
FOCUS: Speech & Language

Speech Development: Giving Birth to Speech

Speech and the Human Encounter, Keynote Lecture I – February, 2018

— Dr. Lakshmi Prasanna

Dr. Lakshmi Prasanna, anthroposophical medical doctor and neonatal specialist, and Michael Kokinos, physiotherapist specializing in neurology and the relationship of movement and sensation, brought to the conference insights and imaginations about speech and language development. Their presentations are deeply informed by their therapeutic work with nonverbal young people with autism, by their dedicated study and work with anthroposophy, and by their sensitivity to “living into” different experiences of consciousness. Dr. Lakshmi, as she is known, emphasized that it is essential to consider karma’s role in our encounters and relationships, especially with children. Michael’s presentations shared pictures of consciousness and relationship he has come to respect and admire of the aboriginal peoples he has lived and worked with in Northern Australia.

It is difficult to capture on paper what it was like to experience these keynote presentations. Along with thinking the thoughts shared, the audience had to work to live into the pictures and imaginations offered. This reporting will be a pale representation to what it was like for those who were there.

Rather than summarize the content, we are reproducing the speakers’ actual words as much as possible. This is to respect the mood and development of images that led us into a subtle and profound consideration of the essence of language and speech. The young child needs particular things from us to develop this uniquely human and connection-making gift of speech, which we bring with us from the spiritual world.

I knew that I would work with children for the rest of my life when I was three. At that time, I had my brother and took over care of him totally. I think we both agreed on this before we came here [to earth.] And I told my father to not come between me and my brother; I am going to teach him.

This presentation is about speech development. This is close to me personally, biographically. I have carried many images in myself. Teachers struggled with me; doctors struggled with me. But I am so glad I was one of those children who kept images from childhood inside of me.

I will bring some images and pictures, which Rudolf Steiner brought to us in a free deed of love, which we can carry into our sleep. Try to take these not just with the head but with the whole organism. Some things will make sense and some things won’t. Just say to yourself that this is a story from an Indian doctor; she is not a Waldorf teacher. We learn much from each other through speaking. As I stand here, I am not just speaking. I am also listening, I am listening to the sounds of your soul as you are listening. I listen with my soul to the questions and responses within you and bring it out through me. This is the space into which I invite you.

Today I want to put speech development in a young child into the context of what happens before and after it develops. Speech comes in between two other important phases of the first three years of life. Speech comes after the child has become upright and the hands are freed. The milestone after speech develops is coming into thinking. These first three years are important for the whole of a person's life. No matter what a person's age, we are still working with what happened in the first three years. It is exciting that human beings are never complete. We are always in development, striving to become a full human being. We even learn to walk every day again and again. When we wake up each morning, we have to remember who we are, where we are. When we awake each day, we can joyfully begin again. Only human beings are always developing and can return to previous phases. If you grow up to be a good cat, that is what you are. You cannot go back to previous stages or phases of development.

Through these developments of the first three years, the child can come to experience herself. When I speak, I can begin to think and can come to experience myself.

The first three years concentrate upon development on the basic physical, sensory level. This continues, ongoing, all the time. Every moment in our lives, we experience ourselves—where our feet are, where we are in space. We claim our space. The moment this happens, we have a longing to share, a longing to meet someone on earth whom we have known before in the spiritual world. There was a time when we met without these physical bodies. We promised each other that we would meet again, though not in the same level as we did in a pre-bodily state. How is it to meet one another in a sensory experience on this earth?

This moment of longing for connection can only happen when we wake up to remember pre-physical consciousness. I wake up inside my physical body. I wake up to my motor system, my sensory system. I wake up and look around and look for my friends. Every time in our lives when we wake up in our physicality, we are looking for an encounter, an encounter which brings a memory from a previous encounter. It is a little game we play when we wake up to each other behind the masks we are wearing now in this physicality. Human speech organs are completely formed and

matured at birth. But speech develops only after uprightness. What is behind speech formation? How does the longing to speak come?

Babies “speak” with their fingers and eyebrows, with drooling, with intake of breath, etc. The babies are longing to get to see the doctor for this prearranged upon encounter. Even the drop of saliva shining on the face expresses the joy in coming for this meeting. Inside the doctor is also dribbling. The babies and “talking” and the “listening-other” become one. Anyone who has had a deep encounter with any baby will agree with this description and leave aside any need to be psychologically and scientifically correct. If you open yourself, then the baby comes inside you. There is much movement here. Who has moved and who is inside of whom?

When the pre-birth journey begins, there is no physical body. But with every earthly birth, the physical body has to learn how to deal with gravity. Rudolf Steiner tasks educators to continue the child's pre-birth education here on earth. The child carries its pre-birth wisdom inside itself already. Our task is to observe in such a way that we can see the spiritual truth of story we are hearing now.

Out of this wisdom, the first thing the baby does is breathe. There is an exchange between the internal world and the external world. The child has something inside itself and comes to meet what is outside. There comes the first breath, then warmth, and then the first mother's milk. Inner and outer continue to be experienced through touch, all the sensory organs, as well as through nourishment and taking in earthly substances. With breathing we have inner and outer. Babies also sleep a lot. There is sleeping and waking, forgetting and remembering—both for children and for ourselves.

When we come into physical life we forget the agreements we made in the spiritual world to meet again in earthly life. There is a long time between remembering the intention, to forgetting it, and then feeling the longing awaken for that meeting with a long-lost love. This wonderful loving relationship is what the baby comes back to find. The baby comes into the mother's arms, into a loving family, into the world. The baby will thrive, grow, and claim its place. The space of mama's arms is the space into which the baby comes. The baby cannot even lift a hand. There is total trust.

Then a moment comes when the baby can leave the lap of the physical mother and return also to the other mother, Mother Earth. This listening to Mother Earth involves the child's whole organism. Every individuality comes through the physical body of the mother to meet the world. Birth is almost like a stepping stone to step first to the mother and then onto the earth.

The child comes to standing on the earth and tries to listen to the story of the earth. In the child's inner life there is a dreaming, imaginations of how he will enter into life. The child has carried the earth story inside before having a physical body. Now there is an earthly part—this physical, metabolic part—which stands, and hands which are free. The child has come to stand upon the earth and to listen to the earth with his feet.

Then the child takes a little, very gentle step, and now there is walking. The child walks on the earth in a pure, sensory experience that comes out of love. We can spend hours and hours watching children and how they take their first steps. They are not showing how powerful they are as they take these first steps. We are not talking about the power of strength or the power of intellect. I am talking about the power of love. They walk out of love for the earth and being upon it to encounter and connect with others.

But this standing and walking also means that there is now a distance from mother and from the earth. Now there is a space between child and mama and between child and the earth. Before this time, the space could be bridged by physical touch. Now how is this space filled up? Now the child fills it up with sound. This is how speech comes. The need to be received physically with love through all the steps described above must have been met. The child needs to have felt received, enwrapped, touched, and nourished so the he will now experience the distance created through walking and long to fill up the space through speaking. If any of these steps have not happened, then the child will not want to speak.

When the child first comes to earth, first there is deep touch. In touch the child meets the other she is seeking and says, "Ah, ha! That is who you are. There are so many things that I want to tell you

that I see of this wonderful world. But what comes out of me are only sounds. I still do not have words. How do I collect words?" The job of the child is to go around and collect words. They actually fill up their pockets with the words. Adults around the child want to know what the child wants. What the child wants is words. In India when a child is in distress, the whole village comes and the child is very happy. In the Waldorf school the children are very happy when the school doctor comes and a big meeting happens with the college of teachers. The child is happy because the adults are finally asking, "Who is the spiritual being of the child that I do not understand?" Whenever we start talking about who is this child and what does this beautiful being need, the child begins collecting words. Then five to six months later, the child walks in the room and her pockets are full. She throws a word into the room. If the word gets a good response, she keeps it. The child has already learned how to get our reaction. So begins a collection of vocabulary.

The little child feels a word as pictures inside, not as an intellectual concept. Some people draw pictures when listening to a talk. The speaker uses words but the listener draws pictures. We use our metabolic life to build pictures out of the external world. We can hear a word and understand in our heads what it means. But when we hear "water," for example, we respond with all kinds of different pictures within ourselves of—rain, a glass of water, a shower. Everything in our lives has pictures. Repeated experiences are stored in the human body as pictures. It is like we are a camera taking days and days and days of pictures. We can store what we experience as a picture, as an image, as a tone. Each time the same tone comes, we have a picture. Children are living with pictures inside them. If every day at lunch mama gives me water to drink in the red cup, then every time I see the red cup, I drink water inside of myself. And every time I need water, I see inside myself a red cup. I have repeated sensory experiences and I begin relating them. Now the child will need to find the word so she can ask for water. The child hears parents talking about how she always drinks water in the red cup. But she cannot say water, so she says

“red.” An inner experience related to a picture and a word related to that picture come together. There is a meeting of the inner life of images and the outer life of language. The carriers of language to a little child’s life are all of us—mother, father, family. If the relationship of the mother, father, or other caregiver to the language is a big, soul-filled relationship to that language—then every time the adult says “water,” the child sees inside a beautiful picture of water. There is a harmonious joining if the speaker’s inner picture corresponds to the image the child carries inwardly.

In another example, the doctor sees children in the clinic. The doctor has to find words to convey to the parent what she experienced as image of the child. The doctor has an image inside and chooses the words to describe this outwardly in language. If we go to the spirit of the language, we go inside and find what matches the image. If she finds the words to communicate the image, we can understand each other even though we live in different languages.

We have children in the kindergarten come to us and start explaining what they have seen in the playground. They come to the moment when they do not find the words for something, and they take deep breaths between words and are actually going all the way into their organism. If we are good kindergarten teachers, we are lending all of our forces, our form-giving forces to the child. We lend these forces patiently and silently to the child and work together so she can get the word out.

The coming forth of a word is a kind of labor. We do not want this to be an assisted labor. The speaking of the word has to come out of the child’s own life forces. It has to come out of the whole organism—a giving birth to speech. And if we do not have this experience in freedom, it is not possible to experience the next stage of development.

The child is ready to speak. Once the child starts speaking and meeting the world—through the senses, through the limbs, through interacting—then there now stands a physical being who has an experience of self as a physical being on the earth, as a sensing being on earth, as a speaking being on earth. The child awakes from out of the dream of who he was. Free from the dream, he can sense who he is and in

all encounters use language. All future development in any age of life depends upon having had these two experiences—of self as a physical being and of self as a speaking being in social encounters.

In *Philosophy of Freedom*, Rudolf Steiner talks about freeing the spirit out of the organism. The human physical body is different from all other things physical. It is condensed spirit. We come all the way to the physical body in the first three years. Rudolf Steiner talked about freedom as freeing the spirit. The human being has to take charge of every muscle, top to bottom, from head to toe. We experience everything inside and outside of ourselves. Physically we meet ourselves. But we want to free the part that is spirit. And when we free our spirit, we can express to the world what lives inside of us. That is to be free. Freeing life of the spirit gives life to perfect harmony.

This harmony arises out of how many inner pictures we inwardly carry of the world that truthfully resonate with the word in the spirit of the language. We have the freedom to choose the word. We celebrate when a child says a new word and we sense an awakening within them.

What is this “spirit of language”? It is our task to research what the spirit of language is and work with it in our speech. ♦

Lakshmi Prasanna, MBSS, DCH, is a pediatrician. She was one of the pioneer parents and founding members of the Abhaya Waldorf School in Hyderabad. Lakshmi has worked for many years all over the world as a school physician and was the founding president of the Anthroposophic Medical Society in India. She runs a teacher training (www.iralearn.com) as well as small curative education centre in India. Lakshmi has developed courses for schools, parents and teachers to understand and help children with Autism. More info at www.doclakshmi.com.