

In the Light of the Heart

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*In the human heart
there lives a part of man
which contains matter
more spiritual than in any other organ;
also a part of man
of which the spiritual life
is made more manifest in matter
than that of any other organ.*

*Hence in the microcosm that is man
Sun is the heart,
and in his heart is man united
most of all with the deepest fount –
the fount of his true being.
(Steiner, *Verses and Meditations*, 43)*

Take a moment to recall a memory from your childhood. . . . Did you go to kindergarten? What did you do after school? What feelings arise from this period of life?

Many of us have childhood recollections of vast timelessness – coming home for lunch, perhaps a nap, and playing outside forever until being called in for dinner, often from a far-off distance. The echoes of childhood ripple through us, as if on the shore of a great ocean. They whisper in our ear. They warm our heart. Just when we think we have forgotten what “absolutely wonderful” feels like, a memory of childhood can flow over us and we are once again whole.

Life today has brought many challenges for childhood. The world moves ever more quickly, and stress impacts even the youngest. Fatigued families are becoming the norm, creating health and social needs for both children and parents who struggle to have the energy to prepare meals, enforce bedtimes, and care for themselves (Palmer, 79–80). More young children stay all day in institutionalized care than ever before, and this is likely to continue. In many ways, this may present one of the greatest challenges to early childhood education in the modern world. How can young children still acquire the necessary experiences of timelessness, love, and warmth, combined with play and movement,

in order to build healthy physical bodies? How can we breathe into our programs that feeling of easy, slow, simple joyfulness that we remember as children, perhaps over at Grandma’s house? Today, children need this more than ever to balance the physiological effects of our fast-paced world. A more complex world actually increases children’s needs for sufficient sleep and for a long childhood as preparation for life.

Contemplation of the human heart can provide us with much inspiration needed to re-envision the early childhood work of the present and future, in light of our quickening pace of life. How can we learn to weave a slower, more seamless and whole morning-through-aftercare day for the young child? The lack of a rhythmic lifestyle places the greatest demands on the heart as the central organ of rhythm (Husemann and Wolff, 390, 394). On the physical level, the rhythmic system mediates the polarities of overstimulation of the nerve-sense system on the one hand, indigestion and physiological stress responses from the metabolic system, on the other. Physical development and health are compromised when frequent excesses at either pole tax the growing child (and adult), as is so common today.

The heart is a truly amazing, selfless organ that adapts itself to the immediate needs of the moment, adjusting heart rate and blood pressure to mirror the situation. Many children and adults today experience nearly continual states of arousal due to stress responses from overstimulation, lack of sleep, and a lack of rhythm. Because the physical body is still forming in the early years, the child’s rhythmic system (which includes the heart and lungs) is also still forming. Healthy formation of the rhythmic system requires in the early years that rhythm be imprinted from without, that the child actually learns to breathe, to sleep, to rest, with regular pauses and a predictable tempo. As Rudolf Steiner put it, “Roughly stated, we can say that children cannot yet of themselves breathe properly, and that education consists in teaching proper breathing.” (Steiner, *The Foundations of Human Experience*,

40-41.) Being able to simplify what we bring to the children in our care, to slow down and cultivate real rhythm, is more and more a challenge for adults today. Rhythm is the great healer. But, there is so much more to the picture.

In the autumn of 2007, I attended the “Whole Family, Whole Child” conference at Shining Mountain Waldorf School, in Boulder, Colorado. One of the keynote speakers, Tim Burns (author of *The Brain in Motion*), presented compelling information. From research into the heart/brain connection, he shared that in addition to movement as an essential need for the developing child’s brain and physical body, the heart function itself, and particularly our own hearts as teachers and caregivers, are profoundly critical. The heart organ is the most energetically powerful organ in the body, both magnetically and electrically, influencing every cell in the body (McCraty). There is a “torus field” that radiates around the heart that can fill a large room. Torus fields are found and recorded by science as occurring around heavenly bodies in space, as well as every organ and cell in the body. This holographic energy field is shaped like a donut, extending in all directions (Childre and Martin, 33-34). Through this field, the heart also has the power to influence the physiology and emotional states of others.

The heart has been called “the little brain,” due to having an extensive nervous system containing over 40,000 neurons (Atkinson et al., 47). We have come to believe that thinking occurs only in the brain, but in fact, the heart is the primary sensory organ of the body, also serving motor functions (Rohen 178). The heart’s role is to sense and harmonize the all of the body’s organs and cells, and to inform the brain. The strong electromagnetic field assists this, and the heart dictates what part of the brain we are operating in. Hormones are also produced in the heart. In fact, the heart is the central node, harmonizing multiple systems: neural, hormonal, energetic, biological, and behavioral. Brain rhythms are synchronized to the cardiac cycle (Atkinson et al., 42). The brain (as center of the nervous system) is a processor, but it is in the rhythmic system that comprehension occurs. We have all heard the phrases “the heart knows,” “to know something by heart,” and “heartfelt words.” If something is true, we know it in our heart. Dr.

Michaela Glöckler writes:

It is believed that comprehension has something to do with the human nervous system. In reality, it is based on the fact that the rhythmic system receives our observations and mental images and works on them further. But, because the rhythmic system is linked with our comprehension, it comes into close relation with our feeling. Anyone who practices intimate self-observation will notice what connections exist between comprehension and actual feeling. In essence, we must really feel the truth of something we have comprehended if we are to subscribe to it. An encounter occurs within us between the fruits of understanding perception and the soul element of feeling through the rhythmic system. (Glöckler, 186)

Our emotions strongly determine our heart’s rhythm, which in turn influences the brain’s rhythm. Psychophysiology studies the synchrony (or the lack thereof) within the body, as a result of emotions. When positive emotions such as love, appreciation, or care are experienced the heart’s rhythms change from erratic to coherent, regular sine waves within moments.

This in turn brings about physiological coherence or entrainment within the entire body. In the brain, sensory-motor and cognitive functions are dramatically increased when the heart’s rhythm is coherent. In addition, the immune, endocrine, and autonomic nervous systems’ functions are improved and stabilized by coherent heart rhythms. Through tests such as the EEG, the coherent emotion “appreciation” has been found to bring heart rhythms that stimulate the brain’s frontal lobes, encouraging wide vision and proaction. However, “frustration, anxiety, and worry,” as examples of emotions leading to incoherent (erratic) heart and brain wave states, bring heart rhythms that stimulate the hindbrain (lower brain), which encourages narrow vision and “fight or flight” states, as well as increased stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenalin that actually shrink brain tissue and strongly inhibit immune system function. Other results are increased heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration, and lower autonomic nervous system function. Negative emotions also contribute to increased rates of depression and other psychiatric disorders (Childre). Research has additionally shown

that psychophysiological states, detected in the EEG, are transferred from person to person through “the electricity of touch” (McCraty, 9-10).

Dr. Karl König writes of the specific experience of anxiety and its connection to the lower sense of touch, by way of the heart as the organ of perception:

*‘Man would not have this feeling for God if he had not the sense of touch’ [Rudolf Steiner]
... We can begin to understand the underlying principle of all anxieties. They invariably appear when this inward raying, soul-filling feeling for God (which permeates us always) is disturbed for shorter or longer periods. Anxiety originates as a reaction to the loss of this feeling embedded, through the function of the sense of touch. ... The very moment we lose this security, and the feeling for God which shines inwardly becomes shaky, we experience anxiety and we experience it in the central organ of our existence – in the heart. The heart allows us to become anxious when the anchor of the sense of touch and with it the feeling for God raises itself out of the sense sphere of the skin. (König, 171-72)*

The middle sphere of the threefold human being – the rhythmic system – is related to feeling and expressing emotion. Anxiety is a prevalent emotion of children and adults today.

The heart’s electromagnetic field also powerfully affects the physiology of others in our presence, for better or worse. A coherent pattern (positive emotions) can help to harmonize the health and happiness of others. Daniel Goleman speaks of this in his book, *Social Intelligence*, as he describes the physiological synchrony that human beings share together. Through “mirror neurons,” human beings imitate or sense the intentions or emotional states of others, allowing for empathy. Young children possess large numbers of mirror neurons, which are important in the imitative capacity to learn. (Goleman, 40-43)

Goleman states that we are wired for empathy toward others and can’t help but be strongly affected by the emotions of those around us. Genuine positive emotions and smiles are literally contagious to others and bring about an expansion of the world, shrinking our own problems to the periphery. Self-absorption, anxiety, and worry prevent empathy

and actually contract our world. The example of one human being caring for another helps onlookers to awaken from their own self-absorption and isolation. Interest in the other is the true antidote to fear, and the way that human beings can develop the much-needed capacity of “heart thinking.” Cornelius Pietzner writes of the work of serving others:

Interest in the other serves as a builder of knowledge. Over time it can ripen into heart cognition. The thinking heart begins to become active. It imparts, albeit slowly, information. The beat of the blood has an invisible echo which is a silent counterpart. It emits a new kind of sensing, a new kind of knowledge. The human being, the “service provider,” undergoes a subtle, yet fundamental and gentle process of self-transformation. (Pietzner, 80)

It has been said that many children today are coming to us already with a “heart knowing” that requires us to meet them with heart. “Who will see who I am?” the child asks. Claudia McLaren Lainson, a Waldorf educator, describes the cold grid that surrounds our world as being permeated by the “slavemasters”: hurry, impatience, the “lack of time” illusion, rushing, fear, and the mechanical rhythms of technology that literally “suck” life. These are not strangers to the children in our care. Children today have passed through this web to be here. The real question is: *Can we connect them instead to warmth, light, love, joy, calm, slowness, simplicity, breathing, listening, the natural rhythms of nature, play, imagination, goodness, coherence, and beauty (where human beings used to live naturally)? Can we learn to meet them with heart?*

A modern ailment that plagues many people today is called the “catch and hold breath.” It is a stress response that creates shallower breathing and unconscious holding of the breath, as a possible attempt to protect the self from more stress. Both children and adults are affected. In her book, *The Breathing Circle*, Nell Smyth (a therapeutic breath teacher, as well as a Waldorf teacher) writes,

In the busy world of the twenty-first century, what we often see are children and adults who are in fact very over-stimulated, and so are not digesting or resonating sufficiently deeply with what they have just experienced. This shows up very clearly in the breath

rhythm, where we might see a tightness or controlling emphasis on the inhalation. This in turn can affect the full potential of the exhale, which may be cut off and flattened. . . . We live in a time when we can no longer take for granted that sense of connection to the earth, the rhythms of seasons, or the rhythms of the tribe and community. We must build it anew. Many children – and adults too – suffer terribly from the breathless and increasing busyness that entrap us. Do we even have time at the end of the day to resonate with what we have experienced and its meaning for us from day to day? Difficulties with breathing and eating, allergies, sleeping disorders, and integration and attention issues proliferate. (Smyth, 97, 116–17)

Smyth states that relaxing the mind and body does much to heal the breath and its proper rhythm. The healthy pause at the end of the exhale returns. The way that we speak also profoundly affects our breath and that of others. It is essential that we slow down our speech. Speaking and storytelling becomes healing to the listener when we are mindful of its relationship to breathing and the heartbeat, including very important pauses. For improving the breath, the book *The Quiet Heart: Putting Stress in its Place*, by Peter Grūnewald (Floris Books), is very helpful.

What a gift it is to live in a time when science begins to confirm so much! Rudolf Steiner gave us an amazing picture of supersensible etheric forces in the human being constantly passing from the heart in a light-filled column to the brain during waking hours. This is called the etherization of the blood or the transformation of matter into etheric forces. Through this transformation of the blood, enlightened thinking becomes possible, along with our ability to form living concepts and perceptions: “In the heart not only the astral process but the etheric, too, is concentrated. Therefore, the heart is the uniquely important organ which it is for man This intimate correspondence of the astral body with the etheric body is to be found nowhere in the human organism, except in the region of the heart.” (Steiner, *The Human Heart*, 4–8, 11–12) The heart is also the primary organ of the ego, having a relationship to the element of gold and the sun.

We experience in every heart a sun. The sun shines on all people, shines on the fields of the earth, it shines on

other planets. And all the time it is consuming its own energy. The sun dissolves matter and transforms it into radiant energy. Its light can be seen everywhere in our earthly cosmos. The same power that dwells in the sun wills to live in every human being. (Pfeiffer, 10)

Thus, the energy field of the heart, with its powerful influence over the members of the human being, enlightened sensory/cognitive functions, and ability to “shine” soul forces out into the world (and receive them), is an image of the physical and spiritual reality of the human being, intersecting at the heart, as a lemniscate. From the beginning,

The primitive heart, which supports circulation from the periphery (embryonic sheaths) to the center (embryo) and vice versa and undergoes extensive differentiation as early as week eight, becomes the portal through which the individuality incarnates into the body, the threshold that the human spirit must cross on its journey from the “other world” of the protective embryonic membranes into the world of the developing body. (Rohen, 175)

When a child is born, he or she comes with an etheric body – which is like an exquisite sphere, an entire universe, with stars, zodiac, sun, and moon. In the seventh year, this etheric body now begins to ray inward, with the rays coming together at a center within the human being.

So we have this strange phenomenon of the star-ether-body drawing inwards. As etheric body it is, of course, undifferentiated at the periphery of the organism – very little can be distinguished in there. On the other hand, during the time from the change of teeth until puberty, it is intensely radiant, raying from without inwards. Then it gathers itself together, and there, clearly suspended within it, is the physical heart.

The physical form and function of the heart is truly a miracle. Dr. Johannes W. Rohen beautifully describes the heart’s function in his excellent book, *Functional Morphology* (Rohen, 182–84, 199, 402). Here, we learn that the heart achieved its proper function in evolution when the heart became a centralized organ and human beings became upright, “with our heads oriented toward the heavens and the Earth at our feet.” The major

vertical and horizontal vessels leading to the heart form a cross and hold the heart in place.

The apex of the heart however, is not secured. . . . The heart organ as a whole, therefore, is bound to the cross of veins and moves back and forth rhythmically in front of it. Contemplating this remarkable image can fill us with awe and wonder. . . . Blood enters the heart “under the sign of the cross,” i.e., through the crossing veins. Blood from all parts of the body mingles in the atria and then enters the sacred temple of the ventricles, the “holy of holies,” through the atrioventricular valves. This space, with its columnar papillary muscles and arching chordae tendineae, is truly reminiscent of a cathedral.

The heart is the only place in the physical body where all three dimensions of space are turned upside down and inside out through the unique form and dynamics of the heart. This allows “the forces of life and soul that are carried by the blood [to be] released from the confines of space.” Having the reality of space and non-space, the timeless flow of blood in the body then receives the element of time within the heart rhythm, in quantized portions, bringing the important and healing temporal aspect to the human being. The reversal of the body’s orientations to space in the heart allows the “organism to step outside of space. Ultimately, only such a body can receive an “I”-being for whom individual freedom is a reality. This, then is the goal of evolution.” The warmth of the metabolism is circulated by the blood and enters the heart, where

[Warmth is] taken up by the soul and “radiated” into our surroundings in the form of love, empathy, compassion, or devotion. In this case, the blood and circulation serve not only the regulation of (physical) warmth, but also the actual transformation of physical forces into soul-spiritual forces, which is how Rudolf Steiner describes the true task of our earthly existence (An Occult Physiology).

So, now we return to the needs of the child. So much depends upon the adults. We must find real joy and gratitude in our lives! Our hearts and those of the children, colleagues, parents, and loved ones in our lives cannot function properly without it. Only then can we truly serve the children in our

care. Love and true interest in the other opens the door and allows wisdom to pour into the work we do, helping us to answer many difficult questions. It is not enough to “hang our cloak” outside the door. We need to fully grapple with our own life’s challenges or fears and seek the gift that waits for us in every single problem (Sleigh, 9). What we have learned is that the simple act of filling our heart with genuine appreciation aligns our physical body (and that of the people around us) and opens our mind and heart, enabling us to receive spiritual insight. Rudolf Steiner provides us with valuable training in his book, *How to Know Higher Worlds*, for working through our human weaknesses, interactions with others, and finding balance. We all have continuous inner work to do. It is the work of the present and future human being to let the radiant sun in our heart begin to shine out into the world for all to be warmed by.

The collective energy generated from the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of the almost six billion people on this planet creates an atmosphere, or “consciousness climate.” Surrounding us like the air we breathe, this consciousness climate affects us most strongly on energetic and emotional levels. An increase in coherent thoughts and feelings creates an uplifting momentum in the consciousness climate. An increase in incoherent thoughts and feelings creates a stress momentum in the consciousness climate. The collective stress that people everywhere are experiencing creates a far-reaching broadcast. (Childre and Martin, 256–57)

It only takes one person to affect many, for the good — one drop in an entire ocean. For the children who come to us from vastly different situations, the warmth of appreciation and unconditional love that we can shine on them will plant seeds of happiness for a lifetime, no matter how complicated or stressful their lives may be (Hallowell, Chapter 2). Sufficient night sleep, rest, and naps are essential for children (and adults) for health, proper physical development, and for digesting the day’s activities. Lack of sleep has become an alarming cultural phenomenon (see Lisa Gromicko, “The Physiological Basis of Sleep”).

Take regular time to be in nature, unrushed. Find a relationship to the precious quiet and cultivate this within yourself. It is only in the

quiet that the spiritual world can speak to us. Slow down. Breathe. Forgive. Sleep. Simplify. To provide greater resiliency (a shield) in childhood, we must as caregivers be mindful of what it is to be resilient. We must first foster resiliency in ourselves, developing the ability to persevere, remain positive, and have hope in the future (Burns, 115-118). Our attitudes or expectations may need to be adjusted. We must believe in our own personal ability to make a difference. Often, early childhood teachers and caregivers become burned out and exhausted. It takes extra work to protect our life forces. We can ask ourselves, “What keeps me from living from my heart?” Living from the heart renews our life forces and strengthens our emotional well-being. It is important that we remove condemnation, judgment, resistance, and criticism from our interactions with others. Honor the path of others, whether or not it is our own. Are there virtues that I am living? Should I be working to improve some areas? A recommended book on this topic is *The Power of Soul: Living the Twelve Virtues*, by Robert Sardello.

Through our striving to cultivate peace, calm, gratitude, slowness, and love within ourselves and in our work, we will be able to permeate the future childhood memories, hearts, and breathing of the children in our care with that golden timelessness and joy that so many of us remember from our own, less-hurried childhoods. It *can* exist in the modern experience of childhood, but today much greater consciousness and vigilance is required by adults to bring it about. Let us learn to feel the natural pulse of life flowing in and around us, allowing the inspiration in every moment, to guide our work and secure our footing.

Finally, this verse by Rudolf Steiner (found in *Verses and Meditations*), points us in the right direction toward finding peace within our hearts and the deep well that will nourish the children in our care:

*Quiet I bear within me.
I bear within myself
Forces to make me strong.
Now will I be imbued
With their glowing warmth.*

*Now will I fill myself
With my own will's resolve.
And I will feel the quiet
Pouring through all my being,
When by my steadfast striving
I become strong
To find within myself
The source of strength,
The strength of inner quiet.*

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