

Meeting at the Eye of the Needle: Mentoring on the Path of Adult Learning

Susan Silverio

The WECAN Mentoring Task Force has been studying professional development for Waldorf early childhood educators. How do we learn as adults who work with young children? What is the role of a mentor in this lifelong learning process? How is learning of adults different from the learning of children? In this article below, task force member Susan Silverio explores the work of Coenraad van Houten on adult learning and the life processes. Her article will be included in the guidelines for early childhood mentoring that the Mentoring Task Force plans to publish through WECAN in the coming year.

And so they meet – two early childhood teachers/caregivers.

Perhaps one is retired from classroom teaching. Perhaps one has just begun her first Waldorf kindergarten class, or a home-based LifeWays center.

Or perhaps both are seasoned teachers seeking further development and the inspiration to continue.

Both are united on behalf of the young child and the future of human development.

At this time, one is called to serve as a mentor.

We will call the other the “mentee” for now. Although one is designated the mentor, both are on a path of self-education and adult learning.

What are the various paths of adult learning and what are the processes involved? And how might these relate to mentoring?

In *Awakening the Will – Principles and Processes of Adult Learning*, author Coenraad van Houten, describes three learning paths. One is *learning for life* in a scheduled course of study and training, imparted by teachers, often in institutes and schools organized for higher education. The second path is *learning through life*. “Everyone is constantly faced with a discrepancy between their inner faculties, strengths and weaknesses, on the one hand, and what comes towards them as necessities, questions, and challenges of life, on the other. This is the situation of Destiny

Learning.” The third path is *learning to live in the reality of the spiritual world*. Rudolf Steiner illuminates this path: the modern path of self-knowledge. He points out that instruction and counsel are helpful, but the task is to find our Teacher within. “The highest learning objective that exists is: to become ever more a human being, to be able to experience our true being in the cosmic worlds of our origin. This is so we can become better able to fulfill our tasks here on earth.” (*Awakening the Will: Principles and Practices of Adult Learning*, Coenraad van Houten)

It is the adult ego that integrates these three learning paths. All three paths work together as the adult develops the lively art of nourishing the young child’s unfolding will forces in the work and play of daily life through the seasons. As Steiner-based education cares for the entire human being – body, soul and spirit – early childhood is recognized as a time when the incarnating soul and spirit are taking up residence in the earthly form, surrounding the physical body with a cloud of life forces and recreating it in order to take up the individuality’s life purpose. The being of the child is completely open to her surroundings, including the thoughts and feelings of the adults who relate to her. The child devotes herself to absorbing all she encounters. It is essential, therefore, that the adult is protective of the young child’s life forces and is striving to be worthy of the young child’s imitation. This includes harmonizing our thoughts and feelings as well as our speech and movement. If we are honest, we recognize this work as a lifelong path of learning and development.

Becoming a mentor is also a process of learning as the mentor moves from her own experience of teaching and her own incarnating of the essentials of Waldorf education, to meet another teacher who is moving into the future on her own paths of study, life experience and inner work.

So perhaps it would be worthwhile to reflect on exactly what the *processes* of adult learning

might be. No longer as the young child who is working out of imitation – empathy with his environment and the actions of the teacher – nor as the grade school child whose life of feeling is being carried and developed by the authority of the teacher, nor as the high school and college student working with ideas and still seeking the star of his individual self, the adult learner is now able to call upon his own Spirit Self to navigate into life, to consciously direct and integrate experience into knowledge and capacities. At the age of twenty-one, the very life forces that we strive to protect in early childhood are freed for self-education.

Van Houten works with the seven processes of adult learning, based on the seven processes of life described by Rudolf Steiner ("The Riddle of Humanity," lecture of August 12, 1916) in explaining all of biological life, including human life processes and perception. On a biological level these seven processes are: 1) breathing, 2) warming, 3) digesting, 4) eliminating/absorbing, 5) maintaining, 6) growing, and 7) reproducing. The first three processes involve taking something in from outside as physical nourishment (air, warmth, and food). The fourth process is the turning point of transforming these substances internally. The last three processes involve bringing forth something from within (sustaining the body, growing, and giving birth).

Adult Learning is based on the use our ego makes of the life processes that were originally involved in the forming of our body. Our available etheric forces, energized by the ego, produce Adult Learning. (p. 43, van Houten)

The seven natural *life* processes become available to the adult as the seven *learning* processes: 1) perceiving, 2) relating, 3) digesting, 4) individualizing, 5) practicing, 6) growing faculties, and 7) creating something new.

The first process, *perceiving*, is observing the world through the senses. There is a breathing quality, in that something is taken in, internalized, and needs to be breathed out as well. Outer sense impressions do not simply stream into the adult, as is the case with the young child. An adult must be attentive. "Only

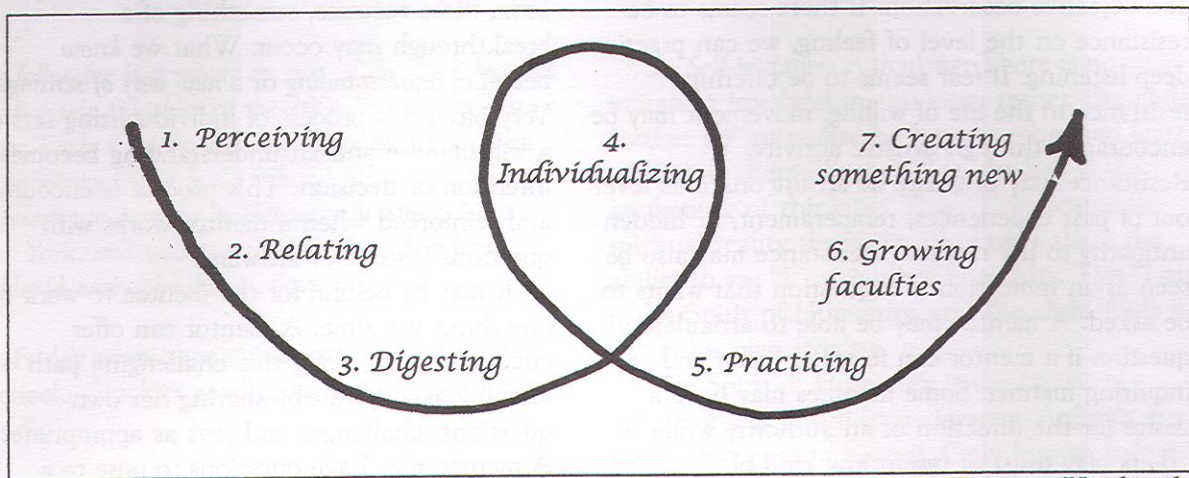
then does one hear a speaker, read a book, perceive a sound, color, movement, etc."

The second process, *relating*, requires a person to form a connection with what has been observed. An inner activity of interest is required to warm up (or cool down if need be) what has been perceived. For example, a monotone presentation would require a listener to consciously engage the ego in order to discover the essentials being presented. The individual ego would also need to be engaged in order not to be carried away by a fiery speaker.

The third process, *digesting*, is to assimilate what has been taken in. Just as food must be completely broken down in order to be digested by the physical organism, so also adults must digest what has been seen and heard before it can provide spiritual nourishment.

The fourth process, *individualizing*, is the central and crucial process of the seven. This is the internal turning point where there is a sorting out of that which the individual may transform for his own use, and that which must be eliminated. This is the "aha!" moment of adult learning, when something is experienced as new, as if born from within and truly one's own. There needs to be time and space for this transformation to happen freely in order for this to occur. This process can only take place if the ego has been active in working with the first three processes of observing, relating and digesting. Someone whose ego does not take up and work with material may continue to "do her own thing." This would be individualism remaining in old habits and attitudes or acting merely out of personal preference. On the other hand, someone could take up new material and adhere to it blindly, without working it through with her own ego, neglecting the step of digesting. This could lead to a kind of rigid dogmatism. These polarities are balanced only when the adult ego is engaged in all of these learning processes.

Once a new insight or impulse is gained, the final learning stages are *practicing*, *growing new faculties* and *creating something new*. The fifth process, *practicing*, allows what has been realized to take root. There may not necessarily be a feeling of immediate success. One needs to have



(Diagram 5, page 53, van Houten. Used with permission of the author.)

the courage and perseverance to practice what is being learned and to find a way to practice that renews vitality.

In the sixth process, *growing new faculties*, all of the preceding work needs to “go to sleep” so that it can reawaken as an inner capacity.

Finally there is the possibility of the seventh process of *creating something new*, something more than the sum of the parts.

This sequence of seven processes describes something more than the acquiring of a skill or a method of teaching. It describes, rather, the development of new capacities. For truly human development, the middle step of *individualizing* is essential.

An example of this learning sequence would be a beginning teacher who works out of imitation of another teacher. As she enters her second year of teaching she may have a dawning realization that there isn’t necessarily one “our school way” that requires that a child’s birthday be celebrated in a specific manner. She had assumed that what her colleague described to her was what every teacher did. Her mentor assures her that it was fine that she had done things, in her first year, just as her fellow teacher described to her. Gradually the new teacher develops the feeling that this way doesn’t feel quite right; she begins questioning, trying to discern what fits, etc. Finally, the teacher begins to find and clarify her own way. This is

never a finished product, rather always a process of development, but now arising out of her Self rather than imitation.

It is valuable for a mentor to acknowledge the gifts as well as the challenges of the mentee. Strengths may be cultivated while challenging areas may be developed more slowly over the course of time. For example, a teacher may rely on her natural storytelling ability while taking a number of years to explore puppetry and to learn to sing in a way that nourishes the young child.

This sequence may take a shorter or a longer time for an individual teacher and some areas will proceed at different paces than others. The experience of individualizing can sometimes be precipitated by contact with a self-realized person who exemplifies the last three stages of practicing, growth and creativity. The teacher may then discover that it is not so much *what* is done, but *how* it is done.

Although the processes of learning are sequential, they are also simultaneous. A mentor may meet a mentee in any of these processes and offer encouragement to continue to explore, to study, to deepen, to make the work one’s own, and to practice, express and create.

This is a challenging path, and resistance can easily develop on the level of either thinking, feeling or willing. Van Houten offers the following approaches. If we encounter resistance on the thinking level, it can be met with interest

and objective observation. If there seems to be resistance on the level of feeling, we can practice deep listening. If fear seems to be offering resistance to the life of willing, movement may be encouraged through artistic activity. Resistance may originate at an unconscious level out of past experiences, temperament, or hidden antipathy to the mentor. Resistance may also be seen as an indication of a question that wants to be asked. A mentee may be able to articulate a question if a mentor can foster an open and inquiring manner. Some mentees may have a desire for the direction of an authority while others may resist or resent any kind of suggestion. Even while the mentor may hold deeply the essential ideals of Waldorf education (and perhaps the principles and practices of LifeWays care or RIE as well), she needs to recognize that even these must be temporarily set aside in meeting another who is in the process of adult learning. Instead of giving directives and advice, a mentor may come to meet a mentee as she stands at the eye of the needle by asking a question such as, "What are you working on now?" The question may engage the ego of the mentee, and stimulate quiet contemplation.

Human beings really are aware of much more than they know about in their daytime consciousness. Their higher beings know, their conscience knows. In their subconscious soul-regions a large amount of wisdom is stored.
(p. 60, van Houten)



From these recesses, something of a breakthrough may occur. What we *know* becomes *understanding* or a *new way of sensing*. Very often this process of individualizing sets off a will impulse and an understanding becomes an intention or decision. This process is encouraged and reinforced when a mentor works with questions instead of answers.

It may be helpful for the mentee to work on one thing at a time. A mentor can offer encouragement along this challenging path of learning as an adult by sharing her own questions, challenges and joys as appropriate. A mentee may have questions to pose to a mentor as well. Experienced mentors have relayed that these questions have been an opportunity to bring to consciousness and to articulate their own intentions and understandings. Such questions may even prompt changes in the mentor's own practice.

Truly the process of adult learning, as a mentor as well as a mentee, can be a lifelong path of learning and development. To consciously choose to remain active in this process of learning takes courage, but engenders life and brings one closer to the realm of the young child.

Susan Silverio is the lead teacher of Spindlewood Waldorf Kindergarten and LifeWays Center in Lincolnville, Maine and the director of the East Coast LifeWays Training.

Questions

As told by Stephen Spitalny, Waldorf School of Santa Cruz

A flood of questions from a six-year-old girl in kindergarten.

"What's it like to die? Will it hurt 'cause I don't want to die if it hurts? When I get born again, will I be the same kid? Will I have the same mommy I have now? I want to have the same mommy."