

The International Waldorf Kindergarten Conference

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Since last summer's conference we have received many warm letters from those attending, and the general feeling was that this was a remarkable event on many levels. In total, 401 people registered from 28 countries. Special guests included 25 teachers from South America and eight from South Africa, plus others from eastern Europe, western Europe, Asia, Australia and New Zealand. Despite opening days of cool, rainy weather, a warmth quickly began to grow that drew everyone together. Shared meals helped foster communion and communication, and the outstanding food of chef Stephen Chalmers and colleagues added much to the experience. In an evening of shared stories, songs and verses from many different countries, we began to know each other. In addition to the morning and afternoon workshops, the "mini-sessions" held each day during the lunch break enabled participants to hear about new realms of early childhood work or to meet with the lecturers for a discussion time.

On the closing evening a marionette performance of Goethe's fairy tale was performed with large marionettes moving across the whole stage. One of the conference participants, Karl-Heinz Piepenbrink of Hamburg, Germany, described the performance in this way: "The most beautiful gift which our North American friends presented to us, besides the smooth organization, was the performance with marionettes of the fairy tale by Goethe about the 'Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily.'" It was one of the artistic highlights. The verbal accompaniment in English was taken up carefully and convincingly by the pictorial element, resulting in an all-encompassing impression. The marionettes led by Joan Almon and others from the Washington, D.C. area described a plot entirely without gravity and carried the audience away into a magic world. This common rapture was discharged in a long applause of thankfulness and admiration."

Another aspect of the conference which stood out for many people was the flow of the lectures. Although each lecturer had prepared his or her own topic, each was willing to "let go" and speak out of the growing content of the conference itself. Thus each lecture not only grew out of the previous ones but worked strongly to build the mood and content of the days we spent together.

The conference began with a brief talk on the children today - their wonderful gifts and terrific challenges. There was focus on the strength of will that stands behind their intention to incarnate. However difficult their life circumstances may be, they communicate a strong message of *wanting to be here*. This theme echoed throughout the conference and was made stronger by the beautiful eurythmy of Jeanne Simon-Macdonald and Mollie Amies. Each day they shared with us Rudolf Steiner's verse, Victorious Spirit, and a beautiful piano piece by the Czech composer, Janoczek, that contrasted passages of deep darkness with others of brilliant light. But perhaps most striking was a poem by Kathleen Raine, performed in eurythmy at the beginning and end of the conference in which the mother, distraught by the pain and anguish of the world, tells her unborn child not to come to earth. The child, however, wants to come to earth, despite all the pain and sorrow, the darkness and the storms of life.

Time has not permitted us to prepare proper summaries of the lectures for review by the lecturers. Instead, we will give brief summaries of some of the themes, leaving other, more complex themes for future articles. We offer special thanks to Nancy Foster of Acorn Hill for sharing her notes.

Dr. Johanna Steegman of Seattle spoke on "The Archetypal Pictures of Child Development." In looking at the human body, there are two aspects to consider - the archetype and the substantial. In Rudolf Steiner's *Study of Man*, the archetype is presented, and pictures are given of what occurs when the soul-spiritual takes hold of a physical body. Normally we are preoccupied with questions of death and what happens to us after death. This can lead to a kind of egotism. To balance this we need to become

more conscious of birth. This is the threshold where we stand as educators of young children, for the first seven years are a continuation of what happened before birth: We are asked to continue on earth what the hierarchies prepared before birth. To take up such work requires that we become active during the night, learning what it is we have to do during the day, and then becoming more awake in the day to what we learned during the night.

We need to carry a consciousness of what has happened to the physical body before birth. The development of the physical body reaches far back in time, to the evolutionary phase Rudolf Steiner describes as the Saturn phase of development. There is great mystery involved with the physical body, and these mysteries of creation are repeated before every single birth. After death the soul journeys through heavenly realms until reaching the midnight hour when it is filled with a longing to incarnate again. Then it begins its return journey to earth. The physical body is then slowly formed with the help of the highest hierarchies and many other individualities.

At this point the physical body is the same for each of us. There is not yet differentiation. If it were to incarnate at this stage, we would all look alike. This essence of humanity is called the spirit germ. It is as round as the whole universe, and inside it is another round form which looks out into the starry heavens. In Goethe's *Faust*, he calls this the "Homunculus." This being is a part of the individuality which will be part of the incarnated body. It carries the karmic memories of past incarnations but it wants to go forward into the future.

Thus, two aspects of the human nature come together: The spiritual germ with its cosmic orientation and the ego organization with its individualized nature. The spirit germ with ego organization now moves through the planetary spheres on the way to incarnation, hearing what each sphere has to say. Intense work now takes place to build up the etheric and astral bodies and to prepare the physical body for this incarnation. This work goes on over long periods of time and is lovingly carried by so many beings, both spiritual and human. There is so much love and care that is needed for us to incarnate. We need to feel this aspect of life, because it changes our mood towards each child who has succeeded in coming here.

Before coming into incarnation the individual sees a preview of the coming life. This may be a moment of shock. Some may hesitate or even say "no", and this may be a cause of later developmental difficulties. The individual has worked hard to form the "model body", but often the path to incarnation is difficult because of modern complications such as birth control. Modern intervention is creating more and more difficulties so that growing numbers of children "just don't feel well." They do not feel right in themselves. Something doesn't fit. It has always been somewhat the case that there is not a perfect fit between the individual and the physical body at birth, but now the difficulties are growing stronger.

In the first seven years the child wants to transform the model or physical body so that it becomes totally his or her own. The helpers in this process are the childhood diseases, for the diseases and their attendant fevers allow the child to transform the body. Today's children aren't allowed to be sick or run fevers, however, and this is a tragedy. In this way the individual has to not only carry her own karma, but also an ill-fitting body.

What is the role of the kindergarten teacher in this process? Rudolf Steiner likens the role to that of a priest, and we may see why we need to work out of the highest intuition, and why it is love which helps the child to fight this struggle. It is through incarnation in the physical body that the individual can experience freedom. There is a great wish to live on the earth. The kindergarten teachers stands next to the child and surrounds the child with love and moral deeds, right down to the smallest gestures. There needs to be truth in all we do. This is the same substance as the origin of the physical body. Rudolf Steiner has spoken of the physical body as the truth body. We harm the child if we use "baby talk", for instance, for it is untrue.

Rudolf Steiner also spoke of the physical body as the body of hope. It is hope that lets us go to sleep at night, hope that we will waken in our physical body in the morning. Today there are so many sleep disorders among children, a sign that this fundamental hope is disturbed. This same form of hope allows us to die in peace with the trust that death is not an end. The mysteries of the physical body lead us to the spirit of resurrection, to the mysteries of the Christ.

In our daily life it is the love and joy which surround the child that allow it to form its organism.

On the next morning Dennis Klocek of the Goethean Studies Program at Rudolf Steiner College in Fair Oaks, California, spoke on “Developing Observation as a Healing Art.” He drew upon his background in the arts and in the study of nature, especially the lawful patterns of nature and the lawfulness of inner life. Such aspects of life do not develop in a random way, but according to an underlying set of laws.

He began by speaking of a phenomenon of our times - an epidemic of boredom. It is most prevalent among young adults, who seek one sense impression after another to try to satisfy themselves.

Sense impressions are a birthright of the human being, but in the early years children usually not given “lawful” sense impressions, that is impressions consistent with cosmic laws. Lawful impressions allow a rich inner mood to meet the sense impressions. Instead children today are bombarded by unlawful sense impressions which do not call for such an inner response. Unlawful sense impressions can be thought of as fast food for the soul. They appear to be sense impressions, but there is no soul nourishment in them. Since sensations help develop the organs in the human body, empty sensations which do not provide real nourishment can leave the organs in an undernourished state. This relates to Rudolf Steiner's statement that the causes of psychological illness can be found in the organs. Normally sensations nourish the organs which in turn contribute to the soul's healthy condition. Thus, when children are given unlawful sense impressions, such as seeing Mickey Mouse or the many other distorted sense impressions prevalent today, the organs are formed in unlawful ways resulting in soul confusion and even illness. If the soul image behind Mickey Mouse is money, the soul does not know what kind of nourishment it is receiving.

Dennis elaborated these points by speaking of the embryonic development of the child, the relation of the center to the periphery, the functioning of the glands and much more. In the future we will attempt to bring these pictures in detail, but it is not possible to do so now.

On the third morning Dr. Bruno Callegaro, a physician from Brazil now working in Kassel, Germany, spoke on the obstacles to incarnation and also on the development of inner life. He described today's children as having a dual nature: a soft delicate quality that can be thought of as an etheric sensitivity coupled with a strong will to incarnate.

Rudolf Steiner spoke of us all as “children in need of special care.” When we see children in need of help, we need to ask, what can we do to change QUE constitution, especially our soul make-up. We are part of the child's environment. If we change ourselves, this can be a great help to the child. We can take on six months of exercises such as the following:

- First month observe thinking.
- Second month observe feeling.
- Third month observe willing.
- Fourth month practice positivity, accepting all things as they are.
- Fifth month practice equanimity, seeing your own soul as it is.
- Sixth month practice all five together
- Then repeat the sequence.

Uniting the soul forces today is a challenge. We can no longer count on nature or culture to help us. We need to take this on as a conscious act. As we work in this way, we provide a model for imitation for the children. Further exercises were also discussed, such as working with the Foundation Stone given by Rudolf Steiner as the basis for the Anthroposophic Society. Working in such ways opens one to Rudolf Steiner as a teacher inspired by Michael who in turn serves the Christ now living in the etheric, the realm of levity. As we work with our inner life we learn to move from the realm of gravity to the realm of levity. Then we can better understand how the child brings its dual impulse: a strong will to incarnate in spite of the pain, as is captured in the Kathleen Raine poem, and a sensitivity to the periphery, which is to say to the etheric where the Christ dwells.

On the final morning the main speakers shared dosing remarks as did Nancy Poer who has worked strongly with souls at the gateways of birth and death. In these talks it was as if the full spectrum of the pain and the joy of life were with us. This was also echoed in the dosing plenum when eight colleagues from South African townships were invited to the stage to share their songs and spirit with us. Many joined them on stage in a great circle dance of friendship and joy culminating in their singing the South African national anthem. All the pain and striving of South Africans as well as that of all souls in the world today seemed embodied in this beautiful song, sung in such a heartfelt manner.

One could sum up the conference by saying it resounded with a commitment to the children who are here on the earth now, a willingness to serve them as best we can, through our classroom work and through our inner lives, but it was also a call to the unborn souls awaiting birth, a call to say we will do all we can to prepare the way for them and to nurture and protect them when they arrive. When the hail filled with glorious singing each morning, led by Eleanor Winship, it was not hard to imagine that unborn souls gathered with us.