

# *Deeper Relationships Between Emmi Pikler's Work and Waldorf Early Childhood Education*

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During the summer of 2004, I had the immense good fortune of attending the first English language course (with fourteen other women) offered at the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary. I was also able to observe groups of children at Loczy, the residential nursery at the Institute.

It was a life-changing experience. Each day was filled with the wealth of a lifetime of experience which Anna Tardos, director of the Pikler Institute, shared with us—from the time when her mother, Dr. Emmi Pikler, was a family pediatrician during the 1930s and 1940s in Budapest, to the early days of Loczy in 1946, when Dr. Pikler was commissioned by the city of Budapest to organize

and direct a foster home where children would live until they were three years old—to the present. This institute was called the *National Methodological Institute*, and later *Loczy*, for the street on which it is located.

Fortunately for the children who came to Loczy, the task of organizing this foster home was not given to a professional with experience in institutional care, but to a family pediatrician who was convinced that the key to the task was to be found in the principles and methods developed during her work with families. These principles provided a rich, happy, active and peaceful

childhood for the children living with the families with whom Dr. Pikler had worked.

For the past sixty years, Loczy has been housed in the same building, a house that had been the home of a married couple and abandoned after the war. It was redesigned and rebuilt according to Emmi Pikler's specifications. She also gave dimensions for furniture, changing tables, bathtubs, and eating tables, and carefully selected the materials to be used for clothing, sleeping sacks, soft shoes, etc.—all of natural fibers. Every small detail was important. Thirty-five children, who had been abandoned or orphaned during the war, or of parents with tuberculosis, came to live there initially. Over the next seventeen years, some one thousand, eight hundred children lived at Loczy, where the nurses, doctors, and other staff professionals carefully documented their growth and development. At present, children who are not adopted by age three may stay at Loczy until they are of school age, six-years-old.

I am very grateful to Anna Tardos and her dedicated, wonderful colleagues who made this course possible. The human encounters were permeated with warmth, friendship, and collegiality as we gathered in the conference room on the third floor of Loczy each morning around a table arrayed with bowls of ripe, red cherries or raspberries from the home gardens of the staff. And always the cries, the shouts of joy, the tears, and the laughter of the children playing in the garden were in the background.

As I took notes during the course, I repeatedly made more notes to myself in the margin, which related what we were studying of Emmi Pikler's work to Waldorf education, out of my frame of reference as a Waldorf early childhood educator. Two of the salient themes were the development, the care and the nurturing of the four lower or bodily senses, the sense of life, the sense of touch, the sense of movement and the sense of balance, and the development of the will. The name given to these aspects of the work being done at Loczy was cooperative caregiving and self-initiated independent movement. There are many common insights between the work of Emmi Pikler and that of Rudolf Steiner. Below, I have attempted to outline some of the themes that are woven together in the pedagogies of these two pioneers.

### *Self-Initiated Movement*

Anna Tardos told us:

*The key elements of the Pikler idea are free movement, free space and time. Children do not have the experience of a position until they try it themselves. We do not put the child into a position! Self-initiated movement creates a sense of competency and self-reliance in the child. Flexibility in movement leads to independent, psychic flexibility, and eventually, to independent, flexible thinking.*

We know out of our study of Waldorf pedagogy that the *will* evolves from the earliest moments of infancy, through the play of childhood, and, finally, manifests in adult activity in living thinking and initiative.

Anna continued:

*When a space and time is provided for the infant to develop and one observes the capacity of self-reliance in the child, our image of the infant changes from one of the child needing us to guide him to his capacity to the image of the child as active, independent and capable without our presence and help in all instances.*

Dr. Pikler noted that the child's transitional postures from supine to turning on the belly, stretching and rolling, creeping on the belly to crawling on hands and knees, all before the "milestones" of sitting, standing and walking, are critical in the development of the child's motor capacities.

The children I observed were steady and sure on their feet, both graceful and agile in their movement and play. I soon observed the *capacity of self-reliance* of which Anna spoke, in Hajnalka, a small and delicate three-and-a-half-year-old girl, who had undergone heart surgery in April 2004. Hajnalka was a particularly agile child. At naptime, her nurse buttoned her into her sleeping sack, carried her outside to the row of beds and laid her down for her nap. One by one, the children were brought out and laid down in their cribs. Then the nurse went inside to tidy up. As soon as the nurse was out of sight,

Hajnalka stood up in her crib and began climbing the bars (in her sleeping sack) from crib to crib until she reached the end of the row of beds, where she lay down next to the child in the last crib, who was almost asleep. The nurse observed her through the window and went out to pick her up and carry her back to her own bed. As soon as the nurse went back inside, Hajnalka began climbing from crib to crib until she reached the other end of the row of beds! I held my breath as I watched, worried that she might fall, but she was quite sure of herself. Again, the nurse came out and carried her back to her own bed, where she stroked her head gently and spoke softly to her. By now, the other children were asleep. Hajnalka was soon fast asleep, tired out from her climbing escapades!

Rudolf Steiner also emphasized non-interference and a respect for the infant's autonomy and independent movement. He tells us that the first two-and-a-half years are the most important of all, ". . .during this time the child is learning to walk and speak and the formative forces of the head are shaping those organs which have the most intimate connection with the development and self-confidence of the individual in later life. In these years the child really does do everything of its own accord. It repels any will that seeks to impose itself from without." (*Understanding Young Children*, p. 2)

Rudolf Steiner also describes how in developing the sense of movement, in the contraction and elongation of the muscles, the child perceives a feeling of freedom, the experience of being free in his soul. "The experience of oneself as a free soul is the radiating out of the sense of movement and the radiating into the soul of muscular contraction and elongation, just as inner comfort or discomfort is the radiating into the soul of the results and experience of the life sense." (*Man's Twelve Senses in Their Relation to Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition*, p.16).

He tells us in Lecture Three of *Human Values in Education*. "During the first seven years of life there is an interest in gesture, in everything connected with movement. . . Speech develops out of movement in all its aspects, and thought develops out of speech." In the same lecture, about learning to walk and speak, Rudolf Steiner said, ". . .we should leave everything to the child. Of the child's

own accord she will raise herself into an upright position when the right time comes. Premature efforts at walking and standing or gymnastic exercises can only do damage."

Both Emmi Pikler and Rudolf Steiner note that the child's very individuality and experience of competence arise out of self-initiated independent movement and that the proper attitude of the adult is of paramount importance to the child's development.

### *Attention to Detail*

"Peace begins on the changing table." (Ute Strub, German physical therapist)

At Loczy, as well as in Waldorf kindergartens, nurseries, and parent-toddler programs, careful attention is given to detail. The preparation for the caregiving times of the children at Loczy is done with meticulous care down to the last detail. The bathtub water, the soap, the clothing, oils for cleaning, diapers, etc. are prepared by the nurse before the baby is touched by her sensitive, tender hands and before she speaks to him in a soft voice that expects an answer. The nurse is also inwardly preparing herself for this time when she will give her undivided attention to the child. When she finally lifts the infant from his bed, she informs him of what she is doing, what is about to happen to him and around him. During changing, bathing, and dressing, the nurse speaks softly to the child, her movements are delicate and considerate, she plays little private games with him, and he knows she is there just for him. There is a rhythm to what the nurse does, day after day, week after week, with the children in her care, which creates an invisible mantle of security around the children, a profound sense of well being.

In Waldorf programs, the teachers painstakingly prepare the physical space to receive the children daily. We, too, work with the principles of rhythm, repetition, and attention to the smallest detail in order to create a basis of security for the children. Each activity of the day is carried out with careful attention to detail, and repetition and rhythm are components of everything we do with the children. This rhythm and repetition nourishes their sense of life daily—the rhythm of the morning circle, the

preparation of the morning snack together, kneading the dough for bread, free play time, always with the smells of delicious food wafting in from the kitchen, rest time, washing hands in lavender water and gently drying them with a soft towel, and finally, the ritual of sharing the morning snack, lighting the candle, singing the blessing, serving each child a bowl of warm food and a cup of warm tea, savoring slowly and deliberately the colors, tastes, and textures of our food with the children—all with reverence and gratitude.

### *Observation*

The nurses at Loczy, with meticulous care and attention to detail, record daily observation of the children's growth and development. These observations are shared amongst colleagues in weekly meetings. Out of these meetings, new insights about the children come to light and help guide their caregivers as to how they may best care for them. Out of her daily experiences, the nurse also writes a *development diary* for the two children for whom she is the *own-nurse*. This *development diary* is written on the day of the child's birthday every month, with the help of the group's pedagogue. She writes about the child's emotional state, his relationship with his own nurse and the other nurses, parents, companions, the development of his play and motor skills, speech, eating, bathing, sleeping habits, the child's joys and difficulties. A well-written development diary is a valuable tool, through which the nurse also evaluates her own work: whether she has given to the child everything that he needed.

An important aspect of our work in anthroposophy is observation. Rudolf Steiner repeatedly emphasized the value of observation. He told us: "When you have love for the other, their whole being will be illumined for you." Waldorf early childhood teachers have child studies wherein we create a picture of the whole child for our colleagues through our observations—his birth experience (from what the parents have told us), his appearance, movement, gestures, speech, soul faculties and social qualities, play, etc., with careful attention to detail. We then share these observations with colleagues and out of this sharing often come

insights about who the child is and how we might best serve that particular child.

### *Reverent, Cooperative Caregiving*

*Receive the child in reverence,  
Educate him in love,  
And send him forth in freedom.*

Rudolf Steiner

Observing the reverence and quiet devotion with which the nurses at Loczy approach the infants in their care, one senses what a holy task it is caring for these motherless babies. Bodily care becomes a sacred ritual, as Anna Tardos pointed out to us when we were observing a nurse gently applying oil on a cotton ball to the creases in the baby's body, hands and feet after his bath. "She is anointing the child, as Mary Magdalene anointed the feet of Jesus," Anna told us. Here on the changing table, the infant's trust in the caregiver and in the world develops through the engaging of the nurse's finely developed higher, social senses with the child's lower bodily senses of life and touch.

"The mother cares for the child because she loves him. The nurse loves the child because she cares for him," wrote French psychiatrist, Myriam David, co-author of *LOCZY: An Unusual Approach to Mothering*.

Every physical contact with the child is preceded by a verbal announcement and a visual announcement to the child, e.g. when the nurse holds up the diaper, she tells the child, "I am going to change your diaper now." Anna told us that speaking to the infant during caregiving helps the nurse to keep her thoughts organized and focused on the child (the engagement of the ego through speech). When the child is able to trust that the adult is really there for him during care, when the caretaker's gestures are sensitive and questioning, waiting for the child to respond, a real dialogue, a profound relationship between the adult and the child can emerge. Cooperation can develop between them when the adult consistently prepares herself to be fully present to the infant and his reactions.

The caretaker encourages the child to cooperate with her words, "Please give me your hand, your foot, etc." and she waits for the child to respond by

offering his hand or his foot. The child is helped to develop self-awareness by being encouraged to actively participate in what is happening to him. Out of this self-awareness, the infant begins to experience a meeting with his physical environment and, as he grows older, naturally, this includes awareness of and encounters with other children.

Dr. Henning Kohler, in his book *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children*, describes the infant's and young child's need for *nourishing and warming acts of bodily care* and says: "These acts must be done with true inner participation." At Loczy this inner participation is called *fully conscious caregiving* or *face-to-face caregiving*.

Dr. Kohler continues to describe the life sense:

*This sense of being sheltered and stable, which starts with bodily self-perception, is of utmost conceivable importance for later life. Not only does the degree of our self-confidence and trust in existence depend on it, but also, as we have seen, it relates to our looking forward to an ongoing course of development or else facing a life that is a conglomeration of fragmented, disconnected single events. But this sense is far from mature at birth. . . Babies are so at war with their bodies that all they want to do is sleep so that they need not notice they have bodies! There is scarcely a trace of well being to be seen. Their bodies cause them constant annoyance. A few weeks later, if everything goes well, the condition called "positive peaceful waking" in developmental psychology sets in. Rudolf Steiner describes this sense when developed as "feeling comforted and comfortable through and through."*

In Waldorf early childhood education, the teacher holds the image of the children as coming from the spiritual world, where they are cared for by angels, where goodness is what they breathe and beauty just is. There is a recognition of the child's spiritual as well as earthly origin and the teacher sees her task as continuing here on earth the work of the angels. As Helmut von Kugelgen wrote in *Working With the Angels, The Young Child and the Spiritual World*, "In the highest sense we work in accordance with the angels, the archangels and the archai. It is these beings of the third hierarchy who employ us, who give us our work. . . When we care for a child out of

this understanding, we are endeavoring to ease the pain of this loss of the human being's spiritual home. . . We know that our task is to continue the work of the angels as we care for the child trying to make himself at home in his physical body."

Emmi Pikler recognized the child's struggle to feel at home in his physical body:

*In the beginning, the child feels more or less uneasy during the care situation. Often he doesn't like it, he cries, wants his peace and quiet. . . If, from the start, we handle an infant peacefully, patiently and carefully, she will discover ever more joy in these activities, learning at the same time to trust us more and more, and to take an increasing part in our work.*

When one reads the following paragraph in Henning Kohler's book, one is struck by how closely it echoes Emmi Pikler's principles in her book, *Peaceful Babies—Contented Mothers*:

*It is a fact of educational practice that a child's life sense maturing is given the right support by devoting enough attention to his bodily care, to gentle handling in the way we feed, warm, and dress him. . . For this we need an unhurried sense, patience, foresight, a capacity for inner quiet that allows for what might be called a reverential atmosphere.*

During this course, we were not given an explicit picture of the child as both earthly and spiritual, yet caregiving at Loczy is so exquisite that one observes how the nurse's every deed is designed to ease the pain of the loss of the child's birth home and of her family. The nurse's soft voice, her eyes, her gentle hands, create a reverential atmosphere and help the child to feel at home in her body, to feel trust and joy in the world around her with each caregiving encounter. Nor was there any reference to the care and protection of the senses of the child. Yet every caregiving encounter I observed was palpably a deed of the higher, social senses of the adult working upon the child and her lower, physical senses, particularly the life sense and the sense of touch.

Nurturing the four basal, or lower, senses is so important because they provide the soil for the maturing of the higher, social senses in adolescence: the ego sense, the conceptual or thought sense, the

speech sense, and the sense of hearing. The life sense and the touch sense form a unity. Out of the development of the life sense unfolds the capacity for tolerance, which is one of the preconditions for understanding our fellow humans, while out of the development of the touch sense evolves the capacity for establishing and enjoying close relationships with others. Development of the sense of movement is essential for the development of speech and the sense of word. Balance and inner calm are the preconditions for development of the sense of hearing. Albert Soesman quotes Rudolf Steiner in his book *Our Twelve Senses, Wellsprings of the Soul*: "The birth of our true humanity depends on the right nourishment through the well-springs of our senses as essentially as the air we breathe and the food we eat."

### *The Gesture of Protection*

Another aspect of both pedagogies is *protection*. At Loczy, the children are surrounded by a gesture of protection. They are sheltered from the onslaught of the many sense impressions of our modern world. The daily life of the children is quiet, rhythmical, stable and predictable, which gives them a deep sense of security and well-being.

One sunny morning, I accompanied Gyurika, a four-year-old boy and a staff doctor on a short bus ride and outing to a nearby small shopping center. I was asked to remain a bit apart from the boy and the doctor and to not speak or interact with them, but only to observe. The doctor told me that this was the boy's first ride on a bus and the first time he had been to a shopping center, that by now he was old enough to experience wider parameters. Gyurika was a delight to observe during the excursion. He was in complete awe of all that he saw. It was the escalators that totally fascinated him. He observed for several minutes how passersby stepped up on the escalator, took hold of the moving railing, and were carried by the moving steps to the next level. At first, he was a little frightened and cautious about placing his foot on the first step, but once he summoned the will to do it, he gingerly stepped up as he had seen the others before him do. Holding tightly onto his companion's hand and grasping the moving hand rail, he reached the last of the stairs and jumped off

the top step triumphantly with a wide grin. His companion was right by his side, speaking to him in a soft, encouraging voice.

Of course, Gyurika wanted to go back down on the escalator. His companion solicitously encouraged him to take the first step alone, and to hold onto the moving handrail, rather than take her hand. Again and again the boy went up and down the escalators. His companion stayed a few steps behind, patiently encouraging him with her warm smile. After ten or twelve trips up and down the escalators, Gyurika's interest and curiosity was at last satiated. He was ready to walk on and experience other things in the mall for the first time with his wide-eyed openness and interest. His companion patiently and quietly responded to his barrage of questions in Hungarian until it was time to go home again. All the while she spoke in a soft, encouraging voice, always giving him the space to choose where he wanted to go and what he wanted to see. She offered her hand only when he asked for it. When we arrived back at Loczy, I spent the rest of the morning in Gyurika's group and observed him excitedly relating to his friends all that he had experienced that morning. The other little ones were, of course, all ears!

Later that afternoon, we met with Anna Tardos and Gabriella Puspoky, pediatrician at Loczy for the past thirty-eight years. They shared with us the history of the children we had observed and I learned that Gyurika had been a beggar in his sixteen-year-old sister's arms. His family rarely came to visit him.

There is a high level of conscious respect and protection for the children at Loczy, which one cannot help but admire. Two or three of us were standing on the balcony outside of the conference room watching a group of children below in the garden playing. Anna asked that, out of respect, we did not observe the children if they did not know we were observing them. Before our observations of the children in their groups, Anna asked us not to speak to, nor to interact with the children, as this would distract them from their play or their interaction with their caregiver. We were asked to sit quietly to one side of the room and to be as unobtrusive as possible.

In Waldorf early childhood programs, we also enfold the children in a protective gesture against the many sense impressions of our modern world. The development and protection of the child's senses are central in our work. Daily life in the kindergarten is

quiet, rhythmical, consistent and predictable. Visitors to the Waldorf early childhood programs are few and are asked to not converse with the children or to distract them from their play. As at Loczy, visitors are asked to remain quietly in the background.

### *Imitation*

Dr. Falk, a colleague of Anna Tardos, spoke to us about imitation, “We believe in the ability of the children to learn and behave like the adults around them. We must be aware of what we do and say in the presence of the children so that they can develop properly.” At Loczy, they recognize that the adult’s whole relationship to the world is copied by the child’s fine sensing imitativeness: how one speaks, how one relates with others, how one moves, one’s handling of everything about us, even lifeless objects.

In Waldorf early childhood education, we recognize that young children are completely united with their sense impressions, and because of this are deeply imitative. Everything in their surroundings makes a deep inner impression.

Rudolf Steiner has told us that the young child learns through imitation. He said that a caretaker of young children must be *worthy of imitation*, for in imitating us the children are continuing to do what they did in the spiritual world before they were born—when they imitated the angelic beings. Since they come from the truth and goodness of the world of spirit, they see the world as truthful and good and all those by whom they are surrounded on this earth as good. It is our task to create truth and goodness for the children to “breathe” and imitate here on earth.

This is what they create at Loczy, by giving the children a model for qualitative imitation in the caregiver’s reverent care, in her profoundly respectful manner, her unhurried, deliberate movements, her gentle, considerate hands, her clear, soft voice, her equal treatment of all the children alike. This model for imitation extends to the other adults around the children who respect and support each other and act out of insightful, finely developed higher, social senses.

### *The Etheric Mantle Around Loczy*

The children whose life circumstances bring them to Loczy are received into a home whose very walls have

been hallowed by the selfless love, hard work, and dedication of many nurses, caregivers, doctors and others over the past sixty years. The protective etheric mantle around Loczy is a living reality, created by this long history of sensitive, devoted care of motherless, abandoned or abused children and by the respectful, supportive collegial relationships of the adults who care for them. One is enveloped in this etheric protection as soon as one steps through the big wrought-iron gates at Loczy.

The wellsprings of the pedagogies of Emmi Pikler and Rudolf Steiner are profoundly deep and give us much to guide us in our work with young children. It was a truly inspirational experience to be in the presence of and to learn from the wonderful adults and children at Loczy. My daily work with the children in my care has been deeply enriched by all I saw and learned and by the deep human connections I made there. I look forward to returning to Budapest for the second and third component of the course.

### *Afterword*

This report would not be complete without mention of the sense of community across worldwide borders that lived amongst the participants and faculty during the weeks we were gathered at Loczy. Our long days of study and work together were balanced by carefree social times in the evening—dinners together at lovely garden restaurants, coffee and exquisite Hungarian pastries in the center of Budapest, concerts, and visits to the national museum.

One evening we were invited to visit a Waldorf school located one hour from the city and later to the home of one of the teachers for a delightful dinner in the garden beneath a luminous, full, summer moon. Each of these social encounters helped to nurture and strengthen our sense of world community.

But most memorable of all is the evening when Anna, her husband, Marton, and Gabriella came to visit my husband and I at the flat we had rented. We joined hands in a circle and danced to traditional South American music played live by a group of Ecuadorian friends who live in Budapest. Anna and Gabriella were transformed, as the tiredness of the long day fell away and became pure joy in the spirit

and light-hearted movement of the dance. Music, laughter, and comradere brought the fresh bloom of youth to their faces, a picture of them that I will carry always in my heart.

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