

Learning to Accompany the Child – Part One

John Allison,
Melbourne
Australia

The following essay has coalesced in September 2008 from notes and transcripts of talks given to teachers on various occasions during the past year in Mt Barker, Perth, and Melbourne. It retains some elements of the original oral delivery.

All real living is a meeting.

~ Martin Buber

This quote on the blackboard is one of several by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber I'll refer to in the course of this evening — in the first place, making use of them as moments of contemplative presence within my narrative, but also offering them as a parallel commentary that resonates interestingly with some of the ideas I've been living with recently.

I want to develop several observations and reflections, to consider what might be involved in accompanying the child. This first became a question for me many years ago when I was starting to struggle with my Class 6, and a mother — a widow whose sixth child was in the class — said to me one afternoon: 'You

need to find a different approach to my son now. It isn't enough to stand in front of him as his teacher — you need to somehow get alongside him, to be at his side, to be looking in the same direction and saying, this is what it looks like from here, this is how you could go at it... You need to learn how to accompany him.'

Like most lessons, it's taken me a while to learn this, and I still feel I'm just beginning to get it, and more importantly to do it. Therefore I'd like to share a little of what I've learned about this art of accompanying the child. Before we start, however, I want to say something about creative processes, which will help establish my approach. Many years ago I read one of those important books for my life: Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*. In the first chapter he asks, what are the necessary steps in learning any art? And he suggests there are two aspects: 'one, the mastery of the theory; the other, the mastery of the practice'. Now, many among us may shrink from the word 'theory'; too much in this domain can seem academic, abstract, mind-jarring.

But the word derives from the Greek word *theōrein*, which means 'to behold, to contemplate'. This is the activity I seek to develop — a way of seeing things. Then, I want also to establish an approach to intelligent praxis — a way of doing things...

From the outset I will be looking at this task as a soul-spiritual activity — to explore empathic presence and how we are called upon to develop it as 'moral technique'. This latter is a term Rudolf Steiner uses almost in passing near the end of *The Philosophy of Freedom*, where he simply comments:

Moral action, then, presupposes, in addition to the faculty of having moral ideas (moral intuition) and moral imagination, the ability to transform the world of percepts without violating the natural laws by which these are connected. This ability is moral technique. It can be learnt in the same sense in which any kind of knowledge can be learnt.

So let's begin. And because we are



teachers who like a good story, let's begin with a story you can find in both the Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments (though Protestant churches have declared it apocryphal). Old Tobit is blinded, and his son Tobias is to undertake an arduous journey to neighbouring Media, to collect a sum of money his father had deposited with a business associate some time earlier. Azariah, a relative who offers to accompany the youth, is in fact the Archangel Raphael, who has been sent to protect and guide him.

Over in Media, a young woman named Sarah is in despair because, every time she has been betrothed, each of her seven newly-wed husbands has died on their wedding night. This would trouble anybody! Especially a prospective suitor... Quite understandably, she prays earnestly for death. Raphael's mission from God is, on one hand to heal Tobit, and on the other to free Sarah from this

demonic curse afflicting her.

En route to Media to collect the money, Tobias is attacked by a large fish, which he manages to kill. Azariah tells him to remove its heart, liver and gall and take it with him. In Media, Tobias meets Sarah, entreats her father to be allowed to marry her, and is then instructed by Azariah to burn the fish's heart and liver on their wedding night to drive away the demon. And yes, it works.

Then, collecting the money and returning to his father, Tobias uses the fish's gall to cure his blindness. Azariah reveals his true identity as Raphael and departs.

You will have by now recognised the story depicted in this painting by Francesco Botticini — an artist in the school of Botticello — which can be seen in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. It is generally called 'Youth with Archangels', and I first saw it many years ago on the cover of a

book by AC Harwood, *The Way of a Child*. Botticini departs from the Biblical narrative in two respects. Tobias is carrying the whole fish, not just its organs — perhaps because in a visual depiction, organs might be a rather obscure reference to say the least. How do you make it obvious to the viewer what three nondescript lumps of offal might be? And there are now three Archangels accompanying Tobias, walking across an apparent wilderness above a typical Italian landscape: we know them as the Saints Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel.

Michael strides ahead, wearing armour and carrying his sword at the ready; in his left hand he is holding a golden orb which might represent the Sun (with which he traditionally is associated) and the way to the future. In other paintings, Michael is more typically depicted thrusting a spear into the belly of the dragon — like his earthly counterpart St George. But one feature is in common — he gazes sharply out of the pictorial space at the viewer, as if saying, 'I have my mission, and I know what I'm doing — but what about you? What are you doing?'

To the right, and slightly nearer the viewer, we see rosy-winged Gabriel, Archangel of the Annunciation, walking bare-footed across the terrain and holding a lily in one hand. This lily and the white robe evoke traditional associations with the Moon, the past, and the forces of generation and birth. But it is the look Gabriel casts back over his shoulder which attracts our attention — an anxious gaze that might seem to say, 'Why did we ever leave the Garden of Eden to

end up in this wilderness? And where's the big bad wolf?'

I need perhaps to explain this a little more. Gabriel is the sheltering guardian of conception, childbirth and early childhood, who inspires nurture and protection. From this perspective, the world is a problem, full of danger, and the loss of primal innocence. The wish to remain in Paradise is implicit in this mood. And it is in distinct contrast to the challenging gesture and gaze of Michael. Just look at them. I want to suggest here that these two gestures — of shelter and of challenge — are in fact complementary gestures that represent the range of the teacher. Also, in their respective roles, of the parents. 'Come here,' we say gently, offering comfort and care. Then, increasingly — 'Wake up!' we say, confronting the emerging Self of the child. When the child is yet young, we tend the soul almost exclusively with the protective, nurturing gesture — however, as they grow older, it is important that the child experiences the other, sharper injunction...

These two gestures establish the parameters — the human boundaries as it were — for the real work of accompanying the child. For together they form an 'in-between' space, a dynamic place where we find the central figure of Raphael tending the youth. We know a few things about Raphael. He is the Christian equivalent of Mercury, messenger of the gods, the great communicator, and also the healer — he bears in his right hand a small casket or jar such as might hold a potion or remedy. His robe's silvery-grey colour suggests to me this connection with the metal quicksilver (mercury). But now take in the whole figure. Just look at this act of attentiveness! Such a focussed

look of intent devotion, and here experience the trust implicit in the remarkable way that Tobias's hand rests in the cupped fingertips of his companion... As though Raphael is saying to him, 'I am with you — it's OK — let's go along this way together.'

This is how I 'read' this painting. And I'm convinced the first two gestures — indeed, those beings — make this central relationship possible. This gesture of attentiveness is what I call empathic presence — that is, being there, with open-hearted interest, and not at all attached to outcomes. Martin Buber speaks of specific conditions of being present — of inhabiting what the present in reality is — that relate to this:

The real, filled present exists only in so far as actual presentness, meeting, and relation exists.

It may be symptomatic that in recent years, more attention is being paid to attention. Not so long ago it seemed enough to speak of consciousness — but perhaps it is because we are so distracted, because we are suffering collectively from a kind of attention deficit syndrome, so — here is a great word for it — pre-occupied by trivia and our selves, that we must emphasise the activities of attention and attentiveness. To attend — this word is related to 'tendrils', those remarkable twining shoots that coil about the object they are sensitive to — to really attend is to stretch towards the object of attention. Thus, in my book *A Way of Seeing*, the first chapter (which you may read on my website) is called 'Attending to Attentiveness'; and this capacity for attention is central to empathic presence. It is at the core of relating — you can see it

here in the painting, in the relationship between Tobias and Raphael. Whereas the attention of Gabriel is elsewhere — as indeed is Michael's...

Now, I want to get a little closer to a distinction between 'consciousness' and 'attentiveness', and here this painting might help us again. Look at these three gestures again: of Gabriel, gazing about distractedly, anxiously it seems; of Michael, whose stern focus is resolutely upon the viewer; and then finally of Raphael, who appears wholly attentive to Tobias, yet simultaneously aware (you can sense this in the 'opening' gesture of Raphael's right arm) of the world.

In *A Way of Seeing*, I identified two distinct modes of mindedness, called by some Jungian psychologists (eg Irene Claremont de Castillejo in *Knowing Woman*) 'diffuse awareness' and 'focussed consciousness' respectively, and which are generally attributed to more feminine and more masculine mind-states (and perhaps they might also be related to the right and left hemispheres of the brain). Here, in the figure of Gabriel, I suggest we can observe a kind of 'diffuse awareness' — a sensitivity towards the periphery of possible eventualities, including threats, that mothers may find familiar. And here, in Michael, we see an utterly 'focussed consciousness'. But my point is that 'attentiveness' can locate itself within the field of either mode, and simultaneously in the space between. The character of the kind of attentiveness I'm interested in is that it is 'both / and' rather than 'either / or'. It is mindfulness — an active function in the broad spaces of the mind. And I would suggest that it is primarily a will-function to direct attention towards anything in particular.

Think about Rudolf Steiner's six basic or supplementary exercises for instance. Let's recall the first three... The first is called a thinking exercise; the second is manifestly a will exercise; while the third has to do with establishing equanimity in the soul's feeling life. But just try doing them! To accomplish anything at all requires a tremendous effort. They are in reality exercises in willed attentiveness.

Attentiveness. To thought. To feeling. To the will itself. You will readily acknowledge that this is in fact the ego's attentiveness, the ego's 'presencing' activity (I use this neologism 'to presence' to mean 'being present in the present'). And here is an interesting reflection, one that is difficult to state clearly, and so some contemplative thought may be necessary — that the ego (which means 'I Am') is only truly an I Am when it is not wholly preoccupied with itself but attentive in the 'thou' relationship. Attentive, that is, in the ego-sensing of an Other. Martin Buber establishes this in his beautiful book *I and Thou*: that the I is implicit in the experience of the Thou — which is different from 'you' — and vice versa, in what he calls the primary word I-Thou.

If this seems hard to grasp, just look again at the Raphael-Tobias relationship, at the unity of being that is expressed there. Feel your way artistically towards the idea of the primary I-Thou articulated in that mutual engagement... Such thoughts can guide us to a point where contemplative regard enables us to imagine that empathic presence is a possibility, and that it can be accomplished not only by archangels but perhaps also by human beings. And if it still seems abstract, or maybe rather mystical, just stay with this image and let it touch you...

We will continue in a few moments.

So where is this leading us? How can such thoughts develop through moral technique into a social technology of classroom practice? In *The Philosophy of Freedom* Rudolf Steiner speaks of the conscious process that characterises the practice of the ethical individual — it's worth considering the following excerpts:

Nature makes of man merely a natural being; society makes of him a law-abiding being; only he himself can make of himself a free being...

A free spirit acts according to his impulses, that is, according to moral intuitions selected from the totality of his world of ideas by thinking. For an unfree spirit, the reason why he singles out a particular intuition from his world of ideas in order to make it a basis of an action, lies in the world of percepts given to him, that is, in his past experiences...

What the free spirit needs in order to realise his ideas, in order to be effective, is moral imagination. This is the source of the free spirit's action...

Moral imagination, in order to realise its mental picture, must set to work in a definite sphere of percepts. Human action does not create percepts, but transforms already existing percepts and gives them a new form.

In order to be able to transform a definite object of perception, or a sum of such objects, in accordance with a moral mental picture, one must have grasped the principle at work within the percept picture, that is, the way it has hitherto worked, to which one wants to give a

new form or new direction.

Further, it is necessary to discover the procedure by which it is possible to change the given principle into a new one.

This part of effective moral activity depends on knowledge of the particular world of phenomena with which one is concerned. We shall, therefore, look for it in some branch of learning in general.

Moral action, then, presupposes, in addition to the faculty of having moral ideas (moral intuition) and moral imagination, the ability to transform the world of percepts without violating the natural laws by which these are connected.

This ability is moral technique. It can be learnt in the same sense in which any kind of knowledge can be learnt.

I have already referred to these last few sentences at the beginning of this lecture. The whole passage can be regarded as a meditation on free action, and I have to suggest here that we have a choice: I'm tempted to spend some time 'unpacking' each phrase, each sentence (I've already re-paragraphed the densely-printed original in presenting it here, to enable a kind of breathing space which might let us in a little more easily) — or shall I entrust it to you, and just summarise briefly what it means for me in the context of our theme, in order for us to continue on our way..?

OK? So, briefly... creative action requires the ethical individual to experience new insights — moral intuitions — which are distinct from all the past patternings of recalled thoughts; this implies conscious choice, necessitating a clear examination

of the usual habitual modes of thought which impel reactive action. Through moral imagination the ethical individual can then elaborate that originating insight within the world's field of possibilities and limitations. In developing initiative in this field, the ethical individual will consider how things currently stand and how they came thus to be; then, how they might be changed; and finally, how this might be accomplished. This is called moral technique. It is always a moral question because human action, at this stage in human development, is

commonly experienced as damaging, at least to some degree, from the perspective of others who are affected. Imagination enables us to see the potential for this; mastery of technique enables us to cause minimal harm.

It's important also to note Steiner's opinion that moral technique can be learnt like other skills. And it is useful for our further considerations to recognise that we do not know whether actions proceeding from our intuitions are morally good until after the event, when we

can perceive the consequences. This is uniquely so because the action is utterly new, not derived from habitual past experience through mental recall or instinctive reaction. With all this in mind we can now consider our praxis... [to be continued]

References:

Allison, John: A Teacher's Book. Immortal Books 2008

A Way of Seeing. Lindisfarne Books 2003

Buber, Martin: I and Thou. Scribner 1958

Fromm, Erich: The Art of Loving. Unwin Books 1974

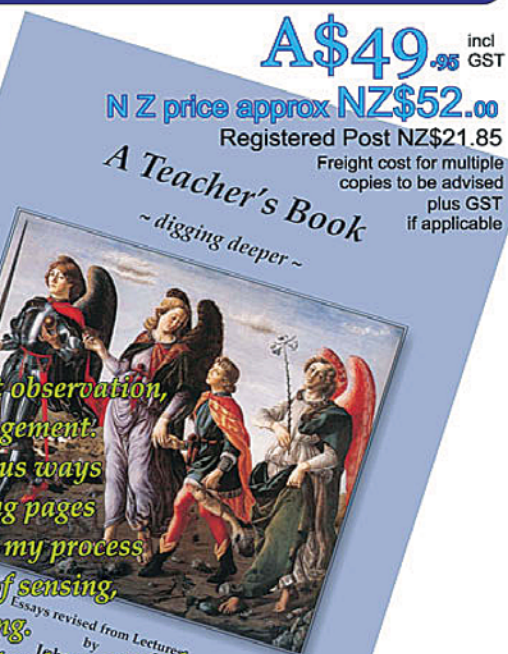
Steiner, Rudolf: The Philosophy of Freedom. Rudolf Steiner Press 1970

There are transcripts of other lectures on my website www.johnallison.com.au which complement aspects of this essay.

Available Now!

The latest book by John Allison, eminent author, lecturer and facilitator on teaching, learning, and parenting.

'This book then is about observation, understanding and engagement. I approach this in various ways throughout the following pages until, in the final essay, my process is articulated in terms of sensing, 'presencing', and realising. The subtitle of my first book suggested I was just beginning to understand Waldorf (Rudolf Steiner) Education; with this one I am digging deeper into the same ore.'



Teachers', Schools' and Bookshops' discounts apply as usual

(All invoices in Australian Dollars)

For orders please contact
IB Publications Pty Ltd (Immortal Books)
PO Box 5123, South Murwillumbah NSW 2484
or email us at
teachersbook@immortalbooks.com.au

Some interesting web sites

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY>

Sir Ken Robinson
an interesting speaker on education

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ip0lWv8QZY>

Susanne Boyle singing
(be surprised)

www.steinerwaldorf.org
www.bobnancy.com
www.whywaldofworks.org
Interesting site for parents too

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/99316025@N00/page2/w>
Photos from Nelson Pomeroy of the
Bernard Graves conference