

The Healing Art of Puppetry: Supporting the Child's Path Toward Wholeness

— Nancy Blanning

In the summer of 2023 a group of puppet enthusiasts, educators, and artists working within the Waldorf cultural stream gathered in Niwot, Colorado at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The essential focus of this gathering was to share the inspiration and delight of the moving art of the puppet. Hosted by the World Association of Puppetry and Storytelling Arts (WAPASA), the days that unfolded were rich and inspiring. A fledgling organization born during the isolated times of the pandemic, WAPASA's mission is to support and unite a growing community of storytellers and puppeteers who have experienced the profound nourishment that children (and adults!) receive from the living pictures of these art forms. Rudolf Steiner, who had taken up puppetry in fairytale theater during the First World War, reflected that such artistic engagement had potential to heal the ills of civilization. Educator, author, and therapist Nancy Blanning explores Steiner's indication in post-pandemic life in the following article,

edited from her keynote address at the conference this past summer. For more information about the associative arts of puppetry and storytelling visit www.puppetryandstorytelling.org

—Janene Ping

Everyone attending this conference shares two things. We are interested in—dedicated to, even passionate about—the art of puppetry. The other commonality is that we are all educators, whether we are puppeteer-educators out in the world, or teacher-puppeteers in a classroom, who care deeply about the future of our children. The world is emerging from the extraordinary experience of the pandemic, and we are now seeing its consequences. No one has come through the pandemic without being changed to some degree. We see anxiety, uncertainty, and shaken trust toward the future. Many children are disoriented, dis-regulated, socially awkward, and inexperienced. This

is true for adults too. To feel whole and confident again, the world is calling for healing.

What does “healing” mean? The phrase “to heal” comes into English from Anglo-Saxon, derived from a Greek origin. Webster’s Dictionary says it means “to make sound, healthy again.” We can rephrase that to say, “to make whole again.” The word “whole” comes from the same origin, meaning “healthy, hale; not diseased or injured; not broken, damaged, defective.” It means “entire, complete.”

Healing is mentioned in a verse given by Rudolf Steiner to young doctors in March 1924.

*In olden times
There lived in the souls of initiates
Powerfully the thought
That by nature
Every person is ill [or incomplete]
And education was seen
As a healing process
Which gave the child, as [the child] matured,
The health to be a true human being.*

We can say “A true human being” also means “a whole, complete human being.”

There are many ways to support this healing, this coming to wholeness. Puppetry is one of these ways. Puppetry is healing in that it offers children a pathway toward developing their wholeness. We know this from how we feel ourselves when we have seen lovely, engaging puppetry. Our breathing changes and we feel calmed by the sensory experiences of what we see in the color and movement of the puppets. The words of the story reassure us that, in the midst of challenge, there is a way forward. We are encouraged by the balancing resolution the end of the tale brings. We have experienced how our inner state and sense of well-being is nourished. We experience this, but how can we understand and substantiate that this is true for the rest of the world?

When we look at puppetry from the perspective of child development, we can assert that puppetry is a subtle but powerful, sensitive, intuitive, artistic, non-intrusive healing gift for all, children and adults alike. A brief look at child development will give context to understand how this can be true. In Lecture 3 of *The Child’s Changing Consciousness*, Rudolf Steiner described young children as totally open to all sensory experiences with their whole body and being.

“Up until the change of teeth, the child is one big sense organ. This is what makes children receptive to everything that comes from their surroundings. But it also causes them to recreate inwardly everything that is going on in their environment ... The child takes in what is thus coming from the environment with a specific, characteristic form of inner experience.”

Children inwardly recreate everything they see, hear, touch, taste, and smell around them. They also inwardly recreate experiences of movement and balance. They take in impressions through gesture and speech. They collect all these experiences together to make meaning of what is happening before them and reflect this out through *imitation*. Young children imitate physically all the time; everything that comes to them is reflected back out through movement, vocalizing, and speech. As the child grows older, the outer imitation lessens as the ability to inwardly synthesize our sensory experiences into whole pictures and concepts grows. The inner sensory stimulation still occurs but becomes an inner resonating that does not necessarily show externally. But no matter what our age, this inner resonating continues through our whole lives.

One confirmed physical example is that when one person speaks, the larynxes of everyone within hearing distance imitate the speaker’s voice in sympathetic resonance, matching the movements producing the tones. We do not consciously feel our larynx responding, but there is inner activity going on all the time. Adults watching an athletic event may find themselves subtly moving in imitation of the athlete. We shift posture, twisting and turning both inwardly and outwardly. Subtle imitating is going on within each of us throughout our lives.

From the beginning of earthly life, children intend to become a true human being. They want to grow a physical body to house the spiritual “greater-I” that they have known before birth. They trust that what they absorb through their senses will help them unfold this promise. Puppetry supports this intention. It can help to heal, to fill up what is incomplete. Puppetry in all its aspects nourishes the senses, nourishes the soul, and affirms the spirit existence in each one of us. Puppetry can model what it is like to be a truly upright human being of noble purpose. And in our post-pandemic times, puppetry reaches to heal and



Photo courtesy of Heike Adamsberger

restore healthy growth toward wholeness.

The use of color in puppetry is one of the most varied and rich aspects of this art. Colors not only inform the eye but also speak to the soul without words or explanation. Colors can be earthy and grounding, airy and radiating, energetic and expansive, and quiet and introspective, as well as calming, comforting, and reassuring. Color choice is intentional to match the character and virtues the puppet is representing. The plant colors often used in our puppetry feed the soul as described above. The careful use of color is also an antidote to the excessively bright, unnatural fluorescent colors that confront our eyes in popular clothing, footwear, and advertising. Seeing subtle tones relaxes the eye and often helps to regulate our breathing.

The visual impression of silk marionettes is particularly healing. The light as it shimmers on the colored silk bathes the eyes in a healing encounter. The viewer does not have to guard against a sharp, jarring image. Considering all of this, it is justified to say that puppetry can be considered as a type of color therapy in a subtle way. Use of different skin tones with the puppets, representing all races, offers an opportunity to offer healing to social life. Every color and tone of humanity can be represented and honored as they intermingle and work together.

Puppetry offers healing sounds. Quiet music to introduce the play often begins with simple singing, single-note lyre or glockenspiel music. The simplicity of these melodies or pentatonic-sequences is gentle to the ear. Hearing is given a healing respite from loud, artificially produced sounds. A drum or other rhythm instrument may be just the right accompaniment to other tales. Consistent rhythm and repetition of a predictable sound is reassuring.

Live, human speech is another sound gift with a puppet play. As described above, the larynx of each listener resonates with the words of the speaker. When the speech is carefully, lovingly articulated with warmth, hearing has a chance to recover from the strains of daily sensory input. Well-articulated consonants help form and tone the body. Clearly paced speech—rather than rapid-fire talking that runs all the words together—helps the listener to experience the importance of each word as a distinct entity contributing to meaning. Warmth of tone and interesting dynamics—not dramatics—invite listening. Puppetry makes full use of all these speech and voice qualities.

Then there is the story itself. Each story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The story progresses with recognition that events in life take time. The individual's destiny unfolds through related encounter. Adversarial forces bring challenges that require creativity, and sometimes bravery to surmount—and dedication to reach resolution. Such clear relationship between action and consequence is under-acknowledged in our fast-paced, instantly gratifying technological world. It is strengthening and healing for viewers to be taken on an imaginative journey through time and witness the effort, patience and perseverance it takes to complete a task.

Characters in the stories artistically represent capacities and virtues known in the spiritual world that will foster becoming a full, whole human being on the earth. For example, stereotypes aside, if we imagine the purest idea of a king or queen, we can think of nobility, guardianship, generosity, and wise rulership. The innocent and inexperienced child sets off on a journey. They may experience adversity but are resourceful. They do not turn back but keep going until the prize is won and resolution achieved. The characters' attitudes and dedication to their tasks in working for the good are copied inwardly and do their work in the soul realm.

Everything about puppetry engages movement. The marionettes and table-top puppets move through the agency of human beings. The puppets are moved with intention and attention to posture and gesture. The marionettes move in the three planes of space—forward-and-back, up-and-down, side-to-side—just as the upright human being does. This modeling of posture is also imitated inwardly and reinforces the striving to be upright physically and soulfully. Puppets can move in lively and energetic ways or slowly as the story requires. The quick, sprightly movement brings delight and humor. The slower movements of the silk marionettes allow the children to dwell a bit in the movement, seeing how the limbs gesture and bend. The slower pace can be taken in deeply and can create a slower inner pace of activity to counterbalance the haste of the outside world. Regularity and rhythm in the movements can heal and nourish the foundational senses of self-movement and balance. Puppets present both outer movement and an inner soul mood of beauty and purposefulness to imitate.

To this point, we have considered that puppetry offers nourishment and a healing gesture that moves toward completeness in body and soul. Puppetry provides us with spiritual pictures as well. In the first year or so of life, a child gains uprightness and begins to walk. In the early stages of walking, children's arms are slightly elevated to the side with elbows bent. It looks as though invisible strings are attached to their wrists, so the arms are like little wings. The legs take steps bending from the knees. This looks as though the bending leg is being pulled up by an invisible string as the child advances. We can think that the little child is like a marionette, and the puppeteers above are in the angelic realm. When children see marionettes guided by benevolent grownups, this can remind us that our lives have unseen spiritual helpers who are guiding our steps of destiny in life.

The table-top puppets are moved and guided by visible human hands. The puppets are treated with respect, care, and gentleness. We see only the hand of the puppeteer, but this offers the picture of a companion who assists and accompanies each human being in earthly life. This image calls up the old story of Tobias, a youth who had to go on a difficult journey to obtain

healing medicine for his ailing father. A benevolent companion offers to accompany him, offering advice but not interference. This companion turns out to be the Archangel Raphael, whose domain is healing. What a reassuring image this is. There are always human helpers to companion us in our earthly journeys.

Puppetry offers healing gifts in all of these subtle ways. The power of this medium lies in its subtlety. The artistic simplicity, color, speech and tone, and movement are offered purely. As conference presenter Brian Hull stated, puppets are pure; they are what they are and are not pretending to be anything else. Whatever the puppets offer flows inward through the senses to form, to balance, to complete what we have come to earth to do. We take things in through our senses and are moved inwardly. The colors, forms, movements of the puppets come to live within us. These impressions work quietly and softly with no intrusion or expectation. Puppetry leaves the human being free to accept its gifts as it offers healing balm.

This closing verse* by Adam Bittleston sums up in seven lines our wishes for the child—and our hope to give what they need to step out well on their destiny path. ♦

In Thought for a Child

*In your breath the light of the sun
In your bread the salt of earth
In your ears true words of love
Sustain your growing, changing life
That your spirit's will may work
That your soul be warmed by joy
That your body's world be built.*

*Note: Pronouns have been modernized from "thy" to "your."

Nancy Blanning serves as editor of Gateways and is Co-Director with Leslie Burchell-Fox of the Early Childhood teacher training (WECTE) at Sunbridge Institute, NY. Her special interest is in supporting young children's healthy physical, emotional, and social integration through joyful and purposeful movement. She sees that this impulse can be supported in everything we share with the children in our Waldorf programs, including puppetry.