

# Hennig Köhler: Companion to the Companions

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**T**he world of Waldorf education recently marked the passing into the spiritual world of “the warm philosopher of childhood,” Henning Köhler. Köhler was born in Germany, in 1951, and first encountered the ideas of Rudolf Steiner when he was in his early 20s and following a one-year curative education internship at Haus Sonne (Saarland). He ultimately became a clinical therapeutic educator and counselor. Henning Köhler’s views were both radical and transformative.

*The ability to devote ourselves to children in ‘knowing understanding’ (in particular to those who put us most severely to the test) presupposes a fundamental transformation of our attitude. That is easy to say and... possible to do, albeit only through considerable effort.*

Hennig Köhler, *Difficult Children*, p. 31

Two of Henning Köhler’s books have been translated into English. The first one, *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children*,<sup>1</sup> fondly referred to as the Pink Book, is a key to understanding the impact of the foundational senses on physical, social, and moral development of the child. In this book, we also begin to understand the profound influence of the quality of our attention when we are observing the child and how to work with the child’s angel.

In his second book, *Difficult Children – There Is No Such Thing*,<sup>2</sup> Köhler asks us to recognize that understanding another human being is a creative, artistic process, and further to consider the idea of parenting and education as an initiatory experience. He introduces and describes in detail the four central concepts of this process: *protecting, accompanying, comforting, and healing*. Köhler awakens anew the awe we feel in the presence of children who are bringing us fresh messages from the spiritual world and

are trusting us to help them solve the riddles of this earthly life.

The following short tributes come from four early childhood educators, all of whom feel deeply indebted to Henning Köhler and his work.

## Loving Companionship

*We must stand at the child’s side with a waiting attitude, simply be there, patient.*

Köhler, *Difficult Children*, p. 128

When I think about the work of Henning Köhler, the word that immediately comes to mind is “companionship.” To me companionship means understanding and affirming that each child, each human being, has come into physical life with the intention to experience, grow, and learn for our own development and to serve the growth of goodness, beauty, and truth in our society. In our times, we see many children who have chosen to come, even if it means facing challenges and difficulties. They have also chosen us as their loving companions who will accompany them on this life’s journey.

**In his second book, *Difficult Children – There Is No Such Thing*, Köhler asks us to recognize that understanding another human being is a creative, artistic process.**

Each child comes to tell us something important. It has been said that everything a child does, all behavior, is communication. Actions, moods, celebrations, and frustrations are also their means of speech. Our children come to us, trusting that we will accept and understand what they are wishing to tell us about their experience of being on this earth. This communication can come to us as signs of distress, often described as “challenging behavior.” If we are baffled and frustrated in these difficult times, our response may be to become firm, authoritarian, even harsh. Typically, everyone ends up unhappy and isolated from one another.

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Köhler offers a different path. Instead of seeing “misbehavior,” he urges us to receive the child as a mystery-of-transformation struggling to unfold. All of us—adults as well as children—are in a process of becoming. A beautiful butterfly lies hidden within each

1 Henning Köhler, *Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed Children: A Spiritual Perspective to Guide Parents* (Chatham, NY: Waldorf Publications, 2000).

2 Henning Köhler, *Difficult Children: There Is No Such Thing: An Appeal for the Transformation of Educational Thinking* (Chatham, NY: Waldorf Publications, 2013).

of us. But the caterpillar in the crusty, drab brown chrysalis has to turn into green “goop” before it can emerge as the glorious butterfly. It has to struggle out of its tight imprisonment by bursting the chrysalis open. This process cannot be forced or hurried but must be allowed to proceed according to its own pace and inherent wisdom. These seeming prohibitions can make us feel powerless.

In his therapeutic educator role, Köhler met with parents who came for advice on how to change their child’s difficult behaviors. He gave lectures and guidance in a surprising way. He counseled the parents on *how to change themselves*. We can try to change a child to our will, but the only change we can truly control is within ourselves. We can work to change our perception of what we see and hear and how we respond. How do we do that? By bearing witness, accompanying, comforting through silent caring and patient waiting; these are forms of doing that carry unacknowledged power. Köhler states that what matters is that we allow time for the mystery to unfold. “We must stand at the child’s side with a waiting attitude, simply be there, patient.”

In tense moments we can slow and quiet our breathing and give the child a model to imitate. Wait for the storm to pass—it will! We can offer an inner gesture of warm embrace. In the long term, we can open our hearts to feel and hear, be still. Practice patience. Companion. Accompany. Köhler comforts us to accept the mystery-of-the-other as the starting place. Then the door to understanding—perhaps only with the heart, not with the head—can begin to open, because the other feels accepted and companioned rather than judged.

On a personal note, the ideas shared by Henning Köhler have affected in profound ways my life as a parent and grandparent, educator with children and teachers, and unofficial counselor with families. His warm, compassionate holding of children and their parents stands as a gift. Thank you, “warm philosopher of childhood.” May your words continue to companion us all.

#### **Nancy Blanning**

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## **The Dignity of the Young Child**

*Before we even receive her as a guest that is looking for the way, the child raises upright her entelechy of hope to a place beyond the reach of our influence, to a space of innocence.*

*Köhler, *Difficult Children*, p. 121*

Henning Köhler was a remarkable advocate for the dignity of the young child. With genuine compassion he gazed into the spirit of the child working to enter her earthly body and experienced the heart of her situation. His capacity to engage in the depth of childhood development, enriched by clear perceptions and a tender heart, has given teachers and parents a warm understanding into the world of the young child. Inspiration streamed into the creativity of his deep thoughts that relay renewing ways of approaching children.

He encouraged the caretakers of the child to work on their own emotional soul life and find the strength to overcome the irritations and judgement that they inwardly encounter with children that face challenges. Köhler stressed the need to contemplate each situation with the child by selflessly feeling in oneself what the child feels in order to sense what their experience is. By adjusting the atmosphere in our attitude towards our expectations and prejudices of ‘how the child should be’, we open our arms and fully accept the child as they are, knowing that each human being is “an entity of hope”; their essence is in their becoming. Teachers and parents are the guardians, the holders of this treasure for the child, orienting themselves towards the child’s potential.

Henning Köhler was what Martin Luther King, Jr., coined as a ‘non-conformist’. His work came out of knowing that every human being is a citizen of two worlds, “the world of time and the world of eternity” (MLK). He followed the path of a dedicated non-conformist and stuck to his convictions rather than the formulas that narrow the approach to the child that consist of rules and judgements. The independent thought and spiritual practice in his work with children often went against the stream of expediency that sought to change a child’s behaviors and embraced a new creative outlook that calls for patience and loving understanding. Deepening the relationship to the child in this way builds trust. For Köhler, the gift of this approach is that “the child entrusts herself to me and this feeling heals. When the child resolves to entrust herself to

us, she does so in agreement with higher beings and is filled with the impression of her transition through the sphere of pure human love.” The teacher or parent feels honored by this gift of self-entrustment.

Köhler speaks of “places where the educational relationship is cultivated and permeated with artistic spirit: laboratories of the future, nurseries of hope.” He gives us advice that touches on the very source of the pedagogical task: “Healing means to give hope, to give hope means to have hope, and whether or not a person has hope is a question of thinking. A person’s hopeful thinking about another person is loving thinking, that is, thinking inspired by the essence of childhood.”

**Laurie Clark**

*Lead Kindergarten Teacher, The Denver Waldorf School*

## Relationship as Key

*You either dignify or debase. You either take up a relationship or break it off. Vision that takes up relationships heals; the view that breaks them off harms. The latter stockade a child into a version of what it has become, and this version is not its own; the former turns to that future which can only be the child’s own and fetches this future into the here and now by entering to the relational process.*

*Köhler, Difficult Children, p. 47*

Henning Köhler sits with me as I sit cross-legged on what the children in my care call “Ramp Mountain.” Ramps—also called wild onions or leeks—cover the hillside in a blanket of green. In the week of Henning Köhler’s passing, the ramps were calling for harvest, and so, as children scampered about under a canopied cathedral of trees, I sat, dug, and cleaned soil from the bulbs of the ramps one at a time. Slow, methodical, meditative. Children came and went to help as I sat, worked, and peered into the stormy grey eyes of a child sitting at a near distance across from me.

Earlier in the morning, this child had knocked classmates to the ground during circle—the ground, in this case, a flat exposed piece of granite—and then jumped on top of them. Sequentially, individually, as I did my best to corral the child into my teacher body while howls of distress descended into the space of our circle. As masked face met masked face, the child looked up to say, “I am laughing under my mask.”

A typical moment in my accompaniment of this child.

**The second requirement of the Watchman is that we have formed a clear and living image of the child, an image that is the result of our actually having taken the time to lovingly and attentively observed the child.**

Now the child had asked to sit with me. In his words, “I will sit here and wait.” And so, I have the opportunity to see the furrowed brow, the stormy grey eyes looking out and seeking, and because the words and presence of Henning Köhler are so fresh in me, I see and ask, “Where have you gone? What brings such weight to you?”

“Faithfulness,” Henning Köhler reminds me. In the shadow moments of our human encoun-

ters, we have the choice to look to the light. Or not.

Henning Köhler urges me to stay steadfast in my accompaniment of the children, all children, and that I must see the task of accompaniment as it comes in the moment with the child—this child—in front of me. And if not “this” child, then another. The children, our children, each and every, one by one.

This voice that cuts to the essence of our work tells me to dig deep within myself to understand. To observe with a thinking heart. To put aside the external stuff in order that I might devote myself to the essential task: The relationship. Deepening the relationship.

As I prepare for sleep after a day, a different day in an ongoing journey of destiny and freedom, in which this child came from behind to scratch at the eyes and face of a passively unengaged other, Henning Köhler tells me that tomorrow is another day. I make a plan. I will try again to understand. I will try again to hold the faithfulness that I need to have in order to be whatever this child needs me to be so that he may find himself, a social self, a self in relation to others.

**Stephanie Hoelscher**

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## “Who are you and who am I and what do we have to do with each other?”

*To whom do we owe the privilege and/or the ability to do nothing less than continue the work of the gods? The child. The idea of childhood has no foundation without the insight that it is not possible to influence the educational process unless*

*the child empowers us to do so. The child is the divine messenger. Not the educator. The educator is given back a piece of his or her lost closeness to heaven by being given the chance to prove him or herself worthy of this gift. The same holds true for the social organism as a whole.*

*Köhler, Difficult Children, p. 122*

In his first book, *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children – A Spiritual Perspective for Parents*, Köhler gives us a very potent image with which to work. He speaks about the Watchman at the Bridge, whom we can meet on our way into sleep. He tells us that in order to earn the right to connect with a child's angel, we need to bring to the Watchman a clearly thought-out question that concerns us for the child's sake and not for our own. The second requirement of the Watchman is that we have formed a clear and living image of the child, an image that is the result of our actually having taken the time to lovingly and attentively observed the child. This is a practice that I used daily in my life as an early childhood teacher and was an invaluable support to me, to the children in my care, and sometimes to their parents as well.

In Köhler's view, the children who are coming to earth now may, in fact, be extraordinarily light-filled and courageous souls. Our task is not to rid them and ourselves from the challenges they bring, but to recognize what they are telling us about the ill-fitting world that we are creating. Their gift to us, their parents and teachers, is that in truly seeking to understand what a specific child in our care is asking for, we uncover a hidden piece of ourselves. We become more whole human beings. We are the ones who are being rescued! If we can grasp the spiritual principles that guide our learning to understand another human being, there is hope for us all.

**Holly Koteen-Soulé**

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