

BOOK REVIEWS

Connecting with Young Children: Educating the Will by Stephen Spitalny (2011). Available at www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/2079685

During his tenure as *Gateways* editor, Steve Spitalny distinguished himself as a seeker of truth. He stimulated the journal's readers to ask deep questions about how we interact with young children to truly educate the developing human being. He always looked deeply at Rudolf Steiner's indications to distill what is truthfully essential, sorting out "Waldorfisms" and practices and opinions that may have started truthfully but become sentimentalized.

In his newly published book, *Connecting with Young Children: Educating the Will*, Steve shares the fruits of his own quest for these essentials through his many years' experience as Waldorf mixed-age kindergarten teacher, parent and grandparent, researcher, thinker, and student of Anthroposophy. The opening chapters give a broad view of the nature of the child from birth to seven as he or she journeys toward human being-hood with help of the four foundational senses—touch, life, self-movement, and balance. Long-time students of child development will likely read this section with head-nodding assent to the accuracy of a familiar picture. For someone new to these ideas, these pages give a panoramic view upon which to ground the more specific and concrete chapters which follow—"Imitation, Life Activities and the Role of the Adult as Example and Guide" and "Language and Communicating." These chapters particularly are recommended for everyone's reading. There are philosophical and practical treasures on these pages.

The chapter on imitation reminds us of how profoundly the imitative models in the child's environment affect physical, mental, emotional, and social development. "The sense impressions being received by the child . . . are the building blocks for the body and soul and need adult attention to ensure they are supportive to the child's development." [p. 72] The quality and amount of materials and toys ("It is even possible to have too many 'Waldorf' style toys"), coupled with an unhurried pace of the day, are critically important. But the most essential requirement for healthy growth through imitation is the purposeful, will-engaged adult. Witnessing an adult making something from raw materials "stimulates the child's imagination into

creative mobility. The imagination resonates with the activity of making when encountering it. This resonance works deeply into the child's soul and into the physical body. It stimulates the formative forces working in the brain and works deeply into the developing breathing and circulatory systems. The activities of making nourish and energize the young child's will forces" (p. 73). This chapter is filled with other observations and encouragement to remind teachers how urgent it is for young children to see adults engaged in "making" and other human work. "Kindergarten has to take on some aspects of what the home once stood for; the home is no longer the heart center of the family, but is a resting place in between the errands, responsibilities, and activities where parents and children are often on their way to" (p. 81).

The chapter "Language and Communicating" is equally a gem, but not a delicate one. Steve demonstrates deep regard and sensitivity for the use of language. He challenges to us to observe and evaluate how we use language ourselves. Choice of words and tone of speech to children reveal much about our attitudes as adults toward them. Is our language objective and truthful? Is it brief and comprehensible, matching the developmental state of consciousness of the young child? Do I sometimes make statements sound like a question by tagging "Okay?" onto the end? Topics of giving choices, questioning—"What did you do in kindergarten today?"—and praising are also given a critical look. The book's subtitle, *Educating the Will*, reminds that our use of language must leave open the possibility and opportunity for the child to do what needs to be done out of his own will, not as the result of a subtle or implied coercion. This objective use of language is an art for each teacher to develop.

This book is permeated with respect for the nature of young children and invests them with dignity. The young child is just beginning the journey into human physical and social life and making connection with others in our modern world of isolation. "A truly human education attempts to overcome this isolated quality of modern life by developing the capacities for connecting within each child, which will remain latent until later stages of life. We can plant the seeds in early childhood for faculties of relating; but it is important to be conscious that we are working to nurture and fertilize what will bear fruits only in the child's later years.

The task is to help the child relate to and connect with all aspects of life in ways suitable for [his] development, so that later as an adult many realms of connection are available to him. This is a social path toward cultural renewal and a more peaceful world, one individual at a time. If you want to change the world, change yourself so that when the children who imitate you grow up, they will change the world” (p. 19).

Years in the classroom reveal that much, if not most, of our task as educators is self-development. This subject fills the final chapter. Whether this is a new consideration or a path we have been treading for a while, this book gives us lots to consider in taking a further step. Thank you, Steve.

—*Review by Nancy Blanning*
