

Soul Development  
Through Handwriting

The Waldorf Approach to the Vimala Alphabet

Jennifer Crebbin

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And, thanks to you, the reader, for opening this book to see what it contains.

## Rudolf Steiner on Education and Handwriting

*“In regard to handwriting, it is so that people do not have a writing, rather the writing has the person... That means, we have in our wrist, in our hand, a certain writing trait. We write mechanically out of our hand. This fetters the human being. The human being becomes unfettered when he writes in the way that he paints or draws, when each letter next to the other becomes something that he draws.”*

ROSICRUCIANISM AND MODERN INITIATION

*“The reverence that is needed to make education effective, something that can take on a religious quality, will arise if you as a teacher are conscious that when around the seventh year you call forth from the child’s soul the forces that are used when the child learns to draw and to write, these actually come down from heaven!”*

BALANCE IN TEACHING

*“Our rightful place as educators is to be removers of hindrances.”*

THE SPIRITUAL GROUND OF EDUCATION, LECTURE IV

*“Each child in every age brings something new into the world from the divine regions, and it is our task as educators to remove bodily and physical obstacles out of its way: to remove hindrances so that his spirit may enter in full freedom into life.”*

THE SPIRITUAL GROUND OF EDUCATION, LECTURE IV

*“We must work on our etheric bodies. We must transform the qualities of our temperament to the extent that we can, for instance, consciously alter our movements, our gait and our handwriting. It is not enough to become a more ethical person. We must become a different person.”*

ISIS MARY SOPHIA: HER MISSION AND OURS

*“Take for example, writing. The boy writes something like this, does he not? Now it will be for you to set to work and take the utmost care and pains that he shall gradually change his handwriting and develop it into a finely formed script. And you will find that while he is doing this, there will be clear signs also of a transformation taking place in his whole inner constitution.”*

CURATIVE EDUCATION, LECTURE XI

## The Vimala Alphabet

A a B b C c D d E e ε

F f G g H h I i J j K k

L l M m N n O o

P p Q q R r S s T t U u

V v W w X x Y y Z z

## Introduction

*The Times ahead* will place demands on our children as never before. Life forces will be required to see clearly the choices available to them, evaluating their consequences and implications. They will be asked to sort through and prioritize vast quantities of information to deal with a rapidly changing world. With the steady stream of impressions from television, computers, movies, Xboxes, iPods, and so on, the young child is constantly bombarded with nerve-sense impressions that can have a lasting, deadening effect on young bodies. Children fortunate enough to have parents who provide a safe haven from continual sensory input are becoming increasingly rare in this country today.

Children who are taught by the Waldorf method, whether at home, in the public system, or in an AWSNA school (Association of Waldorf Schools in North America), are fortunate to be in an educational system that has many not just nourishing but truly healing aspects in its curriculum and educational methods. Waldorf education contains a profound capacity to provide the kind of stimulation most suitable for growing children through a curriculum based on real insights into child development, with a deep concern for the long-range goals of education: to foster development toward becoming free-thinking, actively engaged, and warm-hearted adults. The aim of Waldorf education is to ensure that students develop all of their potential.

Over the last twenty-one years, I provided Waldorf education for my three children, following their education as a parent and, at times, as an administrator or the wife of a specialty teacher. When I discovered the Vimala Alphabet, I saw the power of the marriage with Waldorf education. After earning my certification as a Handwriting Consultant, teaching classes, and working one-on-one with handwriting clients, I developed a passion for introducing this work to the Waldorf school movement. Open hearts have met me all along my path.

## SOUL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH HANDWRITING

Audrey McAllen’s excellent book *Teaching Children Handwriting* has long been *the* book on how to approach the subject of handwriting in the classroom, but does not go into detail about which style of writing to teach, except that it should be upright and rounded. This is a critical question, because when we write we not only express through the forms of the letters how we see ourselves and the world, but we also reinforce it. Many teachers choose the Palmer or revised Palmer style, which was first developed in 1895 and reflects all the values of that materialistic time. The Palmer Alphabet was created when the world was a radically different place. It can reinforce the qualities of greed, fear, and jealousy, to mention a few, every time it is used for writing. Children of the twenty-first century deserve something different. The D’Nealian Alphabet is also a popular choice, but still includes many of the repressive qualities of the Palmer Alphabet.

I bring a new choice to the Waldorf community. The Vimala Alphabet was first made public in 1995 by Dr. Vimala Rodgers, an Alphabetician and educator. She shares with us forms of the letters that support us in expressing our finest human qualities. Dr. Rodgers’ goal is to create a world so harmonious that intolerant behavior would be shocking. When we teach the Vimala Alphabet to children, we help them preserve their connection to their innate spiritual wisdom and express their noblest human traits. It helps remove hindrances to the full expression of one’s unique Self by supporting soul development. On the pages that follow, I offer the basic tools for teaching children a form of handwriting that will support the development of healthy human qualities: tolerance, service to others, compassion, direct communication, trust, and creative expression. My vision is that, through this work, we can create a world of individuals living in peaceful community.

This way of writing has a profound impact, whether taught to children learning to write or to adults later in life. When adults change their handwriting, they uncover hidden talents and gifts with amazing speed. The process is miraculous—but that is a different book.

This book has five parts. Part one summarizes the available literature on introducing handwriting to your class plus a few insights of my own. Part two covers the vocabulary, or “terms of art,” the terms needed to understand the rest of the book. Part three covers each letter, with a description of the qualities or meaning of each letter, including examples of when a student may need to focus on a certain letter and how to form each letter. This section gives guidelines for identifying and removing hindrances in the children under Supporting Soul Development. Part four gives examples of undesirable forms and the corrections needed. Part five contains pages that may be copied and

distributed in the classroom as practice pages. Although these pages are copyrighted, along with the rest of the book, you have my permission to copy these practice pages for use in your class. Please do not copy other pages in this book. In the appendix, I have included a form to assist in looking at students' handwriting and evaluating the changes needed. It has been developed for inclusion in the teachers' year end reports to the parents.

The Vimala Alphabet is already being used in many Waldorf settings in North America. One teacher, Carole Street, pioneered this work at Brightwater School in Seattle, Washington. Her premature death in 2006 prevented her from realizing her dream of carrying this work forward to the Waldorf community. In her own words:

In my teaching I incorporate much that I and my colleagues feel will strengthen the character and capacities of the children. I know that Vimala's cursive has added an extra dimension in this quest. When the Vimala Alphabet was introduced to me, I immediately had a deep appreciation for its beauty and the premise upon which it is based. I taught it to my current class four years ago as their first cursive alphabet, and have continued with it to the present. My Grade 6 class is in great shape. In fact, this class is widely acknowledged as a leading light in our North Western U.S. Waldorf school community. On top of that, they are the most loving and compassionate class, and the best-behaved class in our school. Who knows how much how they write has added to their development, but added it has!

This writing technique supports and strengthens everything Waldorf education works toward. The Vimala Alphabet supports the child in becoming a conscious human being by supporting the soul's development. This simple shift in writing styles can transform, awaken, and develop the capacities children need in order to thrive. I invite you to take this sacred technology into your classroom and witness for yourself the amazing results.

Please join me on this journey.



## Part One: Teaching The Letters

### Form Drawing: The Straight Line and the Curve

*I* remember my youngest daughter coming home from school and telling me she had learned all the letters in school that day. Knowing how slowly the letters are introduced in the curriculum, this surprised me, and I said, “Oh really? Show me.” She proceeded to draw a straight line and a curve. In her mind, she had learned all the letters!

Waldorf teachers begin teaching the letters by exploring these two basic shapes, the straight line and the curve. The goal is to integrate these two forms as deeply as possible before introducing the specific letters. They typically ask that the class walk these two forms and draw them with their feet; the children experience the straight line and the curve on the blackboard and on the floor.

Then, they explore where these forms live in their bodies. The curves are in their head and in the curved arms, while the straight lines live in the spine and straight limbs. The children lie on the floor in straight lines, then in curves, feeling these forms in their bodies.

We can divide space in six ways in our three-dimensional reality. Think of the sides of a box. The vertical line divides left from right, while the horizontal line divides space into above and below, and a slanted line divides space into front and back. It is important for young children to experience all these types of lines, which they can do in form drawing and writing. The movement from left to right strengthens the physical body; it is not only the direction in which we write, but is also included in the final stroke of many letters in the Vimala Alphabet.

## *Presenting the Letters*

By introducing the letters with a gesture or picture, one by one, the children cultivate a reverence for each letter. Taking care and time in presenting letters in this way provides children with lifelong memories, as well as a reference point for the pronunciation of the letters, which is so useful in spelling. The consonants are presented as an image in the shape of the letter that begins with the sound of the letter, while a gesture or image introduces the vowels. Twenty years later, my oldest daughter can still recall the images first given her as she learned the letters.

Here I would like to introduce an idea that we will return to later. Imagine a cat curled up, drawn with the letter  $\text{C}$  to represent the curved spine. One could use cat as an image to represent the letter  $\text{C}$ , since this letter is shaped in a curve, like the spine of a curled-up cat, and carries one of the sounds of this letter. Now to expand on this, we can add an additional element, the quality of the letter, as explained in the following pages, drawing on both Steiner's indications and the Vimala Alphabet. Each letter has spiritual qualities. The letter  $\text{C}$  carries in our handwriting the quality or meaning of complete trust, particularly in regard to our relationships with the feminine world. In this way we can express not only the shape and image with the sound of the letter, but also express the quality contained in each letter.

For  $\text{K}$ , the image of a king could be used, as one who rules and, at the same time, recognizes his responsibility to those he governs. The letter  $\text{K}$  represents the right relationship to authority, not rebelling, being a tyrant, or buckling under. One can easily see for  $\text{P}$  a lovable Prince who fully and freely forgives everyone, with his upright stem and sweeping forward stroke? The letter  $\text{P}$  shows us self-lovability and acceptance. These are only a few examples to encourage your creativity in developing the images for the letters that contain the sound and shape of the letter, while carrying a sense of the quality of the letter.

## **Exercises**

These exercises can be used with your class to begin teaching writing. They will assist the children in taking the forms into their bodies, whether the beginning shapes of the straight line and the curve or, later, the letters.

Students can draw the straight line and the curve in the air. The first time the children do this exercise, observe with which hand they choose to draw and with which eye they follow the movement. This will give you vital information about their dominant eye and hand. (See *A Guide to Child Health* by Michaela Glöckler and Wolfgang Goebel for more information on right/left dominance issues.)

The next time you do this exercise, instruct the students to use their right eye and right hand (except for those with true left dominance). Later, you could have your class close both eyes and draw the shape in the air with their hand, asking them to follow the movement of their hand with their closed eyes.

The forms, or letters, can be drawn on butcher paper on the floor of your classroom, allowing the children to make huge letters with their hands and their feet. Observe carefully, as this is the time to catch malformed letters early.

Pair the students, having one child write a letter on the other's back while saying the letter aloud. Then switch so that each gets a turn to experience both writing and feeling the letter. Later, you can have the children who have experienced the letter on their backs write the letter on paper or even say it aloud.

The letter is drawn on practice paper and, finally, when the children have really mastered it, they can draw it in their main lesson books.

## **Teaching Uppercase and Lowercase Letters**

Because writing with a strictly uppercase script is a highly defensive method of writing, I suggest teaching the uppercase and lowercase letters at the same time. Here is an image of the uppercase writer: The uppercase letters are blocks, or bricks, circling the writer, preventing much from entering or being expressed. I know the uppercase letters are usually introduced first and that what I am saying goes against the traditional method of teaching in the Waldorf schools. Breaking the introduction of letters into small steps for the students is important, but the use

## SOUL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH HANDWRITING

of uppercase letters by themselves is not a desirable form of writing; it is something we don't want to encourage young children to practice.

Here is an example from my own life that illustrates my point about uppercase printing. When first studying the Vimala Alphabet, one of my classmates used printed uppercase letters exclusively. He spoke only when spoken to, and then only very softly. About three weeks later, we were in another class together. He was an altogether different person. He had decided the time was right for a big change and completely changed his writing to using the Vimala Alphabet, including both uppercase and lowercase letters, even connecting most of the letters. He went out to lunch with the class, was talkative, and shared fascinating stories about his life and his plans for the future. He had become a completely different person, now open and friendly, after only three weeks of dropping his uppercase writing.

If you do choose to present the uppercase letters first, I strongly urge you to introduce the lowercase letters as soon as possible. From that point on, please insist on writing that contains both uppercase and lowercase letters together through out the school years.

### *Connectivity*

The Vimala Alphabet is a discontinuous style of cursive writing. Some of the letters reach out to join the next letter, but not all of them. Many of the uppercase, or capital letters, are actually printed and do not connect to the next letter. Cursive writing, or running style, connects the letters, and it is important to connect many, but not all the letters. Just as we reach out to others in friendship and community, our letters need to reach out to connect. However, if every letter is connected, there is no room for something new to enter. Imagine a group of people standing together. If there is no reaching out or holding hands (connecting strokes), there is little sense of community. Moreover, when everyone is holding hands, with no breaks (every stroke connected), there is no place for new people to join in or for new ideas to enter the circle. The connections can become fixed and stagnate. Space between letters allows for something new to come into our lives. After every five letters, leave a little space, or at least pick up your pen, so that there is not a string of six or more letters connected without a break of some kind.

Some letters, including many of the uppercase letters, lend themselves naturally to leaving spaces around them, because they begin in the upper zone. Some letters are best not connected to the letter before it; these include the *g*, *y*, *v*, *s*, *p* and *c*, because they begin at the waistline. The letter *k* starts in the upper zone with an “I am” stroke and does not connect to the letter before it. *X* and *x* always stand alone, not connected to any letter.

## *Writing Position*

From day one, it is well worth the time spent to encourage the development of a relaxed grip when writing. When a child cradles the writing instrument in the hand, with the pencil resting on the curved middle finger and gently held between the base of the index finger and the thumb, it can be gripped without developing a white-knuckle approach. There are excellent pencil grips on the market to help establish a relaxed hold on the pen or pencil.

The tips of the fingers and thumb contain nerve endings that need to be stimulated when writing. Children enjoy hearing about how the thumb and first two fingers are friends that need to share, and so must all be close together when writing, and, of course, this encourages the proper position for holding the writing instrument.

Having the right size chair and desk for each student quickly turns into a huge challenge for teachers. Here are words of encouragement to help you persist in the effort. Have you tried sitting at a table that does not allow you to rest your arms comfortably on it, or sitting on a chair where your feet are forced to dangle in the air? The body becomes uncomfortable, which brings a degree of strenuousness to the task at hand. In order to write enjoyably, the knees of the child need to be slightly higher than the hips. The elbow should hang slightly lower than the top of the desk, and both feet need to rest flat on some surface. Foot-long pieces of 4 x 4 (or 2 x 4) wood can be placed on the floor, on which to rest the feet and achieve the correct alignment for feet, hips, and knees.

Children who bend over and place their face close to the paper when they write should have their vision checked. They may have a vision problem, which adds to the frustration of writing. If vision is not the problem, then focus on good posture. Give your students the visualization of a rope along their spine. Ask them to feel it pulling up, as if they are puppets, until their head becomes erect. You can remind them, “No vultures at the desk,” to encourage upright posture.

## *Writing Instruments*

In Waldorf schools, the first letters are drawn with a colored pencil in the first grade, moving to pen in the third grade. Third or Fourth grade is a great time to introduce the goose feather quill. You can easily find these in public parks with ponds, at farms, or on the internet. See resources in the appendix (page 114) on how to harden the quill before cutting it at an angle with a sharp knife to form the writing tip. Learning to write beautifully with a quill requires patience and practice, both valuable skills worth cultivating. Making and writing with a quill pen is a rewarding and unforgettable experience to share with your class.

## *Using the Vimala Alphabet with Your Class*

As the teacher, you must assess what is most needed to bring balance to your students. A class full of analytical minds might be guided to use more soft curves and arcades in their writing, which will bring feeling qualities to the forefront. A class that lives mostly in the feeling life could be taught to write with more angles to encourage intellectual faculties. For example, the letters *M*, *N* and *W* each have two forms, one more angled and the other more curved. It will be up to the teacher to decide which forms to present and teach to your class.

In addition to using this alphabet as a way of writing, it can also be used as a tool to help bring balance to individual children. Each letter can be used to strengthen a quality, build up what is missing, or balance what is overactive, thus supporting healthy soul development. In Part three, after I share the quality of each letter, I also share some examples of when this letter might be useful for you, as the teacher, to help your class or a certain child overcome a hindrance. A particularly rebellious class, for instance, might spend more time with the letter *K* to support right relationship to authority.

In lectures, Steiner referred to teaching the students cursive in the first grade. The Vimala Alphabet is a print script well-suited for introducing the first letters young children learn. If you have already taught printing in the first grade, it is easy to introduce the Vimala Alphabet in second grade as your class's first connected form of writing.

If you have already introduced a cursive style of writing to your class, the Vimala Alphabet can be presented as a more modern style of writing in the later grades. There are teachers who present cursive writing, printing, and calligraphy, all in the first three grades. The Vimala Alphabet could be taught instead of any one of these.

Some teachers in the upper grades teach a “refresher” section on handwriting, in which all of the letters are practiced. This could be an opportunity to present a more modern style of writing to your class. To polish their handwriting skills, use this as a time to have them complete a practice sheet from part five for each letter of the alphabet.

In the upper grades especially, you could introduce the Vimala Alphabet through your personal handwriting changes, as seen by the class on the blackboard. I suggest simply using the Vimala Alphabet yourself in writing. When your class notices that your writing has changed, this could be the time to speak about the Vimala Alphabet.

As a teacher presenting the Vimala Alphabet to your class, I strongly recommend a program of practicing your own handwriting before presenting this style to your class. It is important to develop an intuitive understanding of the letters before presenting them. Just like any other aspect of the curriculum, allow it to live in you first. With a copy of the Vimala Alphabet in front of you, practice each letter and feel how different it feels from your usual way of writing. Some letters you may already form like the Vimala Alphabet, some changes may be easy to make. The changes that are hardest to make will bring you the most benefit. (See Vimala Rodgers’s excellent book, *Your Handwriting Can Change Your Life*, on adults changing their handwriting.)

## **Child Study**

Observing a child’s handwriting as we would the child’s movements can reveal valuable information and offer insight about the child. These insights can be used during the child study portion of a faculty meeting to help find a creative remedy when a difficult situation arises. Consider, too, the first letter of the first name; it can summarize the opportunity (or challenge) each of us face in life, while the first letter of the last name points to our work in the world. A program of specific handwriting changes can produce real shifts in a person, young or old.