

Developing the Eyes to See

Notes from the 2009 East Coast Early Childhood Conference

• Nancy Blanning

The early childhood educator is sometimes a “magician,” a “priestess” or “priest” who sings form into being. This was the opening picture Dr. Gerald Karnow shared with the early childhood educators at the February 2009 East Coast Early Childhood Conference. He described how he had observed kindergarten classes where he saw apparent chaos while the children played. Yet the chaos was highly structured. Within it he could perceive developing organs of interacting groups, mobile flow forms, messes, battles, and intimate relationships developing. When the chaos lost its organization for a moment, the teacher sang a song. The children suddenly moved into a circle and heard a story from which they moved to put the room into perfect order. The children knew just what to do. When he sees this in an early childhood class, it is utter, beautiful magic.

These experiences reminded Dr. Karnow of an image from Rudolf Steiner’s lectures, *Cosmic Memory*. A priestess sings to a group of people. They move in relationship to what she sings, and the song deeply impresses itself into those who listen. Something is structured through the song into these human beings. Recalling the thoughts presented from the previous year, Dr. Karnow re-emphasized that everything the children experience in our classes literally forms their physical being—as well as their social and psychical being—for the rest of life. Our intention and responsibility as educators is to connect what the children have brought from the past with lawful activities to form and guide their future. To do this rightly, we must find ways through our inner development to become priestly.

The guidance to achieve this comes to us through spiritual science, Anthroposophy. In the “teaching bibles,” *Study of Man* (or *The Foundations of Human Experience*) and *Curative Education (Education for Special Needs)*, Rudolf Steiner gives a reality-based understanding of the

human being that embraces our spiritual nature as well as the sense-perceptible form. Deeply studying these works gives us common ground for building Waldorf education communities. Through time, humanity has become more distant from the divine worlds. Anthroposophy offers us means to re-establish that connection and to work for redemption of the human being from the materialistic picture that dominates today. This requires conscious study and disciplined will to grasp these ideas and bring them into actual practice. This can give us enormous enthusiasm in perceiving the priestly task of the early childhood educator. Yet, cautioned Dr. Karnow, enthusiasm must be filled with real content. Without content, things become sentimental. The children do not need sentimental educators but ones grounded in spiritual-scientific knowledge.

Our understanding has to be grounded in realizing that the little child is entirely a sense organ standing in a devotional mood to what surrounds him. All experiences are taken in, “eaten,” indiscriminately. What the child takes in is consumed and works to structure the body. Not just the physical environment is consumed but also the movement, speech, and inner life of the teacher. Our attitudes and moods, as well as actions, change the child’s breathing, circulation, and metabolic functions, the child’s whole physiology. We wish to be mediators and creative priests who surround the children with a world worthy of imitation supporting healthy development. Consequently, we must observe what is happening within our own souls.

We must also develop eyes to truly *see* the children. Seeing involves more than the common idea that the human eye is like a camera that creates a visual image. Seeing also involves moving and touching with invisible hands and arms that reach out and touch the world through our gaze. This permits us to identify with and become

one with what we are seeing. The children we direct our interest and attention toward want to be perceived and acknowledged as the true spiritual beings they are. In our seeing, we open and empty ourselves to experience the child as though we were that other human being. This is the kind of communication we strive for. Through our knowledge of child development, we have to provide an environment that draws the children into this relationship with us.

Dr. Karnow now returned to expanding and refining the picture of the young child up to the change of teeth. Rudolf Steiner emphasized repeatedly that etheric forces in the child are dedicated to physical growth rather than thinking consciousness up to the change of teeth. The same etheric forces, through which the child grows, are liberated at the change of teeth to be available for thinking. (See Steiner and Wegman, *Fundamentals of Therapy*, Chapter One.) The ability to intentionally direct attention and consciousness is not at the child's disposal before this point. Rather, the body grows and changes and consciousness emerges in three stages from birth to about age seven (see Lievegoed and Schoorel for further description of these phases). Consciousness and attention are still body-bound in young children, as is their behavior. We must have an accurate picture of how development unfolds in order to observe what is typical, healthy development in a child and what is not.

Rudolf Steiner divided human development into seven-year periods—birth to seven years, seven to fourteen years, fourteen to twenty-one—and then each of these periods is subdivided into three parts. Each state results in the development and birthing of a particular aspect of the human being. The time we are essentially concerned with is birth-to-seven and its three divisions. Within these one-third divisions, certain aspects will lawfully arise if the child is developing in a healthy way. (These stages were described in detail in the Fall/Winter 2008 issue of *Gateways* in “Living and Working with So-Called Difficult Children,” part 2.) If we know the nature of each of these segments, we will know what is appropriate to ask of the child at each stage. If we demand activities too early, we can cause etheric damage.

We can see how the child is being affected by

the environment through watching how the child responds to what we do. If we see that certain organic, physiological events have not happened, we cannot demand that the child perform intellectual activities without damaging the child's physical body. This is the kind of *seeing* that we are striving to develop within ourselves.

Development in the first seven years proceeds from the head downward through the nerve-sense system. In these years we see growth and changes in the physical body accompanied by changes and development in the child's consciousness. The child “communicates” its development to us through changes in body and behavior rather than in words or intentionally directed deeds. In understanding the right kind of communication at these stages, we can come to judgment of how development is progressing.

Dr. Karnow went on to characterize the changes in consciousness and awareness that correspond with these one-third segments. A baby in arms, for example, is caught in the human warmth relationship with the mother, not with external objects or people. From birth until this time, the child is intimately bound to the organization of the mother and needs to be nourished in her own etheric formation through this connection. Everything of the body is round and “head.” As consciousness gradually emerges during the first seven years, it shows itself as a purely reflective or mirroring consciousness. At about two years and four months, the etheric formative forces are freed from the head. Physically the head features are becoming more defined and pronounced. In behavior, this change is also marked by the child completely mirroring its environment through imitation. This stage marks the beginning of cognitive intelligence.

The middle period from two and four months through about four years and eight months begins relationship formation. Forces are freed that permit relationship to develop with others besides just the mother. Social development begins. This is the sphere of feeling life, demonstrated physically through the development of the rhythmic system. The head form now recedes and we see a change in the trunk through separation of the belly from the chest. Imitation here is based on relationship, and social and emotional intelligence begins

development during this phase.

In the last stage the limbs lengthen. Willing aspects of the body are freed from the metabolic-limb system and are available for doing things. The child physically becomes long and dangly. The child moves from the rounded aspect of the first third to a more linear form. Play becomes much more goal directed. Objects do not matter so much for what they are themselves but for what they can be made into. This can be called limb and skills intelligence.

Children will go in the environment to what they need. It is our responsibility to provide the right environment which allows and supports these developmental stages to be explored. Observing where and how the children interact with the environment and play helps us read the developmental stage of the child.

Uniting these observations with the other things we notice brings us to child study. In child study, we never want to judge. We do child study only to deepen our insight into knowing what to do that is helpful for the child. Treatment, for the doctor, comes out of understanding the problem; inherent in the diagnosis lies the remedy and treatment. This is true for the educator as well. We strive to understand the dynamics of the child—physical development and outer form, outer movement, inner soul movement, social behavior, and so on—so we can understand and help.

One dynamic we can use in our observation for child study is between round and linear. The nerve-senses system is linear and deadened. Through the nature of the nerves, we are able to have consciousness. Children with very awake consciousness are often thin and pale, and vice versa. The nerve-sense system predominates and intellectual precocity will probably be seen. Dr. Karnow described a child of this nature who was quiet and observing, not interacting. She was having difficulty placing herself into relationship with the world. In its furthest extreme, this inclination leans toward autism.

On the opposite side is the metabolic-limb system, the blood pole. A child Dr. Karnow described here was one who was short, compact, and ruddy, and also very active and prone to bumping. Everything was a little overdone in a “hysterical” reaching out to others. Here there

is excessive working of the blood so behavior is uncontained.

In both of these cases, if the inclinations described proceed into the future, we can anticipate problems for the child. How can we bring nerve activity to cool the blood? We bring conceptual activity and love. How do we bring life to a dead nerve? We bring blood activity to balance the excessive nerve dominance through enthusiasm and love. The particulars of how to do this are ours to discern. Our profound interest in the child will lead to the details of what to do with these two gestures of cooling and warming. When we remind ourselves that everything we do as educators affects the physiology of the child, we can know that what we offer can truly provide healing to such out-of-balance inclinations.

The blood and nerve poles are brought into connection through our breathing and feeling life. To learn how to activate the breathing needs to be part of our training. Educators become soul artists in learning how to appropriately speed up or slow down the child’s breathing. Through doing this, Rudolf Steiner was literally able to change the physical body of his student, Otto Specht. At the beginning of his talks, Dr. Karnow gave the picture of the kindergarten class during free play. When the children engaged in “chaotic” play and then found the way to order—in this case through the priestly singing—their breathing changed. At first the room felt like “a stable” and then it felt like “a church.” Increasing breathing emphasizes the blood pole and slowing it down leads to wakefulness and consciousness, the nerve pole. We are in control of this and can use this insight to the children’s benefit.

Dr. Karnow concluded by saying that we need to carry in ourselves the following statement from *Fundamentals of Therapy* in our blood and our hearts:

These forces functioning in the ether body are active at the beginning of the human being’s life on earth—most distinctly during the embryonal period—as the forces of formation and growth. During the course of earthly life a portion of these forces emancipates itself from this occupation with formation and growth and becomes forces of thinking, just those forces

which, for the ordinary consciousness bring forth the shadowlike world of thoughts.

It is of the utmost importance to know that the human being's ordinary forces of thinking are refined form and growth forces. A spiritual element reveals itself in the forming and growing of the human organization. And this spiritual element then appears during the course of later life as the spiritual power of thought.

This power of thought is only one part of the human capacity for form and growth that weaves in the etheric. The other part remains true to the purpose it fulfilled in the beginning of the human being's life. Only because the human being continues to evolve even when his form and his growth are advanced, that is, when they are to a certain degree completed, does the etheric spiritual force, which lives and works in the organism, appear in later life as the power of thought (Steiner and Wegman, Chapter One).

What we see in children's behavior arises out of the form of the body. To understand behavior, we have to look at the body, not with outer eyes, but stopping midway to read its form. We learn to know that there is meaning in every form. Our attentive observation will lead to understanding the dynamics at play within the child. The soul and spirit create the body and then emerge out of it step-by-step. The life forces, which formed the body, offer themselves first. Only when these forces do emerge, allowing consciousness, can we do thinking activities with the child.

Dr. Karnow urged us to work together and share our observations. Then we will develop "seeing" reality with multiple dimensions. There

is the child's outer form with physical dimensions. There is also the inner form with soul dimensions, as well as the psychological dimensions of thinking, feeling, and willing. It is necessary to also perceive the spiritual dimension. How is the child striving to incarnate? To learn this, we must truly see the child in these multi-dimensional ways to dialogue with his or her being.

References

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