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# Focus—The Healing Gifts of Waldorf Education

## Agitation and Anxiety and a Disturbed Sense of Life

~ Stephen Spitalny

Over the past several years, many early childhood educators have observed increased signs of agitation and anxiety in young children. These observations include difficulty in settling, discomfort with silence (as exhibited by punctuating quiet moments with loud vocal sounds), breathlessness, a heightened sense of alert, constant scanning for danger, inability to come to rest, and uncontrollable silliness rather than participation in group activities. Through articulating my thoughts, I want to share some ideas and perspectives. I do not expect the reader to agree with all of what follows. I do, however, hope to inspire the reader to explore these ideas and discover other approaches and solutions. As Cynthia Aldinger once said, “There is no one and only way.”

Many tried and true methods no longer work to bring order and form and structure and calm.

To me, all of this is symptomatic of an unhealthy *life sense*, or disturbances to *interoception*. “Interoception” is the name modern science has given to what Rudolf Steiner called the life sense, and I use the terms interchangeably.

What would happen if your interoception experience was unreliable, unclear, or confusing?

What if you were unable to feel what was happening in your body? What if you noticed feelings originating in your body but had no idea what the feelings meant? What if, on a daily basis, your internal sensations were so overwhelming that your body felt an unsafe place to reside?

One of the functions of the sense of life is to give a basic feeling of wellbeing. Without that sense of wellbeing, the individual is constantly in a heightened state of preparedness for threat, anticipating an unsafe situation. Humans have basic needs, and primary among those are being safe and feeling connected to other humans. All of the above “symptoms” point to children not being at ease in their body or in the world, due either to inadequate development or to a

disturbance in the development of the life sense. They respond with nervous or aggressive behaviors that speak of bodily unease and fear. A healthy life sense can distinguish between major or minor irritations, and raises the tolerance level for upsetting experiences, fostering calm and stability even amidst challenges. The life sense can only do its job when a sense of wellbeing is raying into the soul.

Steiner identified the life sense as one of the “lower,” or body-based, senses, as it delivers information about aspects of the physical body. Later research has added to our understanding of what modern science calls “interoception.” The pathways are the spinal cord and vagus nerve, which send signals to the brain and deliver messages to peripheral organs (heart, kidneys, lungs, liver, digestive system). There is a very close connection between interoception and the activity of the autonomic nervous system (the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems). Interoception includes the processes by which an organism senses, interprets, integrates, and regulates signals from within itself. Research shows that our sensitivity to interoceptive signals can determine our capacity to self-regulate our emotions, and this affects our tendency toward anxiety.

There are three separate aspects of interoception to understand:

1. Continuous information is provided to the brain about the state of the various organs. Some of the sensations transmitted include hunger, fatigue, illness, need to use the toilet, pain, and heartbeat.
2. In response to the received information about the organs, signals arise to release various chemicals (hormones) to create balance, harmony and wellbeing. For instance, our brains might detect high glucose levels in the liver, and then release hormones that trigger metabolism, below the level of conscious awareness. A vast number of these silent, non-conscious communication processes are going on within us all the time.

3. When the organs are in balance and functioning in harmony, a feeling of wellbeing permeates the whole organism and is the basis for a basic experience of body-soul completeness.

After birth into a physical body, a first step on the path to experience of self is connecting with sensation through the life sense. Interoception can provide a feeling of security and shelter, of belonging in one's own body. It helps us form an image of our own self below the threshold of consciousness.

With young children, when there is disturbance or overstimulation, or a threatening situation that takes away the feeling of safety, then consciousness is switched to an alert or wakeful state. This is opposite to what the young child needs, which is to be drifting in a dream-like consciousness, not yet fully awake to the experience of self-consciousness.

The ability to detect interoceptive signals is influenced by stress and by adverse life experiences. Adversity and trauma reduce emotional awareness, decreasing our willingness to tolerate, take interest in, or pay attention to the signals of our own body. People who have experienced significant stress, chronic pain, or trauma stop listening to or trusting bodily cues, making it difficult for them to predict their own emotional responses and to regulate them.

It must be noted that our time is a stressful one, and over the past few years the stress levels have been magnified.

## Sleep

Healthy sleep is something that doesn't come easily to people in our time. In general, people don't get enough sleep, or their sleep is disturbed and interrupted. There seems to be an epidemic of sleep disruption, both among children and adults. Sleep provides an essential time of rejuvenation and renewal for the human organism, so this disturbance is significant.

According to Steiner, during waking life, the astral body which is the bearer of our soul life exerts a destructive influence on the etheric body. During sleep, the ego and the astral body separate from the etheric body and the physical body. This allows the etheric body to be rejuvenated by the forces received from the cosmos during sleep.

In an early stage of nightly sleep, the soul experiences drifting in the cosmos as if adrift at sea. A later stage is that the soul feels permeated by the divine, nurtured in the arms of the godhead. These

experiences must be carried into waking life to be able to metabolize substance through the digestion of food, otherwise there will be disorder in the entire organism. Additionally, our ability to think intelligently rests on what is received during sleep. (See Rudolf Steiner's lectures "The Experiences of Sleep and their Spiritual Background" and "The Soul's Experiences in Sleep.")

In many young children we may observe a constant scanning of the surroundings as if they are expecting something to go awry at any moment, a constant scanning for threats. This is a sign of a disturbed sense of life, suggesting that the children feel unsafe and uncomfortable in their own body. Lacking a basic sense of wellbeing, the nervous system is led by what can be called the "reptile brain," the basal ganglia. Survival and self-protection become the primary focus.

If you are in tune with your bodily signals out of a basic sense of wellbeing, you will be able to form nuanced interpretations of your feelings about a situation, and this in turn supports an ability to make choices about the best ways to respond. To make those wiser choices, the higher systems of the brain, such as the limbic system and the pre-frontal cortex, must be active. People carrying a heavy load of anxiety, in contrast, may misinterpret their interoceptive signals, which can lead them to perceive everything as a crisis and magnify their sense of panic.

When a person's life sense is not broadcasting the message of wellbeing, then the nervous system is placed on high alert. The sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system is activated and attempts to restore balance. This creates a cycle of sensing something is off, releasing hormones (such as cortisol) that heighten bodily readiness for danger, and then feeling more and more a lack of wellbeing.

## Why is the sense of life in children disrupted?

Recent years have led to a tremendous heightening of stress and anxiety in adults, as well as extended periods of isolation where in-person connection and support were not possible. Children were isolated from peers and spent more time at home. During this time, people of all ages were engaged with technology more than before. During this time, the technology itself rapidly advanced to make personal devices more efficient, powerful, and relied-upon for more and more uses. Even when at home together, adults were more and more distracted by their own electronic devices and less emotionally present for their children. Children

were allowed more screen time than ever before, and this screen time became a habit that did not go away when in-person social time and school recommenced.

Technology can distract us from noticing important signals from the brain. At the same time, it can itself become a source of distress. People scroll on the computer for hours, not paying attention to how tired they are, or how unhappy it makes them feel. Google searches, emailing, checking social media, and news media bombard us with external sensory signals. With an overstimulated nervous system, it's harder to notice how we're feeling. Negative sensations, like anxiety and tension, only get worse. One very significant reason the children are anxious and agitated is the heightened anxiety in the children's surroundings, meaning in adult caregivers and parents.

Over the last several years, adults have been more worried about an increasing number of things: politics, social media, scary viruses, and the polarization of opinions about all of these. There is less trust in what is read in the "news." Fear is used in advertising and media to motivate us in one direction or another. Parents seem less calm and centered, and are more distracted.

With adults distracted, agitated, and anxious, it is no wonder that everyone's sense of life is out of whack, and children don't have the capacity to remedy it themselves. They need adults to find the way for them.

### Some tools and solutions

In one of his earliest lecture cycles for teachers, *Foundations of Human Experience* (also known as *Study of Man*), Steiner said to teach the children to breathe in the widest possible sense. This is perhaps even more important today than 100 years ago. As teachers, we need to help the children become adept at breathing between chaos and form, between expansion and contraction, between noise and quiet, between sleep and waking, periphery and center, and between the activities of the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems, among many other polarities. One of the tools we have long used is rhythm. Rhythm is an alternation between polarities, a breathing between this and that.

The autonomic nervous system is involved in interception. It is made up of pathways of neurons that control various organ systems inside the body, using many diverse chemicals and signals to maintain balance and bodily harmony. It branches into the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. The sympathetic component is responsible for the "fight or

flight" response to danger, while the parasympathetic component helps us to "rest and digest."

One aspect of breathing is the physical activity of respiration itself. With each inhale, the sympathetic system is activated, with each exhale, the parasympathetic system. Awareness of this can guide us to solutions for the anxiety and agitation the children are experiencing. Are there ways to guide the children away from a tendency to holding their breath to experiencing long exhales, without making such breathwork conscious for the children?

Adults can bring this knowledge to our own heightened states of stress or tension, and immediately reduce our own stress by breathing in several cycles of extended exhales after shorter inhales. This truly is a magical practice for neurological reset.

With young children whose organs have not yet achieved their own rhythms, providing a solid external rhythm is an essential support. So we have rhythms for sleeping and waking, eating and not eating, playing and putting away toys, and on and on. These are all part of learning to breathe. Creating a routine for the unfolding of the day is an incredible support for the developing organs, for relaxing into the flow of life, and for reducing stress.

With children who seem to avoid stillness, how can we bring them an experience of quiet and calmness? This is when a sense of wellbeing can penetrate into them. One method is for the adults who are caring for these agitated children to have an unhurried mood, steeped in patience and reverence for each child's unique path of development. The children may be unsettled because of a lack of attention, which is a basic human need. How often are the children with an adult who is truly present, devices put away, and thereby able to offer full attention? Without the needed presence of another human being, the children are unsettled.

Unhurried inner participation, full presence, allowing no interruptions, no phone answering, taking a moment of silence to truly think before speaking: these are all worth practicing ourselves and offering as a suggestion to parents. Maybe a start for parents could be to practice this for at least 30 minutes with their child every day.

There is a natural sequence of rhythms articulated by dancer Gabrielle Roth that can easily be incorporated into the work with young children. She described these "5Rhythms" as *flowing*, *staccato*, *chaos*, *lyrical* and *stillness*. One could also describe them as states of

being. Imagine a gentle rain starts to fall. It increases in tempo as the winds pick up. It becomes a raging storm with howling winds. The winds slow and the rain lets up. The sun shines again and everything is still and peaceful. In circle time, one can find opportunities to take the children on a 5Rhythms journey, with a finger game or with whole-body movement set to song or rhyme. Start slowly, increase the pace. Increase even more until the words are so fast the fingers or body cannot keep up. And then decrease the tempo until there can even be a moment of silence and stillness at the end. This is one way to enter into chaos, into the world of agitation, and then to lead the children out into stillness.

As example, here is a finger game combining subtle breathwork with the 5Rhythms. Thank you, Bonnie Maffie, for this song and finger movements. Of course, the game should be conveyed by imitation. There is no instructing nor correcting the children even if they aren't using the same fingers.

*Come, little birdies, peck my corn,  
Peck, peck, peck, peck, peck.  
Peck, peck, peck, peck, peck, peck.  
Chew, chew, chew.*

The first time through, using both hands, the forefingers and thumbs form two pecking beaks, pecking at each rhythmic pulse. Chew, chew, chew is accompanied by forefinger and thumb touching while making small circles together. Repeat a second time, a little bit faster, with the middle finger and thumb active as the pecking beaks. Pause after the second time through and take an exaggerated deep breath with a long exhale. The third time through is as fast as possible, maybe even faster than possible. The fourth time is quite slow and the words are mouthed and silent. Then:

*Fly away, fly away, come back home today.*

Hands make a "bird" flying. Slowly the arms stretch out as the "bird" flies upward, and on coming back home hands land in lap forming a "nest." The group is ready for what is next.

In my kindergarten we follow up with a circle-time ending verse (origin unknown).

*The gift of light we thankfully take  
[Hands are in a nest form on lap]  
But it shall not be alone for our sake.*

*The more we give light  
[Stretch arms/hands out to neighbors  
on either side, palms up]*

*The one to the other*

*It shines and it spreads, it glows still further,*

*Until every spark by friends set aflame,*

*Until every heart with joy to proclaim  
[Cross hands over heart]*

*In the depths of our souls*

*A shining sun glows.*

And then we have created a quiet space that I let linger for a few seconds or more.

The autonomic nervous system is intimately connected to breathing, as well as to the polarity of heightened anxiety and relaxation. One of my intentions is to find ways to support shutting off the sympathetic system through examples of long exhales integrated into daily activities such as circle time or food blessings.

A basic pedagogical practice is to meet what is present in the children and offer what is needed. This is serving both the present and the future, serving children by being a true servant of sacred things. We have to be selfless and true. We can heal the child's life sense by applying the inner capacities of adults' developed life sense, which manifests as active tolerance for chaos and disruptions. If an adult does not have the ability to go into that chaotic state and transform it, then nothing works.

Egoism says "I have prepared this and you must go along with it." The selflessness that is needed says "What do you need and how can I serve you?" Enter into the chaos, don't resist it. Meet the children where they are and bring them where you want them to be. Even something as simple as inserting longer and longer silent pauses into songs or verses can help develop a listening quality in the children, and a capacity to allow stillness and quiet.

Learning can only occur when an individual's will is engaged. If you want the children to develop form, then you have to find ways to encourage the children to take hold of the form from within themselves, through the activity of their own will. Of course, teachers can impose their own will on the children; teachers can impose form. "Let's make a circle....Oh, I notice a hole in our basket. Step back and fill the hole.....Stand closer to her...Reach out your arms and make sure they aren't bumping anybody...." Or one can simply do circle

time activities and patiently wait until a circle arises from the children. This is the way to take the children from where they are to becoming a group with form.

Another remedy for the children of today is for adults to fully engage their own will in activity. When telling a story or doing a circle, live into the inner pictures of what the words are speaking. Create vivid mental images while telling a story, picture strongly yourself as tree or woodcutter or bear while doing circle time. Many traditional movement practices, such as Qigong, as well as the new art of eurythmy, can enhance our adult consciousness toward becoming more present in our own movement.

When sewing or woodworking, sweeping or doing dishes, be fully present in the activity. Engaging our adult will forces can in itself bring a calming presence to a group of children, and to ourselves. Our interest and attentiveness can then offer fuller receptivity to the child.

As with so much of our work with young children, the most important pedagogical tool is the teacher. We need to find reserves of peacefulness and patience, depths of true reverence, and the capacity for responding to each present moment. There are many practices to develop and enhance these qualities. Steiner's Six Basic Exercises work deeply on the soul faculties of thinking, feeling and willing. Some other practices worth mentioning in this context are Steiner's Main Exercise, and Else Gottgens' Vertical Column of Light.

We must be the example for the children of peacefulness and love and true presence. This is



Photo courtesy of Heike Adamsberger

the only cure. The children are watching! If we are experiencing agitation and anxiety, we must do the inner work to overcome those. It starts with awareness of our inner state, with mindfulness of what our feelings are saying and what our sense of life is telling us about our own bodily state.

To close these ruminations, I offer an English translation of a verse by Rudolf Steiner in which we may experience that peace and inner quiet can only come through utilizing our own strength and striving for that peace and quiet. These words reveal that an

engaged strength of will is inner peace and stillness.  
They are one and the same. ♦

*I bear quiet within me  
I bear in myself  
Forces that strengthen me.  
I wish to imbue myself  
With the warmth of these forces,  
I wish to permeate myself  
With the strength of my will.  
And I wish to feel  
How peace flows  
Through all my being,  
If I strengthen myself,  
To find in myself  
Stillness as a force,  
Stillness as a force,  
Through the power of my striving.*

Translated by Walter Alexander

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#### References:

The lecture by Rudolf Steiner, "The Experiences of Sleep and their Spiritual Background" was given on 9 October 1922, as Lecture 1 of the cycle *Spiritual Relationships in the Human Organism*, GA 218. "The Soul's Experiences in Sleep," given on 10 September 1922, is Lecture 5 of the cycle *Philosophy, Cosmology & Religion*, GA 215.

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