

***The World Kindergarten Conference
June 1998 at the Goetheanum, Switzerland
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The 1998 World Kindergarten Conference was truly a Whitsun festival, taking place at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, the world center for Anthroposophy, just after the completion of several years of sculptural and artistic transformation of its Great Hall. Sculptors, painters and many volunteers from around the world, working in an intensive process of artistic collaboration, had taken hold of and transformed the Great Hall so that it now radiates warmth, life, and the activity of spiritual, artistic formative forces capable of transforming matter. This was an inspiring context for a conference devoted to the theme, “The Spiritual and Formative Forces for Education and Social Life at the Threshold of the Millennium”.

More than a thousand kindergarten teachers from Europe, Asia, Africa, South and North America gathered in this space in the middle of 1998, at the threshold of the millennium, to consider anew the spiritual foundations of our work in the context of the challenges and unique opportunities of our times.

The conference was an opportunity for looking back at the development of early childhood education and the Waldorf kindergarten movement in this “Century of the Child”, beholding the present situation of childhood and our movement at the end of the century, and looking ahead at the challenges of the new millennium which is approaching.

Heinz Zimmerman, the leader of the Pedagogical Section, described the three spiritual questions at the heart of our educational work at the end of the millennium as follows:

- 1) How can we each rediscover again and again the inner spiritual forces of strength which we need for our work?
- 2) How, in times where social forms are disintegrating around us, can we find ways to create new, productive forms of community and working together?
- 3) How can we participate actively in the issues of our times, not just as small oases or islands, but as active participants in contemporary culture?

Reijo Wilenius from Finland challenged us as Waldorf kindergarten teachers to help the surrounding society understand the meaning and significance of early childhood. Living imaginative thinking, empathy in feeling, and joyful, creative, transformative will are capacities which the young child brings from the spiritual world. They are the unique forces of childhood which need our protection and nurturing as the seeds for the future of humanity.

Protecting these childhood forces from the dragon is a Michaelic deed of freedom, one which involves not only looking at threats and evil from the outer world, but which requires what Mr. Wilenius called the “painful, embarrassing process” of getting to know the evil within our own souls. It is here, in recognizing our own prejudice, envy, intolerance, and negative feelings towards others and through cultivating positivity, respect and recognition of the positive qualities of the other, where each of us can best do battle with the dragon on behalf of the children in our care. By fighting the dragon in ourselves rather than fighting against others, we can create the inner basis for outer peace in the world and participate in what Rudolf Steiner called “building the chariot for Michael.” In this way we become

worthy of the child's imitation and can collaborate actively in the creation of a global culture, a culture based on respect, recognition, and love for that which is truly human in every human being.

Heinz Zimmerman described how we can each contribute toward the building of new community through practicing the social art of listening understanding and speaking. Thus spiritual science becomes not a body of knowledge, but a path, a way of uniting with others through entering into a loving "listening of the heart", which can lead to true social understanding. Our own smallest efforts at such listening can lead us into realms of inspiration, refreshing and enlivening our work from deeper spiritual realms. "Head understanding" can move towards a deeper "heart understanding", giving birth to new forces which can heal and inspire our speaking and doing. The children (and colleagues and parents) will experience our inner work and our kindergartens will be able to radiate joy.

Finally, Michaela Glöckler challenged us to move into the new millennium by protecting the right of every child to a childhood which will nurture those unique capacities on which the future of humanity will depend. She challenged each of us to look for allies in our own communities, organizations and professionals who share our concerns for the protection of childhood. However, as we step out to engage with the public, we will encounter the risk of losing or even denying our own identity; thus steps into the outer world must be accompanied by inner steps - our own inner work and a deepened understanding of the sources of Waldorf education.

Through such contributions from keynote speakers, as well as the stimulating workshops and artistic events, and the many rich encounters with our colleagues and new and old friends, many of us experienced this conference as a festival of rededicating and re-founding our work. We return enlivened and challenged, carrying many active questions:

- * How can we reach out to participate with those outside our Waldorf communities in a responsible way?
- * What new forms of outer and inner collaboration with colleagues and with parents can we responsibly undertake?
- * How can we approach our inner work with courage and humility, to confront the dragon within?
- * How can we approach all our work in such a way that we can contribute to the protection and nurturing of the forces of childhood as the basis for human development in the next millennium?