

Youth Guidance and Empathy

by

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The individual in the period of adolescence is like a small boat leaving the security of the harbor and setting out to sea full of the spirit of adventure. The boat has to go through turbulence—as well as moments of calm and peace—before reaching the shore of adult life.

R.D. Laing, when writing about behavior and experience *The Politics of Experience* postulates that we see each other's behavior but cannot see the experience of the other which underlies his behavior. Thus "experience is man's invisibility to man."

As anthroposophists we cannot accept the finality of this statement, but we can use it as our point of departure on a path setting out to reach the true experience of the other's experience in an act of empathy.

Rudolf Steiner often spoke about the evolution of human attributes or faculties. Thus he attributes the birth of the faculty of compassion to Gautama Buddha; he was able to take up the untold suffering that he met in the world when finally leaving his sheltered home and make this suffering his own experience.

The emergence of the internal conscience (voice of conscience) sprang from the experience of Elija on the mountain, when, after having contested with the five hundred prophets of the Baal and called down the Heavenly Fire, he hears the Divine Voice not from the external realm of the elements but from the still, small voice within himself.

Once such faculties have emerged through such leaders of human evolution they enter the stream of evolution. Turning to sympathy and antipathy, as Rudolf Steiner described them, we see how they weave in human social life. There unfolds in social life, in meetings between human beings, a constant oscillation between sympathy and antipathy which is almost beyond our control. (It is as little under our control as is our breathing process). We 'sleep into the other,' reawake in ourselves, and so forth.

But gradually a new possibility begins to emerge; Empathy a new power, a potential for holding still this eternal oscillation of sympathy and antipathy (even as we can hold our breath), and in this deed of holding still, of 'making a space,'

a gateway is opened towards the other person and towards his experience. This is a strenuous and meditative exercise opening a gate into the private world of the other person; a beginning of an experience of his experience.

But one has to strip oneself of all illusions, all functional relationships—teacher/pupil, doctor/patient, and so forth. We must even strip ourselves of our own wish to help. Empathy is thus almost a non-power; it is the non-power of the consciousness soul.

It is indeed a meditative way we have to go for this; a way leading into the landscape of the other person, into his sanctuary. Communities such as ours [the Camphill Community] must cultivate this path and bring it to effective curative force.

Our empathy would give the adolescent the experience that the ocean over which he sails is everywhere surrounded by land. But we must be able to change our attitudes in order to achieve this; we must lay aside our ‘educator’ function and, at least for a while, learn to walk on the sea out to the adolescent in his boat to keep him company, to be at his side when the storms rage.

Final comment from Dr. Thomas Weihs:

With Anke’s description of empathy I think we can feel how it is connected to Steiner’s description of the development of mankind. Today, mankind is already exposed to the light streaming in from the future, from the Sixth Cultural Epoch. In future it will not be possible not to experience the experience of the other.

We have a moral commitment not to be like Laing says we are, although (initially) we are. Our prejudice shapes our experience of the behavior of the other.

Our judicial system today is rooted in the experience of mankind two thousand years ago. It is rooted in revenge. Today this is totally meaningless to us because of the Deed of Christ and the Christ Impulse in history. Instead of revenge, forgiveness has evolved.

A similar and as marked change will occur over the next two thousand years and we are already involved in this process. (Development towards the experience of spirit-self.) We will become responsible for the other person’s experience. Thus, our first lesson is not to learn ‘how to help,’ but it is to learn ‘how not to cause.’ The initial invisibility of the other’s experience so easily makes us hurt and damage those whom we love.