

Education as an Art

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A CLASS AS A COMMUNITY

A Talk to the Parents of the Fifth through Eighth Grades

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Some time ago one of our students, who had gone abroad for a year, wrote me that she was with her class and their teacher on a 3-week sojourn in the mountains to learn what it means to live as a community. Her question to me was, "Why can't we do something like that in the Steiner School?" I would not tell tales out of school except to point up the fact that community spirit is hard to come by, for when later we did undertake a 3-day class trip, she was on hand and contributed several yards of paper toweling to wrap around and muffle the rising bell, and it was easy for her to misread the importance of promptness to meals and of not hiking off into the woods without a word to anyone.

Attainment of social consciousness can be a soul-shaking experience for a fourth-grader. The day came when the fourth-graders were to start using fountain pens. It was a great day for them. "These are not toys," said the teacher, explaining their care and use. Each pen became a personal treasure. Each fourth grader felt exalted by the sensation of writing in ink. Then came another day when at least half of the class admitted that they couldn't find their pens. Now a sense of trouble bore down on everyone. What could have happened? What could be done? The heavy concern burdened the day, from one lesson into the next, far more important than the instruction in arithmetic or English or French - whatever the subject might be. Toward the end of the day the pens were found under a pile of school bags in a dark corner of the closet. Astonishment! Who put them there? Why? No one seemed to know. The class teacher made a flat statement. "Someone in the class did it, and that person is not going to feel happy until he or she has told what he knows, at least to me." The teacher found a boy waiting for her in the classroom before the class arrived the next morning. His eyes were wide with compunction but he said nothing. "Did you hide the fountain pens?" she asked. He nodded. "Did you do it to upset everyone?" He guessed so. The teacher felt relief. "I will tell the class only that the person who hid the pens told me about it. I know that will make everyone feel better." The boy took a breath and said that he wanted to tell them himself. So he did, and after he had spoken to them, there was a great outpouring of good will. "Good for him!" they said, recognizing the courage in his confession.

Education toward community feeling can include more than what happens seemingly of itself in an interacting group. For one thing it can include the experience of *wholeness*. Twenty-four first-graders begin to take it in as they move in a circle to the rhythm of

"We are all one whole class,
One by one see us pass
While our feet sing the song—
'Two short steps and one long.'
Now we walk two by two
In a ring round and true
While our feet sing the song —
'Two short steps and one long.'"

and so on, dividing into threes, into fours —all parts of the whole class.

As second-graders they can scan a whole number, for instance 24, and discover that it contains a wealth of number tables: 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 12, as well as itself and 1.

Teaching from the whole to the parts, disclosing their inter-connections or relationships, placing the human being at the heart of a matter, these can be the guiding principles in the forming of the lessons.

Most of you are acquainted with the key subjects of our main lesson curriculum through the first four grades. The fairy tales, fables, legends and Bible stories picture human capacities and deeds. Nature stories, descriptions of animals, man's work in building and farming lead the children into the world around them. In the fourth grade the Norse Myths encompass, through the deeds of the gods, the confrontation of good by that which is evil; and the study of "Man and Animal" is a comparison of the wholeness and freedom of man, in any environment, with the animals who have developed to an extreme some part of their physical organism in relation to a natural habitat.

It isn't my purpose now to present the elementary school curriculum for grades five through eight, but to give you an example of how a teacher might apply the guiding principles I have mentioned to the presentation of a subject.

In springtime, when the plant world is reawakening, the fifth-graders can be introduced to a study of the plants with an imagination:

"From a giant arose heaven and earth:
from his bones the rocks and stones;
from his blood the rivers and seas;
from his flesh the crumbly soil;
from his hair the grass and trees;
the clouds from his thoughts,
the wind from his breath;
and from the heart of the giant arose the Sun.

. . . Even today the giant body of the earth is sustained by the Sun as by a warmth-giving and loving heart." (from Gerbert Grohmann)

More than other beings, the plants are the children of the 'Sun and of the Earth. Rooted in the earth, reaching toward the sun, cared for by both and by the air and water that lie between, the plants help to unite the sun and the earth, and to provide the right conditions of life for us as human beings, as well as for the animals. Why should we be grateful to the plants? They share with us the food stores that they produce for themselves in their roots and fruits and seeds, and in their stalks and leaves. Mankind gives them care in return for these as well as for other gifts. Neither we nor the plants could live without air and water, but the plants do something that we cannot do. In the process of making food they refresh the air we breathe and release water vapor into the atmosphere to help supply necessary rainfall.

We never see all of a plant at one moment, for some of its parts are not visible when others are; but we can see the whole plant in our mind's eye with all its parts, root, stem, leaf, blossom, fruit and seed.

The "higher" plants are those which are able to develop fully each of these six parts in their proper season with the help of sun and earth and air and water.

The roots, growing downward into the earth and surrounded by its hardening forces, become hard and woody; but the root tips are tender and are the growing part of the root, always reaching further in search of the moisture that clings to particles of soil.

The stem, growing upward toward the sun, surrounded by air, is more tender than the roots because the watery element which the roots drink in rises up as sap through the stem into the leaves.

The leaves breathe in the air and spread out to receive the light. The air and the light combine with the sap in the leaves to provide food for the plant's further growth.

The blossom is a heavenly plant that unfolds in answer to the light and warmth of the sun. The petals are leafy but have color and fragrance and surround stem-like parts that are members of the blossom. These are the stamens, delicate like the petals, which produce the pollen dust as golden as the sun, and the pistil, sturdy and stiff, a continuation of the plant's true stem, in which the seeds are formed. The sap which enters the blossom from the roots is sweetened by the sun's warmth and wells up at the base of the petals as nectar, that lures the honey bees and butterflies who belong to the flowers and to the sunshine and who carry from flower to flower the pollen which helps to form the seeds.

As the summer sun warms the earth, the earth sends the warmth back through the plant as it helps to swell and sweeten the fruit around the seeds. Then when winter comes to nip the fruit, it withers away and the seeds fall to earth to await the coming of spring.

In every seed, however tiny, the plant's whole nature lies concealed within the little seed-jacket which has been hardened by the earth forces to protect the spark of life throughout the cold of winter.

The higher plants develop all their powers in relation to nature's forces in earth, water, air, light and warmth. Human beings develop their full nature in relation to the human powers of thought, of feeling, and of will. When a person does not develop as a whole, he can be described in various ways, depending on what he lacks. We often hear it said of someone, "He never knows his own mind," or "He has no heart," or "He hasn't a will of his own." So, too, there are plants that do not develop all the plant parts. Some lack the power to form fragrant blossoms, others have no leaves, yet others no true roots. These plants have developed only partially what the higher plants have as a whole because they do not have friendly relationships with all of the elements as the higher plants do. These are the "lower" plants. Among them are the mushrooms, the lichens and the mosses.

The mushrooms dislike the sun and grow best in shade and darkness. What should be stem and leaf stays underground with the roots to form a network of fibers, and what we see above ground is a combined blossom-fruit that produces spores that are a combination of pollen and seed.

Lichens love the sun but scorn the earth. They form no real roots, nor stems, nor blossoms, nor seeds. They are mainly the leaf part of the plant world, and they spread by means of little pieces of themselves that separate off and start growing in new places. You find lichens growing on those surfaces of rocks and tree-trunks which get the most sunshine.

Mosses love the watery element and are mainly stem and leaf filled with moisture. Their roots are very short and weak, always rotting off to form soil. No blossoms develop, but tiny pods that contain spores.

Many another plant that has what approaches an exclusive relationship with one or another of the surrounding elements can be described and observed, such as the grasses, the bulb plants, the conifers or the ferns. The key to understanding them lies in comparing their variations with the completeness or wholeness of the higher plants.

As the fifth grade comes to the end of this study, it takes a look at the earth as a whole in relation to the sun and the plants. An imaginary journey from pole to the equator — through the tundra where plant life is dwarfed because the subsoil is frozen and the sun's force is weak, through the coniferous forests wherein the hardness and woodiness which the earth gives to roots pervades the trees in their needles and cones, and through the temperate zone where sun and earth are productive of the four

seasons and the harmonious development of the higher plants, to the equatorial forests where the powerful overhead sun draws the plants up and away from the earth to great heights, even to the roots which can grow in the air, and to the blossoming vines which spread over the roof of the forest like flower gardens —such a journey leads to the picture of the earth's vegetation as one great plant with its roots toward the pole and its blossoms and fruit in the tropics.

In the years that follow on after grade five, when the children by rights disassociate themselves from much that they have taken as a whole heretofore, it is increasingly easy for varying degrees of crises to appear and disrupt their relationships with each other, and with their teachers and parents. Exclusive friendships can become rampant. They can discover disparities between preachment and practice. Their emerging sense of independence appears as self-will. Their burning curiosity can put them in contact with many kinds of excitement. Divisiveness threatens the class community!

The example from out of the botany lessons represents the method that is repeatedly attempted by our teachers in literally every subject throughout the elementary and high school years with the aim of helping the individual child fulfill his nature in relation to the world. Starting with the whole of some matter, what is contained within gives the grand design leading back to the whole, which, as the starting point, has become familiar ground. And in the juxtaposition of two kinds of subjects every year, the humanistic and the naturalistic, a looking inward to what lives in man, a looking outward to the world man lives in, there is little inspiration for self-centeredness, or for detachment from oneself. Rather do the cooperative aspects of life relationships become a cause for wonder and enthusiasm.

It remains to say that when teachers and parents, as an adult community working together for the well-being of a class, surround their children with their interest in the class as a whole, then the class spirit thrives and the community of the class reaches out beyond the classroom walls.