

The I Knows Itself

Peter Glasby

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The suggested work theme for the General Anthroposophical Society for 2013/2014

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At first this theme may sound abstract and difficult to access, however, I have found it increasingly fruitful. I would like to share some of those thoughts.

“Oh, Human Being know yourself!” stands as a background to the Mysteries both ancient and old. It stood over the Mystery centres of Greece and stands as a call from the Threshold of Knowledge in the modern Mysteries as founded by Rudolf Steiner. The theme of the year could be seen as a call to understanding what this means right now.

The question of identity is very modern. It has always been important but, I suspect, in different ways. In the past, identity was established by place and the way that humanity identified to that place. I have known Aboriginal friends who felt ill when separated from their ‘place’. In the past this identification with place led in various ways to tribal boundaries and the way that they were maintained with warfare or elaborate trade protocols. This leads us to recognise the other great provider of identity – blood, family and hereditary ties – probably even more fundamentally a provider of identity than place.

I remember vividly an experience sitting on a bus in a remote area of Thailand in 1975 that has some bearing on how the experience of identity has changed over time. I was sitting surrounded by young families on their way from the villages to move into cities like Bangkok. The little children were passed from one adult to another without any sense of fear or inhibition. It was as if they were surrounded by one family of aunties, uncles, great aunts and grandparents. I

had a sense that these young men and women were used to living embedded in a social environment where the protocols for raising children, carrying out vocational tasks and interacting socially were given out of a long accepted tradition, one that was probably changing and eroding rapidly. These young families, attracted to the work, lights and allure of the new city life styles, were about to find themselves living in high rise buildings surrounded by people they might not know and in a social landscape where many of the cues of village life were no longer relevant and where they would experience the beginnings of what is increasingly a signature characteristic of our modern times – loneliness, homelessness. Out of this isolation the modern person has to find their own identity and hopefully in the process their self.

However, identity and self are not guaranteed to coincide. The identity can hide the self, even cause us to abandon the search for self if we become satisfied with the gratification of being identified with one of the many identities with which the self can clothe itself – a member of a particular strata of society, a member of an ideological group, a football club, a motorcycle club, a particular profession etc.

Professor Susan Greenfield has written about this in her book: *ID: The Quest for Identity in the 21st Century: The Quest for Meaning in the 21st Century*, (2009) where she explores the effect of screen culture on identity. She identifies three main categories, depending on the ways we interact with the virtual screen world – being ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ or ‘anybody’.

Certainly, I think any effective work as an independent agent in our modern world requires a firm grasp of our identity and self so that we can act from our point of intentionality with self-motivation and awareness.

Anthroposophy offers a modern approach to this endeavour by providing a path of knowledge, which leads the spirit within the human being to

the spirit in the Universe. What does this mean? How can this pathway help us, as modern people, in our quest to understand ourselves and more and more bring our identity into synchronicity with self so that we can be authors of our existence with greater authenticity?

To begin to work on this question requires a much broader view of humanity and nature than the one we are used to having from our mainstream education. It is a view, which can recognise human existence more deeply embedded in the world meaningfully, embracing notions such as 'life' and 'soul' and 'spirit'.

A first beginning contemplation:

Let's take the different groups of heavenly bodies – the Sun, the Moon, the planets, the Zodiac and the fixed star sphere.

The Sun gives us the rhythm of the day and the night, the rhythm of our intentionality. We can sleep on an experience and awaken with the resolve to address it. It is a rhythm embedded in the fire of resolve.

The planets give the week the rhythm of the soul – the ordering of life in the repetition of activities – 7 qualities of repetition so that the week has a breath of intensification, letting go, inspiration and expiration, work and rest. It is a rhythm of air allowing lightness and mobility to enter the repetition of our lives.

The Moon gives the rhythm of the month, the rhythm of the tides, the rising of the fluids in the plant world, the rhythm of the female cycle. It is the rhythm of life and regeneration in the element of water.

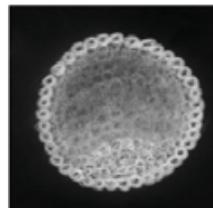
The starry sphere gives the rhythm of the year – the time it takes for the seasons to have turned and returned. It is a rhythm of the earth, which gives a stability to all existence – a rhythm of the physical body.

So we can recognise that our whole existence is integrated with the rhythms of the cosmos. This recognition can be the first step in trusting that our life is part of something larger than we may, at first, be able to discern.

What can biology teach us? A second contemplation.

During the embryonic life the human being forms within the mother in its wholeness. This is one of the great becoming stages of human life and here the microcosm and the macrocosm are expressed in this wholeness. After a week the identical cells of the embryo differentiate within the Blastocyst into the outward forming trophoblast layer and the inward forming embryoblast layer.

Fig. 1: The Blastocyst approx. 1 week after fertilisation.



The embryo at this stage is a small picture of the heavens and the Earth. The embryonic picture of the Human Being after about 10 days is of centre and periphery. There are spaces within spaces. The body is only formed after the environmental periphery has been formed. The embryonic body begins at the touching point of the amnion and the yolk sac, themselves within the wider space of the chorion which becomes the placenta.

Fig.2: The embryo at about 14 days



This touching point is where what is to become our earthly physical body begins to form. At first it has two layers – one which will become the nerve sense system and the other the metabolic system.

During the third week the third layer of the embryo begins to form out of a drama of movement and sprouting. It is as though the whole body becomes plant like.

Fig.3: The three-layered embryonic disc within the enclosing spaces at 21 days

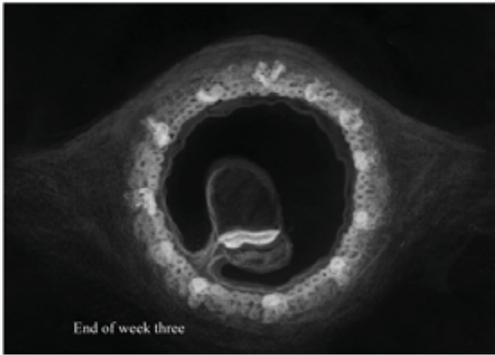
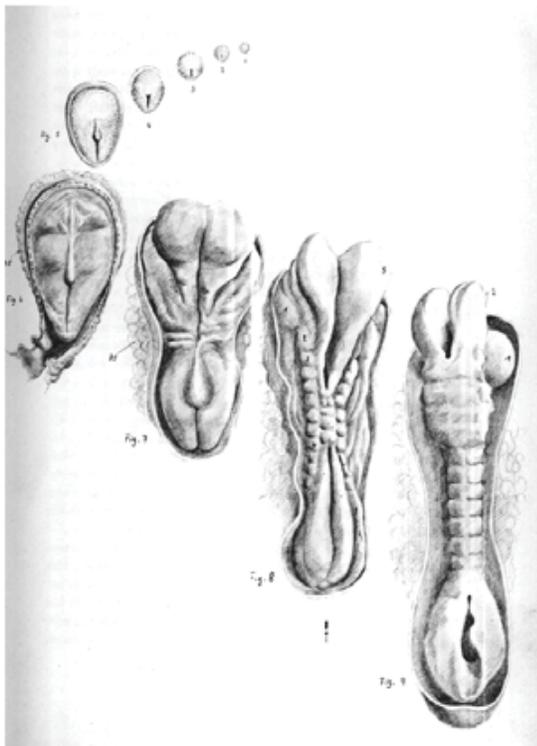


Fig 4: The changes in the embryonic disc as viewed from the amnion. The layer, which is to unfold the nerve system sprouts like a plant. The whole embryo is plant like. From Appenzeller.



After the third week where the embryo changes from a plant like, open state to close off the central nervous system and the metabolic system, it then folds and takes on an 'animal like form'.

Fig 5: The folded embryo – animal stage.



Fig 6: The human form as carrier of intentionality (from Katriona Gilroy).



We see then that the development of the human body recapitulates the development of the whole earth, the plant world, the animal world and the

human form. It is as though the whole of existence takes part in our humanity or to put it another way, humanity is part of all existence.

This embryonic form gives a picture of the wholeness of human life between centre and periphery, between waking and sleeping, between incarnation into our senses and excarnation out of our senses. At birth, the little child is born into his or her little wonderful body. We could call it the 'sense body,' the one we all identify with, where the head the arms and the legs extend from the trunk. The enveloping sheathes of that body, formed earlier from the little blastocyst at the end of the first week of embryonic life, are the 'after birth' and are often, in our culture, discarded. That is the placenta. Birth, therefore is twofold – the birth of the form we identify with the microcosmic body and the birth of the left behind 'macrocosmic body,' (the after birth). Too often in our materialistic age we forget the significance of these discarded sheathes, just as we forget that deeper layer of our own being that nevertheless accompanies us our whole life through, that part of our being that we tap into each night as we disengage from the 12 fields of experience we call our senses and reengage with the 12 fields of being in which our macroscopic being is rooted.

Angelus Silesius, the medieval mystic, referred to this aspect of the human existence between centre and periphery:

*I know not what I am; I am not what I know; A thing and not a thing, circle and point also*¹⁴.

Laying the placenta into the Earth then is an act of acknowledging that part of ourselves that we must find within our Earth destiny. We must find the deeper currents of our life's destiny, as individuals, out of freedom here in the world of separateness, the Earth. We have to find the macrocosmic here within the microcosm. That nourishing environment for our developing intentional body is buried in the earth and forgotten. From our environment of the earth, something rises up to meet us during our life and meets the intentional part of our being.

¹⁴ Retrieved from <http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/9th-september-1972/13/aphorisms-from-the-cherubinic-tramp-of-angelus-sil>

This will be explored further in the third contemplation.

A third contemplation:

In 1915 when Europe was wracked by the devastating First World War, a brilliant young German scientist, Alfred Wegener, published a revolutionary book, *The Origin of the Continents and the Oceans*, a book of integrative science where he gathered together all the evidence available to make a case for a new dynamic view of the Earth where the continents are not parts of the world that sink and rise into the Earth's crust but are permanent features of the planet which 'float around' and change positions but never sink. The Earth's crust then, consists of areas of oceanic crust and continental crust, which are in dynamic movement leading to new configurations of the dry land and the oceans. This radical view was called 'Continental Drift' and wasn't taught officially except, I believe, by Professor Carey from the University of Tasmania, until the 1960s when a mechanism for the theory was established as 'Plate Tectonics'.

Rudolf Steiner took a copy of the book and put it on the shelf of the first Waldorf School, stating it was an important little book. He went on to give perhaps the first curriculum indications ever, about teaching geography and Continental Drift in class 12 in relation to the stars.

I mention this important little book because it highlights these two surfaces of the Earth's face upon which we live and work. The continental surface is deep rooted, dark within and almost impenetrable. It provides a place of support, which is deeply part of our soul life, a part which we take for granted. Pause and think for moment what it would be like to have a surface like quicksand to live and work on. This dark, solid mass beneath us supports us in our conscious intentionality. We 'know' we can stand up on it and move to where we want and pick up something. It gives us an immense basis for our conscious unfolding of our will for our daily work and play.

The ocean on the other hand is this transparent surface, constantly changing and in movement.

The surface has a face that reflects both what is around it and allows some penetration within. Beneath the surface lie unknown depths out of which leviathan type creatures emerge and then disappear again. Nothing is sure. When we enter from the shore we feel the water taking up some of our weight in buoyancy. The further we step out, the more unsure we become. Some have made themselves proficient swimmers, snorkelers and divers and will venture further into this fluid world, however, everyone feels the uncertainty as they go further and further from the land and the blue fluid world becomes the horizon. Some take a small part of the continent with them for security. They call it a boat.

Whereas the continents fill us with the certainty for the actions of our intentional self, the oceans fill us with another sense of the 'ocean world of our being' – that vast part of ourselves which is unconscious and out of which rise unknown beings, partly revealed and obscure. It is insecure, frightening and full of surprises. It can become a savage world of mighty power or a tranquil world of peace and tranquillity.

The threshold between these two worlds is a real threshold – well-known to us here in Australia. We love to play at this threshold running across it briefly and returning carried by its power. We call it the beach.

If we practice reflection on our lives – reviewing the events in reverse order, detached and above them, then we will come to recognise that our lives are made up of actions that are conscious and intentional and then much that comes to meet us, as it were unintentionally, unconsciously. These unconscious currents of our lives will show themselves to be full of wisdom. We could call it the great unconscious intentionality that comes to meet us out of the ocean being of our existence. Once we become aware of the wisdom of this unconscious intentionality that comes to meet us we can be filled with gratitude towards what it brings. Slowly we can begin to participate with it and come into relationship to it. Laurens Van Der Post describes this wonderful journey along the knife-edge of the unconscious in his autobiographical book *Yet Being Someone Other*. The increasing participation with this

world of the 'angel' can be cultivated and develops deep trust in the immense love that underpins our lives in mysterious ways. One can but wonder what a culture of this view would do to our 'lonely planet' where depression and self-destruction are so common place and point to the distrust in existence.

These contemplations lead to new sense of identity and self that is rooted deep in the fabric of existence. It points to one world – a monistic world of which we are a part – a part in which consciousness of itself can lead to a new level of involvement based in the great gift of the cosmos – freedom. These contemplations can lead to a new sense of identity based in self, space and time.

The sense of identity based in self arises from the awareness that we can participate with the wisdom accompanying our life. The sense of identity based in space arises from the sense that our lives are integrated with the natural world around. They can contribute through what we bring to expression in the world from out of our particular space but which is also of universal significance.

The sense of identity based in time arises from the sense that our life is integrated with the large rhythms of time which constantly let emerge newness from the universe into the stream of life on earth.

If these thoughts are allowed to ripen and develop to a real feeling then a deep sense of relationship, integration and trust can develop as a basis for our intentional action.

The above thoughts can come to expression in the following poem:

What is the Self?

What is this feeling of something within, of something apart?

Can it be tied to the streak of flesh that grew inside my mother-

Some 50 years ago?

Can it be - as Nietzsche said -

'The voice of those feared and revered' – during my childhood years?

Let us look at those voices.

They were impressive –
 From wisened, lively souls – too many to name here-
 Each worthy of lines to themselves.
 Their effect is unfathomable –
 But though their lessons went deep – gave the substance
 to work with-
 There remains a moving place within – or is it without?
 An inter-being with all that – and it grows.
 It grows in inter-being as the child grew.
 Each look of love, reproach, disdain, care were the threads
 of that inter-being.....
 And the child grew to those rebellious years, when, like a
 flood,
 Thoughts and feelings came over him and brought a
 change to that sense of self.
 All that had been was to question, though at times with thin
 base.
 With the new sense of self came loneliness and longing-
 Longing for communication with another – for friendship
 and more.
 And so the youth grew with the experiences of life that
 come from where his feet trod-
 From rock and book, from sea and song, from mountain
 and poem, from care and thought.
 Is this the Self? The trodden path?
 Or is it that which participates with the walk?
 There comes a time for reflection – reflection on what has
 been – on the paths that have been trod.
 Within them lies a pattern that lies outside the awake intent
 – a pattern that lies somewhere, deep asleep.
 Is it God?
 Can it be here that the question of Self and God – inter-be?
the question of I and You – inter-be?
 As I look into the eye of Youthere in the deep well of
 the pupil,
 From where the light of You shines.
 There I find an image of me – outside of me.
 Without You there is no me – we inter-be.
 This must be the meaning of the Germanic greeting: “
 Gruess Gott!” - “Greet God” – when I meet the other –
 you.
 So now, when I say : “ Thank God”, I thank all of You with
 whom I inter-be
 Those I have wronged, those I have loved, those with
 whom I have fought,

those with whom I walked and worked and toiled,
 those whom I have taught, those many who have
 taught me.
 For Life is change and I know that the roles I had are not
 me but they gave to me a wealth
 - a chance to be with others.....and me I find
 again In new roles.....
 Children become friends,
 Students become teachers,
 Parents become like children.....
 Roles that allow another way to inter-be another
 way to be free.
 So what is the Self?
 Can it be on the circling horizon of my life
 – the inter-being between the point of intent and what
 comes like a flush of dawn over the dark line of the edge?
 In that inter-being is all the joy, all the pain, all the wonder,
 all the work –
 All the Thankfulness for the Gifts of God. ❖

References

Christiana Haid, in her introduction to the theme in
Anthroposophy Worldwide No. 1 / 2, 2013. has given a
 comprehensive reading list which includes these works by
 Steiner :

*Rudolf Steiner's address for the foundation stone laying of
 the First Goetheanum in Rudolf Grosse, *The Christmas
 Foundation, Beginning of a New Cosmic Age* (London,1984),
 Chapter on “Laying the Foundation Stone of the First
 Goetheanum.”

*Rudolf Steiner, *The Michael impulse Approaching the
 Mystery of Golgotha* (CW 152), Lectures of May 18 and 20,
 1913 in Stuttgart.

*Rudolf Steiner, *The age of the consciousness soul, its
 challenges and perils.*

*R Steiner *From Symptom to Reality in Modern History* (CW
 185), Lectures of October 20, 25, 26, 1918 Dornach.

*Rudolf Steiner, *The Fifth Gospel* (CW 148), Lectures of
 December 17 , 18, 1913 in Cologne. (Other lectures in this
 cycle are helpful, as well.)

Further reading :

Prokofieff, S (1994) *Rudolf Steiner and the Founding of the
 New Mysteries*, 2nd ed., Forest Row

Prokofieff, S *Das Rätsel des menschlichen Ich* [The riddle of
 the human I], 2nd ed.,Dornach 2013.

Peter Selg, *Rudolf Steiner and the Fifth Gospel*, Great
 Barrington, 2010.

Wolf , Ulrich Klünker, *Anthroposophie als Ich-Berührung*
 [Anthroposophy as contact with the I], 2nd ed., Dornach,
 2013.