

Meeting Each Other: The Human Encounter

Dr. Heinz Zimmermann

The following is an excerpt from the opening lecture of the 2005 World Early Childhood Conference at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. It was given by Dr. Heinz Zimmermann, longtime Waldorf educator and former leader of the Pedagogical Section of the School of Spiritual Science. In 1964, Heinz Zimmermann wrote his doctoral dissertation on the "Typology of the Spontaneous Conversation." This interest in what takes place during our human encounters has continued for more than forty years.

Dr. Zimmermann gave the opening and closing lectures of the 2005 conference to early childhood educators from 40 different countries. The following excerpt is from the end of his opening talk, where he spoke about the art of education as an art of human encounter. In early childhood education today, working together with other adults is often the most challenging aspect of our work. Dr. Zimmermann describes how we can cultivate our ability to truly meet each other, "I" to "I". It is this human encounter that creates the vessel of community in which our children develop.

In his book *How to Know Higher Worlds* Rudolf Steiner writes the following words:

When one practices listening without criticism, even in cases where an opinion is brought forward which is entirely contrary to one's own, one will gradually learn to become one with the being of another person, and to fully enter into that person's world. One will learn to penetrate below the surface and hear the soul of the other behind the words.

"Behind the words. . . ." Every human being has a unique voice, and by entering into that voice a communion takes place; a connection is formed with the being of the other. In another context, Rudolf Steiner calls this the "mystery of compassion."

The best place to start practicing is to choose the one who annoys you most, or to pick a person to whom you don't normally pay much attention. By doing this, we build up a connection that will become fruitful in the future. We have some

encounters that are brought about by the past; our legs simply carry us to the people concerned. But there are also encounters that I can consciously cultivate and make fruitful that way. In exactly the same way I can learn from encounters and in doing so make future encounters fruitful as well. Digesting the experience will make future meetings more fruitful.

I would like to conclude my contribution by telling you two little stories. The first story — both have been changed a little bit — stems from India.

After God had created the whole world, including the human being, he sent the human beings down to earth. But they didn't enjoy the earth all that much and soon came back again. They returned to heaven much too early, and God really didn't want to have them come back that soon. So he thought to himself, "What can I do now?" and after pondering this he came up with the following idea. He thought, "I simply have to close heaven. Only the question is, where should I hide the key? For people are smart, and they will look everywhere. Even if I sink it to the bottom of a vast ocean, they would find it."

Finally he had the splendid idea to put the key in the heart of the human being. Within every human being there lies the key to heaven, and it can be found when one seeks the way to the heart. This is what self-transformation from out of the future means: it has to come from the heavenly being within each human being.

The second story is the story of a dying monastery (or perhaps to make it more current, we could say an anthroposophical "branch"). The members are all over 70, and only five of them are left in this monastic community. A friend arrives, and together with the abbot he laments the situation. "We are doing what we have always been doing, but no new people are coming." We know how this is, it is a familiar dirge, which might sound somewhat like this: "We are doing the same thing, only the students have become so different." So the two of them are complaining together about the terrible decadence of present-day civilization, and

how the end is in sight.

On leaving, the friend says, “I can only wish you luck, but one thing I would still like to say to you. There is one among you, who is blessed by God.” (In the anthroposophical branch one would perhaps say “an initiate,” or that this person “had special spiritual gifts.”) With that, the friend takes his leave and the five are alone again.

Now all of them are beginning to think. “Now who could that can be? The abbot? Could it be I? Who knows? It isn’t out of the question. But I don’t really think so. Maybe it is Brother Felix? Or someone else?” And while they are all thinking about this, they begin to meet each other with a very particular quality of respect, because after all, anyone could be the chosen one! Through this, they build up a cohesion and relationship among one another that radiates from the community to such an extent that new people are attracted. The result is that the monastery blossoms again and acquires new members.

So this second story is also wonderful. What it implies is that we can discover that a divine source

dwells within every other human being, and when we actively cultivate this fact within ourselves, we will also be able to work together in a different way instead of only seeing one another as acting in “typical” ways, this way or that way. Instead, we can say, “No, it is not “typical”; within this person’s “type” something unassailably divine expresses itself, something from out of the future – a seed, which is the child within every human being, just like the child which comes into the kindergarten to us in the morning.”

This discovery is wonderfully expressed by the philosopher Martin Buber. He says, “On the way to becoming I, I say: You.” On the way to becoming myself, in the process of becoming I, I see the other.

The full lectures by Dr Zimmerman, as well as those by Joan Almon, Christof Wiechert, and Dr. Michaela Gloeckler, will appear in a volume called Playing, Learning, Meeting the Other, available through WECAN Books this spring.

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Mentoring in Waldorf Early Childhood Education, edited by Nancy Foster with contributions from the Mentoring Task Force, is Volume Four in the Gateways Series.

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COMING THIS SPRING AND SUMMER

Playing, Learning, Meeting the Other, proceedings from the 2005 Dornach World Early Childhood Conference.

You’re Not the Boss of Me! Understanding the 6/7-Year-Old Transformation – the long-awaited resource created by our WECAN Task Force on the Six-Year-Old.