replies: "Son, that's too bad but the fact is that you have to go to school because you're the principal."

School is a place where everyone should like to be – where, particularly, children like to be. That's not to say that school should be some utopia with R-39 insulation against the world's cold realities. It is to say that a proper school for our cherished children should be a deft mix of the "is" and the "ought." Under the "is" we can list the Dopp kit of civilizational travel tools, like reading, writing and arithmetic; exposure to core human facts like people don't always get along, sometimes get mad and even want to hit other people and so it's important to devise and live by rules that keep (or restore) the peace; and a grasp of core facts and themes in the natural and historical worlds.

As for the "ought" world, we can start with the fact that Tamarack students write and illustrate their own textbooks. I've seen samples. They can be

truly stunning. In the "is" world, art is separate and efforts to integrate it constant. In the "ought" world of Waldorf education, art is never separated out in the first place – so there's no need for laborious and never-quite-successful integration. When we add craft to art, the "ought" becomes ampler. Tamarack children learn to do things, to marry head and hand in learning to knit, bake and garden as well as paint. In our 21st century world, we have specifically eliminated shop class and more generally excised the head-infused manual arts from our schools – an indictable act of impoverishment. Waldorf schools like Tamarack stand as outposts of an enriched sanity that await rediscovery.

The "ought" world is also one of practical morality. In the second year of Addy's residence in the Butterfly Garden, I paid a visit one day that happened to coincide with the production of stone soup. When it was ready, I took my place at a table along with the children and was served a bowl of the soup. One of the last diners to be served, I soon noticed that my bowl had all the veggies but not one stone. It happened that in the time before the serving of the soup, I had had several interactions with a boy named Joshua, and those interactions had established the footings if not the foundation of a friendship. Some minutes after the soup was served, Joshua came over to look at my soup, quickly detected that it was stoneless, went back to his own soup, extracted one stone and deposited it in my bowl.

Joshua knew without knowing he knew that the stones had social rather than intrinsic value – just like a dollar bill. He knew that the stones in the context of their classroom use were limited, hence scarce; that he had several and I had none; and that he ought to share one of his with me because it had social value and we had established a social relationship that created a tiny but compelling universe of obligation to the unenforceable. A morality that is aborning in Joshua – and that is part of the ethos of Tamarack – will be a prerequisite to human survival in the balance of this century.

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