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Research Project

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How Does the Middle School Meet Puberty?

by

Michaela Glockler, M.D.

Thank you for this extremely warm welcome—it is all the more challenging now to offer a contribution after such warm applause. But there is another challenge, this one by Betty Staley, who has asked me to bring into my morning contribution something of Rudolf Steiner's lecture on the etheric heart. As that really is a research project of its own, all that I can hope to do is inspire you to take up this tremendous task so that you go out of this morning hour into the break with the feeling, "This topic merits further reflection and study!" I can assure you that I can't bring to it in this hour the completeness it deserves. In any case, it is not the mission of a lecture to leave people with the impression as they go out, "Now I have it." The best effect of a lecture is to invoke the feeling, "I have made a good start for further study." That is my hope, and by the end we will see whether it has been blessed or not.

I would like to begin with some basic elements of the three seven-year periods of childhood by considering three forms of our bodily constitutions. In the so-called "Christmas course" on children, given in 1920, Rudolf Steiner speaks to the English-speaking world in a very systematic way—something he never did for German-speaking audiences. With the help of George Adams' translation, we have a wonderful description of these constitutions in one lecture cycle. Rudolf Steiner subdivides these seven-year periods into three phases each lasting $2\frac{1}{3}$ years. We know that thinking begins in children around the age of $2\frac{1}{3}$ when they start to say "I", and that indicates a freeing of the etheric forces in the nervous system. Then, between 2 and $4\frac{2}{3}$, we have the freeing of etheric forces in the rhythmic system. And finally, around the age of 7 with the second dentition, we have the freeing of the etheric in the metabolic system. The child can now say, "I want to think," or "I want to keep this picture in my mind."

But if we want to stimulate the child pedagogically during the first seven years, then we don't train its thinking but we support its imagination, its powers of imitation—especially if we give space for real activity of will. A small child will spontaneously try to move; it is a being of

will. The capacities of will in later life receive their basic imprint and are formed and strengthened during the first seven years. Later, in adult life, every lack of will or of strong intentionality, of being able really to take initiative, all are based on the way a child was allowed to incarnate into its body, to live out its own actions. Any movement that I do not make out of my own inner will and desire—for instance, if I am drilled in movements that do not arise out of my free will to move—is damaging to the education of the will. Spending even an hour in front of a TV doing nothing is the worst thing we can do at this age. There is an important polarity at work here: thinking at this age is born by stimulating the will. And we all know that the best support for the development of the brain is the exercise of the senso-motoric system.

Let us jump ahead to the third seven-year phase of development (ages 14-21). The ego organization, which is born first in the upper part of the body and then in the rhythmic system, can only exercise all possibilities of will power when it has finally come to birth in the metabolic system. First the birth of will in thinking: The best example I know comes from literature, and yet this is also obvious in many students at the moment when puberty ends. On average puberty is over when this initial phase of the third seven-year period—that is the time from around 14 to 16 $\frac{1}{3}$ —has come to an end, for that is when thinking is penetrated by the faculty of the ego organization and that is our will power. Our ego is our purest agent of spiritual intentions. I am not referring to the sort of willfulness arising from the drives and instincts of our body, but the sort of will coming from our ego intentionality, our ego organization. When we can observe in the youngster this sort of will in the thinking, then puberty is over because idealism is born.

To return to my example: The French literature professor Jacques Lusseyran describes such a moment in his autobiography, *And There Was Light*. At around the age of 16, all of a sudden he experienced the desire to speak nothing but truth. With his best friend he made a pact: “From now on we will speak nothing but truth to each other.” Then the two boys looked each other in the eye and made this commitment. From that moment on, he adds, he and his friend shared many long periods of silence! But we can say that if you are able to be silent, then puberty is over. An inner landscape opens in which young people start to feel responsible for their own thoughts, and through their ideals they may feel, “I am responsible for what I do in my thoughts, for every word I speak and for every action I take.” When this consciousness is born, then puberty is over and young adulthood has started.

And then comes the delicate period from around 16 to 18 years 7 months—this middle phase of the third period—when the ego organization becomes free in the middle sphere and feeling appears in thinking. Then a sense for what is true, what is authentic, is born along with a tremendous feeling of powerlessness, of feeling insufficiently grown up to meet the world. So it is that at this age we have a high incidence of suicide. Feeling enters into thinking as the ego organization becomes free in this realm. So first we learn to bring will into our thought; then into our emotional lives as we struggle with our emotions including the danger of suicide. Then in the last phase of this period—from around 18 $\frac{2}{3}$ to about 21—this free will enters into our physically orientated will. One can say that “the will enters into the will.” We acknowledge these change in the feeling life and later in the will by allowing our youngsters to vote at 18 (at least in some countries). With this right we recognize that young people have reached a stage of maturity at which they can think independently and, yes, handle their emotions—and yet we do not hold them fully responsible for all of their actions. Only from the age of 21 do we treat criminals in all cases as adults; not always do we take this same view of a young adult of 18 because the will is not yet mature and full responsibility can’t be there yet. So here, in the maturing adolescents, we have the beginning of their free will taking hold of their actions, and this of course is stimulated by thinking

activity. This is the complementary polarity of what we saw in the very young child: here, with the adolescents, we have free will at this age born by stimulating the thinking. Herein lies the challenge for the high school: to bring the youngsters into the possibility of thinking for themselves and in this way bringing the will to maturity.

Now the theme of this morning focuses not on the initial seven period nor on the period of adolescence, but rather on this most precious delicate middle period—from about seven to 14—during which time we have the first coming to birth of the astral feelings. That is the crisis of nine-year-old children who start to feel their thoughts. This may be expressed as a feeling of distance, of antipathy. At this age of 9 or 10, sometimes already at 8, children discover one day that their mother is fat or their father has a very small head or that he has no hair. All of a sudden they start to look at their teachers with a feeling of distance between them. That is the Rubicon crisis. But then, by the age of 12 or so, the children start to feel their feelings, and that is a wonderful, delicate, most precious period. If children are mostly healthy they love the world and love to work; they are extremely motivated at age 11 and 12. They are so nice and then half a year later all this beauty is gone. It is a precious moment while it lasts. They have global interests and they have a huge need to confront the evils of the world—for to deal with evil is a matter of will. We can't feel with the ego; left to itself our heart lacks the willpower needed to make an inner change, to transform ourselves or the outer world. Without will all we can do is suffer. When the teacher tells children of this age stories drawn from world history, especially if he is a bit dramatic, then sometimes the pupils (mostly girls) may approach their teacher during recess and ask, "Can't you help bring about a change, can't you tell the story so that the outcome is changed?" If children experience many tragic things then they need a mirror through which they can learn that even out of tragic events good can come if we can but see them rightly and if we work with the knowledge that comes to us out of tragedy. Learning from tragedy and changing it toward the good is a necessary lesson. In short we develop the life of feeling by stimulating it with aesthetic and moral feelings.

This is the period we now want to focus on. We stimulate this feeling life developmentally by a feeling for beauty. This experience stands at the heart of human development. It is the period for which Rudolf Steiner gives us this saluto-genetic indication: work towards beauty, towards completeness, to show the world more and more as it is in its fulness. The curriculum starts with fairy tales in first grade and ends up with modern history in eighth grade so as to bring children down from heaven really onto the earth—and in this way to experience the world "as it is." This is a huge challenge, especially if one is to do this under the guideline of beauty so that even tragic events are fitted into a complete picture of human history. That is the task we have before us. And now I will try to introduce this mystery of the etheric heart.

Our etheric body is built out of the same substance as our thoughts. If someone wants to experience etheric forces, one has only to say, "Study the life of your thoughts," for then you observe your own etheric body. I am not referring to those etheric forces that bring harmony to the body or those laws of nature that work actively on us but rather to all of the forces and wisdom given to us in our thoughts. To read Rudolf Steiner's *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of Freedom* is a crash course in the etheric. In reading this book you meet your own etheric body in an archetypal way. That is the mission of this book—to wake us up in the etheric. And this etheric body comes together when we incarnate and pull all these forces and wisdom together. It carries all of the eternal cosmic constitutional laws but also everything that has taken place during human history on earth. Every law, every activity, every action by a being is part of

this wonderful etheric network, which is at the same time the stream of time coming from the past, because development is also a product of working according to cosmic laws.

I mention this because a participant at this conference has already mentioned that more and more children and adults are speaking openly about past life experiences. This shows the reality of these etheric forces which, as Betty Staley remarked, are already in our time a bit looser in our head formation—that is, they are not so completely incarnated in the physical, and if we observe this etheric world of living pictures much better and have an easier access to it in the 20th century, then we receive a more conscious impression of the consequences of modern times including modern warfare. For now we possess an entirely new generation of weapons -- and new ways of thinking about using these weapons—that has led to the death of five million in World War I and 15 million in World War II, to say nothing of the millions and millions who have died since from hunger or from the political crises of our own times. But all this is imprinted in the etheric realm and this is part of the etheric body of each individual.

Before we are born we undertake a certain roundup—with the result that we carry in our etheric body what happened before our birth. This is what we start with; then we can develop further, but we still have to live with our etheric inheritance which we received from the world as it was before our birth so that we become a real part of human history and evolution. Rudolf Steiner names the etheric body also the “social body” because we carry the world and cosmic history in it. And when our etheric body now unites with the hereditary stream bestowed on us by our parents through our conception, then for the first seven years our etheric body starts to transform virtually all of our physical body— but it leaves out the region of the heart. The heart cannot be fully transformed during the first seven-year period. Why is this? Because the heart has a very special constitution. It is not only a physical organ in which etheric, astral, and ego are working—it has a much looser constitution. Ego, astral, and etheric are not very strongly united with the physical body around the heart and therefore the etheric takes longer to build up an etheric heart. Thus during the first seven-year period a good foundation of heart forces and etheric forces does no more than to help this physical heart function well. But then the etheric constitution of the heart undergoes a radical change that takes almost seven years to complete. This means that the etheric forces coming from mother and father, along with the normal hereditary forces, are transformed by child in the heart over a much longer period than is the case with other organs. These residual forces really help to bring us onto the earth—they wait until the soul of the child is sufficiently mature to say “yes” to the earth out of its own resolves. And that is the mystery of puberty. Throughout all of childhood we carry in the heart the hereditary forces originating from mother and father; for this reason youngsters enter into such a revolution with their parents at puberty. Before puberty the children may feel quite fine in the family for as long as these inherited heart forces carry them. At puberty they must cast them off.

Rudolf Steiner describes how somewhere starting around the seventh year the child’s etheric body, with its cosmic and prebirthly pictures, becomes more and more involved in the constitutional nature of the physical body and begins to form a new etheric heart. We can think of it this way—that what happens during the first seven years in the life of the young child is a struggle to wrest its physical body from the hereditary forces of its parents, using what it has pulled together in pre-earthly life of its own etheric forces. But what is built-up as the child’s own etheric heart during the second seven-year period of development is something else. Now the child brings together all of its etheric forces that have not yet incarnated in the physical body, along with all the etheric forces used in thinking activity from the third year onwards. These available etheric forces are now used to form the child’s own etheric heart. In other words, the child’s etheric heart is

formed by the core of the child's own thinking forces and those etheric forces that were spared from other physical tasks, with the consequence that ego, astral, and etheric form a looser constitution around the physical heart. And therefore it is so extremely important that during the first seven years the images that children see with their developing capacities of thinking and fantasy are filled with goodness, with "good heartedness." What is good for children at that age is what speaks to the heart. In the second seven-year period, when the child's own etheric forming processes are acting and maturing, they need the guideline of beauty—the kind of beauty that can even make a meaningful whole out of tragic tension, that can offer a transformative perspective—because beauty also speaks to the heart. Above all it is balance that speaks to the heart—especially through the experience of singing. And out of this working together of the child's thinking etheric forces and of its as yet unused etheric forces of the heart region this etheric heart is formed.

Rudolf Steiner says that an initiate can see in a child of 12, 13, 14, 15 years that which has given birth to the etheric heart and has let go of the old etheric heart. The initiate can see that the stars and the moon and earthly history that formed the etheric body of the child and the cosmic landscape around the child lose all these particular gestures. All is now condensed to form the child's own vibrant heart forces; the rest of the body becomes indifferently colored.

During this same seven-year period, from 7 to 14, there are also dramatic changes in the astral body—the body of feeling, music, geometry, proportion, number. Rudolf Steiner sometimes calls the astral body the "number body" because it lives in the tension of polar opposites. Polarities of sympathy and antipathy, the cosmic and the earthly, indeed all polarities are of the same quality as emotions. There are no feelings which don't create a tension between two distinct elements—of harmony and disharmony, of tension and relaxation—and between these two we can sense tension, and that is what feeling is. We bring with our astral body into etheric life the complexity of every little thing we did with other beings. All of our karma sticks to our astrality because karma is the way we relate to other people, to the world and to ourselves. My self-relation is my personal astral problem and part of my karma. With the astral body a child carries all the real outcomes of all the relationships of the past including, if it is part of the real karma, a relationship with teachers and other students. And only in understanding this can we appreciate how children are different with their class teacher, different again with their subject teachers.

I can remember speaking with my teaching colleagues about several difficult students during the ten years I worked as a school doctor at a German Waldorf school. Sometimes a student was so unbearable that the entire faculty thought we would have to let him go, but even in these dire straits there might still be one teacher in the school who had a relationship with this student, and on this relation a new strength could be built. We studied together how to help this child and then this one teacher adopted the child—without telling him, of course. The teacher would try to see the student each day and exchange a few words, perhaps passing him in the hall—a quick, "How are you?" In such cases one must be very, very sensitive but then a complete transformation can come because this is a karmic relationship that can change the child's astrality. The student finds a new security, a firm place to stand emotionally; he can feel acceptance and give acceptance—without which no human being can survive. And this astrality, this substance of relationship and emotion, forms the astral heart in the same period. This is also not a matter of the physical constitution.

Rudolf Steiner says that karma does not take hold of the astral during the first seven years—only the etheric forces are there guided by the ego. Penetration of the physical organs by

the astral occurs during the second seven-year period so that the astral unites completely with the nervous system and with the rhythmic organs. But only through the arteries, which are part of the heart system, can the astral reach the organs below the diaphragm and in this way penetrate the internal organs, the limbs, and the rest of the constitution and so unite astrality with karma. Karma enters muscles and organs through the blood stream so that by the age of 14 we are “karma mature.” Past karma has incarnated and helped us find our way, but now the astral body brings all these karmic relationships and unresolved tensions into our body and our unconscious. That which guides us by means of the blood remains unconscious but the astral body, having done this, is from the age of 14 free of its past karma. It is now available for the free will to form new karma—working on one’s relationships, on one’s emotions. That which comes from our past becomes our constitution and guides us in the form of unconscious drives. We struggle with self-education but our astrality is newly imprinted with every thought I think, every feeling I have in a relationship. This creates my new karma and the heart is the vessel for it. The heart is the region in which I carry in etheric form my desire to contribute to history and to humankind’s well being because I carry the history of humanity and its suffering in my heart; my heart fashions a huge etheric desire to unite myself with global work. Therefore in the curriculum we study the story of humanity from India to Persia through the cultural epochs to the present time. I was once privileged to give a seventh-grade block on the ethnic groups in which we taught the healthy constitution together with all the world economies and the way the human constitution speaks into the world. It is a wonderful block in which the seventh graders learn to love every ethnic group, every human constitution, every form of economic life. Only if we all work together and have interest in each other’s constitution do we become really a fully human race. Since Rudolf Steiner suggested his ideal of economic life, based on the principle of fraternity, we have entered a time of global economy and can start to teach it properly.

Why do we start with Ancient India? It is a misunderstanding to imagine that we follow only one stream through history. It is true that we need to study the sequence of civilizations that resulted in humanity’s present earthly constitution which is materialism. To trace this sequence we need to follow the track of the cultural epochs from Ancient India and Persia to Babylonia and Mesopotamia, to Egypt, the Greeks, and so forth right through the Germanics, the Anglo-Saxons to the Americas of today. But at the same time, in order to allow humanity to find its heart and future perspective, we need to embrace all other spiritual cultures and constitutions so as to make humanity whole again. We should not confuse these two intentions because the students need to experience both so that they can stand on their own feet in the modern technical world while at the same time developing their heart for humanity as a whole.

Our curriculum in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades needs to bring more of social understanding—why there is evil in world. Very tenderly must we work on that—focusing on the fact of evil, not the possibilities evil. Through this treatment we help students in the middle school form their own etheric heart. And, though they must realize what might come to pass, we must bring them to trust their own karma even if they are surrounded by events and images (for instance from videos) that are bad, stigmatized, abused, criminal, horrifying. We protect children in school as much as possible so that they trust in their own karma and find one or two trustworthy relationships, because without that experience in school children can find their karmic heart—the heart for karma and for the bad and evil in life. To trust in all, ultimately, serves one’s well being, and if the heart cannot be supported by us then the ego organization working through the will has no place to land and live. If one’s inner will cannot live meaningfully in the etheric heart and in the forms of karmic life, it is impossible to feel related to one’s time and to live in the world of today.

Then all kinds of aggression and expressions of despair erupt, culminating in desperate acts of suicide or making oneself into a human bomb in a last-ditch effort to change this life or to say with one's actions, "I can no longer stay in this life." Rudolf Steiner said that if the etheric, astral, and ego can't live in the heart, then one becomes most aggressive.

My time is over. I have struggled to fulfil Betty's wish to address the etheric heart and there has not been enough time to address aspects concerning children who live in these times. I am curious how Betty will juggle everything I missed.

* Members of the Waldorf High School Project core group have edited this article and the speaker has reviewed it, however, it is considered to be in draft format lacking a complete edit. It is provided so that AWSNA schools can make use of the content.

— David Mitchell
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