

“Panacea”: The Magic Remedy for a Contemporary Education

By Johannes Kiersch

Translated by Genie Sakaguchi

The practice of Waldorf education rests upon Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy and thus it has an esoteric core. This fact can awaken questions and doubts. In our series, Johannes Kiersch deals with necessary boundaries and shows how enlightened rationality, a contemporary pedagogy, and the esoteric exercises of anthroposophy go together.

In our scientific-technical world, the training for almost all careers is built upon the model of an engineer’s course of study. Just as a qualified technician studies the laws of physics and then applies them in practical work, so the candidate for teaching studies the science of his specialty and the corresponding pedagogy founded on educational science, and then works with these in the school. Seen in a general way, this applies also to the Waldorf schools. In Waldorf schools, the teachers need solid knowledge in both their subject(s) and in pedagogy. But that is not all.

From the very beginning, in the foundation courses of the Fall of 1919, Steiner gave the teachers-to-be of the new school, in place of clearly defined scientific teaching content, something quite unfinished: a content inspired by one’s own observations, by open connections to “living concepts,” a web of meditative motifs, and knowledge in esoteric form. If someone expects Steiner’s *Study of Man* [also in English as *The Foundations of Human Experience*] to be a simple introduction to Waldorf pedagogy, they will be disappointed. Steiner expresses himself in thought forms like those that are also found in Goethe’s natural-scientific writings. The Germanist Uwe Pörksen has made a study of this unusual mode of expression. He found phenomenological series, polarities, and semantic “fields.” These characteristics appeal more to an artist than to the prevailing analytical thinking of a scientific researcher of the present. Similarly, in Steiner’s work, what is presented is designed so that the listener or reader

should work on it further, to make it his own, concretely and deeply, each in his own way.

One year later Steiner expressed himself more clearly in the first continuing course on education. He wanted to inspire a “meditatively acquired understanding of the human being.” [*Meditatively Acquired Knowledge of Man*, CW 302a or b].¹ He hoped this would promote a creative art of teaching and instructing, arising from direct experiences with children. “A knowledge of the human being that weaves in life will perceive the being of the child the way the eye perceives color.” (GA 36)²

The conceptual pictures of anthroposophical knowledge of the human being should, in practice, become as transparent as the vitreous humor of the eye is in the process of seeing. Every theoretical element disappears in the direct, concrete contact with the children—and yet every child, even as he is better understood from day to day in his own unique character, still remains a “holy riddle,” as Steiner often said. But that is just what leads to pedagogical productivity.

Here is one example of the many suggested meditative pictures that appear in Steiner’s esoteric pedagogical courses. Steiner called it the “Panacea,” the magic remedy [in the soul of the educator and teacher] for contemporary education. He referred to three basic moods, which, in their harmonious working together, can create a productive pedagogical atmosphere, and he accompanied his words with expressive gestures, by which he indicated that they could be reproduced as sculptural forms.³ Two things are striking about this: His manner of speaking is aesthetic, addressing not only the head, but also the heart—the soul life of the teacher who would take this up. And the corresponding anthroposophical concepts are incomplete, open on all sides, and designed for ongoing development.

First motif: “Reverence for what precedes the child’s existence [before birth]”⁴

Does this refer to the conditions in a child’s life under which he treads his life’s path, the fortunate circumstances as well as the familiar burdens, sicknesses, and blows of fate that the child has encountered? Or something from the hidden sphere of pre-earthly experiences? From preceding incarnations? No Waldorf teacher is required to believe in reincarnation, but neither need he reject such ideas as “unscientific.” That every child brings his own unique destiny into the school is, in any case, a pedagogically helpful imagination. One becomes somewhat more careful and cautious in one’s judgments.

Second motif: “Enthusiastic anticipation of what follows the child [after death]”

Steiner’s view of the future is similar. This is not really speaking about later trials in life, or a professional career, or even future destiny. But it can engender

an encouraging mood of confidence, an attitude of expectation, that gives the child security and helps him forward.

Third motif: “Protective gesture for what the child experiences during life”

This is pointing to the vulnerability, the intimacy of soul that belongs to all truly productive pedagogical processes, which can all too easily be injured by popular notions of educational success according to lesson plans and test scores. A protective mood creates a quiet space of encouragement for anxious children, gives consolation in sorrow, and can even absorb some of the excesses of a “temper tantrum.” Serenity may appear, peace and quiet in the work with the children.

The esoteric “panacea” motifs present a pioneering corrective to the empty operation and feasibility fantasies of so many modern schools. These motifs are not, or not yet, scientifically grounded in detail, but they are very plausible and practicably fruitful. One day an educational anthroposophy will have a great deal to say about this.

Literature

Johannes Kiersch. “Lebendige Begriffe.” Einige vorläufige Bemerkungen zu den Denkformen der Waldorfpädagogik. In: F. Bohnsack, e.-M Kranich (Hrsg.) *Erziehungswissenschaft und Waldorfpädagogik*, Weinheim und Basel, 1990.
Uwe Pörksen. *Wissenschaftssprache und Sprachkritik*, Tübingen, 1994.
Rudolf Steiner. *Pädagogik und Kunst*, GA 36, Dornach, 1961.
_____. *Meditativ erarbeitete Menschenkunde*, GA 302a, Dornach, 1983.

Translator’s notes:

1. These lectures were also included in the English publication, *Balance in Teaching*. The lectures were given in September 1920, in Stuttgart.
2. This number might be different now. The notes from the author name GA36 as Rudolf Steiner: *Pädagogik und Kunst*, but CW36 is not that title.
3. Rudolf Steiner accompanied each of these phrases with a gesture. The following description is attributed to Caroline von Heydebrand: the gesture for ‘reverence’ – hands folded in prayer (in the stenographic record: two hands inclining upward with the finger tips toward each other); the gesture for ‘enthusiasm’ – hand outstretched, pointing; the protective feeling – the right arm [encircling] as in the eurythmy gesture for ‘B.’ http://steinerbooks.org/research/archive/balance_in_teaching/balance_in_teaching.pdf, 2/20/12.

4. Current English translations of this well-known quotation from Steiner add the phrases “before birth,” “after death,” and “during life,” which are inferred in the German, but not explicitly stated.

About the author: Johannes Kiersch was a teacher of German, history and English at the Rudolf Steiner School of Bochum-Langendreer and involved in building the Institute for Waldorf Pedagogy in Witten/Ruhr. He was a member of the board of the Association of Free Waldorf Schools (in Germany) and on the advisory board of the Pedagogical Research Center.

