

An Interview with Hermann Koepke ***Jane Johansson***

(Jane Johansson has been a Waldorf kindergarten teacher and class teacher in California and Michigan. She recently spent several months in South Africa where she met Hermann Koepke who was on a visit there. He has written several books about different stages of child development. We hope his book on first grade readiness will appear in English soon, and in this article Jane gives some indications of its content as well as the life of this dedicated teacher.)

Hermann Koepke has been a Waldorf teacher for thirty-five years. On first meeting him, one is struck by his kind, steady gaze and can imagine the sustenance and strength so many children have received as they shook hands with him each morning.

He was born in 1937 and grew up in Heidenheim, Germany, near Stuttgart. After the Second World War, Mr. Voith, a manufacturer, started a Waldorf school in Heidenheim. He had six daughters to educate and wanted them to have Waldorf schooling. Hermann's father was an engineer in Mr. Voith's factory and so it happened that Hermann was able to attend the Waldorf School.

After finishing school, Hermann became an editor of a newspaper and was able to meet many of the leading political and cultural figures of the time, including Conrad Adenauer and Queen Elizabeth. After the amalgamation of his newspaper with another, he and his staff were let go, and he received three month's severance pay with the stipulation that he not work for another newspaper. Hermann described this as a "wonderful opportunity."

Hermann enrolled at Hawkwood College in England. Margaret Bennell, who also began Wynstone and is the author of *Shakespeare's Flowering of the Spirit*, founded this college. He feels he owes her a tremendous debt of gratitude. Ms. Bennell had the unique ability to make a bridge to the many young people enrolled at her college. At that time, she was already in her seventies. The way in which she spoke and the many conversations they had about Shakespeare and other topics inspired Hermann. One day, after one such lovely talk, he was walking alone in the forest. For no apparent reason, he felt filled with joy and sensed the spirit around him. He thought to himself, "Could I be any happier than I am now? If I were the Duke of Gloucester would I be any happier?" Hermann now interrupts with a burst of laughter, remembering how, as a youth of twenty-four, he had this question of being the Duke of Gloucester. "And in that moment," he says, "I realized that one's outer circumstances or profession do not determine one's inner state." In the bliss of that morning, he felt the answer come to him, as on wings of spirit. From deep within himself, he affirmed it, "Yes, if I could add something, something real, something helpful, something for others to this world, this happiness could be even greater." He felt this to be a turning point in his life.

At the age of twenty-five, Hermann began his eurythmy training at the Zuccoli School in Dornach. He had been considering whether he should enroll in a university for teacher training or take the eurythmy course. This time of the early sixties was a time of great turbulence and questioning of traditional education. Hermann felt that he could not bow down to the many outward and somewhat meaningless demands the university training would entail. He knew that eurythmy had more to do with something inner and real. This choice was certainly not without professional risk, and his parents were not very pleased with his decision. Nonetheless, he chose the eurythmy training.

Upon completing his eurythmy course and receiving additional pedagogical training, Hermann began teaching at the Basel Waldorf School as a class teacher. After twelve years of teaching, he received a sabbatical and, during this time, wrote his first book, *Encountering The Self: Transformation and Destiny in the Ninth Year*. He then helped start a new Waldorf school in Dornach, Switzerland, and took a class from first to eighth grade. Hermann also began teaching at the Lukas Clinic's Seminar for Medical Doctors. After completing his second cycle of class teaching, he wrote *On the Threshold of Adolescence: The Struggle for Independence in the Twelfth Year*.

Public School Teaching

After his second sabbatical, he “crossed the red line” and began teaching in a Swiss state school in Basel. Many people have asked him why he did this, but he says that it was really more a question of it being done “to him.” He was asked by a colleague to take a class for three months. He found this a tremendous experience as colleagues at the school would come to him with “real questions” — Why did he do form drawing? What was the purpose of the recitation he was doing with the children? There was a real dialogue and exchange taking place. The teachers were very interested and he was called upon to explain Waldorf education in vernacular terms.

When he was asked to continue teaching in the state school, he thought it was the right thing to do. “You see,” he explained, “many unknown Waldorf teachers have gone into the state schools in Switzerland and have made it possible for Waldorf education to be lawful to do. The block system, both boys and girls doing handwork and woodwork, written reports instead of number or letter grades, the initial parent interviewing process — all of these are now done in the Swiss state school in Basel. The only thing that isn't done is eurythmy, and even that I was able to do in my class.”

First Grade Readiness

I was anxious to ask him about his most recent book on the seven-year-old change and school readiness, published in German as *Das Siebte Lebensjahr – Die Schulreife*. He is hoping it will soon be published in English. It is already going into its third edition in German and has been published in Italian, Dutch, and Finnish. Hermann wrote this book right after he had finished teaching first grade to his current class, while the experience was still very fresh for him. During that year, he had started the practice of writing a weekly review of the lessons of that week for the parents in his class. Some questioned whether this wasn't a lot of extra work for him. On the contrary, he felt that these reviews were so helpful in building parent understanding and support that they were well worth the additional time and effort. It allowed parents to be more a part of the whole educational process. There are over twelve such reviews incorporated in this book. They give one a glimpse of daily life in a Waldorf classroom and how lessons are built up.

In this book, Hermann deals with such questions as: laterality, dominance and cross-dominance including right and left-handedness; parent evenings; home visits; and childhood illnesses. The book is full of colorful stories and practical examples. In exploring the different topics, he leads one into a Waldorf first grade classroom to experience, first-hand and in a lively way, what he is talking about. This book is such a help to both teachers and parents!

The last chapter of the book deals with school readiness. “This is really important!” says Hermann. He goes on to say, “If there is a sense of failure or inadequacy in the first grade, it will affect all the rest of the child's school days and later adult development. He or she may have to suffer under it the rest of his or her life.” He gave the analogy of misbuttoning the top button of a

shirt and then finding all the other buttons are also wrong. He cited a sad and tragic pilot study done in Ohio in which it was shown that in one year eighty-three percent of girls under the age of twenty-five who committed suicide in a particular county, were “summer birthdays.”

He says, “It is not just a question of whether a child is intellectually clever. He or she must also be physically mature. We should never forget that the child has the double task of growing *and* learning. Ideally teachers, doctors, and parents should be involved in making the decision about when a child enters first grade.”

This chapter on what we might call, “first grade readiness” lies at the end of the book, after we have followed a class through the first year of school. Why does Hermann put it at the end? In the book he reiterates the absolute importance of taking great care in making the decision about a child’s readiness to begin school. Central to this decision is the understanding of the two realms in which the child must develop growing and learning. One is the realm of the doctor, and the other is that of the teacher.

The doctor must look at the physical development of the child. This would include: physical changes in bodily stature indicating maturity (for instance elongation of limbs, shape of face, and so forth) change of teeth and the overall formation of the teeth, establishment of laterality, and general health and history of childhood illnesses.

The teacher assesses the child’s school readiness, taking into account such things as mental maturity and the child’s readiness to take up cognitive work, emotional and social maturity including how the child is able to fit into the social organism of the class, and the imitative capacities of the child.

It is important, then, that these two realms be presented and explored by the teacher, doctor, and parents working together. If there is a discrepancy between the two realms, the final decision on school entrance must lie with the parents, according to Hermann. And here is the reason this chapter lies at the end of the book. One can get a clear idea of what is entailed in the first grade year, what the child is called upon to do, and what the consequences might be if a child starts too early.

Even though most schools in North America do not have school doctors, this idea of separating the two realms of growing and learning can be a helpful way to look at the whole question of first grade readiness. In addition, Hermann gives many practical exercises and examples of how one can do this.

When asked what book he is currently working on, Hermann put his hand to his forehead and, after a long pause, said that his next book is based on Steiner’s six basic exercises. “But,” he says, “I still need many more years to write such a book if it is truly to be based on my own experience.” This is said by a teacher who at the age of sixty-three has never forgotten that it is the work done on one’s self that really makes the teacher!