

## *I Went to Walden*

The news that our beloved Bruce – the head of the theatre department at The Walden School – was nearing his end devastated me. It didn't seem possible that the man who was responsible for leading me into the magical world of drama was no longer going to share his vision with those privileged to be in his orbit. It also brought me back to the pale pink pumps and Bruce's bomb: "I need you to go on for Laurel, in *The Chalk Garden*.

I entered Walden in 1979, after one year at York Prep, where I excelled scholastically, but was unhappy socially. Before York, I was enrolled at Rudolf Steiner, from preschool through the seventh grade. It would take me decades to fully appreciate my Steiner education but that is a conversation for another essay. My father was a Juilliard-trained pianist, and my mother sang opera, and I was immediately captivated by the fine and performing art offerings at Walden. And I still remember the names and faces of, in addition to Bruce, Bonnie, who taught jazz and modern dance -- in whose class I fell in love with Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, and The Modern Jazz Quartet -- and Steve, our fine arts instructor. Yes, at Walden, we called our teachers by their first names.

If my memory serves me correctly – and it is very possible it doesn't – Bruce handed me my *Anne-Baxter-in-All-About-Eve* moment, the understudy whisked on at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, about to bask in the glow of the footlights. *The Chalk Garden*, Enid Bagnold's 1950s play about a troubled teenager with an absent mother could not have been more perfect for me, a somewhat troubled teenager who wasn't quite as dramatic as the pyromaniac protagonist, Laurel, but who was just beginning to come to terms

with my troubled mother, and my inability to solve the traumas caused by her Ukrainian birth in the late 1920s. First, Stalin's starvation of her people, then World War II.

George, our extraordinary history teacher, would have said something like, these people were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In Laurel, I escaped my own drama and found focus and purpose. There were lines to learn and a character to create. Suddenly, needing to provide my own costume and accessories, I found myself in one of those glorious downtown vintage clothing stores near Canal Street, walking across the creaking wooden floor, and spying the perfect pale pink kitten-heel pumps. I had seen the 1964 film version, starring Deborah Kerr, and John and Hayley Mills, and I was going to make my costume as period appropriate as possible. The independence I felt coming home on the 4 train, having been given my dream role and learning how to bring Laurel to life through her wardrobe gave me a sense of self confidence I had never known. I was becoming a new person and having my first Shakespearean moment: "This above all: to thine own self be true."

While I had little to compare it to, the Walden theatre program seemed to be more than a cut above the rest. Having an Off-Off Broadway theatre in the building certainly helped. This, coupled with the fact that New York was still a town where housing was somewhat affordable and many of the students came from artistic backgrounds created a kind of natural breeding ground for creative expression that no longer exists. "The school," according to *The New York Times*, "stressed allowing students to develop their identities, in large measure through the visual and performing arts."

Yet, for all its Central-Park-West-private-school stature, the theatre presentations at Walden were quite no frills. There were no expensive props or sophisticated sets. My favorite memory of Bruce's idea of set decoration is the endless newspaper leaves we cut and pasted onto the stage to create the Forest of Arden for Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The sophistication came from the quality of the instruction: the belief that we were soon to be young adults learning the craft of drama. We would be assigned our roles – whether actor, stage manager, or lighting designer – and we would rise to the occasion because we had a common goal: a show that must go on. And, of course, we wanted to prove ourselves to Bruce. We wanted to please him. Who wouldn't?

In Bruce, I found a father figure who functioned on all levels. He was gentle and kind and you could talk to him about anything. My own father, who was also gentle and kind, seemed to be slowly transitioning into a version of his future self: distant, shut down, and trying to find that last gasp of air sucked out of our one-bedroom apartment by my mother, whose own eating and spending disorders were taking over her life. With Bruce there was not only escape; there was also function. He brought it all together, from first read to final curtain. And even in the sadness of the bare dressing room after a production closed, Bruce helped me understand in a healthy way that everything comes to an end. Especially since there would always be “another op'nin of another show.”

Walden, founded as The Children's School in 1914 by 24-year-old progressive pioneer Margaret Naumberg, entered the educational arena at a time when radical thinkers such as John Dewey, as well as Emma Goldman -- who started her own institution, the Ferrer Modern School -- were challenging the traditional approach of the American scholastic curriculum. Naumberg studied with Dewey at Columbia University

and began forming her educational vision, which combined Freudian psychoanalytic theory, psycho- and art therapy.

Naumberg, who was born in New York, got her undergrad degree from Barnard, then did graduate work at Columbia University, the London School of Economics, and enrolled in the first educator's course with Maria Montessori, in Rome. In New York, Naumberg and her husband, Waldo Frank, lived in the bohemian Greenwich Village world of the 1920s, counting as close friends Charlie Chaplin, Georgia O'Keefe and poet John Marin. The artistic and intellectual community that Walden embodied at the time I was there clearly had roots in this world.

A year after its founding Naumberg changed the name to The Walden School, which was located on the Upper West Side in one room with ten students. "The purpose of this school," Naumberg stated at the time, "is not merely the acquisition of knowledge by children. Its primary objective is the development of their capacities." In 1928, she published her first book on her educational philosophy, *The Child and The World*.

Naumberg, in addition to her teaching background, did extensive research in art therapy and employed the techniques of this practice with her students. She remained as Walden's director for ten years before she moved into her new role as art therapist with children at the New York Psychiatric Institute. She would go on to publish four books on art therapy and technique: *An Introduction to Art Therapy*; *Schizophrenic Art*; *Psychoneurotic Art*; and *Dynamically Oriented Art Therapy*.

One of the radical changes I found when I entered Walden was the notion that I mattered. My ideas were important, and I was expected to be a partner in my education, not simply another student who would be told what I needed to learn. In no classroom

that I'd been in, to date, and certainly not in my home, was I ever respected for who I was and what ideas I had. I was only to be praised for the correct answer, or reacted against, for the wrong one.

This seemed to be the new norm, as nothing in adolescence felt like it was going right. If anything, I was slowly becoming invisible to my mother, who was losing her battle in the what-to-do-with-this-child war. Naumberg had also had a troubled childhood and her son, Thomas Frank, would later speculate "perhaps her feeling both misunderstood and without opportunity to share her inner life during these early years gave her a beginning motivation to battle for less restrictive educational approaches focused on the individual child's emotional needs."

At Walden, I was not lectured *to*, I was in dialogue *with*. And no dialogue was as revolutionary as the one that took place in Marty's English class, the one that asked what I have come to call The Question. Marty was weaving a philosophical dialogue into, perhaps, a discussion of *The Odyssey*, although I cannot be sure of this. As a side note, at Walden we read works to completion, whether *Hamlet* or *The Great Gatsby*. Students now often read excerpts or pamphlets, missing out on the discipline it takes, to say nothing of the joy of being guided by a great teacher, to finish a work of literature. What I am sure of is that the discussion centered around the theme of loyalty – indeed, it could have been *The Odyssey*, after all -- and Marty stopped and asked our class: "Is it more important to be loyal to your own needs, or those of your community?" Specifically, he asked, "If I want to be a painter, but we need more doctors, do I do what *I* want, or what *society* needs?"

Not a month has gone by since I graduated from Walden that I have not thought, pondered, or examined The Question. The irony being, of course, that I have doggedly pursued the life of a writer, which the world clearly does not need more of. And yet it was at Walden, that for the first time, my writing was recognized. I can only hope that in my life as an educator I have stepped up to the challenge of The Question and given my students the respect and interest in their learning that I received at Walden.

Although I had no plans to become a teacher at the time, the seeds of my career were sowed at Walden, where I did my senior year community service training in the preschool. Over twenty years later, when I had become a parent and had gone back to school to study early childhood development, I entered a community in which child-centered learning was the norm. The ideal model was the classroom where the child was respected, and students and teachers learned together. A sense of *déjà vu* set in; was I once more at Walden?

I spent thirteen years teaching threes and fours at a progressive Brooklyn preschool and in those years, and certainly in the ones I was raising my own children, a very Walden-like statement governed everything I did: There has got to be a better way than the one I saw growing up, when engaging with children, and indeed the world around you. I had learned from the best role model there was: my mother. As she gave up on parenting me, the bill collectors pummeled her with phone calls and I watched her struggle with food, as well as her constant visits to doctors who could not fix her problems, I thought there has got to be a better way. As usual, Walden showed me there was.

Decades after I graduated from Walden, I was at a holiday party in the Village and I struck up a conversation with a woman who had studied the French Horn. “Years,” she said, “I spent *years* studying and practicing and performing. And for what? I didn’t become a French Horn *player*. All that wasted time...” she said wistfully. It struck me as a very un-Greenwich Village conversation to be having, somehow completely out of sync with the spirit of the always artistically-inclined neighborhood we were celebrating in.

I don’t remember how I reacted, but I hope that I stood up for the beauty of a musical – indeed an arts education – where no minute is wasted, in fact each one is a “teachable moment.” My own endless years as a piano student, but more importantly in Bruce’s productions, taught me: how to learn a new skill, to endure in the face of struggle, to always be professional, to communicate effectively, to show up on time, to be part of a team, to push myself beyond my comfort zone, and – perhaps the most powerful one -- to open my heart to a new and incredibly welcoming community. It saddened me that the woman didn’t see all the glorious life lessons all those “years” learning the French Horn could have taught her. But it’s as simple as this: She didn’t go to Walden.

The phrase “I went to Walden” is one I carry with me, like some sort of tool, and has gotten me through life’s inevitable we-have-a-situation-on-our-hands moments. It embodies the spirit of open mindedness, empathy, and compassion that I found at Walden and have never seen in any institution since. It also encompasses an idea that I was later to learn, that of “found family.” The friends and teachers I made at Walden –

many of whom I still see regularly -- embraced me when I entered the doors in ninth grade and immediately became my new people.

The woman at the party didn't seem like she'd had any fun learning the French Horn. I felt badly for her. Could anything have matched the time my mother had to call the drug store, desperate for help getting the grease out of my long, thick hair? For the role of the beggar, in *The Threepenny Opera*, Bruce told me to slather my hair with huge gobs of Vaseline. What did I know? Of course, I went ahead and did it. After all, it took no time to put it in. Taking it out, on the other hand, involved repeated washings with a bottle of Dawn dishwashing detergent. Eventually, the Vaseline came out. But, for a chance to relive that glorious production with Bruce, I'd do it all over again.