An Interview on Education with Steven Roy and the Importance of Motivation, Expectations, and Care

Victor Garate
University of Dallas, vgarate@udallas.edu

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VG: Alright well we can get goin. Well so the first one is, what led and or inspired you to become a teacher to begin with?

SR: Um the answer I can’t keep simple relatively but I started teaching uh at university um in 75 at the university of um at Oregon state university first and I um I was basically asked to lecture there because um I was in sports medicine and it was an area at that time that was not well known there were very few people doing it in fact I think I was the only one in that area doing it and uh there were a lot of students who were interested in physical education and wanted to know more about becoming a trainer and such things so that’s where I started teaching and uh that continued for the next um what uh 15/16 years and then I went to India and I taught at the medical school there I taught there for two years. Then went on a different course, but um my different course was also teaching in a way because I became a consultant so I was doing a lot of workshops and a lot um sort of of business education you could say.

VG: ok

SR: And Waldorf came up just out of the blue where suddenly I felt that that was something that I became interested in. Some experiences that friends of mine had had with their children. And then I I was in Hawaii then and I spoke with some of the teachers there, visited the Waldorf school and said this is really resonating I think I’m going to do this to do this.

VG: yeah, yeah haha

SR: So that’s what I did.

VG: Yeah yeah that was that actually led in, you know, perfectly into you know tell me a little bit more about yourself and your personal experience as a whole and that kinda tied into what led you to the Waldorf school which you kind of already answered but yeah I guess more of your personal experience like as a whole just you know whether it started as your schooling when you were young and then possibly more into the experiences you just talked about.

SR: Well, yeah I I guess um at 12 I decided I wanted to be a professional tennis player and uh so actually what I did I did very little schooling,

VG: haha

SR: I played tennis all the time-about 6 hours a day. And um did that until I needed to get into medical school. Even at medical school I was playing for awhile but uh couldn’t manage both just because the days were too long.

VG: yeah

SR: um but yeah so my interest was very much in sports and mainly tennis but also in track and um I played semi-professional for awhile but nothing major.

VG: uh huh

SR: um so then I went to medical school I became a doctor I was a doctor for 25 years um was teaching you know as part of being a doctor and then I became a management consultant in India and um and as part of that was asked to um take over hospitals that were bankrupt or about to close and try to resurrect them and this was one of the most fascinating things I did I mean it was, I’ve done it with three hospitals and um really good results um the first hospital was just about to close it was a hospital that was about um nearly a hundred years old and was considered one of the best in Delhi and then went downhill financially because of private practices coming in.

VG: OK
SR: and when I went there it was in really bad shape and it was pretty awful and um but the experience I’ve had in management consulting really fit perfectly into what I needed to do then because I basically had to get people inspired and interested and see something that made a difference in what they were doing. A lot of the workers sort of saw nothing in their future and those workers tended to be um tended to be people who had no choice in life, they lived on the property. If the hospital closed down they had no idea where they would live because they had no money at all, their income was just pennies and um and they actually opened my eyes to it in a very strange way cause one day I just thought I’m gonna ask them this question. I had all the employees then, none of them looked at me cause they thought I was gonna fire them all, and um and I said um “what do you see when you get out of bed in the morning?” which is a strange question perhaps and most of them looked at me like “what on earth are you talking about?” But the one guy, a young guy, stood up and said, “I see a big black hole” and immediately when he said that, I knew exactly what needed to happen and they just needed some purpose in their life, some meaning.

VG: yeah

SR: and um so that’s what we worked on and they had so few patients in the hospital at that time that we took three hours every afternoon and just did workshops.

VG: wow

SR: so for six months we just did that.

VG: Workshops on sort of like self-motivation?

SR: That, to some extent, but you know the first question I asked them, who’s the most important person in the hospital? And they all said, “oh the CEO”, and I said “no no that’s not the right answer”.

VG: hahaha

SR: um “well then the board? (unintelligible)” “no no no”. And then eventually I had to tell them that it was the patient and they looked at me like, “the patient? Why is the patient important?” you know. So that sort of attitude changed and it sort of became a mantra in the hospital that, you know, the patient’s the most important person.

VG: yeah

SR: And we worked on that and we worked on systems and we worked on ways to make the hospital viable yet fulfill the mission of being a charity hospital.

VG: ok

SR: and um so we saw both private patients and um charity patients and it had to be good enough that the private patients were willing to come.

VG: yeah

SR: And then we started getting people being interested in donating and now it’s the only hospital, only eye hospital in North India that is internationally accredited.

VG: wow

SR: And part of that is because there were 3 or 4 or 5 doctors that I hired who were just perfect for the, for the job, and they’re still there now, and we still connect. Um so that was one place, and then I went to, then I came to Waldorf, and um then I went back when I left Waldorf in 2010, I went back to a very different type of hospital in India. They wanted me to come back, and for various reasons I needed to go back. And so I went to probably one of the finest eye hospitals in the world and it was totally different to what I’d had before which was, you know,
very low standard, um and after about a year, I realized, “you know I can’t really make a big
difference here because they’re doing everything the way they should do it”. And at the same
time I was being asked by one of the um not partner hospitals but a hospital that used to come
and learn from them, they said, “Why don’t you come to Bangladesh?”, and run this hospital
which is a very big eye hospital, and also an old one. It went back to the 60’s I think. And this
was again quite different because this was a dynamic hospital that just was dysfunctional. Um,
they were seeing thousands and thousands of patients and really not treating them well. And
the doctors fought all the time, and there was a lot of dissatisfaction. And, um, but I saw the
potential and I would’ve stayed there longer than I did but the climate, well not so much the
climate, but the air pollution in Dhaka was actually literally killing me. And sometimes I couldn’t
even walk across the room. Um and as soon as I went away for a few weeks I was fine and then
I would come back and (unintelligible).

VG: hahaha yeah

SR: So I realized I had to leave before it became permanent. I thought I had cancer, you know, I
went to clinics in New York and Singapore and London and um but it was the air pollution. It
was air pollution and the food, they put preservatives in the food there. You know what
formalin is?

VG: No

SR: It’s used to preserve bodies. Well they use it on the food.

VG: wow

SR: so any food even health food stores, sold foods that were covered with formalin. And my
body didn’t like it very much.

VG: yeah haha

SR: And so it was literally killing me. So after about three years I left there. But it was a very,
again it was a situation where I was doing lots of workshops. I would do a workshop at least
four times a week for two hours. And trying to again, get them interested in things, changing
the way they approached the patient, and the result was just everything went up. I had to put a
cap on the number of patients because there were too many coming in, we were doing about
120 surgeries a day. It was working really well.

VG: Yeah

SR: And I think it’s still working well to some extent, but I was, you know, after the board saw
that I was actually moving in the right direction, they gave me a lot of leeway and said basically
“you take it and run it”. So I did that and then when I changed they had a CEO that came in and
really wasn’t the right guy and he messed things up quite a bit. I went back there a few times
they asked me to come back and visit. So it slowed down. Um and then I went to an
organization, an eye organization, in New York, which is a pretty unique organization. It has a
plane, a DC10 what is now an MD10 that flies around teaching surgery, eye surgery. And it’s a
pretty large organization. Two hundred million dollar budget and so I was in charge of global
programs. So I spent 80% of my time flying around the world. Which is really fascinating, and I
loved it but I also felt it wasn’t right for my family, and so I decided to, to come back to Waldorf.
So I guess, I guess um that’s my story.

VG: Yeah. Were there any specific places that you’d fly to again? Like bankrupt hospitals that
needed more help?
SR: No the way it worked was, you had two things, you had the plane flying, um, for say two weeks in a place or three weeks in a place, which is very expensive. I mean, we’re talking a million dollars a flight. Or more. And then you train maybe 30, 40, 50 doctors, depending on where it is how many doctors there are. And you train them for the two or three weeks. But then there was also an in-country program. Most of the countries had offices which had a local CEO and a staff that would go out and work with hospitals individually. And basically improve the quality of care. And so my job was to work with each of the countries, mainly the head office, and also I visited around. The biggest one’s in China, and so I spent quite a bit of time in China, Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, um, and then in Africa there are quite a few places, Ethiopia, Camaroon, Ghana, Zambia, South Africa, and then South America just a small one in Peru. And I probably missed some on the way. But yeah Asia was really the focus.

VG: Next question is, I guess,

SR: Is this helpful for you?

VG: Yes. Oh yeah. Everything that you’re saying is perfect. Uh, so yeah what is your personal philosophy on education? And I guess we could tie that into, what was kindof your philosophy also approaching I guess, your employees that you consulted on how to keep themselves motivated, and just their mindset to be more efficient in their work?

SR: So, my focus has always been on non-profit organizations. I never worked for a full-profit and I hopefully never will. Um and so there’s reason not just about shareholder value or something like that. There’s a human reason for this organization. And so the idea is to give maximum quality care, no matter what we’re doing. And by chance I found myself in eye care, which I think was perfect. But the same applied when I was actually running my own practice, that it was about quality of care over money. So I never became rich you know. Hahaha.

VG: HAHAHA. And do you think that that type of philosophy, did you carry that type of philosophy teaching as well?

SR: Oh absolutely yeah.

VG: Um, what do you think led to that specific philosophy?

SR: Good question, I don’t know. I’m sort of a humanitarian type person. You know, it goes back to the question that the patient’s the most important person. I don’t think there’s any one thing. It’s just you know, the way I think about life, my personal philosophy. And it’s sometimes not conscious, its unconscious. And then, just life has led me in a way that’s taken me to those places. So...yeah. Ok, why don’t you move on.

VG: What is specific and different with your Waldorf experiences as a teacher with your other experience whether it be in education or as a consultant or anything else?

SR: Ok well actually I was going to, what I was thinking about talking about but you’ve just pulled my back there. So yes. So what I want to talk about it is, you know, what happened in establishing the school in Cambodia. Do you know that story?

VG: Yeah yeah yeah

SR: So I thought you would. So that to me was about sewing seeds in seventh graders that just were starting to think about how do we make a difference to the world, and getting them engaged in it, and, um, and awakening their consciousness to what other cultures might be like and what the social situations may be that are very different to ours. Um, so in terms of Waldorf, it’s about, I guess again it’s the same sort of thing in a way, it’s about allowing the full potential of the individual to come out. To me that’s such a, a motivation. I mean right now at
school I’ve got one student in the class that, well actually more than one, but one in particular
that is, doesn’t know whether they want to be in school, doesn’t know what they want in life,
and so I’m trying to find a way to-how do you find a right button to push to help that student
become enthusiastic about what they’re doing. So that’s the sort of thing that, I guess, makes
me tick.
VG: Yeah, haha, yeah. Do you have a certain, I guess, methodology approaching it, or is it just
everyone’s different?
SR: Well everyone’s certainly different. There’s a different story-. But you know, I think one of
the things I learned in Waldorf training, well I’ll give you two or three things. And the first thing
that I picked up, I was in this workshop where they were talking about the foundations of
Waldorf education. And at that time I knew a little bit about Waldorf but not much. And there
were about 30 of us in the classroom and there were a lot of public teachers in the classroom as
well, public school teachers. And so the lecturer said, “what is it that Waldorf teaching wants to
accomplish?”. And so the public school teachers said, “oh you know, to get a good job”. And he
said, “no I don’t know about that”. And after awhile he came up with the answer that he saw,
and his answer was, to allow the child to breathe. And that resonated with me so much
because I think as a student at school I always felt like this, and not like that. And I immediately
thought, “yeah, that’s it”. And so that’s my job, to allow that expansion to take place. So that
was one of the really powerful moments, when I sort of realized I really wanted to do this. Um,
and I guess Waldorf is about the child as a total entity in the universe, you know, their soul,
their spirit, and their physical body, and their relationships, all that. And to me that’s a lot
different than somebody thinking, “how do we get them to pass an exam”, and things like that.
VG: Yeah
SR: So that, that’s why I do Waldorf teaching and I don’t go to a public school or something.
VG: Yeah, and do you think when you felt constrained, or when other kids feel constrained, its
usually because they have the pressures of “oh I have to get a perfect score on this test or I
have to get this job or please something outside of me” or...
SR: I think with me, and it’s different with every person but, and I never thought of it that way
until this person mentioned it to me and suddenly there was this flashback, but yeah that’s
what I felt and I think it was more just being scared of teachers. I used to hide all the time, I
used to sit in the back and hide under my desk, even in my final years.
VG: And you think, finding a way to relieve that pressure as you said, is just trying to find
something that motivated the particular student, whatever they want to do, or to find what
they love, to find their passion...
SR: Yeah, yeah, that’s it. You know, this year when I took over seventh grade, parents said to
me, “ok, what is your goal for this class within two years?” . So I said yeah there’s the obvious
goal getting them ready for high school, but there’s also the goal of helping them develop a
love for learning. And so I look at it that way. And also with that love for learning, and I’m sure
you experienced this with me, but, I like to see if we can raise the bar. And this year I’ve been
with them you know five weeks or so, and there are one or two students that suddenly are
doing stuff they’ve never done before, and they never knew they could do it of course. But I
think that’s so rewarding for them, and for me, but for them in particular to see what their
potential is.
VG: Yeah, yeah that’s definitely something that me and all my classmates definitely experienced. The bar was definitely raised but, it’s definitely very satisfying knowing that, even if we don’t get to that bar, we got a lot higher than we thought we would be. Um, so I mean, you tied into exactly the next question is motivating your students and helping them become lifelong learners. And, would you say letting the students know that they know that they can reach those expectations and give them confidence, you think that’s probably the biggest thing.

SR: Absolutely, yeah. There’s no question about that. You know a lot of students along the way get labeled as not so smart and so on, and they tend to keep holding that label up to themselves. And again, I’ve got one person that, since he was in first grade, he was told he was stupid, and he just, he believes he’s stupid. And in fact, he told his parents, “I really don’t like Mr. Roy because he thinks I’m smart”.

VG: HAHAH well I’ve never heard that one before.

SR: Yeah well I hadn’t either. But then, but then, he starts doing this really good work. And so when he sees he can do the good work...Looking six weeks ahead, I don’t know what is going to happen with him because he’s a very conflicted young man, but it’s quite possible that in six weeks he will think, “gee, I really can do this”.

VG: I saw that a lot definitely. Um, so what is, and has been, probably the most difficult aspect of teaching? You keep bringing up, you know, the more conflicted students that you have, its more difficult. What do you think is the most difficult...

SR: well, there’s no question that the most difficult is, students who have issues, and it comes out in the class. And in your class there were two people in particular who had issues and it was, it was, less than perfect with them. Um, but, and to know how to deal with those issues.

Yeah. The thing is to find, what is the thing in the person that will...and the one person that was really difficult in my first class, I think it was before you, no I don’t remember now, maybe you were in tenth grade...were you there when they gave me this Michael Award?

VG: Yeah, yeah yeah yeah yeah, I was there.

SR: So anyway, Eli stood up, and he said, “if it wasn’t for Mr. Roy I wouldn’t be here”. Well we fought, head to head for two years, three years! He was a master disrupter of the class. I mean, every class would start off, “oh this is going a bit better today”, and then he would say “Well I don’t get that” and he would take the class off somewhere over there, and I had to bring them back, and, but those are challenges.

VG: So it was a challenge just the student itself or just keeping the whole classroom...

SR: Well, its both. But I felt with your class, you were the most talented group that I could imagine. And you may remember you did the orchestra thing at the end, and...

VG: Oh yeah I remember that.

SR: Yeah that’s never been done before, or since. And I came up with that idea because I realized, “this class can really do things” and “let’s do something that allows them to do more than the usual stuff”.

VG: Yeah.

SR: In fact, I would put that concert down as one of the highlights of my life.

VG: Really

SR: Yeah. And I remember you were playing drums with Ezekiel.

VG: Yeah, I was playing the timpani with Ezekiel. That was fun.
SR: And, or percussion is a better word. And it was just such a highlight for me to see. And I remember one or two of the students as we were coming to that last, BOOM, they looked at me like, “ok, tell us when”.

VG: Yeah that’s definitely, I mean, I guess I’ll get more personal, but I remember you, especially just going to Waldorf was already just making me open to so many experiences that I never had, but I think, yeah you definitely raising the bar, for me, I guess led me to where I am today for sure. Whether it be, taking my studies seriously, thinking a little bit broader, more than just my immediate life, and I think you see that with a lot of people in our class, with what they’re doing, what they want to do is, I think, you...

SR: Well, as I said, they were super talented, and all you had to do was really just open the door a little bit, and
VG: Yeah, but, I mean, would we have had the door opened without you. As open as I think you
opened it up for us or raised the bar for us, that’s definitely something that helped us.
SR: Well it’s nice of you to say that, thank you.
VG: And, everyone still says it, everyone can attest to it, I promise you that for sure. So kindof
gets to that, what personal goals get you motivated to teach? I guess, what kindof gets you up
in the morning? What gets you ticking?
SR: You know, my responsibility to look after that group. They, that’s my duty. Indians love
saying that. What is your duty. And it’s my duty to do that. Of course it’s more than, the word
duty in English is not a very good word. It sort of suggests a reluctance, “oh I better do my
duty”. It’s not like that, it’s more my inspiration to know that I can make a difference to their
lives. And I need to, I need to be on top of things. So even now I’ve done seventh grade three
times, I work til 10 or 11 every night because it always needs something a little better or a little
different.
VG: Well that kindof wraps things up. Is there anything you’d like to add? Is there anything
more you’d like to talk about?
SR: Well no, I think I’ve done a lot of talking. I think that if this is helpful for you that’s great.
VG: Yeah of course. Thank you, thank you very much
SR: What is it? Sort of a thesis that you’re doing?
VG: Yeah, we’re just interviewing an educator that’s been in America, that’s been in the United
States. Obviously Waldorf is different, I tell people back in school about the Waldorf education
and its....
SR: but you can bring in the university side,...
VG: Yeah
SR: and I’ve done a lot of, in terms of teaching, when I was in medical practice, I was invited to
teach all over the world. So I traveled to Korea, China, where else did I go, India, Bangladesh,
South Africa, England. I was invited to New Zealand, but I couldn’t make it. So, a lot of my time
in medical practice was teaching to different audiences, very different audiences.
VG: what type of audiences?
SR: well some of them were sort of super-specialist doctors, you know who were all very
arrogant and know-it-all, and, “who’s this young guy coming along to tell us things?”, and...so
that was challenging.
VG: well we can wrap the official part up, thank you very much for coming.
SR: Yeah of course, it was very nice seeing you
VG: of course, as always, so appreciate it.