

The Sistine Madonna

Thoughts and Experiences

Stephen Spitalny

In this short article, I describe my personal experiences and ideas in relation to kindergarten work and the *Sistine Madonna*, painted by Raphael Sanzio in 1513/14. For context, know that I had the *Sistine Madonna* hanging on the wall in my kindergartens for many years and now I do not.

My first experience of the *Sistine Madonna* in a Waldorf kindergarten was when I arrived for an interview with my stepson's soon-to-be kindergarten teacher. I was still some years away from taking up kindergarten teaching. The *Sistine Madonna* hung on the wall above her as she asked many thought-provoking questions about his life. I was impressed by her interest and wisdom, and yet was put off by the image on the wall. It smacked of Christianity to me, and I was into spiritual pursuit, but not religion. I was willing to take a chance though, and he was enrolled.

It was still six years before I started a home kindergarten. As preparation, I went to various workshops and at one a participant asked one of the presenters why the *Sistine Madonna* was hanging on her kindergarten wall. The answer: "Because it's in all the Waldorf kindergartens."

I was deeply troubled by this answer, and began my personal research into the question. The idea of “Question Authority” lives strongly in me. I want to understand why I would choose to do something, so then I can be accountable for what I am doing and can explain those choices to others. So I began a personal quest to connect with this painting and to understand why I might want it on my kindergarten wall. I learned many wonderful and wondrous things over the years by attending lectures and workshops, and reading all that I could. Inspirations and insights came from Rudolf Steiner lectures I read, as well as from conversations with Rene Querido and Margret Meyerkort, and many articles and lectures. My meditative life included this painted image, and many insights came from that practice as well. My images and ideas about this painting are abundant and here will only be briefly touched upon.

An important element for me is the healing qualities of the painting, which Rene Querido described as a *yantra*. A yantra is an image that works on a person on many levels, even by its mere presence. Margret Meyerkort helped me to see the wonderful loving gesture with which the baby is held, an archetypal mother gesture. She pointed out the earlike, listening gesture of the painting itself, in the form and shape of the mother and her cloak. She especially helped me to see that the picture does not characterize a situation on the physical earth, but that the veils are pulled back and we get a glimpse beyond. Also, the colors of red and blue in her cloak and dress stand out as archetypal healing colors, especially helpful for the young child. The barefoot mother is carrying the child down through the clouds toward the material world as two saints look on, one looking away in deep reverence, and the other in sadness and resignation, pointing the way forward and downward to incarnation. The curtained veils are parted so that we can glimpse this holy moment. We can also see many faces in the clouds, awaiting their moment of becoming a child on their own path toward incarnation.

Raphael made this painting to depict Mary and her child Jesus, yet this is also a depiction of every child. Each comes from the heavenly world in a similar manner to this depiction, surrounded by angels and saints and the other spirits waiting to incarnate.

One can also see this painting as the path of the individual’s ego as carried by its soul toward conscious engagement in the physical world of earth and its own body (baby as ego, mother as soul).

There is a series of healing images that Dr. Steiner recommended in Munich in 1911 to Dr. Felix Peipers as a curative therapy – the so-called Madonna Series (*Madonnenbilder*). A key image in this series is the *Sistine Madonna*. This treatment was recommended for patients in Dr. Peiper’s hospital with “soul maladies.” Steiner also suggested that Raphael’s Madonna images could be used in medical work with children with soul imbalances. Notes that accompany the *Madonnenbilder* card set I purchased say that these images help one to experience a flow of energy through the movement of one’s attention drawn by the pictures. The five-pointed-star-like movement of etheric forces in the human body can thus be pictured, and by repeatedly viewing these images in the order given, balance and health in one’s etheric body can be restored. The *Sistine Madonna* in itself, as a “whole composition pictures the moving streams of the etheric body (pentagram).”

This is part of the secret of the healing power of the *Sistine Madonna*. The etheric star pattern is depicted in movement in this painting. There are many lectures and articles one can read to try and understand this mystery of the pentagram form, including Rudolf Steiner in Munich, August 20, 1911. Christof Andreas Lindenberg has also offered his thoughts as *Left and Right Orientation in the Pentagram*, and *Left and Right Orientation in the Madonna Series*.

In several lectures in early 1913, Steiner spoke about the importance of the painter Raphael and his mission for the world (January 30, 1913, Berlin and May 19, 1913, Stuttgart). Steiner at various times spoke about other incarnations of the painter Raphael, and the experiences he had in those other lifetimes, even in the very last public lecture Dr. Steiner ever gave (September 28, 1928, Dornach). His visual art of color and form was his medium for expression of the cosmic, spiritual realities that he was able to experience in earlier lives.

Perhaps the reader can begin to glimpse the depth of value and meaning I find in the *Sistine Madonna*. I continue to be inspired by it, interested in it, and helped to heal by it. It is an important

image for me, and I consider it as a friend and a comfort.

When I began my career as a kindergarten teacher at a Waldorf school, I proudly hung a print of the entire *Sistine Madonna* in glorious color. Over the years I visited other Waldorf/Steiner kindergartens and always was greeted by my friend hanging on the wall. Sometimes she was surrounded by draped cloths – silks of course – and I got a funny feeling. It seemed to me like a shrine or an altar.

Over the years a conversation about the painting on my kindergarten wall (with no added cloth decorations) came up only once among the children. An African American child noted to her friend, “You see that painting? That’s me and my mom.”

“No,” replied her “white” friend. “That’s me and my mom.” This interaction confirmed for me that the children see far deeply below the surface of things. But I know that grownups, who have the gift (and curse) of the intellect, have thoughts and feelings that might be simply based on the image itself. I regularly speak to prospective parents about Waldorf kindergarten, and often the question is asked, “But is this a Christian school? Why is that picture on your wall?” I get a sense of what some parents new to Waldorf/Steiner education feel about this image, based on these questions and bearing in mind my original experience of the *Sistine Madonna* in kindergarten.

Waldorf/Steiner education is a healthy and supportive developmental and spiritual approach for all children. I want our Waldorf/Steiner schools to be welcoming to all families, from all traditions and religions. I have already described some of my thinking about the painting, and I have articulated all of that and more to interested people. But I still knew that the feelings evoked by the painting could be a barrier to a family bringing their child, no matter what explanations I could offer. (There could be other barriers that bear considering – what might they be? This seems another worthy research question.)

While I was living with all of these ideas and experiences, I had a dream. I dreamed that I took the print down from my wall, and in the dream I felt a great relief. Shortly after, I described my dream to a colleague, as well as my new intention to eliminate the painting from my kindergarten for

the following school year. She suggested I consider the possibility of changing to a print that just had the central details of the painting, the mother and child portion. I decided to follow her advice, and procured a copy of the painting that only had the central image, and made a wonderful oval-shaped wooden frame for it, and there it was, all ready for a new kindergarten year.

She hung on my wall in that form for many years. Several years ago, I took her down. My thinking about what sort of an obstacle this image can be for parents grew too large, even as wonderful, and healing, and esoteric, and, and, and . . . as the painting truly is. My thinking is that the feelings of people, parents for instance, are powerful, and they are *not* ruled by thinking. Feelings arise out of responses to experiences, values, needs, and even self-image, and perhaps even past-life experiences. All of my best and wonderful thinking cannot change how someone feels. I want all the families of the world to come knocking on the door of Waldorf/Steiner education, and not find an obstacle to their child entering in a print hanging on the wall. So I have made my choice not to have this amazing image adorning my wall in kindergarten.

Rudolf Steiner mentioned how the education he offered is based on the *Christ impulse*. He described that lofty ideal as that which is uniting, that which creates a bridge between people. That which is separating and creates barriers is of another impulse, an adversarial stream. It seems to me this idea of the Christ impulse is sometimes changed into a notion of Christian education, with trappings from Christian tradition including festival life and the contents of wall hangings throughout the grades. Steiner said, in Bern on January 9, 1916 (*The Universal Human*, Lecture 4, pp. 85ff):

This is one of the meanings of the Mystery of Golgotha: the attainment of the unity of humanity from within. Externally human beings are becoming more and more different. The result will not be sameness but differences all over the earth, and human beings must exert all the more force from within to attain unity.... Such differences will always exist because human beings will only gradually be able to attain unity. At the same time, different groups will fight each other tooth and nail about everything concerning their outer life. These are setbacks from

earlier epochs that run counter to the Christ impulse, rather than in harmony with it.

Indeed, here we have a very profound meaning of this Christ impulse. Based on true knowledge, we can say Christ is our savior who keeps humankind from being fragmented into groups.... We have the right feelings for Christ only when we see in him the savior, rescuing humanity from dispersion and separateness; only then can Christ fill our innermost I. Christianity lives wherever people are able to understand this union of humanity through Christ. In the future, it will not matter much whether what Christ is will still be called by that name. However, a lot will depend on our finding in Christ the spiritual uniter of humanity and accepting that external diversity will increase more and more....

We have to be able to face calmly and courageously the increasing diversity in human nature, because we know that we can carry a word into all these diversities that is not merely a word of speech but one of power. Though there may be groups that fight against each other and though we may even belong to one of them, we know that we can bring something that will express: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" into every group. We know that this "Christ who lives in me" will not lead to the forming of groups; rather, it will bring about the spreading of the glory of the name "human being" over the whole earth....

You are called upon to help in this development, which will lead to something appearing to people in bright clarity, something we cannot yet express because we do not have words for it in our languages, yet something spiritual science works toward. When you feel you belong to such a spiritual stream, and feel at home in it, because you see that it is necessary for human

evolution, then you have a right understanding of our spiritual movement – you belong to it in such a way that you rightly understand the greatest of its goals based on your increasing understanding of the contrast between Christ and Lucifer-Ahriman. You understand that this contrast is vital and had to exist....

I am not suggesting everyone now immediately remove this wonderful image of the Sistine Madonna from his or her kindergarten walls. I ask though, that you consider the items you choose for your kindergarten from a personally thought-out



perspective. And you decide what images, what items and colors and shapes and materials you provide for the kindergarten environment that you are the priestess or priest in. I have chosen to have other images for my kindergarten walls (my kindergarten was a house long ago, and there are several rooms, all with walls). These images include a wonderful print entitled *Madonna with Flowers* by Brenda Joysmith (a dark-skinned mother and child in a field of flowers). This picture surely has a different mood, it is fully of the earth, and is still a

beautiful rendering of mother and child. (It can be viewed online at <http://www.joysmith.com/files/posters.asp>) I also have a large print of a page from the book *Grandfather Twilight*. There is a small print entitled *Amor de Padre* by Simon Silva. (I even have a poster in my coatroom exhorting the parents to read to their children every day.)

It wasn't a lightly-taken decision to remove the Sistine Madonna from my kindergarten walls. Something that has supported that choice for me and the children in my care is an understanding of the reality and working of flower essences. Rescue Remedy, for example, is a wonderful tool for regaining presence and calmness. Merely thinking

about the remedy and the flowers in it can give the same effect as physically adding a few drops of the liquid to your system. I do use the *Sistine Madonna* every day as an invisible hygienic elixir. I actively picture it and I especially call it up before my inner eyes when a child seems in need of its comforting qualities.

I have not seen in person the original *Sistine Madonna* by Raphael that has its home now in Dresden, Germany. Everyone I know who has, though, mentions a profound feeling of peacefulness that came over them. Even “non-anthroposophical” friends speak in glowing terms of the feelings the painting evoked in them. It is a special image that I will always carry in my heart, and I hope one day to set eyes upon the original.

And gazing at the sun-illuminated clouds there may dawn on us the realization that the picture of the Madonna and Child is a sense picture of the eternal super-earthly element in man, that is wafted to the earth from super-earthly realms themselves and meets, in the clouds, those elements that can only proceed from the earthly. Our perception may feel itself raised to the loftiest spiritual heights if we can give ourselves up – not theoretically, or in an abstract sense, but with the whole soul – to what works upon us in Raphael’s Madonnas. (Rudolf Steiner, January 30, 1913, Berlin)

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