

Nurturing the Activity of Connecting

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A fundamental activity of human existence is the activity of relating, and connecting, to all aspects of experience. The human being relates to the world, other human beings, spiritual beings and themselves. Once one becomes aware of the activity of connecting, it begins to be visible in all aspects of human life and experience. Margret Meyerkort holds this as a central theme in her work with young children and the adults who relate to them. (See *Gateways*, Fall/Winter 2002.) This powerful idea has become a core thought in my own thinking. This article is an attempt to articulate some ideas and, in doing so, enliven my own thinking as well as that of others'.

In our modern world, human beings increasingly experience isolation from each other, from the world of nature around us, and from the spiritual world, and, most of all, are disconnected with themselves.

Anthroposophical-based education attempts to overcome this quality of modern life by developing the capacities for connecting in each child, some of which will only bear fruit at later stages of life. The task is to help the child connect with all aspects of life, so that later, as an adult, many realms of connection are available to him.

If one really thinks out these matters in keeping with full reality, then a feeling of the immeasurable responsibilities arises connected with education and teaching. The following ideas surface: What one does with the child forms the adult beyond his twentieth year, and, from this, that one must understand the child, the complete course of life, not merely the age of childhood, if one wants to build up a real art of education. (Rudolf Steiner, *The Basel Course on Pedagogy, April–May 1920, Lecture 13*) (Also in *Understanding Young Children*, p. 52)

In the spiritual world, and even at birth, one experiences the complete interconnectedness of everything. There is not yet an experience of self and other. As the child develops self-consciousness during its first years, and as its intellect gradually develops, there is more and more an experience of separation. While the intellect is a gift, it also disconnects the human being from being fully “present” and from the possibility of total engagement since its capacity is reflective and objectifying. Many adults choose to embark on a spiritual path to be able once again to experience connection with the spirit, with the spirit in the world around them, and to overcome the separation of the intellect.

We can plant the seeds in early childhood for faculties of relating that can bear fruit only much later in life. But it is important to be conscious that we are working to nurture and fertilize in early childhood what will become fruits in the future. In this article, I want to consider two realms of possible adult activity, including supporting the child's sense development, and the self-development of the communication faculties of the adults who surround the child.

Rudolf Steiner described twelve senses that are conduits for receiving images and perceptions of various kinds. It is through the senses that one relates to the world around oneself, as well as relating to human beings. All sense impressions are images. One could say images form the young child. This includes images of all kinds, human activity in its environment, images streaming toward earth from the cosmos and from the world of nature around us. Human organs are formed and developed out of images received from the cosmos. We come from the cosmos, and cosmic images form our physical being and constitute our life forces.

Steiner, on May 26, 1922 in Dornach, said:

The etheric body that develops in the human being is a world in itself. One might say that it

is a universe in the form of images. . . It is of extraordinary significance that we, in our descent into earthly life, draw together forces from the universal ether and thus take with us, in our ether body, a kind of image of the cosmos. If one could extract the ether body of a person at the moment when he is uniting himself with the physical body, we should have a sphere which is far more beautiful than any formed by mechanical means—a sphere containing stars, zodiac, sun and moon. These configurations of the ether body remain during embryonic development, while the human being grows together more and more with his physical body. . . Indeed they remain right into the seventh year, until the change of teeth.

The human being has, as Dennis Klocek would say, a hunger for sense impressions. (Also, see Dennis Klocek, Lecture 2 from *Knowledge, Teaching and the Death of the Mysteries*.) One can sense a sort of image craving in our world perhaps because the human being is seeking images that are “healthy” in the midst of so much that is not. Life giving, life-affirming images are so important for the young child. I think that the development of the senses in the young child, especially the “life senses,” is a full time activity and needs the adults’ awareness toward providing life-supporting images such as sense experience of nature, of other human beings, and of nutritious and wholesome food. These are what nourish young children as they develop their own sense organs and the neurological structure to process those sense impressions.

Steiner described the life senses, or the lower senses, as those that give experiences of one’s own body. Through the sense of touch, one experiences one’s own limits. The sense receptors are the skin, the covering around our entire body. We usually are not aware of our sense of life because it is a general feeling of well-being. We only sense when it is off. Then we feel out of sorts and ill at ease. This sense is connected to how well one is nourished by rest, nutrition and health. It is a realm of etheric balance. The sense of self-movement is how we experience our own body moving in space and the muscles are the sense organ. The sense of balance is both balance in the body in space, as well as inner balance and calm.

The physical organ that senses balance is the inner ear. Through the senses of smell, taste, sight, and warmth the human being brings some of the world into itself and becomes aware of their relation to the world. These “middle” senses bring awareness of the relationships of the self to the world around.

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The higher senses relate the self to the other, to other human beings, and can perhaps be described as the spiritual senses. Through these senses we find our connection to other human beings. These higher senses develop out of the foundation of the life senses. Each of the life senses transforms into a particular higher sense as the individual grows and develops throughout its life.

The child’s sense of balance, whose sense organ is the inner ear, transforms into the sense for hearing the other—not the words, but the way the words are used. Through this we experience not the content, but the intent of the words we hear spoken. The sense of our own body’s movement through space metamorphoses into a sense for the speech of the other. Through this sense, one gets an experience of how the words of another human being move, to understand another’s ideas, we must hear them expressed as words.

The sense of life, an inner sense of one’s general well-being, transforms into a sense for the idea of the other. This is how one can experience the thinking of another human being. What is the idea this person is trying to express? Just as the sense of life is a sort of gauge for etheric balance, the sense of thought of the other is also a sensing of the etheric world, the world where thinking lives. The sense of touch transforms into the sense of the ego of the other. Physical touch transforms into a capacity to touch the very being of another individual human being whom one meets and experiences.

The healthy development of the life senses, the four “lower” senses, requires a healthy diet of images so those senses develop to their fullest

possibility. Then a sound foundation is in place for the much later development of the higher senses, the senses for the other. These are truly social senses and are the basis for understanding and experiencing empathy for others. Attention to the development of these senses in young human beings is at the core of an education attempting to renew culture and create a fertile ground for human connections.

Steiner said how important it is to bring life activities into the kindergarten, to surround the young children with real life. It is perhaps because these life activities, life-giving and sustaining activities such as cooking, cleaning, gardening, "housework," etc. are nurturing the developing etheric body, the life body, of the child, which will not, in a sense, be born until age six or seven. Since life activities support the development of the life senses, this creates the foundation for truly social life.

We know that imitation is the natural learning mode for the young child. All the sense impressions, all the experiences, all the "images" the young child receives are soaked up by her in an unconscious way and help to form him. Steiner described imitation as a sort of bodily religion arising from a sense of joy and wonder toward all experiences and sensation. Especially for the young child, the very being of the person is what is most imitated and what has the deepest impact on his development in many areas. Our attempting to better ourselves has significant impact on the child. Our striving for self-development IS worth imitating. *Become what you want the change to be.* So then, the very striving of the adult to develop new capacities penetrates deeply into the developing child and can bear fruit much later in life. One can say, "There are certain qualities I want to develop further in myself and I am actively engaging my own will on this path." Indeed, it is a path of development for the human being who is striving toward consciousness.

One area where we can attempt to awaken is our speaking and communicating. The realm of speech is an obvious realm where the activity of connecting can occur, but in fact often does not. (See Steiner, *Social and Antisocial Forces*.) It is challenging to connect with one's own true

needs and values and be able to communicate those, or to connect with the real needs of the other. True listening and empathy is challenging to realize, to experience. For instance, we often slip into judgmental thinking and speaking or blaming, or we solve another's challenges unasked, or react rather than respond, or feel responsible for another's feelings.

Steiner is often quoted when he speaks about the importance in connecting with one's own thinking, and being aware in one's will. For some inexplicable reason, his thoughts about the importance of connecting with one's own feeling life are scarcely heard about. For our own adult development, it is important to connect with our feeling life, and for the young child, our example there is important. For while her astral body is still years away from its birth, the examples impressed on the child gestate as potential for her future. So one can consider how colleagues are spoken to, how assistants are worked with, parents, and so on. I think of the work of developing communication skills and resolving conflicts in a healthy way as a life-long learning. It is important for the children to experience our working on ourselves in these areas. Also important is how the children are guided toward resolving their own conflicts. Of course, one must respond to the situation in the moment, and not meet the young child in an intellectual and abstract manner, but directness and brevity are essential. I'll share an example from kindergarten:

Jack was playing with a small wooden boat. Jill approached Jack and took the boat and went to another part of the room to play with the boat. Perhaps Jack was pushed, but I did not see that for myself. Jack cried. Jill played.

There are many possible approaches for a teacher to take. "Jill! Give that back to Jack and say you are sorry." Or, "Jill, how do you think Jack feels? What would you feel like if he did that to you?" The approach I take is based on the particular children involved and the specific situation. Always central in my thinking is what is the consciousness of the child. We cannot expect the young child to be able to understand how someone else is **feeling, when she is just beginning to be able to label her own feelings.**

Also, to simply require an apology does not allow Jill to help resolve the situation herself. Her own will is not involved. Lastly, it is important not to blame one of the children or to make them “wrong.” I wouldn’t say, “You hurt him.” Or, “You know better. You should feel ashamed of yourself.” Rather, “He is hurt and needs some care.” Or, to Jill with my hand outstretched and open, palm up, “It is Jack’s turn now and you may have a turn next.” Or, to Jill, “Jack is sad. Can you do something that will help him?”

Through active developing of compassion for the one hurt, out of imitation, the children can develop tools for their communication, and conflicts are resolved more easily. And the children in kindergarten can begin to imitate a non-blaming way of resolving their own conflicts, and more peace descends into kindergarten. How these seeds come to fruit in later years can only be a hypothesis for me, but I think they do bear fruit in capacities for checking in with one’s own and the other’s needs and finding solutions where the needs of both can be met.

For some profound thinking about communication and life, I recommend reading *Non-violent Communication; A Language of Life*, by Marshall Rosenberg. He is also a moving and articulate speaker. Rosenberg offers an approach to liberating ourselves from old habits of blame in our thinking and communicating. Practicing such a path of spiritual development is a gift for the children (and all others) in our lives.

NVC [Non-Violent Communication] is founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions. It contains nothing new; all that has been integrated into NVC has been known for centuries. The intent is to remind us about what we already know—about how we humans were meant to relate to one another—and to assist us in living in a way that concretely manifests this knowledge. . . developed NVC as a way to train my attention—to shine the light of consciousness—on places that have the potential to yield what I am seeking. What I want in my life is compassion, a flow between

myself and others based on a mutual giving from the heart. . .NVC helps us connect with each other and ourselves in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish.
(Rosenberg, p. 3)

There are of course infinite opportunities and situations where there is potential for nurturing a later life of connecting. In that light, I have lately been particularly thinking about the realms of sense development and my own self-development in communication. My hope is to have awakened thinking in you, the reader, about where seeds can be planted for a life of future connecting possibilities for the children.

From the Children

One of the younger children in kindergarten had overheard some parents discussing if their child would be in kindergarten or first grade the following year. This child would be turning six in the middle of the summer between and would be in kindergarten again. He said to his own mother, “I don’t need to go to first grade. Steve can always be my teacher. He can teach me everything.” A few days later, he asked his mother to pick a bouquet of flowers. She asked him what it was for, and he replied, “It is for Steve, so I don’t have to go to first grade.”