



# EDUCATION AS AN ART

## BULLETIN OF THE RUDOLF STEINER SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

Vol. 23

Summer, 1963

No. 3

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### ACTIVITY IN EDUCATION

From time to time the educational world is swept by what are known professionally as "crazes." Briefly, a "craze" is a method of teaching which is thought by some to be the last word in enlightened and up-to-date education, and by others — well, just a craze. And the fact that this word is used chiefly by teachers themselves, and has originated from among them, allows one to use it here without implying any unworthy criticism.

One such craze which has been discussed with considerable vigour among teachers and in the educational press, goes by the name of Activity. Broadly speaking, activity means that the children are to be encouraged to do something in connection with what they learn. One might object, of course, that learning is itself already a "doing," an activity; and that the young child who has been asked, for instance, to find out how many 15 cent articles he can obtain for \$1.05 already has plenty to do. But that isn't enough nowadays. You have to get hold of some real money (or a suitable educational counterfeit), and go to a real shop (or part of the school you have temporarily transformed into a shop) and actually buy \$1.05 worth of 15 cent articles (even if the articles themselves are worthless or non-existent). And such a method, worked out in all sorts of ingenious ways for every subject, constitutes Activity.

And there can be no doubt that it is a good method as methods go. Even Mr. Squeers knew and practised it in his notorious academy at Dotheboys Hall, where it was his custom, having led the boys through the intricacies of spelling, to send them off to do something in connection with their studies. As he once explained to his newest teacher, Nicholas Nickleby, "W-I-N-D-E-R spells "winder," Nickleby; and when a boy knows that he goes and cleans 'em."

But once again one can see in this how a method, worked out by itself simply as a method, isn't necessarily educational; and the very fact that these methods, these "crazes" come and go, shows only too clearly that they fail to meet, or only partially meet the basic needs of the child. A method, any method, if it is to meet those needs must be based on a knowledge of the child. If that knowledge is incomplete or unsound, then the method must sooner or later break down and a new one be sought, which can rest securely on such knowledge.

It was to provide such a method, and to let the world test its practical application that Rudolf Steiner some forty-five years ago entered the sphere of public education, and out of a life's work devoted to the formulation of a comprehensive knowledge of man, gathered around him a group of teachers at the opening of the Waldorf School and gave them the leading thoughts for their work. And the first words he ever spoke to them were not about WHAT they were to teach, or even HOW they were to teach, but WHO they were to teach — the child, the young human being. And that has continued to be one of the fundamental requirements, qualifications if you like, of all those who teach in Rudolf Steiner schools.

In every word Rudolf Steiner spoke, the fact that we have before us in the child a living spiritual being, active in every fibre of his organism, was never for one moment lost sight of; nor what must inevitably follow — that everything one does in the way of education and instruction must harmonise with that living, active individuality.

A child is so supremely and completely active that we hardly need to make him more active — even supposing we could; but we must know by what activity that which we have to give him is best mediated. We must know whether he is being too active in one direction, and needs the compensating 'rest' of activity elsewhere; or conversely, whether he isn't active enough in one direction and needs stimulation. But just to consider activity in an abstract way, or to consider only *limb* activity is just not enough. There is for instance the obvious activity of sense perception-cum-thinking, or intellectual activity, by which the major part of what we call learning is still acquired. There is the even more obvious physical activity of the limbs by which all the skills of writing, drawing, etc., are practised and developed. But there is also the tireless rhythmic activity of the breathing and circulation of the blood which must on no account be ignored; and what is perhaps even more subtle, what even more 'makes or mars' the child's future, that silent, mysterious activity of growth which accompanies the whole course of education.

It might be a surprise to some that the activity of breathing is something one should take into account in education, — but a little thought on the matter should make the connection quite clear. Let us take for instance what is perhaps the most inactive lesson of all outwardly — that one where the child sits still and listens to a story; and whether he is enjoined or obliged to sit still beforehand or not, he will none the less do so if the story is well told. This apparent stillness is an illusion; for as the story unfolds the child's soul follows, responds to all the changing events it portrays. It is a living, active experience for him. To ignore such movements in the soul, or in other words, in the feeling-organisation of the child, is to blind oneself by force to some of

the most vigorous activities in the child's life. Indeed, to fail to control such activities, by the way one tells such stories, stimulating here, quietening there, is to set up repercussions in the child's whole organism which may later have an effect on his outward, more apparent movements. Nor is the connection between these soul movements and actual physical movements so inscrutable as to escape detection by an observant teacher. Every one knows how closely the feelings are connected with blood circulation and breathing. Who has not himself suffered a shock of fear, and experienced afterwards those violent palpitations of the breathing and heavy hammerings of the heart? Or who has not at some time received unpleasant news and found the whole digestive system revolt at the thought of food, even to the point of actual vomiting. All the time a child is sitting "still" (and how still they can sit on such occasions) listening to a story, he is vigorously active, too; and those activities are re-echoed in the whole rhythmic system. This is so obvious that teachers must have noticed how a child is literally "tired" after having listened to an interesting story. Sometimes he will yawn prodigiously in order to restore the normal current of his breathing; invariably he will stretch himself; often too he will get violently active, repeating in actual physical movements and mimicry the incidents of the story, or breaking out into unrestrained and excited chatter. Then is it the time for him to play — to *rest* what has been so active in the soul by the release of activity elsewhere.

That activity which tires most quickly in a child (a feeling for which is behind the popularity of the 'craze' outlined above), is the sense perception-cum-thinking, or intellectual activity. There was a time when this was considered almost the only activity required in education. Some of us can still remember the days when school was a place where you sat still, with your hands behind your back (*and* your feet together on the footrest) and listened to what the teacher told you and watched what he did on the blackboard. But almost everyone agrees today that this is wrong. It is extremely difficult — if not impossible — for even a fully mature adult to endure a long period absorbing knowledge in this way; and that it was ever demanded of little children shows us into what aberrations a short-sighted view of the child is likely to lead us. Have you not observed, for instance, a veritable ripple of relief pass across a whole audience, subtle but perceptible, when a lecturer or speaker in the midst of a closely reasoned discourse pronounces those welcoming words, "Now let me give an illustration . . ." and though he still continues to use words, to speak, everyone rejoices that they can now rest one part of their listening soul and call into activity another — the imaginative, picture-forming capacity. Rudolf Steiner often speaks of 'humour' in the giving of a lesson, but he doesn't necessarily mean 'heartly laughter' (though that too has a most important place in the range of soul and physical activities), but those subtle fluctuations of mood, that breathing of the soul, that variation between the heavy, the tense, and that which relieves the tension. All this is activity — activity which the teacher must be able to stimulate and abate almost at will; and one which, properly directed, will keep the child keen and alert even though he may not be roaming round the class or going off on some cultural expedition in the neighbourhood. If this is not done, then our teaching and we suffer that damning and crushing condemnation of the little girl who, on being asked what she had been doing at school replied, "Nothing. Teacher was talking all the time."

The trouble is, however, that when the evils of excess in one method have become apparent there is a danger to run into excess in another direction. "Let the children do it themselves," has become in some quarters a principle of modern education, and if this goes on unchecked we shall rapidly approach the anomalous position where, instead of teachers teaching the children, we shall have the children teaching the teachers. It is thought now by some that children should talk freely, roam about the classroom, do this or that as their inclination dictates, and the teacher should be hardly much more than an observer taking his cue as to method from what the children do themselves. But if the teacher secedes from his natural authority; if he fails to guide the child's activities out of his knowledge of those activities and how they originate, the children must grow up with a casualness and dilettantism which will be hard to uproot later.

That this should be possible is all the more strange when it is remembered that in that one sphere of a child's total activity, where his own initiative might be given almost unrestricted free play, he is still bound down to the most rigid observance of a strict form — to wit, in his play. A sports teacher is as essential a member of the staff nowadays as a teacher of arithmetic; and no local authority would any more think of putting up a new school without a playing field than they would leave out a cloakroom. In that part of its activity where a child is by nature prone to express himself freely (and where we can learn a great deal by becoming a mere observer), he now tends to be organised and supervised out of all recognition. Any child will naturally kick, throw and hit a ball, and unite with his fellows to do so; and the ingenuity of children in devising games for themselves (some of which have persisted down the centuries) is well-known; but one cannot help wondering how far children by themselves would have got in devising all the complicated forms of leagues, league tables, cup-ties, championships and points systems into which their purely physical activities tend to be directed, nowadays. It is a sad confession of much modern educational theory (even though the principle by which it exists is supported by the dignity of a Latin tag — *Mens sana in corpore sano*) that what a child loses through physical well-being through having to sit in school and learn, must be made up for by a vigorous imitation of adult pastimes on the playing field; and nowhere is the so loudly trumpeted freedom of modern education so sadly lacking as in the child's play.

Man is already an essentially active being and does not need to be made so by education. We can no more import activity into education than we can hope to make the ocean wet by pouring water on it. But we can strain the activities that are already there by too much use, or cause others to atrophy through refusing to recognise them or by failing to give them the opportunity to develop. And that supremest activity to which all education is directed, that which alone gives us the right and reason to educate at all, the unfolding in full self-consciousness of the free, independent human spirit, can only appear long after our efforts are over, and will be the final judge of all we do. Education exists for no other purpose than to guide the activities of the natural man which are already there, so that the free spirit may awake in due time in full consciousness of its power and activity.

—ALAN HOWARD

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publication of the Rudolf Steiner Schools in England.*

## HOW THE LAND WAS DIVIDED

*A story told to the first grade as introduction to the division sign in arithmetic.*

There was once a king who had two sons. When he became old and weary of his rule he said to his sons, I am old, go and rule my land for me.

Now, it was a very great land, so that part of it lay in the cold icy North and part lay in the hot, sunny South. When the king was younger, he lived in a castle in the North for a time, and then he lived in another castle in the South for a time. He was the only king who ruled from two castles.

The sons obeyed their father and rode to the castle in the South to rule as their father had done. But there was only one throne, and there was not enough room for both to sit on it, so they quarrelled. Besides, the first son did not like the South because he loved the snow and clear, fresh air of the North, so he was doubly unhappy.

Soon the time came for the two sons to go to the castle in the North for a while, to rule the land from the other castle. Here too, the throne was too small for both to sit on it, and besides, the second son did not like the cold and snow. He loved the hot sun and the green grass.

And so it went on for a long time, until one day the two sons felt that they could not bear their unhappiness any longer. They called a wise old man and told him all about their grief. The wise old man said, You will have a dream and if you can interpret the dream, your sorrows will be ended.

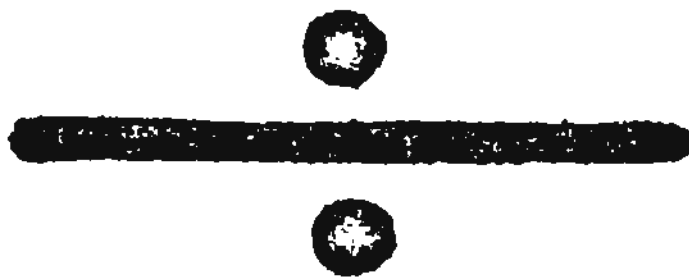
The two sons went to sleep that night, and this is what they dreamed: They were both standing on the bridge that crosses the river which runs across the country exactly half way between the northern part and the southern part. The first son who liked the ice and snow and clear fresh air walked north and sat on the throne in the castle of the North. The second son who liked the hot sun and the green grass walked south and sat on the throne in the castle of the South. They did not quarrel because there was room for each one on the throne and they were happy because each one ruled in that part of the land that he liked best. And because they were happy, the people were also happy.

In the morning the two sons woke up and told each other their dream. They had both dreamed the same dream so they knew that this was the right answer to their question. They were both so pleased with the new way of ruling the land that they told the whole story to every stranger who came to the country.

It was like this, they said, there was a river running straight through the land. There was a castle in the North and a castle in the South. — and they drew a picture on the ground like this:



They told the story so often that soon they stopped drawing castles but instead they just made two marks to show where the castles stood and they drew a line to show where the river flowed. They said, This is how the land was divided:



—HARRY KRETZ  
(Illustration, Jean Laise)

## THE HAPPY CANDLE

"Sunlight," calls the lily,  
    "Stream down into me!  
With you my white cup I must fill;  
For out of you I must distil  
    Nectar for my bee."

Downward streams the sunlight.  
    "Lily, tell your bee  
To put a little of me by,  
To make a candle one inch high,  
    To deck a Christmas tree."

"Lily," calls the hive-bee,  
    Buzzing as she flies,  
"May I drop in and take a sip  
Of nectar, and a dusty dip  
    Of pollen on my thighs?"

"Do, bee," sings the lily.  
    "But light says, tell your bee  
To put a little of him by,  
To make a candle one inch high,  
    To deck a Christmas tree."

Homeward wings the hive-bee;  
    Straight her airy road.  
There she in turn sings sunlight's song  
To eager nurse-bees as they throng  
    To lift from her her load:

"Sunlight said to lily,  
    And lily said to me,  
Please put a little of him by,  
To make a candle one inch high,  
    To deck a Christmas tree."

Away each bee-nurse hastens,  
    With nectar for her brood.  
Bee-masons turn the rest to wax,  
To build their white, six-sided sacs,  
    To store their golden food.

"Thank you," sing the masons.  
    "Please tell light that we  
Will put a little of him by,  
To make a candle one inch high,  
    To deck a Christmas tree."

Into his bee-garden  
    The gentle bee-man comes.  
"Please may I take the honey flow?"  
He asks each hive; and, bending low,  
    He listens as it hums:

"Yes, sir, take our honey.  
But would you kindly see  
A little cell-wax is put by,  
To make a candle one inch high,  
To deck a Christmas tree?"

The bee-man runs the honey  
From the bright honey-comb;  
And from its small, six-sided sacs  
He makes brown candles of sweet wax  
To light his winter home.

His little boy is helping.  
"Father, please," says he,  
"May I put just a little by,  
To make a candle one inch high,  
To deck a Christmas tree?"

"Do, son," says the bee-man.  
And so the wax that came  
From sun to flower, from flower to hive,  
Among the carols comes alive,  
And turns again to flame.

Little boy and bee-man,  
Sunlight, lily, bee,  
Join hands to bring down from the sky  
A happy candle one inch high  
To deck a Christmas tree.

—ISABEL WYATT

From *The Way Down*: Christmas Poems for Children of All Ages, with the kind permission of Michael Press, Hawkwood College, Stroud, England.

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## RE M I N D E R !

Please bear the date of the Christmas Fair of the Rudolf Steiner School in mind: it's December 7. Eager hands are working already for beautiful surprises.

Whatever you have ready for the Christmas Fair can be brought to the School, and again we would like to point out the importance of receiving these items at the earliest possible date.

We look forward to hearing from you, and once more thanks for your continuous friendship.

THE CHRISTMAS FAIR COMMITTEE

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## THE RUDOLF STEINER SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

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Membership in the Association, including the quarterly Bulletin,  
is \$3.00 per year. Single copies of the Bulletin, 35¢ each.

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