

Birth to the Age of Three: Our Responsibility ***Dorothy Olson, Duncan, B.C.***

Reprinted from the Autumn/Winter 1995 issue of the British Waldorf Kindergarten Assn. Newsletter from notes taken from Dorothy 's workshop at the International Conference.

What is our responsibility to this age group?

One of the answers comes to us from Rudolf Steiner, from Lecture I in the collection of lectures in *Study of Man*. "...here in the human being you with your action, have to achieve a continuation of what higher beings have done before the child's birth." In the same lecture we are asked to "become aware of birth as an integral part of human development." We are asked to remember that the human being evolves through a long period between death and a re-birth, and as it were, "dies for the spiritual world." The Higher Hierarchies have worked on the soul-spirit and given it the strength to incarnate into a physical body here on earth. To incarnate, to take on a body of flesh is a struggle for the new soul-spirit as it strives to form the inherited physical body as its own. Rudolf Steiner describes this struggle in another lecture series, *Kingdom of Childhood* "...if a glove were to fit your hand as badly as the body generally fits the soul, you would discard it at once."

The first seven years of life are needed for the mutual "attunement" of soul-spirit and life body. In normal circumstances, it is the parents who at first take on this task, who are

responsible for continuing the work of the higher beings, whether they are aware of this or not. This is also a question of destiny. We are told by Rudolf Steiner that the child chooses the parents, that this has been planned and worked over for many eons of time. However, today, with widespread contraception and abortion, is it possible that many a soul-spirit is not able to incarnate in it's "first choice" situation? This raises questions about a further comfortable attitude that the young child, the under-three's, should be at home in the care of the mother. For many families this is no longer possible, and for some, it may not even be desirable.

So the questions arise, what can we do to help the incarnation, what can we do to help foster the ego intention and assist the destiny for the new incarnation? How can we fulfill our responsibility? When does our responsibility begin? A first question is: what about pre-natal education?

Prenatal education clearly belongs as an education for the parents. In many countries there is much in place for the education and care of the mother. In spite of this there are still many babies born with serious physical hindrances as a result of drug and alcohol abuse. Addressing these problems is not in the scope of this discussion.

In regard to the possible education of the unborn child, Rudolf Steiner is very clear. In the same first lecture in *Study of Man*, he states, "...prenatal education does not belong to the human domain... it can only be an unconscious result of what the parents, especially the mother, achieve," and he goes on to say, "...the less we think of beginning to educate the child before it sees the light of the world and the more we think of leading a right and proper life ourselves, the better it will be for the child. Education can only begin when the child becomes a true member of the physical world." I do believe that we must pay particular attention to the statement of Rudolf Steiner's in regard to the mother's soul life, of her emotional state, for it is of utmost importance for the well-being of the yet unborn child.

This brings us to the next questions. What form does this education take? How will it be brought to the as yet unconscious child and by whom? For the newborn human child this cannot as yet be consciously done by the child itself. We recognize our role as parents and educators in that we are to take this up and be the consciousness for the newborn. How do we go about doing this?

If we are to provide a foundation for the eventual flowering of the consciousness soul in the life of the individual, we ourselves must be prepared in our own soul-spirit. This is not a state of being which is ever completed, but one of continual striving. One of the first goals we can strive for is to provide an environment where the child can experience the "good." If we strive to do the good in word and deed this would ask of us to work out of a sound moral and ethical base. A

beginning for this ideal is to practice living the great virtues, which Rudolf Steiner describes so eloquently in a lecture, *The Great Virtues* (Zurich, Jan. 31, 1915)

These great virtues are: Justice, Temperance (prudence), Courage (fortitude), and Wisdom. The remaining three, Faith, Love and Hope are only touched on in this lecture but further developed in other lectures. Further to this we are given a picture of the archetypal human where there lives “truth in the thinking, love in the feeling and freedom in the will (intention).” Waldorf education is devoted to these ideals which are closely related to the Christ being. It is interesting to note that the ideals of truth, love and freedom are carried by all beliefs and religions. Our self education precedes the education of the child. The child learns by imitation, and in our striving for the “good” within ourselves we will become worthy of imitation.

Rushworth M. Kidder, in his book *How Good People Make Tough Choices* says that we recognize the goodness in people when we experience them as having some conscious sense of vision and some deep core of ethical values. These qualities give them the courage to stand up to tough choices. To stand up for what we think is right for our children, to make a right choice for their education, there are tough choices today. In many ways we may be seen to be going against the mainstream of Western society.

Out of a devotion and reverence for all that is given by the Spirit for the growing child, out of gratitude and love for what the child is and, what it brings into the incarnation, we may be inspired to develop “goodness” in ourselves. This will help us to carry out this responsibility to the incarnating child.

How and where in the first three years, in the early years of the child's life, can we bring our sense of goodness to expression? The birth itself - there is much that can be done to protect the infant at birth. If possible, and if the parents are comfortable with the idea, help arrange that the birth be at home in the care of a competent midwife. If it is to be a hospital birth, help ensure the support of an understanding and supportive doctor. One of the needs of the newborn is to be held supine across the mother's heart. There the infant can continue to hear the heartbeat of the mother which has been a constant in utero.

This is an affirmation for the infant and it allows time for an adjustment to the world which it has entered. The father's presence, and the sharing and exchange of eye contact between mother, father and infant is a further affirmation and establishes the bonding fundamental to the soul life of the new incarnation. It is important that the infant not be separated from the mother, but be cradled in the same room. It is important that the infant be tenderly caressed and held and rocked. There is nothing to be gained, and harm can ensue, if a young infant is allowed to cry for long periods of time. Breast feeding is fundamental to the physical and soul life of the child and is yet another expression of the “good.” If at all possible the infant should be kept at home for at least the first six weeks of life. After that, and for as long as possible, the baby should not be trundled around in cars and taken to public places. It is far better for the baby to be taken for walks in a sturdy baby carriage or English pram. Is it still possible to find this truly fine and worthy carriage for the baby? A safe place in which to sleep out of doors, well protected from the wind and the direct sunlight, is a help to babies.

The nerve sense system of the infant and little child needs the utmost care and protection. This care and development of the senses, particularly the four lower or “will” senses, is of particular importance for the future development of the consciousness soul. The care of the other physical senses -- sight, hearing, smell and taste -- are also fundamental to healthy development of body, soul and spirit.

Furthermore, in the early months of life the baby needs to experience the “good” through the consistent and continued presence and response of the mother, or if not the mother, then of another consistent caretaker. When the child feels loved and accepted, a quality of trust, which is fundamental to the future quality of relationships the individual has to other people and to the world in general, is established. If parents are under stress and hurried, or if the child is neglected physically or emotionally, this leads to a loss in the soul life and puts the later spiritual development at risk.

The infant should not be hurried in its physical development, but given the time, space and opportunity for nature to take its course. It takes weeks, months and years for human development to take place. Movement is an integral part of human development. The latest research has shown that the development of neural pathways to the brain and brain growth and

development are dependent on the child being able to move freely and continually. The reflex movements are present at birth. Slowly, during the early months, the eye and hand movements come under control of the developing child. It is indeed a marvel to observe the “growing down” into the physical body, as the movement of head, neck, shoulders, trunk and hips bring the little body into a roll and then into a crawling position. Then to experience the miraculous expression of that which is truly human as the child comes into the upright position and begins to walk. Rudolf Steiner spoke of the three spiritual gifts of the hierarchies, especially the third hierarchy, which make us truly human. This first one is given by the Archai, as the child comes to walking in the first year. The second, is the gift of human speech given to us by the Archangels, and comes to expression in the second year of life. The third is the gift of the ability to think, which is given to us by the Angels, and this comes to expression around the age of three with the ability of the child to say “I” for itself.

These three gifts are given by the third hierarchy during the first three years. Here again we are asked to fulfill our responsibility, to care for and protect the growing child so that in each case the full potential of the incarnation may be realized. Then, in maturity, the human being is able to find the true self and is able to make choices in freedom for his or her own life. To quote Rudolf Steiner, “Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings who are able of themselves to impart purpose and direction to their lives.”

How do we support these stages of development? The baby should be left in the horizontal position and not propped up, it should be allowed to struggle, and through movement to come into the upright stance. This striving strengthens the physical body as well as the life and the will forces.

The awakening consciousness wants to move the body in space, and it is this awakening consciousness that enables the child to comprehend his/her own self by the end of the first year. It is our task not to hinder the process but to allow nature to take its course. In coming into the upright and walking, the child begins to experience the separation between self and the world.

In the striving for connection with other human beings speech is acquired, and with speech, the child becomes aware of self. In learning to speak, the child needs to hear human speech, and to experience being heard. Language unfolds within the child and expresses itself in speech. Talking is the true acquisition of one's native language and is only possible if the child grows up in a talking environment. Our responsibility is to speak clearly, use a varied vocabulary and to respond through gesture and word to the child's developing speech. We do not teach speech, we do not correct the child's speech, we do not indulge in baby talk. We do not force or cajole or correct pronunciation. Our role is that of example.

Out of the movement of the limbs, the child plays with all the objects in his world. The urge to take each thing and to connect with each other, is expressed in the child's play activity. The child plays with words in the same way the child plays with words. Through the medium of speech the child gains possession of the world. The inner world of feeling can come to expression, and through talking and naming the outer world can be understood.

In the third year, the child is at the threshold of thinking. The child becomes fully aware of self and says “I” for self. The individuality comes to expression for the first time and memory is born.

I quote the words of Rudolf Steiner in the lecture series *The Modern Art of Education*: “In helping the child as he learns to walk, we must be pervaded by love. In helping the child to gain the power of speech, we must be absolutely truthful. Our own thinking must be clear if right thinking is to develop in the child from the forces of speech.”

This leads us to an important aspect of “goodness.” It is that we must provide appropriate boundaries for the child. When we give direction to the child or make requests of the child, or say that we are going to do something, we must be clear in our thinking, phrase our request in the positive, then stay with the direction and be consistent. If we reverse direction, we damage the child, we cause nervousness and insecurity. Parents and teachers who are constantly inconsistent, do not allow the child to meet the realities of existence. The child is then educated for a life which does not exist, becomes weak, and is at the mercy of its surroundings and of other people.

Our task, our responsibility as parents and teachers may be seen as formidable. It may also be seen as an opportunity, a motivation to choose a spiritual path, to strive to do the “good.” Inasmuch as we act out of goodness, love and wisdom, striving to do the right action brings us into contact with the Spirit of our time, the Archangel Michael.

To quote Herbert Hahn: “Remember daily that you are continuing the work of the spiritual world with the children. You are the preparers of the path for these young souls who wish to form their lives in these difficult times. The spiritual world will always stand by you in this task. This is the wellspring of strength which you so need.”

Bibliography:

- Rudolf Steiner, *Study of Man Stuttgart*, August-September 1919, Lecture I.
Rudolf Steiner, *The Modern Art of Education* England, August 1923.
Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood* England, August 1924, Lecture I and 2.
Rudolf Steiner, *The Waking of the Human Soul and the Forming of Destiny* Prague, April 1923.
Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity* August 1911.
Rudolf Steiner, *Metamorphosis of the Soul: Paths of Experience* Lecture 5.
Joan Salter, *The Incarnating Child*
Wilhelm Zur Linden, M.D., *A Child is Born*
Bernard Lievegoed, *Phases of Childhood*