

The Four-Fold Heart of Waldorf Education: Polarities and Constitutional Types

A conference for teachers, therapists and physicians

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This year's alumni conference of the San Francisco Waldorf Teacher Training of Rudolf Steiner College explored the theme of the four polarities or constitutional types which Rudolf Steiner characterized in various lectures.¹ Not just for alumni, the conference brought together about 40 people, including teachers, doctors, and therapists. The conference was organized and moderated by Dorit Winter, Director of the SF Teacher Training, and took place at the San Francisco Waldorf School on October 9 and 10, 1999.

The main presenters were David Weber, a class teacher on sabbatical from the San Francisco Waldorf School, Bob Dudley, an anthroposophical M.D. practicing in the greater Bay Area and serving young patients in several Waldorf schools, and Maria Reiland-Hansen, a pedagogical and therapeutic eurythmist at the San Francisco Waldorf School.

Some of the burning questions brought were: "How do the different people who are working with a child work together?" "How do we work with children who are on Ritalin or other drugs?" "How do we bring therapeutic work into the classroom?" "What are the effects of modern medicine on the incarnating ego?" Not all of these questions could be addressed in this brief conference, but many of the underlying issues were explored.

Dr. Bob Dudley put forth the thought that we need to be aware of the difference between how we, as anthroposophists, perceive the child with difficulties, versus what the "mainstream" approaches are. We recognize the child's struggle as related to incarnation, but we need to have an in-depth view of where in the four-fold human being the struggle originates. He sees the Waldorf approach as "shining the sun on these growing children," in an effort to assist them in growing as strongly and humanly as they can. This is a different view from one which sees the child as having a brain or hormone imbalance. We need to consider the needs of a living being rather than a mechanism. It is important when we are working with a child with learning difficulties for us to know that we need to meet the child as an individual. This means that there is no formula for what approach will work for each type of child. We need to be experimenters. We need to try things with the individual child and see what he or she responds to. Dr. Dudley reminded us of the following quote: "This blindness does not stem from his sin nor from his parents', but rather, through it the working of the divine in him is to become manifest." (John 9, The New Testament, Floris Books). We need to respect that a child's struggles are also his opportunity for growth.

Therapeutic eurythmist Maria Reiland-Hansen led us through what might be prescribed movements for some of the constitutional types and allowed us to experience the metamorphosis of the movements as we went from one pole (i.e. the "cosmic" child) to the other (the "earthly" child). She also showed us how indications given for therapeutic eurythmy can be transformed by the teacher. The teacher can also work from "minor" to "major" when she makes up a story, for example.

Dr. Dudley went on to present the four constitutional types and their relationships to the four-fold human, and how we might recognize these types when they are before us. He reminded us that Steiner did not give us principles for working with these polarities, but only specific suggestions. He thus left it up to us to discover the reasons, thereby keeping his indications more alive. That means that it is up to us to discover what works in each individual case. Dr. Dudley also reminded us that when we work at

balancing these polarities, we are strengthening the child's physical constitution and helping to protect his or her future health. The four polarities might be charted like this:

Ego realm	ego incarnated too deeply or loosely
Astral realm	imagination/memory rich or imagination/memory poor child
Etheric realm	cosmic or earthly child
Physical realm	large-headed or small-headed child

Class teacher David Weber began his address by saying, "We thought that we would get to bring beautiful things to the children, to bring an ideal education, but now we learn that-in addition-we have to teach and understand all of this, too!" This daunting task is not hidden from us. In *Study of Man*, Rudolf Steiner points out that it is our task to harmonize the soul-spirit body with the physical-life body. It is our job to understand how to do this. What is presented in the classroom should be a call for the children to incarnate. Mr. Weber spoke about indications given to the doctors to "warm up" the small-headed children, but how can the teacher bring this same gesture in the classroom? Perhaps we can work on bringing a "summer mood" to these children through laughter. Mr. Weber pointed out that the keys to all of this are in the curriculum. He then went on to show many examples of how particular children could be met through specific class experiences and individual exercises. He reminded us that we cannot merely mark these polarities out on a chart. Rather, the best way to get a true picture of the children is through our meditative work. It is through this work, when we try to approach the higher self of the child, that we are able to gain insights into what the child is asking of us.

Sunday began with another experience of eurythmy. Ms. Reiland-Hansen told us that we want to engage the will of the child to work through, and to learn to do, what he or she cannot yet do, and that this is the healing process. She also reminded us that it is possible to present movement exercises in such a way that they become mechanical and lose their potency. Instead, we should strive to give the child's soul a reason to move, and this is done by giving imaginative pictures which themselves will evoke the movements. She demonstrated this and engaged us in the movement through a lively poem she had devised to give purpose to the movement.

We spent much of the rest of the day deepening our understanding of the incarnating process that is expressing itself in these four polarities, and trying to formulate questions about how to meet the children who are coming to our classrooms. The most commonly held question seemed to be, "When are we meeting a child's needs, and when does he or she need to leave the Waldorf school?" It was obvious from many reactions and comments that this is the most pressing question for many teachers today. We see that there are children who create disturbances, as well as children who quietly drift away, but where do they go when they leave our schools? Are their needs really being met in these new environments? Have we really done all that we could to support the children and their parents?

We also recognize that sometimes there is a reason for a child to leave. Perhaps they do need other experiences that will give them the tools that they are looking for to mold their own incarnation. We need to be sensitive to all of the subtleties that are at play here. Sometimes children are not meant to be "academic achievers," yet how many Waldorf schools commend the graduates who don't go on to attend four-year universities? Our task is to prepare the children for life, but do we sometimes lose sight of what this really means?

These questions obviously can be answered only by individuals in specific situations, but it does seem that the children who are coming to us would be well served if we, as teachers, doctors and therapists,

were able to deepen our knowledge and work together in a healthy way to support the children who come to us with difficulties. It is only by looking deeper, through seeing the incarnating paths of the children, that we will be able to place the right stepping stones before them which will support the next step that they need to take.

It is likely that the next Alumni Conference, again open to all, will be a continuation of these themes, and that we will focus on one of the constitutional polarities in our own work during the coming year, and meet next fall to present and compare our discoveries.

Notes

¹ References in the works of Rudolf Steiner for cosmic and earthly children—*Waldorf Education for Adolescence*, Chapter 2. Imagination/memory rich and poor—*Ibid.*, Chapter 4. Ego incarnated too deeply or loosely—*Balance in Teaching*, Chapter 4. Large and small-headed children—*Conferences*, Feb. 6, 1923, Vol. 3,

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