

Focus—Healing Gestures

Simple Puppetry as a Pathway to Living Thinking

— Philipp Reubke

In the media and in many schoolbooks today, there's an assumption that the human being and the whole solar system are mechanisms—just causes and consequences. Claims that there are living beings in our universe whose intentions influence what happens are called ridiculous. But those defending the mechanistic outlook don't recognize that it comes from a weakness in our thinking and in our will forces. Adults who claim that all around us is lifeless and mechanistic cannot perceive their own blindness for life.

The small child is just the opposite. Children see in every little piece of wood many different beings and forms—a horse, a fox, a trumpet. Their dynamic imaginative ability allows them to continually add something to their perception of an object and to picture what it could *also* be, or become. Young children's willpower, which shows itself above all in their movements, also lives very strongly in their thinking, giving them a marvelous capacity to imagine

life everywhere. Steiner's pedagogical aim for the young child was above all to preserve this power of imagination for as long as possible.

How is this to be done? By surrounding the child with materials, objects, figures and toys that are very simple. The child's tenderly awakening imaginative ability is given the opportunity to continually supplement what is missing and to add something new. Steiner often emphasized this kind of simplicity, as in this excerpt from *The Child's Changing Consciousness*:

Give a child a handkerchief or a piece of cloth, knot it so that a head appears above and two legs below, and you have made a doll or a kind of clown. With a few ink stains you can give it eyes, nose, and mouth, or even better, allow the child to do it, and with such a doll, you will see a healthy child have great joy. Now the child can add many other features belonging to a doll, through imagination and imitation within the soul. It is far better if

you make a doll out of a linen rag than if you give the child one of those perfect dolls...What are you doing if you give the child such a doll? You are preventing the unfolding of the child's own soul activity. Every time a completely finished object catches the child's eye, the child has to suppress an innate desire for soul activity, the unfolding of a wonderfully delicate, awakening fantasy. You thus separate children from life, because you hold them back from their own inner activity.

By presenting toys which are too perfect, too beautiful, too finished, we hold the child back. We set the child's imagination free by way of simplicity. The task for puppetry is the same. The puppets and their décor—and also our way of storytelling—should first of all be simple. By leaving free space for the children's imagination to fill in what is missing, we help them develop reality-based thinking infused with will activity and liveliness. Otherwise, one cannot connect to reality or to spirituality; the thinking is weak and one lives in the belief that the world is only a machine. I think if we realize puppetry in this way—in addition to giving children simple toys to play with—we can contribute strongly to our children's development of reality-based thinking.

As a kindergarten teacher, this way of considering puppetry gives you a very practical advantage: you don't need to prepare long hours into the night to be able to present puppet shows in your classroom. Where you really need to invest your energy is in living with the story, building up its inner pictures within yourself, and carrying the story in your heart and mind. Then the facts of making the puppets and décor can be done simply while the children are engaged in their morning play, because you know that outer perfection, as opposed to focusing your inner attention, can become a problem if it's too much. If through your simple dolls you can express your intentions and the images living in you, then the child will receive this inner activity.

Sometimes I would make a knot doll—or in a little bit more sophisticated way take silk or cotton and put wool in the center for the head and make knots for the hands. Since I couldn't hold all the figures at once, I put them on little wooden supports so they could stand up for themselves. Or I could take only stones,

pinecones or other natural objects—with perhaps a little spot for the eyes and mouth—and very simply play out the story.

When I started teaching kindergarten, I was afraid that these children, who'd seen fantastic shows on screen or in the theater, would be annoyed to watch such simple plays. I didn't dare do it. Then I saw a colleague using very, very simple puppets, and her group paying attention with such a respectful and devotional attitude. Even children accustomed to seeing televised soccer games could attend to a 10- or 15-minute puppet show with deep respect. I realized then that it's not the outer fantastic effect that counts.

Rudolf Steiner said of the nineteenth-century French writer George Sand that she had given to the French what Goethe had given the German-speaking world. That is, both writers depicted human beings coming to know themselves not only through what happens out of their own thoughts and actions, but also through what life brings to them and through the influences of their environment. In Sand's *The Snowman*, the protagonist is pursued by the police in Italy; she hides herself in a puppet show in the marketplace. For some days and weeks our protagonist participates in moving a *burattino*, a classical, simple Italian marionette:

Of course, one can imitate the human figure and its movement by many technical means. But the more you make it resemble a human being, the sadder and more sinister the performance becomes. I understood this *burattino* is not a machine, it's not a puppet, it's a being. And why is it a being? Because it is very simple. It was as if the intention of my hand, the intention of my soul, can express itself completely in the simple puppet because my soul can flow completely into the puppet. The more complicated it is, the more difficult it is for my intention to express itself in the doll.

As George Sand describes, not only do simple puppets allow children to add what is missing and activate their imagination, but the puppeteer with a simple doll can more easily express what is living in her soul. If you take something which is not too perfect and doesn't too closely resemble a human being, you create in the children the feeling, "The puppeteer is magic—she can make an inanimate object into a living being!" This is the impression we can create



Photo courtesy of Philip Reubke

by choosing simple materials, elements and objects, and moving them in such a way that the spirit, the soul, can speak to the audience.

I hope you will agree that in order to grasp the essence of life, for instance of a plant, you cannot just stay with the image of, say, the sunflower you are perceiving right now in your garden. This is not “the” sunflower; it is “a” sunflower. To more closely approach the essence of the sunflower, you need to remember all the developmental stages the sunflower has gone through in the past, and to foresee its future states. You would have to bring all these images into flow and imagine the whole evolution and movement. And you need to think, see and feel all this movement

in one instant! With your thinking and feeling, you perhaps then encounter the being, the archetype of “sunflower.” To know living beings, you need to connect fixed present states over time—to take into account what was, and what may become.

We can nurture these capacities when we prepare a puppet show for children in their presence. During playtime you can prepare your dolls—perhaps over some days if you have several characters. And you also prepare your décor for the puppet show in the children’s presence. The morning comes when you are ready. You set up your stage and place your figures there. Something that was visible before—that the children observed you making—*became*. You cover the set—it’s invisible again—then uncover it, and it’s visible now once more.

You play out your story, then cover it again with a beautiful gesture. The whole process is made visible to the children and they are not fixed to one static state. Every time they experience the whole process you are helping to encourage living thinking.

Puppetry prepares the inborn forces we need to have living, reality-based thinking. This is linked to our bodily senses. We all know that if we have a mental thought but not the physical ability to express it, we cannot really serve that thought. We’ve all worked with children who have fantastic, wonderful spiritual capacities but who cannot express them. We need a harmonious, healthy bodily grounding to be able to fully express our imaginative and spiritual selves.



Can puppetry foster the bodily senses and help a child to incarnate? Steiner refers to one of the basic bodily senses as the “sense of life,” which we can also call the sense of well-being. With the newborn, we help cultivate this sense by helping the baby to overcome the unwell states of hunger and pain that often occur during the first weeks and months of life. By meeting a baby’s needs in a rhythmical and loving way, we help the child develop a basic confidence in knowing

that states of unwellness, of crisis, can be overcome and made right again. We don’t need to panic. The nervousness and restlessness people experience often come from resisting “just being,” because when they are quiet they feel their unwell-being. In the kindergarten, we need to consider how we can help the children, even at three-, four-, or five-years-old, not to panic when they are in a state of *unwell-being*. Puppetry can help.

Through the puppeteer's caring gestures, the child can feel that there is someone helping this puppet-character overcome its difficulties. These gestures and pictures influence the children, making them feel that this caring is happening to them and that, "OK, it's all right; difficulties will be overcome." The caring relationship includes how you lie the puppet down, or put a coat or crown on the figure. And the simple fact that you showed, in images, the hero overcoming crises and disorder also builds the sense of life. This is done in a non-stressful, very calm way so as not to trigger problems with the sense of life. The children become fascinated, not by a spectacle or quick action, but by your intentional gesture. They are captivated through calmness.

Let's come now to the sense of touch, which helps us develop understanding of our own perimeter, our outer shelter. Touch also develops the feeling for the other and for the world. Through touch I can come to trust that I am now within the shelter of "my house," and through touch I can reach out with interest toward the world. I learn that all that is coming from the world is not my enemy. I can approach the world with warm interest, and don't need to become a tyrant and lash out at it.

The way you touch your puppets, your sets, your silk cloths—all this has a bearing on the child's sense of touch. The puppeteer's sense of touch is awake and sensitive during a performance. And I think it's important that we use different materials—wood, silk, wool, stone, pinecones—and different kinds of puppets; then the sense of touch can become differently nuanced. The puppeteer is doing the touching, yet the children's sense of touch is stimulated. And, of course, it's important that your puppet touches the ground; only flying beings should fly. Otherwise, puppets should be grounded and not lose contact with the stage surface. When a puppet lies down or touches something in the play, really feel inwardly the contact between the doll and the set. And when you cover your play at the end, feel with your silk how it is covering the stage. All this is nourishing to the sense of touch.

The sense of movement is fundamental to children as they learn to use physicality to carry out their intentions. In the spiritual world, intentions were easily carried out, but with this physical body our intentions meet obstacles. By learning to master movement, children learn that the physical world is

not a prison; it has the possibility to allow us to express our soul intentions. Rhythmical, musical movements in puppetry help cultivate this. We don't only speak the story; there are sequences in which our figures move without any speech—with only music, or even silently in a dynamic way. In this way we foster through puppetry the development of the bodily senses and help children see that their spirit can express itself in and through their bodies.

The simplicity of your sets and your puppets not only nourishes children, it also stimulates your inner activity as puppeteer. Puppetry allows you to express your soul-spiritual activity more than in everyday life. And by showing the children the whole development of your puppet play—beginning, middle and end—you can help them see that life is not a succession of static moments but rather something that evolves in processes and that involves the child. By allowing children opportunities to make these connections, you help prevent them from becoming stuck in limited, mechanistic thinking.

It's a marvelous opportunity to perform puppetry for small children; they are completely absorbed in what you are doing, fully resting in the story in a dreamlike state. If there is a small accident you can immediately see how they react in their bodies. The soul and spirit of the child is living in the puppets, in you, and in your soul and spirit. And while children are so fully absorbed, the effects of your gestures and the puppets' actions can work deeply into their physical bodies and bodily senses. Through the power of the images you as puppeteer create—and through your strong sense of the story—you can give children a solid, warm ground for their healthy development and for vibrant, living thinking. ♦

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