

Young Children Today - Understanding Them and Helping Them
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(Many of these ideas were presented in a lecture at the International Waldorf Teachers' Conference in Dornach, Switzerland, in April 1996. The conference focused on karma and reincarnation and their implications for education today. The theme of this talk is especially relevant to this summer's International Kindergarten Conference and is included here as an introduction to that conference.)

For the past 20 or more years we have watched a decline in the health and well-being of children in North America. We have been concerned and, at times, preoccupied with the growing problems the children present. Now it seems we have overlooked something that is just as strong as the problems: this is a remarkable generation of children and young adults who have brought new levels of awareness to the earth with them. They need our protection and help, but they also need our recognition of the gifts they have brought.

When we look at this younger generation, those ranging from birth into the upper twenties, we see a group that is quite different from those in their thirties, forties, or fifties. We first became aware of this in Waldorf circles in the following way. When the Waldorf training programs began in the United States twenty years ago, the students were largely the young people who had been activists in the 1960's. Born during and after World War II, it was a generation that had been involved in the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement and the uproar on college campuses in the late 1960's. In the 1970's they grew quieter, turning toward meditation and spiritual growth, and, in many cases, toward Waldorf education and Anthroposophy.

In the 1980's one began to notice that this same generation was still filling the teacher training centers. The next group, born in the late 1950's and 1960's did not seem to be entering Waldorf schools as teachers. We used to joke that the teacher trainees were growing older each year, but it was not actually a joke. It was a reality. Of course, some from this next age group, now in their thirties, did enter the trainings or entered other fields of social activity. But I have known some to comment that as they grew up they felt very isolated from their peers, most of whom seemed intent on earning as much money as possible, with little concern for environmental or social problems. As Waldorf educators, we grew accustomed to a generation that did not seem to care, and we have perhaps missed the point that there is now a new group in our midst that does care deeply. They are quiet in their caring and thus far have not made a lot of noise (although a recent demonstration at Columbia University suggests that they may be finding their voice), but beginning in the early 1990's they began entering our training programs, and some are now entering our schools as new faculty. Who is this generation and what is it like?

A teenage relative had become a vegetarian at age 15 and showed me a magazine article about her and other teens who had given up meat eating. I knew a number of other teenagers who had made the same choice, but had not realized this was becoming a widespread trend. My generation had not turned to vegetarianism until we were in our twenties and out of our parents' homes, and I found it interesting that this generation was starting younger. When asked why they were not eating meat, many spoke in terms of not wanting to hurt the animals, but vegetarianism also has a spiritual dimension, and one wondered about the unfolding of spirituality in this group, as well.

As this group went on to college, a quiet revolution began to occur on campuses, which even now is not being discussed in the media. In many colleges, 50 - 60% of the students are engaged in volunteer activities, working on environmental issues, serving in soup kitchens, and the like. When I mentioned this trend to my husband, a Professor, he mentioned that at the University of Maryland - not known for social activism - the graduate students in the Economics Department were working together to renovate a house for a low income family.

Arthur Zajonc, a Physics Professor at Amherst College and now General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in America, has spoken of the remarkable spiritual consciousness he is finding in today's students. Some are having lucid dreams where they are very conscious within their dreams, or speak of other higher states of consciousness as an everyday event. In the 1960's such altered states of consciousness were sought through drugs, but these young people are not using drugs.

As one looks at the younger end of this generation, the children at present in kindergarten and elementary school, one sees that the trends have not come to an end, but have intensified. For example, whereas today's college students may have turned to vegetarianism in their teens, I know many younger children who became vegetarians at age four or five. These are not children growing up in vegetarian homes. These are children in meat-eating homes who decided on their own to become vegetarians. I first thought these were isolated children, but a Waldorf class teacher in England who has a sixth grade told me that when his class came to him in first grade, half had already become vegetarians, without parental support.

When asked why they are vegetarians, many of the children say they do not want to eat animals. They express a tremendous concern for the earth and all who live on it. Recently I stayed with a family who had a six year old son. All through breakfast he spoke of his animals with much warmth and a good deal of knowledge. Later, he said to me in a voice full of conviction that seemed to come from the depths of his being, "You know, I love this earth. I just love it. I love the stones and the plants, but especially I love the animals. I just love the animals." He then paused and resumed speaking in a more childlike voice. "When I grow up, I'm going to work in the zoo!"

It seems that this generation shows a deep love for the earth, but also for the plight of human beings. Such an awareness seems to start earlier than one would expect. Last year there was a youngster in the news who had started a major ecological movement with other young students. Now there is a 13 year old who is working actively on behalf of children trapped in child labor situations and has written a book about it. At first one is tempted to think of these as isolated incidents, interesting anecdotes. But when enough isolated images come together, a larger picture starts to emerge. The picture which is emerging is of a generation with an unusual degree of concern about the earth and about humanity. This was echoed in a recent interview with the doctor who is the head of the National Institute of Health in Washington. A fine woman, she spoke of the young medical students she is meeting and of their commitment to medicine and to human beings. They are entering medicine at a time when one can no longer expect the immense earnings of the past. She described them as a group entering medicine with deep compassion and a wish to serve through medicine.

Could it be that at this very time when human and ecological problems of unparalleled complexity face us, the earth is fortunate to be receiving a generation that seems able to shape the next century

with honesty, social and ecological commitment and new depths of spiritual insight? If so, it would be only half the picture. The other half is that it is this very generation that has suffered greatly through the new ideas on education and child rearing that have arisen during the past 25 years. In the United States and increasingly in other countries, the idea has taken hold that one must mentally stimulate children as much as possible from as young an age as possible. To allow children to play and dream through early childhood is considered a waste of time. Cognitive knowledge is considered all-important, and every effort is made to awaken children to writing, reading, and arithmetic in the nursery school and kindergarten. This thrust is now interwoven with media exposure and computer usage, and the result is an intensive bombardment of the nerve-sense system, so that few children escape a premature awakeness. To transform children's innate awareness into worldly awakeness places a great burden on them, and has the effect of limiting their capacities rather than enhancing them.

Is it also possible that the incarnation of this generation of children is a cause for the huge growth in Waldorf education since 1970? As teachers we have often joked that the children are bringing their parents to the school. Perhaps this is the truth. In the 1980's at the first world teachers' conference in Dornach, Switzerland, the Waldorf movement gathered and reports were given about the growth of Waldorf education in different countries. Again and again one heard the same picture - until 1970 a slow but steady growth. Then around 1970 an explosive growth of schools. Here in North America, for example, in 1973 there were about 12 Waldorf schools; 25 years later there are well over 100.

Most of the new schools were not initiated by seasoned anthroposophists as the early schools had been. They were started by parents who were dissatisfied with existing forms of education and had an idea of what they wanted. They were deeply moved by Waldorf education and in some cases laid deep, strong foundations for schools which are thriving today. In other cases they acted too quickly and founded schools that have struggled greatly. I have met with many new initiatives over the years, and am consistently impressed with the parents, for they have a deep love for their children. This love, coupled with a dissatisfaction with existing forms of education, has led them to invest enormous amounts of time, energy and even money to bring Waldorf schools into existence.

In many cases there seems to be another element at work, as well. Perhaps the parents are hearing the deeper wishes and intentions of their children, sometimes spoken even before the birth of the child. One such parent described a dream she had while pregnant with her first child. In the dream he appeared as a radiant child, a child filled with the light of the Sun. In his early years his light continued to burn brightly, showering warmth on all those around him. Then, in her dream, at age six she had to place her child in a box and all the light was cut off. She awoke deeply shaken by this dream and determined to find a form of education that would not cut-off the Sun-filled radiance of her child. Finally, her search led her to Waldorf education.

Another example came from a teacher who helped found a kindergarten in South Africa. She described how a mother from a township brought her five year old daughter for a visit. The child looked around and promptly announced, "This is my kindergarten. This is where I want to go." The mother then explained that her daughter kept describing the kindergarten of her dreams. It was a very beautiful kindergarten, full of wonder, and with regret the mother had to tell her there was no such kindergarten. Then she heard of the opening of the Waldorf kindergarten and took her child to see it. The child seemed to recognize the kindergarten. This was the one she had been looking for, and she happily settled into it.

This story reminded me of another, told to me by a teacher trainee in her twenties. All through her teenage years she told her mother she wanted to be a kindergarten teacher and would describe the kindergarten of her dreams to her mother. The walls were painted softly, the toys were simple and made of natural materials. There was even a beautiful instrument like a lyre that she played each day for the children. Neither the girl nor her mother had ever heard of Waldorf education, but when the young woman was about 21 she saw an announcement for an open house at a Waldorf school. She took her mother with her and went. There was the kindergarten of her dreams, right down to the lyre. She recognized it at once and soon enrolled in an orientation year program in preparation for becoming a Waldorf kindergarten teacher.

In one way, these are isolated incidences, but speaking personally, in my travels around the world, I have met so many extraordinary children and young adults, that the individual instances are growing into a broader picture. In addition, as I speak with experienced kindergarten teachers, and ask whether they, too, are seeing new, positive capacities in today's children, they say yes, but they are not yet able to fully verbalize what they are seeing. It is time for us to share our observations so that the picture can grow much clearer. At present one can only say that many indications point to this being a very wonderful generation that has come to earth, wonderful not just because it has a strong connection to Waldorf education, but because of its overall commitment to serve the earth and help it humanly, environmentally, and spiritually.

Yet the general conditions that have greeted this generation are not conducive to its healthy development. It is confronted with overstimulation from infancy onward. It comes to the earth with a wonderful awareness, a soul mood of wonder, and this is quickly diminished by an all-out effort to wake the children up as soon as possible. They are stuffed full of information when they are seeking a much deeper connection to the world around them, growing out of the soul mood of imitation. They are put in front of television screens when they hunger for human beings and life. One can go on and on regarding the amount of media, computer time and early academics that confront them from a young age, as well as the lack of rhythm and often the lack of warmth and homelife in an over-busy world. It is a problem which afflicts middle class and upper class children, as well as poor children. It is a problem that affects children in North America, and increasingly all over the world. It is basically a problem that affects a whole generation. One example of it is the number of children today being diagnosed as hyperactive or suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). This disease is as rampant as any epidemic of old, and some estimates say that one third of American children are now on the drug Ritalin to stabilize their behavior. Yet few people are asking how this epidemic has occurred or how to help children without drugging them.

This generation has been under serious attack, and perhaps it is not a coincidence that such an attack on our youth has been mounted just when a generation has come that seems to have such new capacities for understanding and healing. One cannot help but think that those adversarial beings whom Rudolf Steiner describes as seeking to hinder the evolution of humanity, Ahriman and Lucifer, are playing a part in this attack on our young people. If so, the battle will be a long and difficult one, but we have already seen that this is the case. So much has been written about the problems of media, early academics, etc., but so little attention has been paid to it. One could grow very discouraged, and sometimes we do, but we can also take hope that wherever Ahriman and Lucifer are at work, other very positive spiritual beings are working intensively to counter them. In this regard, Rudolf Steiner points to Michael with the flaming sword, giving us courage to battle such difficulties, to the Christ whose love can move mountains and can enable us to fight evil

without growing hardened by the battle, and to the Sophia, whose great wisdom enables us to see the cosmic pictures and not be lost in earthly details. They are at work in the battle, but they need earthly allies.

We are at a point in time when it would be easy to give up, particularly because the onslaught will now grow more intense. In the coming years, we will have not just computers, videos and televisions before the eyes of our children, we will have the information highway with its 500 channels, interaction between television and computers and virtual reality. One can feel overwhelmed. Yet we can also think of the souls not yet born, but who will also belong to this generation. Rudolf Steiner sometimes spoke of the souls who will want to incarnate at the end of this century, some of them his colleagues among the early anthroposophists, as well as other great souls. The next group to incarnate will meet this next wave of technology during the delicate years of early childhood. They need our help, and we will need the help of others if we are to help them - the help of spiritual beings, but also the help of our brothers and sisters upon the earth.

This is a battle that goes beyond our strength and resources as kindergarten teachers. We need to forge new links with our colleagues in our schools and with the school parents, many of whom are great fighters on behalf of childhood. We will need to reach out to the school doctors, the social consultants, the artists and the scientists in our anthroposophic movement. We will need all of their insight and strength. And we will need to reach beyond our own boundaries and find allies in the wider community of education, parenting, medicine and more.

There is much more that can be said on this subject, and I am grateful that we have the International Kindergarten Conference coming this summer, for it provides us with a time to go more deeply into these questions, and to share our thoughts and insights with colleagues from around the world. Also, we have been in conversation with the Pedagogical Research Institute at Sunbridge College to explore the possibility of intensive conferences and workshops to take up these questions in greater depth, as well as to work more closely with individuals from the wider public. There is much to be done, and we must find new courage to do it, and for the sake of the children, those born and those unborn, we need to keep going.
