

The Inner Life and Work of the Teacher

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Again and again, the question came: “What is the difference between State education and Steiner education?” How often, as I have been working in Steiner education, I had, usually in a conversation on a bus, or during a walk, or in a new group of people, a new group of students, to try to find an essence, to create a nutshell picture, to make sense of something vast in a few moments.

Now, through 25 years of struggling with this, and finding in these years that gateways have been opening in the souls of many, I have found personally that I can speak, at such times, as also with students, and new teachers, of the truly holistic nature of Steiner education: that we are working with every aspect of the child, which can be termed body, soul, and Spirit. So we try consciously to work with many levels, from the most physical to the most mysterious. A conversation can often lead to the question of the inner work of the teacher. Sensing what is appropriate for each occasion is vitally important.

What follows is, then, a brief resume of some aspects of that work, as applied particularly to those who work with the young child under seven years of age. Most of it is very basic but, hopefully, not to be undervalued in its repercussions. In *The Education of the Child* Rudolf Steiner writes:

What the adult does, feels and thinks are all imitated by the child under seven years, so complete attention to the task in hand, with a care, love, and joy in the doing actually helps in the formation of the child’s physical body.

Arrive well before the children. (Very easy to say. More and more this becomes a problem area.) When we take off our coat outside the door, we leave it, with outdoor shoes, and any excess baggage there. It is essential to leave at that point, consciously, those worries, grievances, tensions, which would sap the life energy that is needed for all our work with young children. It is healing for us consciously to free ourselves so that we can give to each task in the day the devotion that gives the young child a worthy role model for imitation. (I have found it a blessing to come out of the kindergarten room at the end of a day’s work with children, and realize I have been totally free of all those worries for hours. How healing to have to be in the moment!)

Create a quiet space in the room. If there are colleagues, assistants, students, or visitors, ensure that you have arranged a regular time to meet, say “good morning,” along with a verse, song, or some short exercise to focus attention, calm down, bring a morality into the room, and set the tone for the day. It really does alter the space for the children, and the adults. For example, there is a verse for each week of the year, collected in *The Calendar of the Soul* by Rudolf Steiner, which can link our inner soul life with the seasonal round.

Teachers often use the following verse, also by

Rudolf Steiner, either to begin the day, or to begin a meeting:

*We have the will to work
That into this our work may flow,
That which, from out of the Spiritual Worlds,
Working in Soul and Spirit,
In Life and Body,
Strives to become the human being within us.*

A verse given at the end of the basic lecture course for teachers is also to be recommended. In the original translation of Steiner's *Study of Man*, it reads:

*Imbue thyself with the power of imagination,
Have courage for the truth,
Sharpen thy feeling for responsibility of soul.*

In the more recent translation, *The Foundations of Human Experience*:

*Enliven imagination,
Stand for truth,
Feel responsibility.*

The Christian Community priest Adam Bittleston has written many prayers and verses, including one for each day of the week, collected in a little book called *Meditative Prayers for Today*:

*Dwelling in silence on the beauties of life
Gives the soul strength of feeling.
Thinking clearly on the truths of existence
Gives the spirit the light of Will.*

There are many other possibilities. I have worked with the eurythmy *Hallelujah* and also with *I, A, O*, as also with a song. What really matters is that you can feel connected to whatever you choose.

Be conscious that the way the adults work together, or not, will become an example for the children to imitate. Try to set an example of cooperation amongst the community of adults, which includes teachers, assistants and parents. (I shall not forget an occasion when an advisor, visiting a kindergarten, remarked that it was no surprise that the children were quarrelsome, as the adults were setting a fine example of that in that group!)

Having worked through the day in the kindergarten, and prepared the next day, time is set aside before sleep to take all that work, along with the preparation for the following day, and a loving inner picture of each child in the group, into the night, into one's sleep.

The first part of that is the review, when one travels in one's mind and memory backwards through the day, taking a maximum of 15 minutes. I tried to picture the child, with his angel behind him, and the parent(s) with their angels also. Then ask those beings for help and guidance on the following day. This means that I am not trying to work alone, or out of my smaller self, but with my higher self, consciously working with the Spirit Being of each of the children. I have all the support, and loving help, of my own angel, the angel of each child, and many other higher beings.

At that stage, a meditation will support the process of connecting my individual self with Universal Wisdom or Light: microcosm within the macrocosm. I, and others, have used:

*I carry my sufferings
Into the setting sun;
I lay down all my worries
In its light-radiating lap.
Purified through love,
Transformed through Light,
They return as helpful
Thoughts, as strength
For deeds of sacrifice done
In full joy.*

One then takes a few moments to picture the day ahead inwardly, along with the true being of each child. One can perhaps picture from the day a joyful moment for that child. To feel a restfulness is then a prelude towards giving all that up to all the invisible beings, to continue what has been begun, through the night, when in sleep; and I am then at one with all those we have experienced as separate individuals through the day. The mysterious world of sleep then takes over the work.

On awakening, it is advisable to give some moments of attention to any new thought, insight, feeling, which has "come out of the night" (for example, a realization about a child, especially one that has been a puzzle, a way forward towards a new

step for one who has a difficulty). Then, picture each child, followed by a review of the day to come.

The verse, or meditation, uniting the teacher with the divine then leads into a feeling of being supported by the Angels, Archangels, Archai.

I used this verse for many years:

*O God, grant that in regard to my personal ambitions
I may entirely obliterate myself,
And Christ make true within me
The words of Paul:
“Not I, but the Christ in me”
That the Holy Spirit hold sway in the teacher.
This is the true Trinity.*

As the day unfolds, perhaps the most important quality is to have an openness towards what each child is expressing, in his skin colour, his demeanour, his play: for example, how he joins in, or not. As my experience of teaching grew, I knew and saw clearly that I was not the teacher. The teachers were there before me. All I needed to learn was to be open to the messages they were giving me. Thus, to learn to observe objectively, and then to be open to letting go of what might have been prepared, if the behaviour of the children is showing a mismatch.

One great gift my teacher Margret Meyerkort gave me, as I began my kindergarten work at Wynstones Steiner School, was the following verse by a Dutch anthroposophist named Ledebur:

<i>Inner labour</i>	<i>Outer experience</i>	<i>Peace within</i>
<i>Works outward.</i>	<i>Works inward.</i>	<i>Love to the world.</i>
<i>Do not judge</i>	<i>Do not turn away</i>	<i>Say nought</i>
<i>But listen;</i>	<i>But seek;</i>	<i>But suffer;</i>
<i>Do not wonder</i>	<i>Do not resist</i>	<i>Do not ask</i>
<i>But look –</i>	<i>But endure –</i>	<i>But wait –</i>
<i>Love them all.</i>	<i>To the end.</i>	<i>Until you receive.</i>

This apparently simple verse has, over my years of teaching, proved so helpful and affirmative as a way of being within the early years work, and, then with Advisory work.

In the course of visiting those newer in the work, I so often see teachers who have laid on themselves false expectations of a “kindergarten morning,”

so that, for example, they feel obliged to have a 20-minute ring-time. No matter that not one child is still with them after one song! The children are not naughty. There is no point in blaming child, or parent. But if one were to live with these words:

*Do not judge, but listen.
Do not wonder, but look –
Love them all,*

a changed response would begin to emerge in the teacher, who would learn to listen, look, observe the children, but then be prepared to admit that their message is that “I, as the teacher, must change.”

Perhaps, to go back to the above example, just try an opening song, a poem, and then, a song to lead out, if the children are not captivated, not engaged. Then one must ask: “What must I change so that the children can enter joyfully into this?” It could be too slow, and to work more with such polarities as slow/fast; large/small; sitting still/moving briskly, contraction/expansion might be what is needed. So, above all, learn to observe the children, and be prepared to take on what that says to me. The children’s behaviour is my best teacher.

Ring-time for me became an increasingly special time. The children began to spontaneously, and joyfully, create in the centre of the ring exquisite small “gardens,” with candle, veils, flowers, and so on. I used the time around the morning verse and song specially to connect with the angel being of each child.

One day I cannot forget, when I had two older boys, polar opposites in character: one who would love nothing better than to scale up an apple tree and look down on us from high above; the other who had spent two years sitting on the periphery, not joining in any play outwardly, and seemed to find it painful to dirty his hands in sand, water, etc. At that precise moment when I was quietly connecting with the one who seemed more inwardly active, the outwardly active one said gently to me: “Margaret, sometimes the flower comes out before the leaf.”

I needed no other sign that here was a word from the angels, and all those steps outlined above needed, for me, no other “proof of the pudding.” Put another way: “Inner labour works outward.” The child had in those words concisely expressed a new

helpful way to look at the riddle of the child who had puzzled me for nearly three years. That “riddle” has now become a successful artist.

The work with the small children indeed led me to the realization that I am not the teacher, but the facilitator, and my job is not so much to speak, as to listen.

Then, the awe, the marvel, the privilege, the joy, and the healing of this work can grow.

Note by Janni Steiner: We note with sadness that a dear friend and colleague Margaret Duberley crossed the threshold suddenly in February 2007.

Margaret had a joyful, warm, and caring approach to everything she touched, and worked tirelessly for Waldorf early childhood since gaining her diploma with Margaret Meyerkort in 1982 (she was a qualified teacher before this). She worked at Wynstones school from 1980 to 1988 where, after qualifying, she became involved in teacher mentoring. She also completed the class teacher training course, which helped in her project with the Snowdonia Steiner school in Wales. There she taught children from six to ten years old in a variety of subjects until 1994, when she moved to the Dublin Rudolf Steiner school as kindergarten leader and trainer, and also class teacher.

In 1996, Margaret became an educational consultant in Steiner Waldorf education, helping to establish and run the early childhood training programme in Ireland as well as working as a Fellowship advisor for kindergartens throughout Ireland. In 2001, Margaret became the coordinator of advisors in Ireland for ISWECA, the Irish Steiner Waldorf early childhood association, organising and leading workshops, including visiting all the kindergartens and initiatives, where she was welcomed and loved for her unstinting support, helpful observations, and advice.

Margaret will always be remembered for the sparkle in her eye, her boundless energy, her love of nature, her joy for the work, her commitment to furthering and enriching Steiner early childhood education, and her deep love of Anthroposophy. She had just retired from Ireland, settling happily in her new home in Stroud, and had applied to become a kindergarten advisor in the UK, when we heard of her passing. I was looking forward to working with her more frequently, instead of occasional visits to each other's homes across the sea. Margaret's contributions to Kindling have been donated to the international association. She will be sorely missed by me, and those who knew her.