

A Conversation with Joan Salter ***Linda Murrow***

“Being a Mother is one of the highest achievements possible for a human being. The world would be a sorry place indeed without the love of motherhood.” – Wilhelm Zur Linden, from A Child is Born

About Joan Salter

Joan Salter is the author of three books: *Modern Man: Reflections Arising from a Study of the Spiritual Scientific Knowledge of Rudolf Steiner* (1979); *The Incarnating Child* (1987) on the care of the child; and *Mothering with Soul* (1998) on mothering.

For many years she has been deeply concerned with the care of infants and young children, as well as the recognition of mothering as a valuable womanly art and path of development. In her mid-life, Joan worked for twenty years as an infant welfare nurse in migrant hostels, working largely with refugees from World War II.

Later, after being introduced to the work of Rudolf Steiner, she established the Gabriel Baby Centre, a center for maternal and child welfare guided by the teachings of Rudolf Steiner and the practical medical work of Dr. Wilhelm Zur Linden. In Joan’s words, “The Centre is concerned that the nurture of an infant should be such as will enable the child to reach, in adulthood, his or her full human stature; and this not only physically, but also in the capacity to think clearly and creatively, feel deeply, to work purposefully, and to gradually develop his or her own individuality.”

Now in her late eighties, Joan has decided to retire and is hopeful the Gabriel Baby Centre will find its own future incarnation.

Introduction: Personal Reflection and Acknowledgement

My first meeting with Joan Salter was in 1994, just after Duncan and I were married and before we conceived our first child. After reading Joan’s book, *The Incarnating Child*, my intuition led me to contact Joan to establish a connection with her. This proved to be very important for me because I needed the support of a spiritual approach to the art of giving birth and becoming a mother. For me, Joan was and is a manifestation of the Madonna’s cloak. Her whole manner — her tone of voice, posture, and breathing— exude an encompassing warmth.

A visit with Joan always felt like a meditation and would leave me feeling more in contact with my own spiritual depth. She has developed her own spirituality, and this is very uplifting and reassuring, especially around the threshold of birth or death. Her wisdom and experience also gave me a feeling of confidence in her practical skills, but somehow I never was really going to her for that. I wanted to be in her presence, to have a conversation. We brought both of our children to her over a five-year period. Now, in the year of her retirement, it is time to share one of our conversations.

Upon reflection, I can see that my “conversations with Joan” over the years have been instrumental in my own development as a mother. It is with the deepest gratitude, respect, and love that I offer the following transcript of a conversation that took place in Joan’s lounge room in South Yarra one overcast afternoon in May.

“There is nothing on earth so wonderful to watch as the unfolding of the inner human being within the outer, during the development of a child in the very first years of its life.” – Rudolf Steiner, quoted in Joan’s Gabriel Baby Centre Baby Book

The Interview

LM: How did you become interested in Rudolf Steiner?

JS: Well, I have always been a seeker. I was very interested in yoga for a long time, I traveled to India to stay in an ashram. It was my interest in Anthroposophy that rescued me from yoga. I began to see that yoga belongs to the past and is not suitable for Anglo Saxon people in modern times.

LM: That’s interesting. I wonder how you would explain the popularity of yoga today.

JS: Well, I think it is a very good beginning. I found it so anyway. I think that a lot of people are waking up spiritually, and that’s why it has become so popular. But you need to take a further step on. And I have to thank Anthroposophy for that. What appeals to me about Steiner is that he is thoroughly practical. We’re inclined to think of babies as children, but they have been old people. Our “little treasures” have been here many times. I think we need to be aware of this. You can see this if you observe the child. That is why I think observation is so important.

LM: Can you say more about this in relation to caring for young children?

JS: The reason we come here again is to redeem old karma and to establish new karma. We need to ask ourselves: If this is why the human being has come, how can we bring up the child, or what can we do, to help the child do this?

LM: That sounds like the key to parenting!

JS: Yes. And then, you see, you’re dealing with the most practical, down to earth things. Steiner didn’t write much about babies because it was such a natural thing. We have to remember that he was writing about one hundred years ago. You know, when I think of my mother, it was just something you did! I haven’t found anything Steiner has written about bringing up babies, but he did write on incarnation and reincarnation.

LM: Can you say more about how we can assist children with incarnation?

JS: Can I start with babies?

LM: Of course.

JS: I think that in order for parents to help the child incarnate, they need to know that the child has more than one body, for example. It brings you to the most practical things, such as warmth. The ego incarnates by joining itself to the blood. So the child needs to wear a woollen singlet. One thing about doing infant welfare centre work in my old age is that in old age you go back to your second childhood. I can’t hold my body temperature. I have to wear a woollen singlet every day. So warmth is frightfully important for the baby.

And, of course, breast feeding and the introduction of food. Breast feeding is much more than the nutritional value of the milk. Although formula and breast milk have the same amount of protein, carbohydrate, and so on, formula lacks life. It is the life forces or etheric forces that the baby needs. In the

human being, the breasts are located on the upper pole of the body. The opposite is true for most other animals, except for apes. You see, the breasts are located over the heart region. It has been suggested that the heart rhythm is the same as the cosmic rhythm.

Then of course, the baby needs to be introduced to foods that lead him down to earth as well as nourish his physical body. So one begins with locally grown fruit, then moves on to grains, vegetables that grow above the ground, root vegetables, and so on. Rice is not suitable for young babies, for example, because it belongs to the water and the air. It does not help bring the young child's consciousness down to earth, though it's fine to give later when the child is thoroughly "earthed."

LM: So you are speaking about warmth, breast feeding, and the introduction of food as being important aspects of incarnation.

JS: Yes, and I would add sense impressions to that. I think the baby should be out in the garden, spend time in nature. Sense impressions are very important.

LM: Sense impressions help the senses to develop fully?

JS: Yes, and then I think you need to know about the soul powers to bring up a child. What are they? How we express ourselves through thinking, feeling, and willing? In guiding children, it's very important to know how their inner life is unfolding.

The soul develops in three seven-year periods. For the first seven years you are laying foundations for the will. If you observe the baby or young child, he is a doer. He doesn't sit there and philosophize about things. That comes later on. Doing lays a foundation for the child's will. It means that when the child is an adult, she can get on with life.

So the parents need to see what young children do, like hopping, skipping, and running. The young child needs opportunities to do things. Climbing on climbing frames and digging in the sandpit are very good. The child is a doer in this phase of development, and this helps the child in later life. The danger today is that parents are pleased when their young child can read and write, but this pushes the child into intellect too early. As adults we need a strong intellect, but we also need a capacity to think pictorially and imaginatively, don't you think?

LM: Yes, more than ever. I think we need to reclaim and reawaken this part of ourselves as adults. Can you say more about why you think this is important?

JS: Yes, I would say that if we can only work things out intellectually, we can't arrive at the truth of the matter. But if we can form an imaginative picture, then this can balance our intellectual grasp on the subject. The foundation for this is laid in the first seven years, and up to about age twelve. We certainly need a capacity to think intellectually. But today children are pushed into it too early. By observing young children, you can see that they need activity, that they are living in their will. Even a little baby likes to kick his legs!

LM: Is there anything you would like to add on the subject of the incarnating baby and young child?

JS: When we look at a baby we need to remember that our children have been here many times before, sometimes as a woman and sometimes as a man. As parents we need to bear that in mind. They have chosen, or an angel guides them, to incarnate through their parents. We have all been here before. We've been babies, children, old men and women. And I've come to realize that if you really take that in, you have a different picture of the baby and child.

The baby is essentially a human being, and we are simply preparing the body and preparing the soul so that the human being can get on and take the next step.

LM: For me, what you are saying highlights that we are all equals on a soul level.

JS: Yes, and your children may even be more advanced!

LM: I'm sure they are!

JS: And I think we will each have a different task with each incarnation.

LM: For me this way of thinking instills a deep respect for the child as a full human being.

JS: Yes, a person who has been here before and will come again. Each child is unique in its soul qualities and way of expressing itself. I don't know whether one can ever come to a real knowledge of what the child's reasons are for being here. This is why observation is so important. A lot can be gained by observing the qualities of each child. That is the basis for a deeper understanding.

LM: It sounds like you are saying that each child has a different reason for being here, and will have different needs as a result. This has implications for how we interact with them.

JS: That's right. Each one of us is unique.

LM: And at the same time, you have said that we all share the universal task of redeeming karma. How does a human being redeem karma?

JS: To resolve or redeem one's karma is quite a task. To go through suffering is one way of redeeming karma. Suffering wakes us up. It gives us an opportunity to think about things.

LM: One of the instincts a parent has is to protect its child from suffering. How does that fit with what you are saying?

JS: I think we should suffer as an adult. Ideally, childhood shouldn't be fraught with suffering. It should be a happy time.

LM: Is the redemption of karma, then, the quintessential spiritual task according to Steiner?

JS: We are guided to our parents through old karma, then the life choices we make create our new karma. So, both processes are going on at the same time, the redemption of old karma and the creation of new.

LM: I was moved by the way you spoke about your own experience of getting older, of aging.

JS: I think it is very important to experience old age consciously. Putting up with all of the bodily inadequacies is a challenge that one has to deal with. It is an opportunity to practice letting go. I think it is important not to be afraid of death. It opens doors to other regions. It may be uncomfortable going through it, but once you've thrown off your body, you're okay. You're free. (Pause.) Shall we have some tea?

LM: Yes, that would be lovely.

(Continues)

The Gabriel Baby Centre Baby Book

The parents of each baby who regularly visits the Gabriel Baby Centre received a gold-coloured baby book that served both as a journal of the particular baby's development and as a resource for useful and important information. At each visit Joan would write on the baby's behalf a responsive description of the current developmental circumstances. The following are examples of Joan's writing in my daughter's baby book, reflecting her integrated approach to the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of Sophia's development.

14/04/98, 11 weeks old: "I show my pleasure in being with my chosen family by smiling often at mother, dad, and Adam. Thus do I express my fundamentally happy state of soul. . . . Family life is, of course, important to us all. It is a preparation for belonging to the greater 'family' of mankind!"

12/10/98, 8 months old: "I've learnt to crawl and this gives me a real sense of body freedom. I will carry this forward into later life as a sense of inner, soul freedom — i.e. a capacity to flow out into life."

22/1/99, 1 year old: "My fontanelle is not yet fully closed; I am slowly developing an earthy consciousness. I remain 'open' to heaven! At this stage, I am an active doer; and for this I use my whole physical body, especially my limbs. Thus do I lay foundations for a strong adult will and sense of purpose. Later on, as an adult, my ego will incarnate into this, learning to use it and developing it further."

Linda Murrow is the mother of Adam Nathaniel Woodcock and his younger sister Sophia Rose. She is also a lecturer/coordinator within the Master of Creative Arts Therapy at RMIT University, a clinical member of the Victorian Association of Family Therapists, and a professional member of the Dance Therapy Association of Australia.

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