The Stars Are Brighter in Your Peripheral Vision, Part II

Working Towards a Constitutional View of the Epileptic/Hysteric Polarity

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When development is closely observed it is always dynamic. What do we mean by dynamic? We mean that it is moving, in process. While modern science loves nouns and labels, facts and numbers, development really happens in verbs. This poses a real challenge, of course, because it is easier and safer to stay with the labels, the descriptors, but that rarely helps us know what we should do. When we can begin to live into the process then we can understand the *origin* and the *healing* of a developmental imbalance.

In Part One of this article, the constitutional polarity of the epileptic and hysteric process was explored (please refer to the Spring 2008 issue of *Gateways* for the full picture). In the epileptic process the physical and etheric bodies are not yet able to serve as an adequate vehicle for the higher members because they are too dense. Because of this density, these children's relationship to their environment is "numbed," as the astral body and I are trapped inside. They then have to work hard to break through that dense barrier and truly connect with the world around them. Out of this dynamic process—one in which there is a continuous damming up and then breaking through of the higher members—we can understand why these children wake slowly in the morning. We can also understand why they may not be ready to meet and digest food, or sensory impressions, until late in the day. Waking, reintegrating the astral body and

I after sleep, is a laborious process and takes time. Strong sensations—big physical movements, rough play—may help to speed up this process, just as you might shake and bang your leg when it has fallen asleep from sitting too long. We can see the epileptic process expressed in how a child sleeps, eats, and interacts, in many different aspects of their daily life.

The child with a hysteric process does not get stuck; however, he or she overflows. Instead of the physical and etheric bodies being too dense and locking in the higher members, here they offer too little form and boundary. Everything is felt and noticed, and therefore has to be paid attention to. Where in the epileptic process it is long and laborious to make healthy contact with the environment, now there is way too much contact. The child has difficulty releasing the environment. This manifests in difficulty falling asleep; then in the morning, the child is immediately awake and aware of the environment again. And since everything flows in, it is actually easiest for the hysteric child to digest food in the morning. This is because by the end of the day, the "sensory diet" has overwhelmed his or her digestive capacity, and food nourishment is simply too much to handle. The social interactions of a child with a hysteric process may be excessive, even invasive, and the child truly finds it difficult to rein in all of these sensations and interactions.

After looking at the developmental polarity of the epileptic and hysteric process, after looking at its phenomenology (physical, physiological, and spiritual), we can hopefully start to appreciate why a child acts a certain way. But we can't stop there; we need to move to the will sphere and look at what we can practically do. Making observations about a child is a rich and wonderful process, but it is important that its fruits also flow into daily consciousness and activities.

This step from observation to implementation can be a daunting one, and always needs to be considered carefully. On the one hand, casually applying judgments about constitutions and polarities is a dangerous business, because we can again easily get caught in the world of nouns. "Epileptic" can quickly become just a label, like ADHD, or opposition-defiant, or, or, or. . . But if our observations can stay in the realm of careful, reverential focus and consideration, if we can imaginatively live into the dynamic of a polarity, then our study will bring great gifts. If our study of the child is infused with love and interest then we will be guided in the right way.

One open and loving gesture we can make n order to begin thinking therapeutically about a child is simply to say, "What does this child crave?" The child is usually showing us exactly what he or she needs. It is safe to say that the kinds of experiences small children regularly seek out (when we remove the artificial influences of modern media and too many labor-saving devices) express exactly what they need.

To summarize again, briefly: if a child's borders are numb and hard to penetrate (as we may see in the epileptic process, in which the astral and ego organization have trouble coming into, and then through the physical and etheric bodies to meet the environment) he or she will often seek out *big movements*, with *strong experiences of touch and gravity*. In a way, with each strong movement, each gravitational encounter, such children are creating a little seizure-like process to help themselves break through. Steiner says that this process is confirmed if the child has problems with vertigo, or dizziness, in which the entire sense of one's body in space, in relation to gravity, is disturbed. This numbed relationship with the environment may manifest itself on another level as well, in that these children's moral sense is weakened or absent. They are stuck inside their bodies (literally ego and astral inside of physical and etheric) and cannot meet the other—their "social" sense of touch is numbed. So then the child who greets you like a bulldozer, or who never seems to be able to have a social interaction without physical contact, may well be repeatedly healing his or her own epileptic process. The timing and form of the interaction is often inopportune (and disruptive), but the underlying intention is healthy, and actually really a seeking-out of healing experience.

If a child's borders are loose, porous, overflowing (the hysteric process, in which the sensitivity of the astral body extends far beyond the physical borders of the body) then the child will try to find ways to rein in the astral body. This generally also involves an increase in stimulus, but instead of seeking a sensation of strong touch or gravity, the child with a hysteric process likes rhythm and surprise.

Rhythm, in that they are better able to collect and feel themselves when things are accelerated; *surprise* (the word Steiner actually uses is shock, "*Schockwirkungen*") to contract and focus.

In *Education for Special Needs*, Rudolf Steiner describes these therapeutic, healing experiences as follows. For the epileptic process:

> *If you find this to be the case [symptoms of vertigo], let the child do gymnastics or eurythmy, but giving him always at the same time objects to hold, such as dumb-bells or the like. . . If you give the child two dumb-bells of exactly the same weight—you must have them weighed on a chemical balance—and let him do exercises with them, making eurythmy movements, or other gymnastic movements, this will be one thing achieved. Then you can go on to something else. Let the child hold in his left hand a dumb-bell that is lighter than the one in his right, and once more do exercises; then let him take in his right hand a dumb-bell that is lighter than the one in his left, and once more do exercises. Then tie some object—it need not be particularly heavy—to one of his legs, and let him walk about with it, so that he becomes conscious of the force that is pulling at his leg. When he walks in the ordinary way, he is not conscious of the force of gravity. It is, however, important for him to place himself, with his ego organization, right into the force of gravity* (Steiner, Lecture 3).

And for the hysteric process:

> *Anything in the environment that may cause even a slight shock to the child—if it originates in the unconscious, in the temperament of the teacher—must be avoided. And do you know why? Because the teacher must also be capable of inducing shock consciously and deliberately; shocks are often the very best remedy for these conditions! They take effect, however, only if they do not proceed from unconscious habit but are given consciously and deliberately, the teacher watching intently all the time to observe the effect on the child. . .*
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> *Try to bring the work into a quicker tempo. . . The fact that the child is at this moment compelled to come into his state of anxiety, compelled to enter into an experience that has been artificially promoted and is different from the previous one, brings it about that he strengthens within him, consolidates with him, the ego and astral body that are trying to flow out. If you repeat such things systematically with a child, over and over again, a consolidation of ego and astral body will take place* (Steiner, Lecture 4).

One of the kindest gestures one can make to a small child in the classroom, is to observe the children with real interest and attention, try to find out what experiences they are seeking, and then provide the opportunity for those sensations in a formed, consciously-held, and socially affirming experience. In a way, it is trying to find the child's itch and respond to it before he or she needs to scratch it. What could possibly be a more loving and enriching social gift?

The following article by Nancy Blanning includes a movement journey/circle time written with precisely these two constitutional polarities in mind. It offers some special gifts of its own:

- The esoteric needs of the child, from both the epileptic and hysteric sides of the polarity, are directly addressed and met.
- The activity is playful and imaginative. In contrast, one could imagine a weight machine of a very "modern" design with asymmetric weights, or a sing-along DVD that would shockingly speed up and then slow down its rhythms. That would perhaps meet the most mundane physical requirements of the two therapies, but it would hold no invitation for further incarnation, no artistic breathing, no archetypal pictures from the spiritual world. It would address only the coarsest aspects of the child but not help teach and encourage the higher members to do the balancing on their own.
- The circle time is fun, and has great humor. The children will be met, and engaged, and simply enjoy what they are doing.

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References

Steiner, Rudolf. *Education for Special Needs: The Curative Education Course* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1998).