

Ecology of the Social: An Exploration of Collaborative Arts

~ Janene Ping

From where do we gain the courage and strength to meet the complex challenges in the world today? In contemplating this question, a thought recently came to me. The first step comes from coming to peace with our vulnerability, from accepting and knowing ourselves and all of the ways we may feel small, helpless, and at risk, like little children. But children are not yet self-conscious of their vulnerability. Our often-intensified individual identity unfolds as we grow older. So perhaps, if we pay attention to the wisdom that works through the child, we find that the second step lies in seeking connection with all of creation. Such presence opens the door to wonder, awakening awareness, and we intimate the numinous. Through the spirit, our soul is connected with a greater whole, with that which is eternal.

These themes were very present in the World Association of Puppetry and Storytelling Arts collaborative conference that was held this past July. On-line or in-person, over 90 participants joined in an exploration of Wisdom, Wonder, and Enchantment. Our need to experience wonder in the world, the laming of will when we fall out of relationship with our true self, the wisdom that is a fruit of our striving endeavor when we overcome challenge—these explorations were embraced through activities of willing, feeling, and thinking as we came together in a unique constellation of colleagues and friends.

One aspect that came to the fore was that collaboration is not easy. Rudolf Steiner states that the birth of the consciousness soul requires the paring down of personality—to quiet the self, and widen our understanding of the other. Collaboration is a practice of this. To be able to share our vision and also welcome that which lies in the heart of the other requires the honing of this skill. It is a kind of ecology of the soul, where relationship in context is key. The holding of a festival or event in which the healthy social life is found and the virtues of each can resonate in the whole is a worthy endeavor! In my experience this has become more challenging, and more crucial, in this 21st century.

There were two main stories that were highlighted in performance art during the conference and each was a testament to the human spirit that is able to overcome individual despair through service to the whole. One was *Kayteck the Wizard*, presented by Brian Hull and Mary Tanner. These professional puppeteers brought a multi-media performance for older children and adults that highlighted a story by Janusz Korczak. Dr. Korczak was a physician, author, and humanitarian who advocated for children's rights and cared for orphans in Warsaw, Poland, continuing through the WWII German occupation until he accompanied children to Treblinka, where he perished. It is interesting that in the spirit of



Participants in the 2022 World Association of Puppetry and Storytelling Arts conference. Photo courtesy of Janene Ping

collaboration, Dr. Korczak collaborated with the children of the orphanage in his writing of stories, as well as in the management and leadership of the orphanage that he created. The story of Kayteck the Wizard shows how the arts can open doorways to education about history, social justice, and the great courage of inspired individuals who are the heroes of our times.

The other story highlighted was *Hambakahle and the Enchanted Waters*. In two-and-a-half days, in-person participants explored the evolution of this tale from Eswatini through marionette making, movement, music, storytelling, colored light and shadow, eurythmy, and puppetry. The archetype of the lead character, Hambakahle, stands for all who, inspired by the spirit, tirelessly work for social justice and freedom day after day, even when it does not seem to make a difference, countered by the racism and depravity of cruelty that can manifest in the world. The understanding of service in honor of humanity is a capacity that I hope to deepen for myself and my community. The beauty of such an archetype working within the metaphor of story is that it reveals the truth of human potential which is universally available for all.

When we join together with others in artistic presentation, there is a joyous exploration of creative possibilities. This is then grounded in the difficulty of weaving together the threads of individuality. It leads us toward the art of the social, where we creatively enter into relationships with others out of our inner being. We experience the giving over of our own design and desire to that which benefits the good of the whole.

Increasingly, life calls for us to pay attention to our interdependence, out of which we awaken to new ways of being human.

In a lecture on October 10, 1916, “Psychological Distress and the Birth Pangs of the Consciousness Soul,” Rudolf Steiner said, “This is how humanity is developing now. We no longer come with a ready-made mind or feeling aspect that works instantaneously. Nor do we have a ready-made intellect that can penetrate everything. The consciousness soul is giving us something much more separate and individual, with greater tendency towards egoism and loneliness... the remedy for the difficulties we encounter in one another is: social understanding.” Steiner believed that storytelling and puppetry arts hold the potential of healing the ills of our modern humanity.

I am grateful to fellow collaborators who shared their talents, insight, and imaginative vision with our conference community through the works mentioned above as well as in on-line, practical, puppet making sessions. For more information about such artistic explorations, please check out www.puppetryandstorytelling.org. ♦

*A Kindergarten teacher at the Hawthorne Valley Waldorf School in upstate NY for over 30 years, **Janene Ping** is the founder of the Magical Puppet Tree Theater (1992–present) and president of the World Association of Puppetry and Storytelling Arts. She is a core faculty member at Sophia’s Hearth Teacher Education Center in Keene, NH.*