

Child Observation

- Angela Michel

The Teacher's Daily Prayer
Loving father, please help me to completely obliterate myself as far as personal ambitions are concerned so that Christ can make true in me the Pauline words 'Not I but the Christ in me' so that the Holy Spirit may reign in me. This is the true trinity.

—Rudolf Steiner

Make me empty of noise, fear, prejudice and any form of projection that obscures my seeing what there really is. Do not allow me to imprint my interpretation and judgment on to the imagination of the child before me. Let me stand in the right place, not too close to see only a partial picture, not within the magnetic ring of reaction, not too far to see clearly and with focus and not so far as to wash over the truth. Let me stand where I can clearly see the whole child. Let me be selfless.

Now, please fill me with light to see by, let me stand under your light and understand, fill me with the love that seeks nothing for itself and allows the one it looks at to be entirely free, so that the Holy Spirit may truly reign in the teacher.

Now, having found the right place to look

from, having been granted the light of love to see, to understand, let me trust in your guidance to accompany the one I look at responsibly and with the inspiration to give the right sustenance.

You all have been given guidelines towards child observation. For a matter of months now, you have shared study sessions through which you may now hold a view of the child as the picture of an unfolding process, the process of a singular unique spirit, a spiritual being taking hold of its earthly body. This describes a one-time, never-to-be repeated meeting and mingling of the materials of the earth with the most particular needs of the supernatural world. If you turn your gaze on the being of a child, you therefore gaze upon someone who is entirely unique. Among all the myriads of cosmic expressions of “being,” the child before you is the only one of its kind. To become conscious of this commands respect in the very act of looking, of beholding.

So, see the child's body as the living and working of the spirit into the world. Then it matters, comes to matter, matters greatly whether the head is small or large, rounded or angular; whether the hair lies soft and shining, or heavily

upon the shoulder; or in wisps too fine to hang; or bounces in tight curls—springy, unruly, like wire, a live wire.

The slight tremor that lives in the limbs of a small child with translucent skin, skin which lets light shine through, might describe an intensity of the incarnating process which taxes the earthly body. In the fleshy podginess of another child you may see the cushioning that spirit may need to soften the impact of coming into a life of gravity and noise.

Then, look at the windows of the senses. How formed and developed are the eyes, how bright and shining, or how dreamy and distant? Do they look out or inward? Are they still as deep pools or has something disturbed the reflection into a rapidly moving ripple? Are the ears large and hungry for hearing, generous and open, or are they small ears curled in fetal positions, protective against too much aural stimulus? What of the hands? Are they strong and dry, ready to take hold of this life and to shape it, or are they slender and fingery, more given to softly stroking, caressing, carefully fine-tuning, refining? Are they damp and reluctant, or round, comfortable and small; capable, or clumsy? Are the feet ready to carry? Are they large and strong or small and slender? Do they who bear the impact of incarnation make their mark with a will to do so—preparing, ready to receive the ego onto the surface of this earth—or are they flighty, hollow? Do they only partly meet the ground on tiptoes or along the sides?

How then does this child move, enter a room? How does he hold himself when he stands still? Are the shoulders curving forward, shell-forming, protecting the heart? Does the jaw strut forward like an invitation to meet the world “on the chin”? Do the eyes look openly forward into the space the child walks into, or down with the shield of caution? Does he walk or does he skip, or run, or rush, or slouch, or heavily plod, or sidle, or . . . There are so many different gestures that show, in the small moment, the big gesture of how this spirit comes into this earthly life.

For a moment also listen with your inner ear to the echo of the child’s laughter, or hear her saying her birthday verse, or your name. Where does the voice come from? Does it comfortably cradle in the crib of the heart, or is it high pitched,

pressured like the high whining of a fly, trapped in the cobweb? In the echo of the voice you can find the telltales of the anxieties or confidence of her soul. Also, notice whether the tongue can, within the cavities of the mouth, form and shape and modulate every consonant, or whether there is a lisp, a non-containment of the tongue behind the teeth—which clearly define the inside and the outside of “me.” Are his lips able to press the seal “b” and “p” with the right pressure upon his breath? Can they form the perfect opening for the sound of the colorful spectrum of all the vowels? In listening to what you can hear, you may sense the degree of ensoulment of this child, who is spirit growing into a human body.

How then does she behave in the social context of the class? Does she agitate or soothe? Does she clang together with another child, like the sharp stones in watery torrents, smoothing off each other’s rough edges to become perfect spheres? Does he gravitate toward commotion and noise or does he like his own company? Does he say what pleases others, or initiate themes that become interesting to others? Or does he bore them? Does her presence have a calming effect; does she have to be at the center of all focus and attention or is she content to be on the side? Does he organize himself efficiently to be “independent,” or does he need many reminders and assistance from his peers? Or is he the one who will freely give help; does he give it where it is needed, quietly and with respect, or does he do things for those who would grow by doing it themselves? Does the child, in her way of working, practice herself into a state of ever more fluid capability, or does she need pushing and cajoling into reaching to the full stretch of her abilities? Can you observe how well a child knows the teachers’ blind spots and is able to manipulate or exploit them into having the work done for him?

There are many more levels and areas which could enrich a true observation of the child. I have not spoken of co-ordination or spatial orientation. I have not mentioned balance and rhythm. I have not looked at work presentation, and, above all, I have not looked at temperament. I have merely attempted to give a taste of the quality of your own attention with which you may best try to observe a child. It is indeed *observation*, holding

before your eye that which is, which we are obliged to attempt, not judgment. We must not label, categorize, evaluate, and thus tempt the privilege of our position. The child must remain free—of us, of our prejudice and its snares.

Recently, a colleague spoke to me of her self-teaching program towards better drawing, figure drawing in particular. She delighted in discovering “looking” techniques, which enabled her to see the context in which features were set which she might be attempting to draw. She was thus not only staring at the shape and size of a face and its features but at the shapes made by the spaces in-between. Looking at the spaces in-between is, for me, a lovely key with which to also look with your inner eye, in the reflection of the mirror of your daytime consciousness, and with which to expand your seeing abilities: you might almost say to that which you can see “out of the corner of your eye.”

We began with a respectful acknowledgement of the uniqueness of each human being. In the same way, the constellation of your perceptive abilities is unique. But abilities yearn to be

practiced, to be used, to be expanded. May I recommend you practice by playing games of observation. Observe and describe someone you all know, but guess the person. Concentrate on gesture or movement, on colors, or voice.

Steiner gave another guiding saying to working teachers, a kind of shared mantra. Again it is threefold like the trinity:

*Imbue thyself with the power of imagination,
Have courage for the truth,
Sharpen thy feeling for responsibility of soul.*

Angela Michel has worked in the York Steiner School in England since 1983, initially, and for many years as a German teacher, learning about Waldorf education “on the job,” and later, after her training, as a class teacher. She has taken one class all the way through from grades one to eight, and is currently back at the school after a few years out, teaching sixth grade. (Angela is also an inspiring singing teacher! —Ed.)

Self-Review for the Teacher

• Sally Schweizer

Sally writes, “Some years ago I began to write down questions I had asked myself regarding my work with children and the adults surrounding them; it made it easier not to forget things, as I wanted to feel I was doing the best I could and improve where I knew I was not. Since having the joyful, rewarding and challenging task of being an early childhood advisor for the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, I have extended them and occasionally offered them to a colleague. Now I have been asked to pass on these contemplations to Kindling [our sister publication in the UK].”

The being of the teacher is more important than the doing. —Rudolf Steiner

The teacher’s example is vital: who we are is soaked up by the child.

Am I aware of my own being as a moral example, of my movements, my inner gesture, my thoughts, my speech, and how and what I said? Do I constantly seek to renew my work?

Do I love all the children unconditionally? Am I open to all of them equally, to their strivings and difficulties? Do I have an imagination of their higher being, in their presence as well as in my meditation? Do I remind myself of their tender sense-being? Am I kind and joyful, understanding and attentive to the children’s needs? Do I pay enough attention to care and detail in my work with the children? Have I noticed individual children enough, especially the quiet ones?

Was I appreciative of the helpers, children, parents, and my colleagues? Did we make the visitor feel welcome and cared for? Did I allow my helpers, colleagues, and parents to make suggestions and help me, and even to know