

KIM JOHN PAYNE

The first of a two-part interview about his work with social inclusion, simplicity parenting, technology and more

We caught up with Kim John Payne in Boulder, CO. He was there to work with Shining Mountain Waldorf School, which is in the second year of a three-year process implementing his Social Inclusion Approach. Shining Mountain is one of a large and growing number of schools working with this Waldorf-based approach to further social health and develop ways to work with exclusion, teasing and bullying. He also gave two lectures, one for the parents on “Social Inclusion” and one for the public on “Simplicity Parenting”. “Simplicity Parenting: How to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure Kids” is also the title of his most recent book, now in paperback from Random House.

The first thing I wanted to do was to congratulate you on the success of your latest book. “Simplicity Parenting” has become a national phenomenon.

Thank you. I had hoped when the book came out that it would create an opportunity for the Waldorf schools to use the message of Simplicity Parenting to reach out. There are a huge number of parents who have resonated with the message of the book that haven’t yet discovered Waldorf education. It’s a message that can bring us together with a much broader community.

You visit a lot of schools in the course of a year. What would you say is the theme of the moment or the question of our time for parents?

There are two things. Firstly, “How do I deepen and strengthen my connection to my children and my partner?” Secondly, “How do I live in this ‘post-excess’ era?” We see what excess has done to our planet, our economies, in the realm of technology and also education. Now, people are waking up to the effect of the post-excess era on families. They see that it’s had a large and stressful effect on their families.

How is it affecting families?

It’s creating a “soul fever”. Families are living their lives at a feverous pitch of emotion. The problem is that the fever is the new normal. The layers have been burnt off our families like the layers around our planet. People are recognizing this more and more and are seeking to strengthen and repair the layers around the family.

What role do you see Waldorf education playing in this?

Waldorf schools have been leading the way in honoring childhood and promoting balance in family life. Our job is to communicate this message to the wider public. Our roots go deep in this area. We know it, we’ve studied it, and now our task is to articulate it. We need to encourage each other and get out there and spread the message of what we do.

Sometimes we forget that Rudolf Steiner was a social activist and a radical in his time. He was constantly engaged with spreading the message of a new education and social order.

Rudolf Steiner said that teachers were charged with the two tasks of educating children and social renewal.

That's right. The recent economic collapse is seen by some as a recession, and by some as a correction. I see it as neither. It's a re-direction, a perfect time to say what our core message is. How do we become social activists in our community?

How can it be that we have the largest independent school movement in the world and you go to some universities and they've heard very little about it? Now is the time to go "wide as well as deep". We've spent years developing depth through our work and study. How can we frame our message so that it's not an enrollment drive, but a message that we can take from conferences to dinner parties and to a much broader audience?

That's been the effect of the Simplicity Parenting movement. The majority of the parents that are involved don't have their kids in a Waldorf School.

The book has attracted national attention. What do you attribute that to?

The secret of Simplicity Parenting and the reason that it works is that parents can begin to simplify. Simplicity Parenting offers them modest beginning points. You don't have to become the perfect Waldorf parent. It's thrilling to see parents doing simple things and getting started now. It's given them a direction. People can find a beginning point that feels natural to their family.

If you just begin by cleaning up the toys, you're already on a path. You can do it in your own way and you can find support. People say support makes all the difference.

What form does that support take?

Waldorf schools are participating by working with a trained Simplicity Parenting group leader. The group leader conducts a series of seven thoughtful and process-oriented parent education evenings over a fourteen week period. Parent education, that's the first thing. It's wonderful to read on our blog and hear first hand from the participants how they become like "cheerleaders for each other's change." We also see that schools are partnering with Simplicity Parenting group leaders to take the message "out" into the community. We've been developing a parent education process that class teachers can use themselves. We give them simple guidelines and then support them further. I think of this as a "campfire" movement. We're lighting campfires and the warmth from the campfire glows and grows.

More and more children are coming with challenges. What are we to do as educators and parents to meet this challenge of our time?

On one hand we've got resources and on the other depth. We benefit so much by going deeper into the amazing riches that Waldorf education brings. The early works and lectures are more relevant than they've ever been. How do we apply this to the contemporary child? What do these things mean when we look at a child having difficulty incarnating?

The typical pattern of incarnation isn't happening in the way that the "textbooks" say. I can give one example here. How does one understand Asperger's syndrome and autism? If we consider Asperger's, it's often put on a continuum with autism. In terms of the ego and the gesture of the finer bodies, it's almost a polarity.

For a child with Asperger's, the finer bodies are layered too thickly. The ego has difficulty penetrating through these. It's almost an ego entrapment. With these children it helps immensely to increase the arts and drama. They're great at acting and excel with a script. In this case the metabolic, or upbuilding activity of the etheric body, is too strong for the astral body's catabolic process, which digests and breaks apart.

With autism, it's the flip side of the spectrum. The astral body is too strong. The etheric, or life body, is gossamer thin. Autism is normally treated through stimulation. However, to strengthen the etheric we need to give the child things of beauty which strengthen the life body. Beautifully carved wooden toys and objects that quietly invite exploration are just one example of how we avoid overwhelming the acute sensitivity of the child. This creates a stronger vessel for the slowly incarnating ego.

When you work with younger teachers, do you see a difference in what they are bringing as questions as opposed to a generation ago?

Young teachers want to know what all of this means for contemporary times. Rudolf Steiner was an action-based researcher and spoke to the teachers of his time, but left many indications for future generations as well. One thing that young teachers respond to is when we approach these modern questions in terms of the four-fold human being, like I did when I explained the polarity of Asperger's and autism in terms of the four-fold human being. It's very hopeful that young teachers are striving for specific examples.

How can we support students, teachers and parents with the social forms that we have in schools?

Schools need to set up structures in the school to deal with social health and inclusion. We need to be conscious when we set up these structures. It's a new thing for teachers to train in how to create a healthy social environment in the adult community.

Our teacher training institutions find it difficult to attract students in a life space to undertake two or three years full time training as it was in the past. The time in training

has reduced. Instead they rely partly on skills of the mentors of these young teachers once they are in the field. This seems like a pretty sound strategy, as we do have many very skillful teachers well-versed in guiding a new teacher through the curriculum.

What we are yet fully to wake up to is that there are far fewer mentors who have made a specific focus of the social, emotional and behavioral aspects of our daily life with the children or how to work with the increasing interest of parents in the their child's life at school. It stands to reason that while our students are training they need a significantly great focus on the social life of the child so they can work with confidence in this area once in the classroom. As one teacher trainee said to me recently, "We get so much wonderful curriculum preparation on our training. It was all curriculum, curriculum, curriculum but after our first practicum we realized to survive as a teacher it was going to be all social, social, social and not just with the children, but with colleagues and in particular with the parents."

You could say that for us as modern human beings, the only thing that we have in common is that we have nothing in common. The social forms that supported us in the past have died away and we are left with this "existential after-image", which can leave us feeling lonely and disoriented. By creating new and commonly agreed upon social forms we can move ahead. The conversation to get there helps us move up to the transcendent or ethical individual. How we handle individualism is a key question for all of us. The challenge for a teacher now is how to be a creative human being and how to stay true to oneself, while welcoming the process that leads us towards commonly agreed social forms.

Next week, we'll continue with the conclusion of the interview.

To learn more about Kim John Payne's work, [visit the Simplicity Parenting site](#) or [The Center for Social Sustainability](#)