

The Lives and Work of Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber

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I brought a pot of tiny daffodils to my hostess as a gift, and in selecting them, I chose the pot that was the least developed with only leaves and buds, short and tightly closed, showing forth. I hoped that the daffodils would open after I had left and be a warm and cheerful gift for the days to follow. But the first morning, to my surprise, the first two blossoms had opened, and by that evening, two more were showing their cheerful faces. I commented in surprise to my friend, who replied, "Well, it's quite warm in here, you know. And we all know how warmth enhances the growth of all living things!" As I looked more closely, I was struck by the beauty of each blossom, despite varying phases of openness. One faced me fully open, six golden petals raying out from the trumpet. Another petal bent the slightest bit toward me, while its five companions rayed away. Another blossom was a bit less perfectly symmetrical; three of the petals reached in one direction, while the other three turned away just the tiniest bit.

And the third was still partially in bud—the golden color, the green calyx all showed through their paper wrapping, but all was still in anticipation. The fourth, it was in-between. Several petals had pushed their way out of their wrapper on the bottom half of their circumference, while the others remained still inside. I was greatly struck by the absolute perfection of each of the flowers, despite their complete individuality. They reminded me of young children: perfect in each moment of their development, a full picture of being at each stage. Yet how often we are pulled to feel that what is to come will be the real fulfillment—some marking milestone such as sitting, standing, walking, or speaking. This gesture of appreciating what is, rather than looking onward to what might or will be, is one of the as-

pects of Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber's work which lighted up my interest from our first meeting.

A cornerstone of our work in anthroposophy is observation. Rudolf Steiner teaches us, through his own enthusiasm and clarity, about the value of observation. "It is extraordinarily interesting to watch a child learning to walk. You must learn to observe this ... This is the first thing to look for in a child; for how a child moves reveals the most inward urge of life, the primal life impulse." (Lecture 3 in *Human Values in Education*, by Rudolf Steiner, in *Understanding Young Children*) I believe that the Hungarian pediatrician Emmi Pikler was one of the first to take what he said to heart him, for this is just what she did. In her work she observed children's growth and movement with tremendous attention to detail. Let us look at the lives and work of two true pioneers in early childhood education, Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber, explore the common insights and values between their work and Waldorf early childhood education, and look at the gifts that their efforts can offer to us.

Emmi Pikler

Emmi Pikler spent ten years from the 1930's into the 1940's as a family pediatrician in Budapest, Hungary. Her devotion to the very young child led her to guide parents in a uniquely intimate way, making daily home visits for the first ten days after a baby's birth, and continuing with weekly visits over the early months. Her work with over one hundred children, giving guidance to families in child rearing, gave her confidence that her insights and approach were viable.

She was, as well, an astute phenomenological observer and meticulous researcher who brought her observations into a continuously evolving practice. Because of this work, she was invited by the Hungarian government in 1946 to create an orphanage

for children from birth to three years old whose mothers had died in childbirth or from tuberculosis. This center was called the National Methodological Institute, or more familiarly "Loczy," after the name of its street location. The seventy children here were cared for by caregivers trained precisely by Dr. Pikler to carry forth the ideas she had developed out of her pediatrics work. Over the next twenty years, over 700 children lived at Loczy, where their growth and development were documented meticulously by a team comprised of, not only their caregivers, but also the doctors and other professionals on the staff.

What was the historical perspective that inspired Pikler? She had observed the growing intensity of "teaching" infants: the adult would decide what babies needed to know, and when and how they were to do things. Being with a young child became increasingly a task of "training" the child as less and less attention was paid to the infant's own initiatives. She noticed that these initiatives became scarcer and scarcer if they were not recognized, and that the child would then become totally dependent upon the adult. Losing the capacity for self-reliance. The child would even become dependent upon the adult for support in learning motor skills.

From her observation, Pikler was convinced that the child's very experience of competence arises from self-initiated active motility (responses that involve muscular sensations) and the changes produced as a result of motility. We know from the research of Marshall Klaus and John Kennell that this basic human need for forming contact through the infant's own activity can be observed immediately after birth, when the newborn navigates from the mother's belly to the breast, latching on to nurse all by herself.

Pikler also noted that in developing motor capacities, the child's transitional postures were critical. Thirdly, she pointed out that it is our daily experience that weakens or reinforces belief in our own capacities and effectiveness. In other words, each act of bodily care, of play, or other learning day by day builds up the child's sense of self as a competent being. For Pikler, the basic elements of competent behavior are self-dependent initiation of action, independence of performing the action, and the effectiveness of the action-in which the formation of contact with others is deemed the primary capacity above all others.

All three elements are required of ourselves continuously as adults. We are dependent upon our own capacities for self-initiated action and initiative to function in the world.

Pikler's leading question was this: how do we instill competence in the very young? She encountered capacities in the newborn at one week of age, for example. She wondered, "If these natural capacities develop so early, how are they utilized by the child, and how do they develop further?"

The traditional method for observation of the child looks at what the child does in response to observer elicited capacities rather than what the child spontaneously and independently could do. For Pikler, as for Stanley Greenspan, one could make quite different observations if one looked at the child himself. Her skillful eyes saw that the child tensed or relaxed at the touch of an adult and exhibited positive or negative contact with the adult in just a few days, dependent on the touch and even the approach of the adult. Pikler's extreme sensitivity allowed her insightful observation of the life sense.

In addition, if we notice and respond, the child will make more and more initiatives. The child who is actively engaged in caregiving will be active beyond caregiving times. She saw that the child's pleasure and desire to initiate remain unchanged throughout the whole period of infancy. A pattern of progress through the entire course of motor and manipulative development would then be characterized by competent behavior and mastery. These observations leading to the development of the formal program at Loczy, evolved out of two fundamental principles:

1. An appropriate physical environment that allowed space for rolling, turning, crawling, and creeping and offered appropriate objects for manipulation.
2. A proper attitude of the adult. No helping or teaching were permitted, since these deprived children of self-dependent achievement.

The child's daily life gives her continuous opportunities for learning how to learn, for experimenting and for overcoming obstacles and problems through her own patient efforts.

Pikler clearly points out what many teachers know, that it is the slower child who is at greater risk for undesirable intervention. These are also the

very children with whom the adult becomes impatient in awaiting the new developmental step. Pikler was confident that these early experiences affect all of life.

Magda Gerber

A young mother had a daughter with a sore throat one day, and her regular pediatrician was not available. The daughter suggested that they call the mother of her friend and playmate, "Anna's mother," because she was a doctor. They did so, and thus began a lifelong collegueship between Magda Gerber, the mother, and Emmi Pikler, the pediatrician. And that little girl, Anna, is now the director of the Pikler Institute in Budapest.

Magda Gerber was so moved by the respectful way in which Dr. Pikler met her own child that she went to work with her, studying to earn a master's degree in child development and, in 1945, taking up her work at Loczy. Gerber and Pikler worked together until the Communist takeover in 1956 made her family's stay in Hungary no longer possible. Her husband was jailed for his political beliefs; her daughter- still in her teens- was imprisoned after being caught trying to cross the border out of Hungary. It is not difficult to imagine that Magda Gerber's passionate belief in the freedom of each child to express himself through his own movement choices, in the respect of each parent for his or her child, were deeply reinforced by these personal experiences.

After managing to escape to Vienna, the Gerbers then traveled to the United States, eventually settling in southern California in 1957. Here Magda worked with autistic children for seven years and, in 1968, founded the Pilot Infant Project in Palo Alto, a program designed as a preventative mental health project for infants. This Demonstration Infant Project work took the Loczy work to the next step, beyond an institution to an application in real family situations. In 1973, she began the parent-infant guidance classes in Los Angeles that led to the founding of RIE (Resources for Infant Educarers) in 1978.

Gerber's special interest was in infant development prior to the unfolding of language. This interest led to profound work with supporting families in the first two years of life. She taught child development at UCLA, California State University, and Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena.

As her work unfolded at the RIE center in Los

Angeles, she articulated its goals in detail:

1. The respectful treatment of children from birth, partnered with the building of a relationship between infant and parent that also respects the adult's needs.
2. The use of observation as a support in "tuning in" to each child's unique needs.
3. An invitation to parents to relax and observe more so that they could truly enjoy what they see their children doing.

The RIE logo, *the waiting hand*, gives a beautiful picture of the way in which respect for the child is put into practice: the gesture of the adult awaits the deed of initiative from the child.

Illumination From One Stream To Another

As Waldorf educators, we place the development and protection of the child's senses very centrally in our work. Both Pikler and Gerber also focused their work here. Let us begin by looking at the life sense. Henning Kohler gives a beautiful description in *Working with Nervous, Anxious and Depressed Children*:

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 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."

For Pikler, all caregiving evolved out of this recognition:

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. Later he gets used to it, tolerates it. If, from the start, we handle an infant peacefully, patiently and carefully, she will discover ever more joy in these activi-

ties, learning at the same time to trust us more and more, and to take an increasing part in our work. Even if she blinks her eyes and makes faces when we prepare some cotton dipped in chamomile tea, she will hold up her head so we can reach her eye, nose, or even ear. . . The child already knows the order in which things will happen in the care situation. She can give us a hand as we dress her, and gives us one foot to dry after the other ... She looks forward to something pleasant happening.

When one views the work from the Pikler Institute on videotape, the principles in Waldorf education of rhythm, of repetition, and of attention to the sense of touch are evident in every gentle, sensitive, and deliberate gesture. The life sense is strengthened with each meeting between infant and caregiver. In addition, we observe the process of imitation in the child's response to the caregiver's care, offered in the most profoundly respectful manner and, in itself, a response to the child's own gesture of engagement and cooperation. The child acts and moves in qualitative imitation of what she experiences from the hands and heart of the adult. The social, higher senses of the adult are finely developed, engaging with the lower senses of the child through touch and life, all in one exchange. Bodily care is given as a sacred ritual.

Kohler describes the infant's (and young child's) need for reverential, relaxed devotion of the caregiver to these "nourishing and warming acts of bodily care; they must be done with true inner participation." This is precisely what happens at Loczy.

When the human child leaves his spiritual home at birth and joins his earthly family, he leaves behind a world in which he felt at home, in which great learning and significant encounters had taken place. When we care for the child out of our anthroposophical understandings, we are endeavoring to ease the pain of this loss of the human being's spiritual home, this "death" to the land of spirit. We know that our task is to continue the work of the hierarchies as we care for the child trying to make himself at home in his physical body.

Nowhere does Pikler explicitly express a sense of the child as both spiritual and earthly. However, every deed of the Loczy caregiver is designed to ease the pain of the loss of the child's birth home and her biological parents. Through the hands, eyes, voice,

and gesture of her caregiver the child is made to feel at home and joyful in her body, feeling over and over again that the world is good. Her ideal is to create an experience that invites the child to reach out into this good world, to explore it, to build relationship with it, and to find joy in it. We know out of our study of spiritual science that for the child, this journey is aided through the child's relationship to her angel. The following quote could equally represent Pikler or Waldorf education, and it happens to come from Kohler:

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 which allows for what might be called a reverential atmosphere.

In every detail, we see Dr. Pikler's attention to the working of what we would describe as the adult's higher senses upon the child and his bodily senses. Pikler and Gerber were both passionate about the sense of movement and the journey to walking-enabling each child to unfold his bodily movement out of his own initiative from the very beginning of life.

While learning during motor development to turn onto the belly, to roll, to creep, sit, stand, and walk, he is not only learning how to learn those movements, but also how to learn. He learns to do something on his own, to be interested, try out, to experiment. He learns to overcome difficulties. He comes to know the joy and satisfaction that is derived from this success, the result of his patience and persistence. I am, of course, always speaking of children who have not been stimulated, let alone pushed by adults to try a new movement. Only then can you see the quietness, the attentive, deep concentration which notices nothing else, the joy and satisfaction which characterizes the learning process ... The child who is learning in that way. . . wants to learn independently, undisturbed, in her own way.

In this quote, Pikler observes the child in the first three years and his determined work to keep out any intrusions into his own activity. Albert Steffan describes Rudolf Steiner's words about learning to

walk and speak: "Here again the rule holds good that 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."

Numerous themes are woven together: the unfolding of the sense of movement, the self-education and will development of the child, and the sacred activity of moving from the horizontal to the vertical. Both Steiner and Pikler would protect the child from intrusions into these capacities at all costs. For Pikler, the child's very individuality was at stake. How could the child become who she was without freedom, freedom to strengthen each muscle in the way she knows best, to spend the ideal amount of time practicing each posture, to find out what are her own interests. And the title of her book, *Lass Mir Zeit, Selbst Zu Tun*, says everything, "Give me time to do it myself." Steiner invites us to observe the young child learning to move. "The principle of imitation comes to light in gesture, in movement. For gesture is what appears first of all in human evolution." (Lecture 3 in *Human Values in Education*, by Rudolf Steiner, in *Understanding Young Children*, p. 32) In Pikler's words:

What is essential is that the child discover as much as possible for himself. If we help him to perform all the tasks he meets, we deprive him of just this, which is of greatest importance for his intellectual development ... Therefore, we allow a child to experience his environment in his individual way, and according to his individual development. [pg 23]

Each of these examples, I hope, gives you a flavor of how Emmi Pikler and the Pikler Institute developed these foundation principles for the work and care of the young children who came to live there. For Pikler, the child's autonomy and well-being were paramount. The caregiver's primary responsibility is to elicit cooperation from the child by offering that cooperation herself. As the child grows, he offers more and more to their relationship. The life sense and the sense of touch in the child are evolved with great delicacy through the sensitivity of the adult. These are the very qualities that we, as Waldorf educators, strive to develop.

Observation as Method

Pikler based her understanding and educational principles upon scrupulous observation. In her early years as a pediatrician working with families, she began her observations. These she continued at Loczy, documenting every detail of the children's care as well as their development. Her research studies, published in professional journals, document her work in demonstrating the value of unhindered motor development for the infant. The documentation of each child's journey offers a path of inspiration for his caregivers, as they see that their careful tending have led to such health and well being for each child. It was not as an observer being on the outside looking in, but observing in a way that integrates and deepens the caregiver's relationship with the child. Is this not closely related to the activity of a teacher who creatively undertakes a child study in order to invite insights about who this child is and how she might best care for that child?

The caregiver at Loczy cultivates her attentiveness in every regard: the child is never treated like an object, nothing is done with haste, and the care is never interrupted. These conditions reinforce the experience of gentleness and an I-Thou meeting at every caregiving moment. Harmony and mutual satisfaction come from each encounter. In between these caregiving I-Thou encounters, the child is invited to experience her own meeting with both herself and the physical world around her. As the child grows a bit older, these encounters naturally include other children. But the foundation remains the same-time to get to know the self, time to build a deep relationship with a caring adult, and time to explore the world around her.

RIE-An Approach Designed for Parents

Magda Gerber arrived in North America and quickly recognized that the application of her years of experience with Emmi Pikler and Loczy would offer a greater gift to parents than would the creation of orphanages. She developed a model of parent-infant classes, in which principles were shared that offered parents a straightforward approach to supporting the development of their babies. Simply stated: Don't put infants into positions they can't get into by themselves. Lay infants on their backs

until they can roll themselves over. In order to provide maximum freedom use no restrictive devices such as infant seats, walkers, or swings. Let infants set their own pace for development. Use caregiving times as the time for intimacy and for the cultivation of the intimate I-Thou relationship by offering one's complete attention.

"Refueled" by these meetings, both child and mother could then be freer in other times of the day. Why are Pikler's and RIE's experiences, practices, and observations of interest and of help to us? In our work with the older child, ages 4-6, we meet the fruits of the child's experiences in the early years. Remedial assessment for children often indicates a need for remediating these fundamental sensory experiences—touch, movement, balance, life. The same I-Thou relationship, the bodily care, and movement remain crucial. We can carry this respectful practice into our work with the older children. Pikler also offers us numerous keys not only into children's movement patterns and sequences, but into the crucial importance of transitory postures and the transitions between movements, and how these all show us the child's inner initiative and give us a picture of the child's unfolding will.

RIE's emphasis on gross motor development, and its specialized equipment to inspire, facilitate and encourage development can show us new ways to create programs for parents and infants, and can inspire us to incorporate such opportunities more fully into our programs for all of the early childhood years. As we enter into child care, Emmi Pikler gives us a paradigm for caring for children in a way that respects both the mother and caregiver's relationship with the child, and places them in a healthy perspective.

Attachment Issues Between Mother and Child

In my work, I have encountered numerous moments in which the key theme is that of balanced, respectful, healthy attachment of child to parent. Magda Gerber offers a position of support, clarity, balance, and health for this relationship. Her path for working together with each mother on the dynamics of the mother-child dyad stimulates dialogue and observation, providing a lens through which to explore the phenomenon of warmth. The mother can dis-

cover how warmth benefits a child by using observation as an objective tool to gain needed perspective. The models of Pikler and Gerber are highly salutogenetic. A picture of health for each family, for each child, is the foundation of this highly articulated work.

Michaela Gleckler describes the necessity of freedom as a condition of development, that out of nothing, out of total insecurity, the child and adult creates themselves. "It is not at all nice, but is a precondition to the dignity of man. We must strengthen these holy will forces that are the expression of the I AM when we incarnate. The mystery of the will is that we understand when we incarnate that we have to do everything ourselves." In Magda Gerber's words, "Why do we expect what the child cannot do, and not appreciate what the child can do?"

In *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity*, Steiner gives a beautiful picture, "In the first three years of life, we learn three things. We learn to find the 'way,' that is, to walk; we learn to represent the 'truth' with our organism, and we learn to express 'life' in our body through the spirit."

We transform ourselves in the course of our earthly life into the power at work in us in childhood. Taking up the work of these two pioneers can inspire each of us to take up Steiner's descriptions with fresh observing eyes and delve in ever deeper. We must look around us for those others who have so much to offer to our work and see what we can share with one another. We can become impassioned (and tactful) advocates for freedom of movement—and *move* ourselves.

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