
Reading the Signs of the Times

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— Nancy Blanning

The previous installment of “Reading the Signs of the Times” (*Gateways* 73, Fall 2017) described how our personal social lives, our lives within our communities and our schools, are especially beset with difficult questions. There are questions about economic equity. There are questions of how to understand and respect what all community members—teaching colleagues, administrative staff, boards, and parents—contribute to the entire social, pedagogical, and economic life. To this must be added the question of what each contributes to the spiritual life of these communities as well.

These vast questions stood before everyone in the first days of Waldorf education and other anthroposophical initiatives reaching out into practical life. The struggle to come to grips with them continues and intensifies today. The WECAN board committed itself to study these social questions as beginning steps. Study for the fall board meeting was Lecture II of *The Inner Aspect of the Social Question*. The group study was profound for the participants and challenging in its implications of how we can begin to act personally as well as collectively to find a way forward.

What follows are some excerpts from the lecture to give a taste of these challenging thoughts. I’ve taken the liberty of adjusting some terminology used in this 1950 translation to make the terms used more inclusive. Everyone is earnestly urged to read the lecture in its entirety.

Rudolf Steiner in mid-lecture characterizes some impulses that influence us as we interact with one another in social and practical life in terms of the different spheres of rights, economics, and spiritual/cultural life.

*In the spiritual life ... what is the ruling impulse?
Fundamentally, it is personal interest—an*

interest arising out of the soul-nature, certainly, but none the less egoistic. Of religion, people demand that it shall make them holy. Of education, that it shall develop their talents. Of any kind of artistic representation, that it shall bring pleasure into their lives, and perhaps also stimulate their inner energies. As a general rule, it is egoism, whether of a grosser or more refined sort, which leads a person—quite understandably—to seek in spiritual life whatever satisfies [one’s] self.

In the political life of rights, on the other hand, we have to do with something which makes us all equal before the law. ... We have to ask what our right should be ... But if we are connected with a religious community, or with a group of teachers, then—just as much as in civic relationships—we come up against personal claims, personal wishes. In the economic sphere, it is through the overcoming of self that something valuable, not derived from personal desires, comes to expression—brotherhood, responsibility for others, a way of living so that the other [person] gains experience through us.

In the spiritual life, we receive according to our desires. In the sphere of rights, we make a claim to something we need in order to make sure of a satisfactory human life as an equal among equals. And in the economic sphere is born that which unites [humanity] in terms of feeling: that is, brotherhood. The more this brotherhood is cultivated, the more fruitful economic life becomes. And the impulse towards brotherhood arises when we establish a certain connection between our property and another’s, between our need and another’s, between something we have and something another has, and so on.

Despite these noble ideals, in our social experiences in community, whether in our schools or other associations, we increasingly find ourselves at such differences of viewpoints, thoughts, and feelings that we reach impasses. We come to a standstill when divisions create factions and strife. We can become trapped within our own viewpoint and only insist more forcefully and earnestly upon the validity of our own “side.” How do we find a way forward? How do we find our way to this spiritual/social path to brotherhood that Steiner described above? What he says may seem shocking and radical to our sensibilities. The lecture continues:

We shall not find [this] if we remain egotistically bound up with our own thoughts, but only if we relate our own thoughts to those of other[s], if we expand our interest to embrace, with inner tolerance, everything human, and say to ourselves: “Through the fact of my birth I am a prejudiced person; only through being reborn into an all-embracing feeling of fellowship for the thoughts of all [others] shall I find in myself the impulse which is, in truth, the [Spiritual] Impulse. If I do not look on myself alone as the source of everything I think, but recognize myself, right down into the depths of my soul, as a member of the human community”—then, my dear friends, one way [now] lies open. This is the way which must today be characterized as the way to the [Spirit] through thinking. Earnest self-training so that we gain a true perception for estimating the thoughts of others, and for correcting bias in ourselves—this we must take as one of life’s serious tasks. For unless this task finds place among men, they will lose the way... This today is the way through thinking.

The other way is through the will. Here, too, people are much addicted to a false way, which

leads not to the [Spirit] but away [from it]... And in this other realm we must find again the way... Youth still keeps some idealism, but for the most part humanity today is dry and matter-of-fact. And [humans] are proud of what is often called practical technique, though the expression is used in a narrow sense. Humanity today has no use for ideals which are drawn from the fountain of the spirit... Lack of understanding among human beings is indeed the great mark of our time.

These excerpts can give only a hint of the power and substance of what lies in this lecture. With so much divisiveness in the social and political realms today, these thoughts offer a way to shift our minds and hearts toward those with whom we disagree. A shift must begin somewhere, and Rudolf Steiner points to oneself as the starting place. May we take these on as “leading thoughts” to ponder.



Two replies came to *Gateways* in response to the fall article. Such gratitude is felt when readers share their own experiences.

The first comes from Andree Ward, early childhood teacher, teacher trainer, and mentor in Harlemlville, New York. Andy relates that these thoughts about attending to the thoughts of the other with interest came on the heels of a conversation she had with early childhood colleague Stevie Ross, who taught for many years in Garden City, New York. Stevie had recently read a memoir by Alan Alda in which he described the principle of improv exercises and performances. The person in the improv dialog can never reject another’s comment by saying, “That’s wrong” or the like. The improv artist must always take the next step from whatever has been stated.

This reminded Andy of the “therapeutic gesture,” where one begins exactly where the patient or client is. Similarly, in dialoguing with parents, we cannot say, “Oh, no! You have to already be over here where I think you ought to be!” She realized that she has already been practicing this for years in an un-named way. By acknowledging the parent’s view without criticism or judgment, sometimes she has helped lead a parent to a new perspective. Just as often, however, she has found herself led to a new understanding of the child who is at the heart of the conversation.

Andy continues to teach a parent-child class. Stevie is retired from the classroom. Both serve as teacher trainers, consultants, and early childhood mentors. Stevie also consults and mentors on “incarnational support” issues for early childhood.

A second comment came from Mark McAlister in Toronto, who deals in finance from an anthroposophic perspective. Mark was preparing a presentation on social finance and said that considering the article’s description of “the signs of our times”—materialism, commercialism, nationalism, self-interest, disrespectful blaming, accusatory speech, and generally ignoring the universal characteristics that unite us in humanity—gave him encouragement to speak out more boldly about how we view our working together in our anthroposophical endeavors where we strive for a higher ground. Mark’s intention in his talk was to give a call for us all to use our most creative and generous thinking, feeling, and willing, and commit to a path toward social renewal and health. Thank you, Mark. This is an inspiring call to all of us as readers as well.



One of the unique hallmarks of Waldorf education is that it was founded to encourage development of healthy social life within the school community, the

classrooms, and society at large. It seems fitting, then, to end with an example of nurturing healthy social life in the early childhood classroom. The Calgary Waldorf School in Alberta, Canada, has an afternoon class of upcoming first grade children. This afternoon extension of the day is required to meet provincial standards with which the school must comply. Socializing and harmonizing fifteen or twenty six-year-olds in one class can be quite tricky. Yet a visit to the class found an authentic social harmony. The class was appropriately lively and energy-filled; no dampers were imposed on the children. So the source of this harmony stood as a tantalizing interest.

Two baskets of felt-covered stones were noticed on a table. These looked prepared to be given as gifts, as cards were being drawn and written to go with the baskets. My visitor’s curiosity asked about the baskets and felted stones. The whole class had been felting the stones to make as sets for each of the two mixed-aged morning groups. All felted stones from this healthy, tactile crafting had gone into the collection. No individual child had a personal stone and all the stones were given away for the use and pleasure of others. The intention was that the activity was valuable in its own right and the benefit from everyone’s efforts would serve the collective.

In a like-minded spirit, classes in some schools elsewhere do much the same at Lantern Walk time. The teachers and children make lanterns, enough for everyone without any lanterns being identified with ownership. The efforts of the whole group serve the collective, serve “the other.”

These are small but mighty gestures and are initial transformative steps toward a more healthy and generous social life.

Please send your reflections, questions, and experiences to share as we work to find our way together to the healing of social life. Please send contributions to gateways@waldorfearlychildhood.org. ♦