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THE PERFECTION OF THE HUMAN HAND LIES IN ITS IMPERFECTION

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(translated by Clara von Woedtke and Gladys Hahn)

The way a class teacher asks questions reveals the quality of his teaching methods. He may, for instance, put many questions only in order to get the children to repeat their lesson. How boring for them if this happens every day! Then he can experience how a wall of enmity goes up between them and himself. Or perhaps he avoids questions and simply delivers the subject matter, even by reading it from a textbook. Then a sort of No-man's-land stretches out between him and the children, and he can hardly take in what is going on the other side. No, to get a real working spirit together, one has to bring about an exchange of ideas. One can do this through questions that arouse the children, that start them searching. A good question can set loose a whirlwind of liveliness; it can also produce a reflective musing; it is sure to bring into a child's consciousness something that up to now was merely a dream within him, something he could hardly have expressed in words.

A teacher, who has been industrious in working up his material so that he has complete control over it, can approach his subject from all sides and make the most varied excursions out from it. He can safely throw problems out to his class and he need not shy away from anything unplanned: the children will also put questions and expect answers! Instead of stuffing ready-made conclusions and definitions into their heads, he will strive in lively discussions with them to find concepts, which call upon the thinking and the feeling and the will of each child.

I would like to give an example of the way we can discover living, flexible concepts in company with the children. But first let us see what Goethe had to say about method as such: "I always wait until I find the pregnant idea from which many things can be derived, or rather, one that of itself brings forth spontaneously many things to me; then I am careful to receive them with open mind and with caution.1

The study of the human hand in comparison with the forelimbs of animals: this shall be our 'pregnant idea' and we shall see it 'bring forth many things.' Let us try to get at them, together with the children, 'with open mind and with caution.' 2

In connection with any subject matter, for instance starting from the form of the human body, the teacher might show how the human hand presents itself as something highly perfect when compared to the forelimbs of animals. The children will enthusiastically agree with this and will bring forward plenty of facts to support the assertion that we human beings are surrounded by the most varied works of our hands which could never have been made by the animals. One could have the children write a composition on the subject, taken just so far. Then on the following day after a short review of yesterday's discussion, one will surprise them by throwing them the question: "But what do you suppose the animals would say if they had heard us humans yesterday, making all those proud remarks?" And then if hands don't go up right away one can introduce a little scene of conversation and let the children carry it further. There could be quite a bit of drama developed during this study.

The lion speaks: "I have clawing paws that, when I spring, can kill my prey and tear him to pieces. And you, little man, how weak your hands are!" "Man" may try to defend himself, but the eagle interrupts and says: "My wings carry me high into the sun filled sky, where I am king. But you, remember what happened to Icarus!" And then the fish speaks, and the bee, the beaver, mole, horse, and others: each one shows his particular superiority so clearly that at first no argument seems possible.

Now one lets the children look at their own hands and one asks: "What is it that is lacking in your hand so that it does not become a claw, a wing, a fin, a hoof, or a shovel-paw?" One should introduce at this point some very detailed descriptions. The children will want to help do this; one can gradually draw out even more by questioning; and finally one can complete the separate pictures. Now one tries to have the children see the one sidedness of the animals' limbs. For instance, one may ask: "Can the eagle swim with his wings? Can the mole fly with his shovel-paws?" And they will realize that an animal has but one skill only, and for this one particular skill it is fitted out in the most practical way. The fin is a complete oar and therefore

cannot be a flier. The wing is all flier and therefore cannot be a runner. The hoof is all runner and therefore cannot be a flier. And so forth.

One can say: "What would happen if the animal were given a human hand?" "It would not be able to live." Now the children will understand that the animal by this entirely one-sided development of its forelimbs has been equipped for "the struggle for existence," to be able to repulse its enemy, to find its food, to maintain its life and the life of its offspring. These observations will be enough for the children for one day if one has done a thorough job, and one can end the lesson with a picture of the magnificent and purposeful perfection but at the same time the obvious one-sidedness of the animal's limbs.

The next day, after the main outlines of this picture have once more been drawn, preferably by the children themselves, one can bring the human hand itself into the foreground, especially in comparison to the animal's forelimbs. And by further questioning one can bring out the fact that the hand is by no means a magnificent bodily tool for some specific purpose that actually it is not built for any single task. Is it a tool at all, as the fin is, or the wing, or the paw? Obviously not. One will lead the children now to the idea that the human hand is by comparison something altogether unfinished, undeveloped, that it is, so to say, only a starting-point for the tool-like limbs of the animals. It could have become any one of these, but luckily it did not - for it still keeps the capacity to evolve in all directions. Wherever there is a human hand, there is also human intelligence and reasoning; these faculties invent the tools which the hand needs, which the hand itself is not. The children will now be astonished to see that man actually completes his "unfinished" hand: as fin, for instance, by making an oar, as wing, by making the wing of an airplane. It is apparent that we sometimes need highly complicated machinery manipulated by our hands, to replace the animals' tools.

One cannot emphasize enough the importance of this picture: the hand in the center, surrounded by extreme, one-sided forms evolved for definite purposes - as one finds them in the limbs of animals. Rather than a sharply defined picture, there should be lively, imaginative images that show forms in constant metamorphosis as the harmonious human hand changes into the special, exaggerated, one-sided, unbalanced limb of the animal.

And one presents a second picture: of the hand forgoing all these metamorphoses and instead making its own tools.

Such living, imaginative pictures allow the idea of human freedom to take root in the children's souls: human freedom, which bursts the fetters in which the animal must remain. For the animal has no choice; it lives as its organism prescribes. "The animal must and man can," is how the children have expressed it.

For why is it that if the animal had human hands it would fail in its struggle for existence? The children will discover that it will fail because it lacks the human reasoning which alone would enable it to make free use of the various possibilities our hand offers us. Man and animal alike have to undergo the struggle for existence. But while the animal spends its entire life in this struggle, the real life of man only begins when he gets beyond the struggle and becomes creative. Man's hands are not chained to the earth, thanks to the upright position of his body; they are free. That is why he can and should change the earth; he makes full use of the creative capacities within his hands, to develop a culture - as farmer, artist, engineer, laborer, writer. And the children should become fully aware of the wide manual activities by which man masters this earth-task of his. Although one can call the forelimb a tool of the animal's body, one has had to reject this term for the human hand; now however one can use it in a new sense, in that one recognizes the hand as a tool of the human spirit.

Once more the children should study their hands and feel how wonderful they are in their detailed structure, their versatility, agility, flexibility. How much a hand can learn! We discuss the ability of a fine mechanic, a violinist, a surgeon, a juggler. How strange that no single hand is exactly like another! That could not be said of the horse's hoof or of the fin of a fish. Think also how our hand clasps another man's hand to greet him; what healing forces can go out from a hand; how the hand of an old man can give a blessing; how, when we fold our hands in prayer, the forces which otherwise go out actively are held back and turned inward. This is a world far away from the animals' world. The fact is apparent even in human speech; when we speak of thinking, which belongs only to man of all the kingdoms of nature, we have expressions that relate to the conscious use of our hands: for instance, we touch a subject, we handle a problem, we grasp an idea, we hold on to it.

That the hand is altogether a tool of the human spirit: this is the understanding the children should carry home with them at the end of the third day. Having reached this high point in the discussion one could bring it to a close.

However, this fruitful theme could call forth many more questions. We will just suggest a study that could be made later, perhaps even in a religion-lesson. If one has the children look again at the things man is able to create and do with his hands, so that they see he is not leaving the world unchanged but is everywhere imprinting the marks of his activity upon it, then

some child is likely to observe that hands can also work destructively - for instance, in robbing the soil until vast land-areas are laid bare. Wherever forces of the human spirit are active, there the opposing forces rise up also. And the children can begin to ponder not only the fact that there is evil in the world, but why it is there. From this point the discussion could go in many directions.

Such thoughts as these can be given to children of the sixth or seventh grade. What here may seem far too tightly woven will become, in the actual teaching, stretched much wider, and therefore will be simpler for the children to understand. The logical condensation here should there become a meaningful series of imaginative pictures, which lead to the sort of conclusions a twelve or thirteen-year-old child can grasp. The thoughts evolved in this way will have no hard contours; they will be living, flexible, formative, so that later they can be broadened or transformed by new ideas, new points of view. For the 'pregnant idea', from which we started, suggests so much 'spontaneously', that we will constantly be hitting upon it in later studies and led thus into ever new directions.

Whoever puts questions later on to one of these children about the ideas we have worked our way through, must not expect to receive automatic, fixed answers. The child will have to recreate in his own mind the sequence of thought which brought us to the end result. If he can do this in his own way, the goal of our pedagogy will have been reached. For it is a question of the way he will have thought the thing through, not alone the conclusion he will reach. The latter could have been given him logically as a concise definition - and how much simpler it would be then to question him! This indeed would correspond more exactly to today's intellectual practices, which must be rejected by a truly creative pedagogy.

Discussions such as we have tried to describe lead right into the sphere of moral and spiritual values. It is improbable that a child growing up with ideas of this nature could ever succumb later on to a materialistic conception of man, with all its dire consequences.

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1. Goethe, *Writings on Natural Science*, 4 vols., edited by Rudolf Steiner, Kurschner. See R. Steiner, *Goethe the Scientist*, Anthroposophic Press, N. V.

2. "The stimulus for this study came from the book *Man and Animal*, by Hermann Popplebaum, Anthrop. Publishing Co., London