

The Nursery Class: A Foundation for Later Life

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As a layman closely interested in the education which Rudolf Steiner has given to the world, and particularly occupied with the study of modern society, I am increasingly impressed with the fact that social problems of very many kinds can be traced to individual disharmonies which arise very early in the child's life. We can, I think, see quite clearly how certain political conflicts can only be understood as large-scale expressions of innumerable tiny stupidities, which have been daily enacted in the nurseries of an earlier generation.

There is a dramatic cleavage that exists in the modern world between the people who have excellent intentions, but somehow do not manage to seize the reins of power, and the people who are notably devoid of real morality, and even not particularly intelligent, but whose strong will-forces carry them inevitably into the seats of the mighty. We have the spectacle of millions of human beings enduring the rule of dictators, simply because, although they may dislike such a life very much, they have not the faintest idea how to create for themselves the kind of social life which they can imagine as ideal. Moreover, it is quite clear that a deep distrust of self is typical of modern people in general, and that most of us feel habitually that it is the job of someone else to know how things ought to be done, and our function to find such "leaders" and follow them.

This must mean that for a great many human beings, there is a deep inner gulf between knowledge and action. This gulf seems often to be particularly wide in clear-thinking people. An enormous amount is written and said by such people about how to make the world a better place, but a mysterious inertia, an inability to seize opportunities for actual creation, seems very characteristic of them—of us. For the most part, we are so dreamily enclosed in the beautiful web of social reform which we spin out of our heads, that we can never rouse ourselves to buttonhole

the important man who is probably passing at that moment and would, with his influence, be an invaluable colleague. Still less can we live actively enough into the lives of other human beings with whom we must work in order to organize and keep in being the great living fabric composed of actual people in which our ideas must find embodiment.

One can understand how this characteristic of a man, which determines whether he is going to be a thinker only, or a doer as well, must have been pretty well settled in the first seven years of life. One can see how in this period, as never later, boys and girls live in their will, in constant movement. Movement of some sort is their natural reaction to every experience; in muscular activity they find their relationship to the world. It is obvious that anyone who, failing to appreciate this, systematically tries to make a child sit still and be taught, runs the risk of ruining the child's character in two ways at least. In the first place, the child will certainly become educated, but in a way foreign to its nature, so that in later years its outlook on life will be artificial and unsatisfying, however correct in matters of fact; in the second place, the check to spontaneous expression will become permanent, and the adult will certainly have the characteristic I have depicted of finding great difficulty in carrying thought into action.

A Waldorf teacher, on the other hand, though certainly using periods of quiet in a rhythmical way during the nursery class day, will actually teach entirely through the child's imitative faculty, its talent for experiencing in action whatever is suggested to it.

It is quite appalling to realize how widespread today is the paralysis of those creative powers that could be present in every human being. We really are a generation of spectators and listeners and bystanders and readers. Nor is this confined to persons of strictly academic type. How do subordinate clerks, artisans, and laborers (who

make up the majority of our population) employ their leisure hours? They read books, they watch movies, they watch football and racing, they listen to music or the radio. All these things can be good in themselves, but they are all passive, absorbent. Lenin described religion as “the opiate of the masses.” Nowadays, we should assign that title to football, or rather, the watching of football.

No human being can be fundamentally satisfied by perpetually listening, reading, and watching. I think it is no exaggeration to say that war remains possible in our time, in spite of all we know about it, because fundamentally, large numbers of people are in the habit of expecting something external to provide interest for them, instead of making life interesting through their personal creativeness. Deep down, they are perpetually bored, and dangerously ready to seek self-forgetfulness in some vast catastrophe that will at least give them something exciting to do.

It may seem a far cry from world-war to the nursery class, but it seems quite reasonable to me that a child who has not been given conditions in which it can play joyously, rhythmically, beautifully, in the first years of life, will inevitably become an adult deficient in actual creativeness and therefore, a bored and dangerous being. I can quite understand that ground lost in this way in the first seven years will never be made up except in comparatively rare cases where the adult undertakes a hard, conscious self-training in later life. And a person who can do that could have gone still further ahead if the ground lost earlier had not needed to be made up.

It seems to me clear also that the quality of our moral impulse must be very largely determined within a very few years after birth. Cannot we see quite clearly how the man who behaves himself only for fear of the consequences—legal punishment, loss of caste, unpopularity, divine wrath, and so on—must have been a child brought up to cries of, “Naughty child!” and punishment? Parents really ought to be forbidden to use the word “naughty” during the early years. It is a sterile abstraction, meaning simply that the action complained of is antipathetic to the parent and, usually means painful consequences to the child. Thus an inner morality grows up consisting wholly of

prohibitions. The adult comes to feel subconsciously, “Evil is that which brings pain to me: Good is that which does not bring punishment upon me.” His morals are thus entirely negative, and the motive of warm love for what is good and true does not exist in him.

I can see, too, that direct moral instruction to a small child is rather worse than useless. If the child is intelligent, it will from such instruction acquire an intellectual code which may happen to be theoretically good: but its morality as an adult will be of the kind which consists in conformity to some abstract creed, and has no real roots in character. Moreover, the killing influence of ethical theorizing upon the minds of children must surely be responsible for the painful feeling so many adults have that moral acts are rather dull, and that most really satisfying things are slightly naughty. How very much better to shape a child’s whole day so that it is entering with positive enthusiasm into a skillfully varied succession of occupations, which are beautiful and good because the teacher quietly sees to it that they shall be! How much more inspired, when a child embarks on some harmful act to deflect its impulse delicately into some activity that will satisfy the same inner impulse wholesomely! By these methods, the foundation of morals for later life becomes a positive enthusiasm for healthy and shapely living—as contrasted with an uneasy tightrope progress over an abyss of innumerable evils. In this way morals are taught incidentally, as an inseparable principle of an *art of living*. It is in the gentle intimacy of the Children’s Kingdom, that our teachers can silently settle for us many of the problems which have baffled the statesmen of all the Grownup Kingdoms for centuries.