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In a lecture on self-education in the light of anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner differentiates between self-education in the realm of thinking and self-education in the realm of will. In educating our thinking, we strive to develop clarity with regard to ideas and ideals, the ability to discriminate between what is essential and what is not. Essentials can be of help in finding the big picture or strengthening such a picture within us. To identify these essentials is to find signposts in the vast spiritual landscape of ideation. In educating our will the situation is different. We place ourselves in the middle of life and are as open as possible to whatever comes. We try not to retreat from what surrounds us, but to accept what meets us as the challenges of life.

In approaching the question of the essentials of early childhood education, let us begin with four images of incarnation, extending our thinking as far as the zodiac. Rudolf Steiner has encouraged us to do so, to look at these pictures of incarnation, if we want to educate young children. In *Practical Advice to Teachers*, he says:

The time is now that the human being must extract the essentials of education from the knowledge of the connection of the human being with the cosmos. The growing child experiences the continuation of happenings which have occurred in the supersensible world before birth.

Out of the cosmos, the zodiac and the planets, come those forces that form a child's body in the womb and continue their formative activity through the first seven years of life. On the other hand, Steiner indicates that cosmic influences continue to work in children's lives; all children

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around the world share archetypal experiences. These archetypal experiences are here called "essentials" of childhood, and they are connected to spiritual qualities associated with specific signs of the zodiac. In particular, Steiner points to the signs of Aries, Taurus, Gemini, and Cancer, which he describes as powers behind incarnation. "When we arrive in the world, the first four powers or impulses [meaning the first four signs of the zodiac] are already in us, though we only develop them afterwards." The younger the child, the closer he or she still is to these four principles or powers. Discovering the connection between a young child and the zodiac is an inner journey.

Once, on a trip to Thailand, I saw a wooden carving depicting the zodiac in the entrance area of an old house from the north. It was the beginning of my journey into the realm of the zodiac, which I had not explored very much before. The carving showed a man and a woman sitting in the opening of a gateway. The man is lifting up a baby and handing it to the mother. Around this scene in circular arrangement are the twelve signs of the zodiac. Twelve animal signs, as known in the Chinese tradition, those which give the theme for each year in a set sequence, formed a second outer circle. A being sits upright on each of these outer animal signs. In the case of the signs of the dragon and the snake, the being holds them under control.

In Thai culture these beings are seen as "Devas," lower divine beings. We could also see them as images of the higher self of the human being overcoming or "taming" the animal forces still present within us. The outer circle could be understood as pointing to moral forces in the cosmos, beyond the zodiac. Thus the family group in the center is surrounded by and part of the outer world of the stars and the inner world of morality.

A second experience occurred at a kindergarten in New Zealand. The kindergarten room had a most unusual doll's house, an area without the usual drapery, but with a specially decorated back wall. In accord with the Maori creation myth, the wall was decorated with a woven arch above which were stars representing the zodiac. In front of them, grass stars were hung, representing the planets. Below the arch hung a three-dimensional woven form similar to a lemniscate. Below this, wooden figures depicting the ancestors stood on a pedestal. Finally, dolls lay on the floor, a special weaving behind their beds. What a wonderful picture of the human being's connection to the cosmos.

The intellect does not help to find this connection, but in the soul experience of feeling we can build a bridge to this realm. While the child's connection to the cosmos is a "gift of heaven," adults have emancipated themselves from a connection with the cosmos.

Building a relationship to the world of the stars does not come naturally anymore. The body has long been completed, ties to the past are cut. In the act of thinking and in the performing of deeds the human being experiences, to a certain degree, a sense of freedom and independence. As Steiner puts it, "Man has renounced the universe at the head end and at the limb end so that we are only wholly given up to the rhythm of the universe in so far as we are rhythmical human beings."

We experience this, for example, whenever we endeavor to understand the spiritual forces in and around the child. When we consider the planets and the days of the week, we reach out into cosmic rhythms related to the earth. We reach out and bring our ego or "I" into contact with these rhythms. We may also embrace what comes from the region of the zodiac and influences a child in the first seven years. This step is an act of conscious inner development. We become interested in the soul experience of the zodiac and in the practice of those virtues that are related to the signs of the zodiac. The practice of the virtues that correspond with the first four signs can become our effort as developing adults to attune

ourselves to this realm of the cosmos and to the incarnation of a child.

### Images of Incarnation

#### *Aries in Relation to Children: The Ram Looking Back*

Steiner describes Aries, the ram, with his head turned back, as if looking over his shoulder, a frequent depiction of this zodiacal sign. "Looking back" is also a gesture of the young child, not as conscious act but out of a kind of "spiritual habit." Steiner speaks about the "telephone connection" which children still hold to the spiritual world. Living in the spiritual world has shaped their way of relating to human beings. A child's ability to imitate and to live out of total trust in the goodness of the world and of those human beings surrounding the child originates in spiritual existence. In many children we witness the acceptance of the spiritual reality behind birth and death as an unquestioned reality. We observe how

effortlessly children connect to worlds different from ours, how easily they slip into images depicting the other worlds of fairy tales, and how naturally elements of long-gone cultures appear in their play. How can we as adults relate to this? What is an adult's gesture of "looking back"?

#### *Aries in Relation to Adults: The Virtue of Devotion*

As educators we have learned to respect the connection of children to the spiritual world as depicted in the image of the ram looking backward. We respond by consciously striving to build our own relationship with the spiritual cosmos, becoming ever more aware that the spiritual realm is in and behind the things we see and do. In the presence of people who are open to the spiritual realm, children will feel "at home" and met with acceptance.

If we want to accompany children, who still so easily traverse the border between worlds, we also need to offer an environment that facilitates incarnation into the earthly world. It does this by containing elements that still remind children of their heavenly home. This does not mean prescribing the kind of dollhouse or type of dolls or soft

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toys, as these are only the outer appearances of less tangible things. The proper environment lives in the inner mood of the teacher, which radiates out into the environment and shapes it.

I was once invited into a Steiner school to evaluate a kindergarten teacher. On the day of my visit the teacher and her assistant were working very hard. Lots of things were going on in the room. The assistant made dough for bread. The teacher set up a table for painting in small groups, calling new children from time to time and tidying up between children. She had to leave the painting table several times in order to re-direct children whose play did not move smoothly or who requested assistance. Once painting was finished, a task connected with the autumn festival was waiting. All children were called to sit down in a circle to decorate their little autumn tree with colored beeswax. The teacher conducted herself with gentleness and love. One could see that she really was committed to her work and wanted the best for the children. Yet there was not a mood of devotion, because the teacher was stressed. The children responded by being unsettled.

The teacher recognized the hectic schedule as the cause of her stress and was able to reduce and slow down her activities. During another visit to this room not long after, I saw at least four groups of children busily creating landscapes on the floor and the teacher sitting close by with her work. It was calm; there was intense play. The teacher was able to “be with” the children rather than to “control” them. And in this “being with” there lived the virtue of devotion—an openness to what happened, and a feeling of timelessness within intense activity.

When we work in devotion, we work in a sacred space. It is our form of looking back, of relating to the spiritual world. Devotion is different from performing our duty. We cannot rightly say that we are devoted to our duty. For devotion requires that we feel ourselves as working in the presence of spiritual powers and toward the highest possibilities of the human being. We can bring this to children as a mood.

Creating a mood of devotion demands of us that we are able to let go of tight time schedules

and a continuous succession of planned activities as well as an initiating or supervising role in these. When we are less driven by a schedule and more open to the sacred quality of our work with young children, then the children will sense that we also are “looking back.”

### *Taurus in Relation to Children: Movement and Balance*

Steiner describes Taurus as the bull jumping sideways. This gesture expresses movement and balance simultaneously. What better picture could be given for young children? In moving, children find themselves in a new world, in space. In moving they learn about their bodies and their relationship to space, and they learn what the body can do, twisting, turning, bending, walking, and running. In the practice of finding out about the forces behind movement and balance, children have their first experience of what it means to be on earth.

Symbolically too movement is a gesture of going toward the future, the new. Young children are immensely curious about the world and eager to learn. They learn from the moment they wake until they go to sleep and are—if healthy—in movement for most of that time,

working with tremendous will. They experiment with the physical laws of movement and balance.

When we work with children, we use rhythm in speech and rhythmical movement to assist with mastering new movement patterns. We know how much the rhythmic movement in a morning circle or the rhythms of hand gesture games or nursery rhymes can help children to incarnate. M. L. Nuesch has wonderful anecdote about this:

He got to know the kindergarten and the teacher only recently, but he learnt quickly that the teacher understood his language. He did not take any initiative in play. If he played with others, he could do that only in a role such as a wild animal or a monster. His imagination was filled with characters of a virtual reality. The little knitted sheep which the teacher had made for him, he brought back into

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the kindergarten, there was no room for it in his world.

"You are now my mommy and you must go and get me from the back there, because I am frozen into an ice block." He really stands there like an ice block, without any movement. Some children help me to carry him away. "You have to bring me into a warm country," he said. But this does not help. He hides in a cave (under a table), he obviously needs protection and quiet.

"Now something will come out," he announces. But it is not a "thawed" child which appears, but another horrible monster...

Many weeks later he comes back to the theme. "Look, I am all frozen," he says. He stands there in a twisted position, even eyes and hair look as if affected by stiffness. This time the teacher takes him on her lap and starts to massage his arms and legs firmly while talking to him with humor. "Also the ears," he says. (He had surgery because he did not hear well.) The teacher shakes him a little and he is content when she tells him that the "frozenness" now is flowing out. He says it has to flow out from both his ears. Then the teacher takes him on her lap like a little parcel, kneels down herself and rocks him backward and forward. "I am not a baby," he cries, but he sounds content. The teacher says that this is what one has to do if somebody is "frozen." After a while the teacher lets him go with a little friendly smack. His face is now relaxed.

This story shows a teacher working with the Taurus quality, which requires the courage to try new ways. It also requires acceptance that not everything that we would wish for can be achieved. The child left the kindergarten shortly after this event so that the situation remained unresolved.

#### *Taurus in Relation to Adults: Balance Becomes Progress*

There is no recipe for the virtue of balance. Finding balance in working with children is an act

of attuning our inner perception to what children need, inwardly and outwardly. We may have to leave behind familiar ideas, habits, and conventions to experience inwardly how a situation may be handled. We discover a rhythm between "old" and "new;" they belong together and need each to be moved to come to balance.

Steiner describes here, for example, the relationship of a younger generation to an older generation. He speaks of three enemies to real understanding: empty phrases, conventions, and set routines. For example, repeated sayings like, "Gentle hands" or "Inside voices" can become empty phrases in our kindergartens. While there is a place for repetition in early childhood, there are many situations where a new way of saying things may be needed and where the right word can be found from immediate experience.

Conventions take over when we do something that has lost its meaning but we still do it because it has always been done this way, for example, lighting a candle before beginning some ritual. Unless we have reflected on why we do it and are convinced of the relevance of lighting a candle in a particular situation, it is better not to light one. The children will feel it if candle lighting has become a convention; they may react by misbehaving.

In mentioning routines in an early childhood context, we acknowledge, of course, that young children need routine. But routine needs to have a rhythmical quality, not a mechanical quality, so that there are possibilities for variation. We would not break the rhythm of a day, but we do allow activities to move slightly within a daily schedule, giving the schedule a living Taurus quality.

Children are eager to both move forward and look back. How much can we tolerate a child trying something new? How do we move within ourselves ("emotion" means, literally, "movement arising from within") so that we do not become rigid? By being aware of the danger of stagnation in empty phrases, convention, and routine, we can harmonize stability and change.

#### *Gemini in Relation to Children: The "I" Meets Self*

The image of Gemini is "two-ness in oneness," twins holding hands. Consciousness of self is possible only in the realm of matter, where there are borders around things and where beings are physically separated from one another. The greatest

transition that children have to make is from the spiritual world to the physical world, the transition from being able to merge and live within other spiritual beings to separation and individualization. It takes years for children to go through this process.

We know that the ability to imitate is a great aid in this transition, and we know of the crucial role that a teacher may play in this process. From birth onward we experience “two-ness:” adult and child, “holding hands” literally and metaphorically. The self of a child rests within the mother and caregiver, the earthly helpers of spiritual powers. Then, from around age three to the end of early childhood, we still “hold hands” with mother, teacher, or caregiver, but also become aware of ourselves as separate entities. When a child says, “I am Laura” or “I don’t want to” or “I don’t like my drawing,” then the child has learned to look at herself; “I” and self face each other.

For some children this individualization does not occur easily. We find a wonderful report on this process of discovering oneself in Virginia Axline’s *Dibs: In Search of Self*. Axline writes about the first session of play therapy with a five-year-old boy:

When we got into the playroom, Dibs walked slowly around, touching the materials, naming the items with the same questioning inflection he had used on the first visit to the other playroom.

Sandbox? Easel? Chair? Paint? Car? Doll? Every item he touched, he named in that manner. Then he varied just a little. Is this a car? This is a car. Is this sand? This is sand. ...After he had completed the first circuit of the room, I said, “Yes. There are many different things in this room, aren’t there? And you have touched and named most of them.”

“That’s right,” he said, softly.

I did not want to rush him. Give him time to look around. ...He stopped in the middle of the room.

### Being served, being nurtured, and being loved create the necessary foundation for developing selflessness later in life.

After a while I ask him, “I say, Dibs! Would you like to take off your hat and coat?” “That’s right,” he said. “You take off your hat and coat, Dibs. You take off your hat. You take off your coat, Dibs.” He made no motion to do anything about it. “All right,” I replied, “Take off your mittens and your boots too, if you want to.” “That’s right,” he said almost in a whisper. He stood there, plucking

idly and restlessly at his coat sleeves. He began to whimper. He stood in front of me, hanging his head, whimpering. “You would like to take them off, but you want me to help you? Is that it?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he said. There was a sob in his voice as he replied.

It is obvious that this child had not been able to form his own identity, that he spoke about himself in the third person as if he were an onlooker with no relationship to himself. In the therapeutic process he discovered himself as a human being who can relate to himself as an “I.” He also discovered the ability to express feelings that he could identify as his own. Axline describes their twelfth session:

He ran over to the table, got the nursing bottle, and went back to the sandbox. He lay down and sucked on the bottle like a small baby. He closed his eyes. “When I was a baby,” he said. ...Then he suddenly sat up. “No, no, no,” he said and got quickly out of the sandbox. “I am not a baby. I was never a baby....”

Later:

He got the nursing bottle, took it to the sink, refilled it, tried to put the nipple on, but it was too slippery. “Miss A. will do it for you, Dibs,” he said. “Miss A. will not turn you down.”

She: "You think I'll fix it for you?" "That's right," said Dibs. "I know you will." He handed me the bottle. [She did it and returned the bottle to him.] He stood in front of me sucking on the bottle looking steadily at me. "You do not call me stupid," he said. "I say help, you help. I say I don't know, you know. I say I can't, you can." "And how does that make you feel?" I asked.

"Like that," he said. "I feel." He looked at me steadily, seriously.

#### *Gemini in Relation to Adults: Perseverance Becomes Faithfulness*

We can learn something about the virtue of perseverance through this story of a therapist "holding hands" with a child. She loves him with a form of objective devotion. She serves him—taking off mittens, helping with his bottle—even though she knows he could do these things himself. She does not ask for independent action, which he may be able to perform but does not, as yet, want to. She follows his steps, she mirrors his actions and intentions, out of the deep conviction that what the child harbors in the depth of his soul is valuable and that, in due course, he will bring forth his inner treasures. This is the virtue of perseverance and faithfulness: to take the place of the self of a child at a time when he cannot do it for himself. Temporarily, she becomes his twin. Today, this is a well-known method of dealing with autistic children, mirroring what children do in order to awaken in the children the ability to "see" themselves.

We also work with mirroring in the education of healthy children, but in normal cases children are able to mirroring or imitate as well. They are able actively to accept an adult as their "twin."

Steiner tells us that the benefit for children is all the greater the more they are able to live not in their own souls but in those within their environment. This ability to live in the souls of those in their environment forms the basis for children's experience of trust and belonging. The part of the adult in forming a relationship of trust and belonging is the virtue of faithfulness—faithfulness to what a child is not yet, but what the child unconsciously wants to become. We can do this by holding within us a picture of the child's higher

self, which will lead him to his destiny. To take the other into ourselves is a gesture of love.

In that we persevere as models for the children to imitate for as long as they need it, we help them, when they are ready, to become individualized and independent. It seems like a contradiction that imitation should lead to freedom, but such is the way of the healthy development of children and the way of Gemini, the twins.

#### *Cancer in Relation to Children: Enclosing and Embodiment*

Of the sign Cancer, Steiner says, "So far as we enclose ourselves, using the crab principle, we are head. This is the gift of heaven and we do not have to contribute." The essentials of incarnation contained in the first four signs of the zodiac are all linked to the process of bodily development, to "growing down" from the head. They relate to what works in children as living etheric forces that work downward, enlivening and fine-tuning the physical body. The bones of the skull can be understood as an image of the hard shell of the crab, protecting the brain, the delicate organ of human thinking, the image of the cosmos. The crab principle is the building of a bodily house around the soul and spirit of the child. Around age three, children act out in their play this fundamental need for enclosure and protection. Children build or seek out playhouses and hiding places. A playhouse is a wonderful image for the bodily house of the human "I."

#### *Cancer in Relation to Adults: Selflessness Becomes Catharsis*

Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, the Madonna who carries the child from the realm of the heavens toward earthly life, holding the child near her heart and enclosing it with her veil, is a most beautiful depiction of incarnation.

Infancy and childhood are times to be protected, nurtured, carried, embraced, and surrounded by human warmth. Being served, being nurtured, and being loved create the necessary foundation for developing selflessness later in life. Young children cannot yet be expected to be selfless. They need adults for the fulfillment of their needs and for the development of trust in the world.

Selflessness as a virtue cannot be demanded. We choose selflessness or we do not; otherwise,

selfless behavior becomes pretence. When we are unable to act selflessly, but we recognize that we should, this may be cause for real self-reflection.

Children depend on our selflessness, outwardly and inwardly. They depend on our giving and our ability to decide freely not to pursue our own needs and wishes when these collide with children's needs. One of the great illnesses of our time can be seen in that more and more parents and teachers experience the foregoing of their own needs, emotionally and physically, as difficult or impossible. In wrestling with such inner stumbling blocks, mothering, teaching, or caregiving can become paths toward initiation. This struggle creates the possibility of becoming different, more spiritually aware persons. It begins a process of purification, of the transformation of the "egotistical" gesture of the crab, a closing off, into inner openness and receptivity to the needs of others.

### Conclusion

Four essentials are symbolically written in the signs of the zodiac as archetypal processes for an incarnating human being:

- Aries: Preserving the connection to the spirit world from whence the child comes;
- Taurus: Moving forward in life and orienting to the future;
- Gemini: Developing consciousness of self; and
- Cancer: Practicing embodiment, enclosure, and enfolding.

As adults, we respond to these essentials. We may, in this regard, practice the four virtues of devotion, balance, faithfulness, and selflessness to deepen our pedagogical work in response to the essential spiritual needs of the young child. We may take seriously Steiner's charge that we learn to feel ourselves increasingly part of the universe, that we base our educational work on the images and powers present in the spiritual cosmos, and that, recognizing these, we bring them into earthly reality.

### Endnotes

1. This article also appears, in a slightly different form, in the proceedings of the 2008 International Waldorf Early Childhood Conference, published by the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America (WECAN), copyright 2009, in association with the International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE). Part II of this article will appear in the next issue of the *Research Bulletin*. Full proceedings may be ordered from WECAN at <http://www.waldorfearlychildhood.org>.
2. Rudolf Steiner, *Self-Education in the Light of Spiritual Science*, p. 18.
3. Rudolf Steiner, *Practical Advice to Teachers*, Lecture 2, p. 37.
4. Rudolf Steiner, *Cosmosophy*, Vol. 2, p. 78.
5. In Chinese consciousness, morality is seen as the highest principle, not only ruling the cosmos beyond the zodiac but also demanding the highest moral qualities from each human being.
6. Rudolf Steiner, *Cosmosophy*, p. 80.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
8. We received the gift of the descriptions of these spiritual virtues through the work of Madame Blavatsky. Her findings were confirmed as spiritually correct by Steiner. Robert Sardello has written a comprehensive study on working with these spiritual virtues.
9. Rudolf Steiner, *Cosmosophy*, p. 67.
10. Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity*, p. 9.
11. M.L. Nüesch, *Spiel aus der Tiefe*, p. 87ff (translated by author).
12. Rudolf Steiner, *The Younger Generation*, Lecture 4, p. 72.
13. Virginia Axline, *Dibs: In Search of Self*, pp. 33-34.
14. Axline, pp. 126ff.
15. Rudolf Steiner, *Education as a Social Problem*, p. 13.
16. Rudolf Steiner, *Cosmosophy*, p. 80.

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The great object of Education should be commensurate with the object of life. It should be a moral one; to teach self-trust; to inspire the youthful man with an interest in himself; with a curiosity touching his own nature; to acquaint him with the resources of his mind, and to teach him that there is all his strength, and to inflame him with a piety towards the Grand Mind in which he lives. Thus would education conspire with the Divine Providence. A man is a little thing whilst he works by and for himself, but, when he gives voice to the rules of love and justice, is godlike, this word is current in all countries; and all men, though his enemies, are made his friends and obey it as their own.

—Ralph Waldorf Emerson, from  
"Education"