

As I am, So You Can Grow – The Impact of the Adult’s Feeling Life on the Development of the Young Child

INTRODUCTION

This morning’s theme is our feeling life. And here at the Goetheanum, everything around us enriches and opens our feelings. The Great Hall – the stories it shares through its windows, its ceiling, its pillars; the gardens on the cusp of early summer; the old and new friends and colleagues—all especially open our hearts. We become attuned to something beyond our place and daily work, and this attunement creates a particular receptivity. It has the potential to form a new seed in each of us that may germinate and grow long after we leave one another and this place.

These special moments can provide the nourishment that we need for the strengthening, the deepening of our feeling life to serve us as in our various vocations we greet families with infants and young children.

Messenger by *Mary Oliver*

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
 equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
 keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
 astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
 and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
 to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
 that we live forever.¹

¹ Oliver, Mary *Thirst* Beacon Press, 2006.

Mary Oliver opens us to the possibility of loving the world when we open ourselves to it with gratitude, with 'mind and heart in these body clothes'. This is a rich picture of the reality for the infant and young child: clothing his mind and heart with his brand new 'body clothes'. The bodily clothes may not fit so well, but they bring each of us into our everyday self. Our mind and heart want to remind us of the higher self living within each of us and our potential for striving toward that self.

In our everyday earthly life, these divine gifts are only potential. They serve as our 'North star', guiding us, reminding of our human possibilities. In earthly life, we could call these daily feelings our *emotional* life – subjective, tied to our daily bodily experiences and our biographies, and lacking the purity of our higher potential most of the time. This is why everyone wants to be near a young baby – the baby wafts a breath of these higher capacities to remind us all. The younger she is, the greater is our opportunity to bring the example the child is seeking. Children come to us with an awareness of these pure spiritual gifts and want to learn from us how to develop them through the years of their childhood.

Rudolf Steiner offers this foundation for our theme:

Rightly speaking all our feelings should take their rise from a fundamental feeling of gratitude that the cosmic world has given us birth and given us a place within itself. The final chapter of every philosophy, in its effect on human feeling at all events should be gratitude towards the cosmic powers. This feeling is essential in a teacher and educator, and it should be instinctive in every person who has the nurture of a child entrusted to him. Therefore the first thing of importance to be striven for in spiritual knowledge is the acquiring of thankfulness that a child has been given into our keeping by the universe.²

Steiner invites us to look deeply at ourselves and to explore what lives within our own feeling life. What is my inner feeling about the nature of the human being? What is my relationship to the entire cosmos as the macrocosm? Do I love my life on the earth, and secondly, do I live in a mood of gratitude and acceptance for my own destiny?

But in addition to our more finely developed feeling life, in reality we each have an unpurified life of emotions as well. It is invaluable to find a path for strengthening our feeling life. Such a path is a deep well of courage and strength in good times as well as challenging ones. It will become a foundation for the moral imaginations and moral technique that are our tools.

We are the early welcomers often meeting a family, whatever its constellation, even before it has developed concepts about caring for a child. What a moment this can be to walk alongside as parent and child build their relationship. It is a tender time, often delicate and even tenuous. My close colleague works, in fact, in a program called 'Fragile Beginnings' designed to support parents with vulnerable infants in a part of the United States in which one of nine babies is born prematurely.

²Steiner, Rudolf *The Spiritual Ground of Education (GA 305)* Lecture IV *Body Viewed from the Spirit* August 19, 1922 p. 7.

The child now forms a new 'umbilical cord' to the world through the human relationships that welcome him. This cord is woven out of our interest, through attention, out of reverence for what preceded the child's birth, readiness to protect this vulnerable and wise child; gratitude for opportunity to accompany him; warmth to counter the coldness in today's times. We endeavor to create a holy mood in our feelings of preparedness to provide the bodily care that is required. We offer a mood of trust in the child's destiny and trust in our potential to honor it. Caregiving is our vehicle for expressing our deepest feelings – my hands, my eyes, my patience, my engagement are educating the child's capacity for being in relationship and all confirm the child's existence. At the beginning, as our colleagues at the Pikler Institute described, we provide 99% of the relationship substance. And I must ask myself: What are my own capacities for being in relationship?

A BRIDGE TO THE CHILD AND PARENT

When we bring these capacities—gratitude, reverence and devotion, respect and patience—we will attain the balance that opens us to be with children and parents in affirmation. Henning Köhler, German teacher of special needs children at the Janusz Korczak Institute, describes this affirmation as follows:

A "yes" spoken deep inside ourselves invokes for the child shelter in and friendship with her physical existence.

We intensify the "yes" to an encouraging and inner comfort (outer comfort is of no use without inner), which strengthens the organization of the child's formative forces and gives her confidence in her capacity to give form creatively.³

We reverently offer our 'right attention' to the child. It is our affirmation of her right to be, to unfold her individual path with our support.

Köhler's term for this is "confirming [the child's] existence."⁴ To confirm the child's existence necessitates that we welcome in each moment the unfolding, changing being of the child.

The infant's unfolding life takes place within the rhythm of time, the heartland of our feeling life. The rhythmic system—our breathing, our heart's beating—are the vehicle for entrainment between ourselves and the child. Here we can find the locus for our action in *love*, love for our task, for all humanity and this child as its representative.

Can we care for this passage from gestation to independence with equanimity, with compassion that yet allows the child his own experiences? Can we offer ourselves in selfless service to the child in a balanced way, with joy and positivity towards his unknown future?

³ Henning Köhler, *Difficult Children there is no such thing*, AWSNA Public. 2003 Fair Oaks, CA, pp. 81-82. In German: *Schwierige Kinder gibt es nicht* 1999 Fries Geistesleben.

⁴ Ibid.

When the child experiences that she is seen and affirmed; that her individuality is welcomed and accepted, the infant or young child then stretches out further into the world. She experiences the support to fulfill her individuality and destiny: freely initiated movement both to get to know herself and to build a strong bodily instrument; developing social capacities that begin by being in heart-warmed human relationships.

THE CHALLENGE OF FEAR

We must be without fear for the child's experience. We must allow him to take risks, to learn from his experiences. I recall at the final gathering of one of my parent-child groups when the children reached age three. A thoughtful highly conscious but somewhat protective mother shared how I had helped her to learn to allow her little boy to take risks – the very first one being to roll from his back to his front and 'fall' off his sheepskin lying on the floor. This was the first 'fall' of his short life and there naturally were many more to follow. We all laughed together in the memory of this moment.

Our emotions are the environment for the child's courage, for his confidence, his contentment. Within our own certainty, the child stretches, explores. We hope to insure as emotionally clear a setting as we can, to leave him free, to enable him to grow in inner and outer alignment, in self trust.

SECURITY AND ITS ABSENCE

Rudolf Steiner describes this capacity in *Philosophy of Freedom*⁵: the possibility to move beyond what one has seen done by example, or what one has been told to do, but to act out of one's own creativity. In this way, we create the cognitive-feeling foundation for the child's later capacity for moral imagination. It is critical to trust in the child's own destiny as well as our capacity to bring healing to every child in the measure that we are able.

Now I shift our attention for a look at each of the first three years to explore how our own feeling life transforms alongside the child's. What gesture is needed in the adult's feeling life as the foundation for the unfolding of moral imagination to meet each situation as it comes toward us.

BECOMING A PARENT

We may meet the parent soon after a child's birth. Huge questions face them. In the U.S., nearly every parent asks what is it to need to return to work outside the home and leave one's infant in care? What is it to be at home with a child in the face of our societal expectations to be in the workplace, or vice versa? Your culture will have its own questions.

Care of the infant and toddler in a group outside the home is not the only support we can offer to today's families. The journey of the mother or father in the first year is as powerful and evolving as that of the child. Mothers and fathers recreate themselves, often from a capable, focused person who is accomplished in the work place — be it a farm, a corporate office, a shop. At the end of each day, they have been able to survey the completed tasks behind them, those in front of them; the

⁵ Steiner, Rudolf *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* (Steiner Books, 1980), GA 004, chapter 12, Moral Imagination.

human relationships are dropped and picked up day by day. But a baby arrives and with it, motherhood or fatherhood – and usually but not always, with a partner.

A baby's birth brings new and overwhelming responsibilities, loneliness, uncertainty. The adults' roles shift endlessly. All these are in a never ending twenty four hour a day stream of care for a vulnerable human being who is dependent upon them but cannot yet offer something in response to their caring. For many women, the complications of pregnancy, the medicalization and technology of birth add to the overwhelming experience. There is the risk of post partum challenges including depression, isolation, change of economic conditions – and these vary dramatically from country to country. All this comes in the contrast to the outer world's expectation of the joy of parenthood and the delight of caring for a child. It is emotional turmoil.

For ourselves as professionals, we need to ask ourselves what assumptions we each hold about the journey of the parent and young child of today. Do I have openness and welcome to whatever parents bring to me? Do I carry fixed opinions about what is best for a child? Can I open myself to interest in each family's journey? Exploring these questions prepares us for our work.

How can we help and support this passage into parenthood? The parent who returns soon to his or her professional work has one set of needs; the mother or father who remains at home with a child has another set. Each culture has its own situation, rarely easy! If the grandparents are deeply engaged in the family's life there may be support, or there may be a conflict of values and expectations as the new generation brings a consciousness to parenting that seeks for new ways.

Many such families find us in Waldorf education. But do we welcome them in true freedom, offering support but not prescriptive advice and a specific ideal of the 'good parent'? How can we work as real partners with interest in and respect for their choices, their struggles? Can we find attunement with them? Can we walk alongside them with respect and gratitude that they are helping a new soul take up life? Can we offer unconditional hospitality?

We serve our vocations in a challenging time. We may have been drawn to our work out of my deeply Gabrielic feeling for the family and its gifts. But we now find ourselves in a Michaelic time, one in which the task for each human being is to strengthen her individuality. Do I welcome and embrace the new possibilities for a parent who is striving to discover her own path, her values, the details of her individual journey alongside cultivating her family life? These are different opportunities from those of the nuclear family with its prescribed expectations. Am I flexible: Can I balance within myself the moments when the needs of the child and her parent appear in conflict without judgment, with care and love for both?

THE NEXT STEP – 'LEAVING HOME'

Towards the end of the first year or in the months that follow, children become upright out of their own initiative and begin to move away from me as the caregiving adult. And although this begins with crawling, there is something different with walking brings a further expression of the child's

individuality.

As the infant becomes a toddler, new questions emerge with regard to my own feeling life: Can I allow the toddler to explore more space, take new risks? Can I offer him a path of freedom to initiate his own direction, follow his own interests? Can I walk alongside without imposing my own feelings of what is right for this child's direction? Can I guide the child into the rhythm of the day with a balance between his independent play, exploration time, and our mutual caregiving time together without strain? My inner gesture now changes. I now need a greater mobility in my inner life. The balance between the caregiving and independent exploration shifts.

During this second year of life, the child gradually adds spoken language to his communication through gesture. We speak together. The warmth of playfulness, creativity and delight stream through the child's own words. Bringing joy through touching games such as those of Wilma Ellersiek as well as lullabies with their particular qualities are the artistic tools of the teacher. They develop a sheath of protection and warmth that rays from the adult to the child.

As the child grows into walking and language, simple songs and verses accompanied by little puppets, allow the child to receive the devotion of the caregiving teacher to him. She offers little gifts throughout the day that communicate her awareness of his experience of the world. The archetypes of the world around the child – the sun, moon, stars; the breeze, light, and air live in these simple verse. The simple animals in his daily experience – a fish, a cow, a cat - all can come to life with a simple poem or song.

This is the pathway for the adult's feelings to reach into the child's world. Tiny stories present the familiar archetypes of the mood of friendship, of kindness, patience, of gratitude that the child experiences directly in his relationship with the teacher, and that he is beginning to unfold within himself.

We need a kind of human knowledge which gives us blood in our soul too, which does not only make us sensible, clever, and intelligent, but which can also make us enthusiastic and inwardly mobile, which can enkindle love in us—for an art of education which springs forth from a true knowledge of man must be borne by love.⁶

Every caregiver will find that particular stages of the child's development will challenge her in different ways. For some, the crying infant touches a chord of pain in her own childhood. For another, the expression of defiance or resistance of the two to three year old may elicit discomfort with conflict and disharmony. These feelings and others may consciously or unconsciously bring forth responses that must be transformed in order to allow the child freedom for his own feeling life to develop, to enable the child to express freely what is his to express.

THE THIRD YEAR

The third year brings a further metamorphosis and transition: to the achievement of uprightness and

⁶ Steiner, Rudolf *Roots of Education* (GA 309), lecture 1, p. 28.

finding his own path, to that of language and finding his own voice, is added the step of saying 'I' to himself. The child creates space for this 'I' in part by pushing away the world. A space begins to open between the child and the world into which this I can stream. Much deeper feelings rise up in the moment and wash over the child with the expression of his emotions.

For the adult who is uncomfortable with strongly expressed emotions and conflict, or has difficulty establishing boundaries and, this may be a difficult time. She finds herself needing to hold many quickly changing situations each day in equanimity and positivity, as well to offer support outwardly that is attuned to the child's growing range of emotions and behaviors.

It is now a new and different challenge to the adult's self-awareness and self-knowledge: are my feelings authentic? Have I tamed the 'wild horses' of my unpurified feelings or am I at their mercy? Are my inner and outer selves aligned; is my inner being objectified? Can I navigate my own feelings within the emergence of the child's own? Can I find a path between sympathy and antipathy?

The child may now experience subtle expression of loneliness or isolation in as the individuality, the self, begins to take form. In the human interactions with the world around – the adults of closest intimacy, siblings and family members, other children and caregivers –the emerging self experiences itself. And our own inner being rises up again and again to guide us to our personal transformation and development, as we ask ourselves leading questions:

- When we care for the infant, what is my feeling when a baby is crying?
- When we care for the toddler, what is my feeling when the child falls?
- What is my feeling when children take play materials from one another?
- What is my feeling when a child pushes another child?
- What is my feeling when a child will not come to the table for a meal, to the bathroom for a clean diaper, does not put on his coat to go outdoors?
- What is my feeling when a child is defiant – says 'No!', or runs away?
- Do I need the children's affection for my own emotional fulfillment?
- Do I know whether my feelings are a response to my own childhood experience?
- Do I have a heightened sense of 'justice' and a black/white feeling of right and wrong with the children?
- Am I able to love the child independent of his behavior – on good days and bad ones?

These questions can guide us toward insight.

HOW CAN WE GUIDE THE CHILD'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

There are three avenues for guiding the children, and as we develop the capacity to move with inner flexibility and intuitive awareness from one to another, our moral imagination can become fruitfully active. First of these three is the development of human virtues; second, of self initiated compliance, and third; of establishing and maintaining boundaries around the child's behavior.

First, *imitation*. Imitation is the foremost means by which children develop the virtues that will guide them for their entire lives: gratitude, reverence, patience. As adults, we bring gratitude and reverence through our living example. We respect the child's spiritual freedom and not attempt to

develop these capacities through 'training', requiring and expecting a child to say 'thank you' or 'please', for example, as expressions of his gratitude.

Rudolf Steiner describes this phenomenon in the following way:

And yet gratitude is a virtue that, in order to play a proper role in the human soul, must grow with the child. Gratitude is something that must already flow into the human being when the growth forces—working in the child in an inward direction—are liveliest, when they are at the peak of their shaping and moulding activities. Gratitude is something that has to be developed out of the bodily-religious relationship I described as the dominant feature in the child from birth until the change of teeth. At the same time, however, gratitude will develop very spontaneously during this first period of life, as long as the child is treated properly. All that flows, with devotion and love, from a child's inner being toward whatever comes from the periphery through the parents or other educators—and everything expressed outwardly in the child's imitation will be permeated with a natural mood of gratitude. We only have to act in ways that are worthy of a child's gratitude and it will flow toward us, especially during the first period of life. This gratitude lives in the physical body and must dwell in it, since it would not otherwise be anchored deeply enough. If the child says 'thank you' naturally, and not in response to the urging of others, but simply by imitation—something has been done that will benefit the child's whole life.⁷

The capacity for compassion, for entering into the suffering of another human being with true empathy, is a highly evolved one, as Rudolf Steiner and other spiritual leaders of humanity describe, will only be fully developed in the far distant future. For the young child, it is only the tenderest beginning as his own I emerges.

What we *can* do as adults is to bring a response that we would hope the child can later offer out of himself. We can be a living example of compassion again and again, offering the healing gesture that the child can not yet offer. In this way compassion, like gratitude, can be deeply rooted in the child.

Again, gratitude is not a social habit or cultural norm. We cannot train gratitude through social manners. Manners are in a different realm, culturally determined and varying greatly throughout the world. Think of the differences among cultures in eating habits where in some cultures it is expected that one eats with one's fingers, while in other places, this would be the greatest breach of etiquette. These culturally determined habits stand in contrast to virtues that are spiritually and universally rooted.

Self initiated compliance

Self initiated compliance is our pedagogical path toward offering freedom to unfold over time.. There are innumerable such moments throughout the day which we may use in strengthening the child's will so that she can more and more smoothly flow through time and space as part of a social group out of her own initiative. She learns through the rhythm of time and the repetition of these

⁷ Steiner, Rudolf, *The Child's Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education*, (GA 306) Lecture 6, p. 125-6.

activities to build habits. The art of drawing the child without coercion to these activities and transitions is the art of the infant, toddler, and nursery teacher.

In what aspects of daily life can we create a setting for self initiated compliance? Everything in the realm of self care – hand washing, coming for diapering and the toilet. Dressing herself with the caregiver as her *assistant*, coming to the table for meals, returning from outdoor play when the transition time is indicated by the adult.

What is the adult's gesture and feeling mood? We carry positive expectation, with patience for what has not yet developed, and with love for young child's process in becoming more fully human.

Working sensitively with the child's unfolding self-initiated compliance strengthens a mood for the adult of flexibility. We hone our capacity to cope with our own frustration when life moves slowly, more slowly than we might wish! We remember that the young child is only a very young child.

The free inner soul life of a child

"...the human being after puberty comes to a true inner experience of freedom, the result of understanding for the first time what was only perception in earlier life. The greatest thing for which we can prepare the child is that, at the right moment of life, he experiences freedom through the understanding of his own being. True freedom is an inner experience, and true freedom can only be developed when the human being is conceived of in this way. As a teacher, I must say to myself: I cannot impart freedom to the human being; he must experience it for himself. But what I have to do is to plant within him something to which his own being—this I leave untouched—feels attracted and into which it sinks itself. This is the wonderful thing I have achieved. I have educated in the human being what has to be educated. In reverence of the Godhead in every single human being, I have left untouched those things that may only be laid hold of by himself.⁸

UPHOLDING BOUNDARIES

To be the parent or teacher of a young child, in a Michaelic or Gabrielic or whatever age, means to set boundaries for the child. Boundaries give safety, security, assurance, confidence – all of which the young child needs above all else. And they must come from the consciousness of the adult, no longer from tradition or 'guidelines' of a particular group of people.⁹

⁸ Steiner, Rudolf *Essentials of Education* GA 308 Lec. 4, April 10, 1924, pp. 82-3.

⁹ Joop van Dam, *Understanding Imitation through a Deeper Look at Human Development* Notes by Joan Almon, 1994 International Waldorf Kindergarten Conference in Eindhoven, Netherlands

Here we lead and guide the children's behavior with firmness and clarity, setting clear, objective boundaries around the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable social behavior. She establishes the behavioral culture.

With young toddlers, pulling hair, pushing are behaviors that may be simple exploration of what will happen if... What are our alternatives in addition to prohibition? We can offer something inanimate to push, to pull, to redirect behavior that is hurtful to another child. But the boundary needs to be clear. Redirection will not give the very young child adequate clarity around what is not acceptable.

The more clearly and objectively we bring our expectations, the more the child can know what is acceptable behavior and what is not. Clarity strengthens the child's resilience and tolerance for frustration; her growing self restraint creates a framework for play, for friendship, for work.

These are three different and mutually supportive areas in which the child grows into becoming a social being who lives in inner freedom and in comfortable relationship with the others around him.

What does the adult need as feeling life capacities? Clarity of thinking, gentleness but firmness of will, reflection as a tool for understanding the situations she experiences with the children.

CONFLICT

A further area of social experience for the very young child is conflict. Eva Kalló, psychologist and pedagogical support staff member of the Pikler Institute in Budapest, described conflict as a natural coinciding of interests and therefore an inevitability in life. But without skills in meeting conflict, it easily becomes a source of discomfort or avoidance. How can we prepare our children to later meet conflict with age-appropriate skills, with a recognition that conflict is a potential source of creativity?

Living and working with toddlers puts us on the forefront of this question, for as they begin to feel themselves as individuals, they meet the world with the creative tension of self discovery, conflict is a necessary effect as each child strives to understand what happens when she reaches out to encounter the world with the force of her personality. How we respond gives the child a picture of his effect on the world around her and begins to mould his actions in a positive way.

The child of today brings new impulse and gifts for the future. They are the most valuable treasure for the future of humanity. Our task is to help them prepare for their own gifts beyond ours. Therefore, we hope to give them freedom from carrying the burden of our own shortcomings. We have an important invitation to do our own transforming for the sake of the young child and his future.

What gets in our way as we strive to find this inner place of joy, of light heartedness, and of informed imagination out of which to be with the very young child?

- ***Our fears*** – fear of making mistakes, fear that a situation will become 'out of control' and will not comply with my expectations – the children will not sit at the table, they will not come in from outdoors, they will destroy the play materials...
- ***Our lack of trust in the child's destiny*** –

- ***Our lack of confidence*** in the parents' ability to be the rightful guides for this child – thinking that they don't keep the child warm enough, don't put her to bed early enough...
- ***My egoism*** that I know the right way, I have seen this before, I am right.

We can join with our colleagues for strength as we strive to become ever more worthy of the child – to comfort, to strive together, to forgive and to love one another each day.

CONCLUSION:

Our hope is that the children and parents who come to us can develop self-reliance, can grow into autonomous personalities who can take responsibility for their own actions.

This work prepares for what Rudolf Steiner foretells about the distant future. In this future epoch of humanity, that we will feel pain when the other feels pain; there will be complete freedom of thought and a longing for it' and third, only real knowledge will be when a person knows that the spiritual pervades the world'.¹⁰ The preparation begins thus:

We must bring an inner fire, an inner enthusiasm, to our work; we must have impulses which are not intellectually transmitted from teacher to child according to certain rules, but which pass over from teacher to child in an intimate way. The whole of our being must work in us as educators, not only the thinking man; the man of feeling and the man of will must also play their part.¹¹

Thereby, we cultivate today what will prevail in the future.

In a practical way, we can 'build a hut' in which we cultivate our inner life. Steiner suggests that we will find the strength we need by developing the capacity to build a hut for ourselves: not a cabin in the woods, but rather an inner space that shelters us from the outer world, that creates faithful moments of tranquility and contemplation. In such moments, we strive to distinguish the essential from the inessential. When we reflect upon our day in the evening, our 'hut' will give us a sheath of seclusion. We emerge ready for the blessings of sleep, carrying away the challenges of our day and refreshing our hearts for the day to come.

Only by cultivating peace in our hearts can we open the space for perceiving the child and parent, for knowing ourselves, and being open to the moral imaginations that seek us. Then we will know what to do in the moment. We, too, can find our way, our joyfulness, can find *our* truth, can find gratitude for all that life has given us. If we strive for this, we give the child a gift for her whole lifetime. This is our path to the dignity of the young child.

*Victorious Spirit!
Flame through the impotence [weaknesses] of faint-hearted souls,*

¹⁰ Steiner, Rudolf GA 159, June 15, 1915 Dusseldorf, 'Preparing for the Sixth Epoch'.

¹¹ Steiner, Rudolf ***Roots of Education (GA 309), lecture 1, pp. 15-17.***

*Burn up our self-seeking and kindle compassion,
So that selflessness,
The life stream of humanity,
May hold sway
As the source of
Spirit rebirth.*