

Early Childhood Teaching and the Etheric

Cynthia Aldinger

While working in my yard today, I was mulling over Margo Running's question in the last Gateways. Her query has to do with a perception of exhaustion of which many early childhood teachers/caregivers speak of, particularly if they work more than four hours with young children. I realized that the different ages and stages of life affect the energy levels of some individuals. In my thirties and forties, I was very energized by my work with young children, and I also loved the work of founding a school, being the faculty chair, the college chair, and everything in between at one time or another. At the same time, I was raising two sons and tending to a marriage. Yes, I believe I was energized by the forces of living in the present with the young children. In fact, I remember those times when I would steal away to my kindergarten room in the afternoons to re-energize before having to attend yet another meeting or deal with colleagues or parents who requested time with me. It was as if the room itself was filled with the health-giving forces I needed. But I also remember that it took a great deal of sheer will to tend to my household, to cook and clean, to be active in my community.

The relationship of the etheric to our work with children is a huge subject and I would like to share just a very few thoughts for now. A helpful tool Rudolf Steiner spoke to teachers about is called The Pedagogical Law. It is meant to help us understand the forces from which we draw in order to best serve the ages of children in our care or tutelage. The premise behind this law is that there are four bodies of activity from which we are able to function throughout life, the physical, etheric, astral and ego bodies.

The pedagogical law tells us that when the child is developing and strengthening his/her physical body, we teachers/caregivers/parents are ideally working with them through the strength of our own etheric forces. The adult's etheric is, in a sense, educating the child's physical body. When the child is developing and strengthening his/her etheric body, the adult is teaching/ tending through astral/soul forces. When the budding youth is developing and strengthening his/her astral/soul body, we are teaching/tending through the strength of our ego forces. To help early childhood children become physically healthy, we need to be life-filled enough (etherically strong) to provide them with the outer activities and nourishment that will provide that health.

The primary work of young children is the development of their physical bodies. Their own etheric forces are there to help support this development, particularly the development of their internal organs, in those early years. When these etheric forces are freed from the intense tending of building the child's physical, they are then rightfully placed in the service of more formal learning and memory work. Each individual is dealing with his or her own etheric strengths or weaknesses when it comes to memory, forming or breaking habits, developing rhythmical living, and other upbuilding activities.

According to the pedagogical law, we caregivers/teachers are called upon to be healthy in our etheric forces in order to provide the physical needs of these little ones. I don't think it necessarily means that the children draw out or use up or deplete our etheric forces. Only we can do that according to how we choose to live or according to health or illnesses with which we may be dealing. Rudolf Steiner does indicate that the child is

very bound up with the mother's etheric forces in those early years, but his indications for early childhood teachers seem to be more in the realm of the pedagogical law.

In our last Gateways, Margo Running posed a question about the potential mythology of early childhood educators being exhausted due to the children somehow using our etheric forces. I view it a bit differently. We are often tired when we are early childhood teachers. Rather than to think that the children are using our etheric forces, could we consider what we are doing to build up our etheric forces from which we are meant to be working. When we have reserve strength in any area of our lives, we are less likely to feel overwhelmed or exhausted. So, what types of activities can build etheric reserves? A few suggestions include: nutrition, sleep, nourishing activities, artistic activity, nature, bringing consciousness to changing a personal habit, music and humor. What fills your cup? What do you do for fun?

Of course, there can be other reasons why we are tired. We can spend a lot of energy on over thinking, on worrying about situations, on trying to please everyone, on adjusting to changes. When we first start with a new group of children or move into a new space, we are also adjusting and helping the children adjust to becoming a cohesive social group.

These things make it all the more important that we tend to our own etheric (and physical) well-being. And this can be done in homeopathic doses. We don't have to disappear, drop out, or disengage in order to protect ourselves. Can we consider how we meet each moment as it comes? If we must attend yet one more meeting, can we have some delicious, nutritious food there? Can we tell a few jokes? Sing? Walk in nature to the meeting instead of driving? Can we be aware of the needs of our colleagues who are there with us, helping to insure that their own children are receiving the care they need while they are at the meeting, making sure that the meetings are hygienic, making sure that, yes, they are not required to attend too many meetings every single week. Perhaps realistic agendas with more mandated groups to carry particular types of agenda items could help.

Margo also brought the question of Christ consciousness living in the etheric and that, in our studies of Rudolf Steiner, we understand that young children live in this Christ consciousness (particularly in the first three years). If this is so, she ponders, how can we be exhausted? Why would working with these children and working out of the etheric not instead be an elixir?

It is a very worthy question and one that we can mostly only ponder and each of us begin to find our own answers. Now, in my fifties, I have more energy than when I was in my forties or thirties. I process things differently. I care differently. I can let go of things more easily and move on. As colleagues, it can be helpful to remember that we are not all in the same life phase. Try to remember what mattered to you when you were in your twenties, thirties, or forties. What was it like to be with children all morning or all day and then again with your own family the rest of the day and night? What was it like to want a new car and a new home, to be in a troubled personal relationship or to be pining for a relationship? What was it like to ponder almost every experience as if it were filled with mystery and meaning?

We tend to meet life very differently in each of the various soul phases. This can impact how well we can take up our own personal care, how well we can fill up our

etheric cups in order to be fuller people for each other and for the little ones and their parents.

Mostly, we do our best. And when we don't do our best, somewhere deep inside of us we know it and that can be the most draining of all. We have each answered the call to this most sacred work of service to human development, working with young children and their families. Let's support each other as we find our own relationship to that Christ consciousness that strengthens us regardless of our religious faith and practice. Let's support each other as we discover ways to homeopathically bring leaven into our daily lives. And may they give you strength of which you are in need.

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