
Reflections on Imitation and Play

~ Wendalyn von Meyenfeldt

While reflecting on imitation and play, and putting on my “eurythmy hat,” I looked in the book *Foundations of Curative Education* by Margarete Kirchner-Bockholt. Although this book is a therapeutic eurythmy resource, I found some insightful and revealing ideas there.

A sequence of sounds is suggested (for trained therapeutic eurythmists) to do with children who “lack powers of imitation.” The given sounds are A-E-I-I-E-A. The three vowels are pronounced as *Ah* (A), *Ay* (E) and *Ee* (I). The sequence is like a wise story that can help us understand the path of imitation.

Kirchner-Bockholt writes, in accordance with Rudolf Steiner’s teachings, that “The power to imitate is a great gift which the child brings from the spiritual world, where he/she turned towards the higher beings in devoted imitation.” The A, which begins the sequence of sounds, is the sound of receiving in wonder. We descend to earth with the starry gift of imitation, bequeathed to us from the heavens.

When we encounter physical existence, we grow, develop and change. This is portrayed with the next sound: E. In the meaning of this sound, we take hold of ourselves and gradually become more conscious, skillful, and self-aware. We awaken to the world, to the kingdoms of nature, and to the people and activities around us. We meet the world; and engage, play, make and create.

The English word “play” carries the E sound strongly, as do “awaken,” “engage,” “make,” and “create.” In play, we explore and experiment. We exercise new movements, ideas and emotions. We take on new roles and make new connections with others. Play is like an unfolding life story: “What will happen next? Who will I be?”

The next phase of development is expressed with the sound I. With this sound, we stretch out into the world and express our individuality, our being. We joyfully “shine outwards” with warmth and light. In I, we develop our unique gifts, find our path, and

discover our freedom. Our deepest life intentions may be revealed and realized.

In his article: “Walking, Speaking, Thinking: Imitation in a Bodily-religious Way” from the Swiss Teachers Course (1923), Albert Steffen wrote: “In the beginning the child merely plays, but it plays in earnest. There is only one difference between the play of the child and the work of the adult. It is that the adult adapts himself to the outer utility which the world demands; his work is determined from without. Play is determined from within, through the being of the child, which wants to unfold...The important thing... is to let ourselves be guided by the individuality of the young human being.”

Free play arising out of imitation would seem to strengthen the individuality of the child. In this way, we can perhaps understand free play as a stepping stone to freedom. Along this pathway, the children can discover and connect with their unique, innermost being, and share this “brightness” with the world.

Returning now to the therapeutic eurythmy exercise for children who lack, or who have weak powers of imitation, the sequence begins with the three sounds A-E-I, and then swings back through them with I-E-A. The intention is to stimulate both inner and outer movement, and to strengthen the child’s life forces and energy/ability to imitate. The sequence of sounds ends where it began, in A. Perhaps the child, and all of us one day, will have something to give back to the stars.

The following short poem was inspired by the same sound sequence, while seeking to understand the path of imitation and play. If you like to play too, see if you can find the sounds (A, E and I) embedded in the phrases!

*We come from the stars, bearing gifts from afar.
We play and create, connect and relate,
To find who we’ll be, joyful and free.
We’ll reach to each other,
Share with sisters and brothers,
To arrive at the stars, bearing gifts from afar. ♦*

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