

Healing Presence

～ Janene Ping and Jane Swain

Once upon a time—or rather, now, in our time—there is a modern fairy tale, “The Tale of Sinhold,” written by German poet Michael Bauer. It tells of a hero who wishes to free a King’s daughter from the slumbering enchantment of a sorcerer. He has learned that no one can achieve this alone, nor in the company of human companions. He seeks a wise woman’s counsel, but when he reaches the oasis in which she lives, he finds she has crossed the threshold of death. He puts her body to rest, then, realizing that her potted violet and animal companions will die if abandoned, he brings them on his journey.

This individual finally reaches the shrouded kingdom where the sorcerer’s powers have taken hold. With courage and strength, he conquers the oppressor, but after many years of darkness, the enchanted daughter of the king has lost the will to live. It is only when the warmth and light of the sun touch her skin, the scent of the violet is smelled, and the song of the bird is heard, that she is able to awaken. Through her senses, the wisdom of the cosmos touches her soul. The truth of being incarnate reveals the numinous

presence that works through creation.

As we know in Waldorf education, a healthy child delights in the sense world, taking joy in play and movement. This is a powerful source of learning in the process of incarnation, a way to become embodied and develop capacities of body, soul, and spirit. But the further modern lifestyle and societal culture moves away from being present in real time and place on this earth, the more challenging it is for the young child to healthfully incarnate. In this post-Covid world, educators and parents are increasingly finding children’s development to be significantly delayed compared to before the pandemic. There are many factors that contribute to this reality, the most tragic being the trauma of loss. Beyond this, however, we must examine how the increase of screen time is a continuing crisis within itself.

In the course “Healing Presence,” taught at Sophia’s Hearth this last summer, a group of Waldorf early childhood educators met to focus on the effects that screens have on early development. Stories of children in crisis were shared, as well as a commitment to

bringing healing through the ways in which we teach. Awakening to this crisis involves a freedom that is both a privilege and a responsibility, and it is extremely challenging work. Although every Waldorf school represented has Media/Technology guidelines or policies for their school community, few have found success in active follow-through with parents.

The young child is immersed in the lifestyle and values that live within each family. Parent education and commitment are essential, accompanied by inspiration and compassion. Our goal is not to judge, but rather to help parents find empowerment with clear discernment to understand the short- and long-term effects of screens on human development, ethical values, family life, and societal culture.

This discernment is developed when we widen our understanding of the phenomena of screens in our time. We understand the pragmatic ways that technology, as a tool, has helped humanity. Yet contemporary research continues to underline findings of the detrimental effects of screen technology. When used on a regular basis as entertainment or in social media throughout childhood, screens adversely influence attentional capacities, social intelligence, and physical and emotional health.

Research can be overwhelming. What is the most recent and relevant information? One of the activities of our course was to collectively read and evaluate the clarity and relevance of several books and articles on this subject. What is helpful to us as educators? What is accessible to parents?

Then there is the living research of our own work. Every child who compulsively spins out with aggressive movements and behaviors imitated from screen programming, every child who chants theme songs from commercials when the group is otherwise engaged in curricular activities, every child who is delayed in simple small and large motor coordination because these have not been actively developed through physical engagement in work and play, every child who has attention deficits that inhibit listening and other skill development...they are the students we long to help, and they are the students we can learn from.

As in the fairy tale at the beginning of this article, we cannot do this alone. We must work hand in hand with parents. Together we can break the spell of enchantment to free the child and let the wisdom of the cosmos nourish their development. In this area,

our work with parents also needs to be collegially shared. In the course, Sierra Humphreys, a student at Sophia's Hearth, presented her research on this subject. She had asked the parents of the children in her early childhood program to help her research the effects that screen programming had on the child's creative capacities for play. A large portion of the parent body was willing to turn off all screens surrounding children (including their own use, except in an emergency) for three weeks. Sierra was able to document significant change for the good within the children's behavior and play. Some families found this experiment so positive that they continued to uphold no or minimal screen time within their homes.

As we explore what it means to be human in a time when machines and artificial intelligence are increasingly taking over our human lives, we have stories to tell. Each story can be a conduit for our own awakening. The healing potential of story holds a poetry of soul that lives within every human. It is the poetry of what is, and of what still might be, filled with beauty and hope. It is moving to enter that vulnerable place in the heart where the transformation of darkness, such as fear and addiction, becomes a pathway to freedom.

Practically, the optimal intervention towards freedom is to stop the child's screen exposure. If this is not achieved, what may the teacher do to serve children who are adversely affected by repeated screen exposure?

Many teachers experience the same phenomena. The class is playing in the forest, where most of the children might be balancing on a log, building a fairy house, cooking up a mud pudding, constructing a house out of logs, breaking down a decaying tree stump, watching a bug, or simply feeling the sensations of sand, soil, and pine needles. Meanwhile, there are others who are seemingly oblivious that they are even in the forest. Instead, they are trapped inside a movie scene that they have previously watched. They may repetitively chant a phrase from a movie or make robot-like gestures or gestures of fighting, whacking, pointing, and cutting which they have absorbed from screen images. These children have difficulty engaging in play with their peers. In essence, they are under the enchantment of the movies that they have seen. How are we to break the spell? How may we make sense of these behaviors? One interpretation of the situation is that these children are displaying a profound lack of connection. They show a decrease of connection



Balancing. Photo courtesy of Janene Ping and Jane Swain.

with their own bodies, with other people, and with the world around them.

We can observe that these children are disconnected from their bodies by the awkward, stilted, tension-filled quality of their movements. When children with these types of gestures are observed, what stands out is that their movements are not peripherally oriented, i.e., they don't move in relationship to the environmental conditions around them. In healthy movement, the movement *originates* in the periphery. For example, when walking through the forest, the body is constantly making adjustments *in response* to the uneven terrain of the forest floor. Additionally, in healthy play, children *interact* with the raw materials of the forest. They may have an idea that they want to build a stick structure, for example, but the specific features of each stick influence how the child uses it in the structure.

This often isn't happening in the child who is preoccupied with images from a screen experience. Instead of being peripherally-oriented, these children's movements are often centrally-oriented—their movements originate in their heads. They are playing out the screen images that are stuck there. As a result, their movements are tight, and lack ease and fluidity. These children have difficulty being present and feeling comfortable in their bodies.

The four foundational senses (senses of touch, life or well-being, proprioception or self-movement, and balance), are the doorways through which the child may walk in order to achieve a comfort-filled connection to their bodies. Unfortunately, screen time emphasizes just visual and auditory input. When the child is partaking of the screen experience, they are being robbed of opportunities to develop their four foundational senses.

Exploration of these foundational senses supports these children. Course participants experienced many different balance activities, including specially designed Spatial Dynamics therapeutic interventions for balance. Many of the students commented that they experienced a profound feeling of grounded-ness from these experiences. Proprioceptive experiences with weight

and its impact on balance were also explored.

Important consideration was given to the child's experience of disconnect from other people and from their environment. In healthy interactions in the "real world" a person experiences two-directional movement—subtle incoming and outgoing gestures. In *The Renewal of Education*, Rudolf Steiner describes that when we listen to another person, we "fall asleep" in our experience of what the other person is saying. In contrast, our comprehension of what has been said is a kind of "waking up." Steiner explains: "Ultimately, our entire intercourse with the world rests on this faculty of being able to enter into an outer situation." In other words, the movements of healthy interactions happen via two-way streets. We go out into the world and have an experience, and the location of this experience is "out there" in the world. Then we come back to ourselves and register what just happened. There is a reciprocal ebbing and flowing gesture.

One of the most tragic things about screens is that they involve one-way streets, with everything coming in. There is not an outward gesture from the watcher. Indeed, if we observe children on screens, there is a certain hollow paleness that they may develop. Their pupils dilate and their bodies become still. We can sense a gesture of withdrawal, as if they are retreating back inside themselves, trying to avoid the assault of



Building. Photo courtesy of Janene Ping and Jane Swain.

the incoming images. Indeed, the child may appear as just a shell of themselves after watching a screen for an extended period.

How can the teacher help the child develop the needed two-way gesture of healthy encounter? One way is through classic children's activities that are specifically designed to enliven the rhythmical system, as the rhythmical system is the place in the body that was designed for connection. These include hand clapping games, twizzling yarn into cords, throwing and catching bean bags and balls, and even passing out bowls of soup. We also tossed felted balls onto long silk inclines, watched them roll down the incline, and caught them at the bottom. These movements are designed to facilitate the in-and-out gesture of the rhythmical system.

As the opening fairy tale implies, *connection* is needed to break the enchantment of the isolation and imprisonment of our times. We all long to connect with each other, but often we don't know how. We want to be able to discuss media policies with our colleagues and with our parents, but somehow it is so hard to move forward towards connection. In the course, we explored ways that movement with back-and-forth gestures can be used to help build connections with our colleagues and with the parents in our

communities. Movement is the universal connector!

Early childhood is the time in life when children are meant to explore and build connections to their own bodies, to other children and adults, and to their interests in the world. The long-term goal is for the children to develop a strong bodily instrument with which to find "their people," follow their calling, and connect with their life's work. The hope is that through children's development of these connections early in life, they may ultimately find the purpose, meaning, and fulfillment of their life's destiny. ♦

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