

Thinking about Steiner Education?

'The proof's in the pudding,' we say, and the Steiner pudding is quite something. In terms of sheer achievement, the various outgrowths from anthroposophy suggest it is a successful contemporary spiritual movement. Most of us may know of Rudolf Steiner as the founder of a world-wide school movement; also as the originator of bio-dynamic farming, of therapeutic institutions for those in need of special care, and of a holistic approach to medicine. We might even know that the fashionable Dr Hauschka cosmetics have something to do with Steiner. In fact, Steiner's creative impulse extended into every field.

Born in 1861 in the town of Kraljevec (in today's Croatia), Rudolf Steiner was a notable door-opener to other realities. The breadth and depth of his knowledge is astonishing. What has happened to it since his time? We can see that a great deal of anthroposophy, as essential insight ('Anthroposophy' can be translated as 'human wisdom'), has permeated intellectual, social and practical culture — finding its way even into institutions such as the Sloan School of Management at MIT.

A Path towards Insight

Steiner was not the only person thinking creatively in the first decade of the twentieth century; others seem to have been similarly inspired. He did not invent these ideas; he perceived them. For anthroposophy is not just a body of knowledge, but a 'way of knowing', which he had characterised as 'a path leading from the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe'. Everything — the schools, curative homes, bio-dynamic farms, the medical centres, the cosmetics — originates from the pursuit of that path.

It may of course be practised as recipes, and often is, but its origins are in insight. And as with all faculties, the practice of insight must be cultivated. Today many people undertake meditation — but this word 'meditation' has many meanings. We can readily go to fields of bliss, for instance, and this may be refreshing. Rudolf Steiner does in fact advocate spending a short time each day seeking a state of inner tranquility, but most of the exercises on his path from the spirit in the human to the spirit in the universe are particularly rigorous.

I call it the 'work-out in the soul-gym'. If we went to a regular gym in order to tone up some muscles, we would probably agree that the apparatus and the exercises are incidental to the desired outcome. We need the work-out just to get somewhere else. Similarly, in order to tone up some soul-and-spirit 'muscles', we need to do the exercises. As with physical toning, we would want the results to show, not just in the gym but in our lives.

So it means some hard work. In doing a work-out in a regular gym we begin to notice some differences, and so too in the soul-gym some differences can be felt. And just as within that flabby physical body we begin to sense another, toned body emerging, so too we may begin to sense another body emerging through the work-out in the soul-gym. We could call it an 'other self'. As this develops, another experience then becomes perceptible. This 'other self' seems susceptible to something kindred in the surrounding world; we feel ourselves to be 'in touch' with something permeating the sensory world around us. We feel 'connected' with all

that is living in our environment — with the life-world, described by the scientist Rupert Sheldrake as a field of ‘morphic resonance’. This is a moving experience, and it is just a beginning. Such activity is an initial experience of the life and content of insights which can result in a holistic educational method, a farming method, a medical approach, and so on.

Testing the Pudding

No one needs to pursue this path in order to notice the efficacy of the insights. As applied, they become perceptible to healthy observation and reason. Anthroposophical practices do work — spirit *works*. I believe that the unease some people may feel is in relation to the challenges of the soul-gym, and the nature of the work-out. And that’s okay, and quite understandable, isn’t it? After all, many of us contemplate a work-out in the regular gym with doubt, distaste or apprehension. But we can also observe someone who does a regular work-out, and decide for ourselves whether it makes them better able to run a marathon, or play the game, or do anything else, or whether they are just a ‘gym-junkie’ (for meditation can be like this, too).

I think that Steiner Education should appeal to common sense. It offers a viable alternative to the generally-held current ideas of education — ideas which are either about the training of an animal, or the programming of a computer. Instead, in Steiner Education we recognise the need for young people to develop all-round capabilities which will be effective in whatever course of life they might choose. It values subjects not only for what they are about, not just the facts, but also what they develop in us as faculties.

An important example of this is the emphasis placed on cultivating the child’s fantasy in the early years. Some think we should be more concerned with the ‘real world’. However, I question whether this world is so real for the young child. Children who live in their fantasy when young tend not to stay there — the imaginative element transforms into a vital social faculty, enabling them to understand the experience of others. But the child who is over-stimulated in an intellectual hot-house, and thus deprived of imaginative experiences, will often escape into fantasy when older.

In a Realm where the Story is True...

A poor woman lived in a hut by the forest, and in front of the hut was a garden with two rosebushes growing in it, one bearing white roses and the other red roses. She had two children, who so resembled the roses that one was called Snow White, and other Rose Red. Snow White was quieter and gentler, and liked nothing better than to stay at home with her mother; Rose Red, however, liked best to run out into the world, to roam through the fields and wander in the forest. The two children loved one another dearly and always held hands whenever they went out together: ‘We will never be parted, as long as we live...’

Are such stories true? In the imaginal realm where a story *is* true, Snow White and Rose Red are living still. Where is this realm? Within each one of us, this story is being played out, in the white cells of the brain, and in the red cells of the blood. There is, on one hand, a quiet process of consciousness, and on the other, an intentional life of will — thinking and doing. Through their interwoven (‘hand-holding’) activity, our experience in feeling is formed. In

Steiner education we constantly work with the Snow White and Rose Red qualities in human life. Consciousness and action. We find this polarity not only in the stories themselves (in Class 11 for instance the students study the medieval story of Parzival, the red knight, who marries Condwiramurs, the white flower), but also in each particular subject: whether we are considering the contrast between sedimentary and igneous processes in Geology (so closely paralleling the paradoxical behaviour of fifteen-year-olds, when eruptive and unpredictable moods are in stark contrast to the steady deposition of thoughts and values within their minds); or similarly, in reflecting on conservative and revolutionary tendencies in World History; or contrasting Classicism with Romanticism in Literature; or perhaps in recognising Apollonian and Dionysian elements in the study of Art History.

These polarities mark out an exercising-ground for the formative challenges of real learning. For we find that matters are usually less an issue of 'either / or' but rather tend to find expression in the complexities of 'both / and'. The world *is* mysterious — even light may appear to behave like a stream of particles, and simultaneously like a wave. What happens, and what we think about it, does matter; the paradoxes are the place where we practice true judging — not in the sense of judgment as opinion and prejudice, but of evaluation in the balance of observation and a range of considerations.

A Choice

Whoever loses out on childhood, later may tend to be childish. Teachers in Steiner schools are convinced that a fulfilled childhood and adolescence is the genuine basis for a fulfilling adulthood. The Steiner approach identifies what is appropriate learning, and meets the child's need for growth at each stage. Then each individual is encouraged to become strong — developing true self-image, self-esteem, self-determination — in their sensitivity to what they find about them, and in capacities for effective living. Because we all want young people to be *capable* in every aspect of their lives. Don't we?

A few years ago I was present at a twenty-fifth year reunion at a Steiner school. A woman whom I'd taught as a child, now an excellent adult educator, commented that she had learned about the processes of learning through 'just doing stuff' — making her own knitting needles in Class One by rubbing sticks on a stone, for instance, before beginning knitting; or cutting a turkey quill to make a pen, and squeezing out squid's ink from its bladder (yuck!) in order to do her first cursive writing. Such fundamental experiences of discovery and processing are the basis of all learning and development, she said, and the academic learning skills simply followed in due course.

Treating children either as trainable animals, or programmable computers — these methods of education identify short-term goals, those of job-training or academic accomplishment. But children need real education for life — for being human is a learned activity, and most of our big challenges do not have either straightforward vocational or intellectual solutions. When I asked one young person in a Class 12 why he had returned to a Steiner school after trying out another form of education, he replied, 'At the other school I found I was pressured to learn. Here I feel challenged to learn. It's *my* responsibility.' And another 17 year old, having been to another school, said, 'You can do courses of study anywhere, even here. But education — this business of becoming a real person — that's best found here.'