

Working and Living with So-Called Difficult Children, Part II

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Dr. Karnow's presentations began with the following verse, which Rudolf Steiner gave to Dr. Ita Wegman in December, 1920.

*The human being is a bridge
Between the past and future existence.
The present is a moment; moment as bridge.
Spirit grown to soul in matter's husk
Comes from the past.
Soul growing to spirit as seed encased
Journeys toward the future.
Grasp future things through past ones
Hope for evolving things through what has evolved.
So grasp existence in evolving growth;
So grasp what will be in what exists.*

This image can serve as a bridge as well to contemplating the second major topic Dr. Karnow offered in his keynote addresses. The first theme, described in the Spring 2008 issue of *Gateways*, considers what mood of soul the teacher must develop in order to understand and serve the child. We need to cultivate selfless emptiness so the being of the child can speak into us and guide us in what to do. We must shed our sympathies and antipathies, our expectations and judgments about the child. We let the development and experiences of the child resonate within us and then guide us into future action on the child's behalf. We do not label. We develop reality-based thoughts formed not on abstract ideas, but upon what we observe.

This leads to the second major theme, observation of the child as a threefold being. Dr. Karnow described that Rudolf Steiner worked for thirty years before he shared the content of his thoughts on the threefold organization of the human being. These are ideas we need to work with more and more seriously, as this threefold picture is the motif of our work. This gives an approach to understand the **time structure** of the human life so we can begin to know what to do. When we are working with the "difficult" child, we are struggling

to understand the threefold nature of the human being.

This time structure and the threefold human being are discussed in *Riddles of the Soul*. Rudolf Steiner perceived through his years of research that the human being has three aspects which find expression in both the physical body and in soul activities. There is the nerve-sense system (including the brain and nerves), the rhythmic system (including the heart and lungs), and the metabolic-limb system. These are the physical expressions of this threefold nature. Connected to these systems are soul activities of thinking, feeling, and willing, respectively. The physical base for thinking is the nerve-sense system. Feeling, emotional life, lives not in the nerve-sense system but rather in the rhythmic system. In conventional psychology, everything is assumed to function within the nervous system, but Steiner's observation-based research said that this is not so. Feeling life lives in the rhythmic system. Willing activity lives in the metabolic-limb system. Steiner states:

*Just as, when something is mentally pictured, a nerve process occurs upon which the soul becomes conscious of its mental picturing, and just as, when something is felt, a modification of the breathing rhythm takes place through which a feeling arises in the soul: so when something is willed, a metabolic process happens, which is the bodily foundation for what is experienced in the soul as willing (Steiner, *Riddles of the Soul*, 133-134).*

The *whole* physical/physiological human being is the basis of the life of soul, not just the nervous system. For those active in Waldorf education, to make the above observations may seem commonplace. We speak of thinking, feeling, and willing all the time. But Dr. Karnow emphasized it is important that we consider these deeply; these are vast ideas and profound insights. Truly understanding the development and expression of thinking, feeling,

and willing can be the “foundation stone” for the teacher’s work.

Rudolf Steiner further explains that thinking, feeling, and willing develop in the course of time. Aspects of these physical and soul processes, which operate in time, permeate the whole human being; yet each system is also identified with a physical region as well. The head, the physical center of the sensory and nervous systems, has its concentrated development during the first seven years of life. The trunk and rhythmic system have focused development, leading toward maturity, in years seven to fourteen. And development of the metabolism and limb system is the focal point between the ages of fourteen to twenty-one, when the body fills out and develops muscles and a solid physical form.

While this development, which we can physically see, is occurring, there is also development occurring for an “invisible” human during these seven-year periods. From birth to age seven, the etheric body—the body of formative forces—is growing and molding the physical body. From seven to fourteen, the astral body—the body of consciousness, of sympathy and antipathy—is educating the feeling life. Then from fourteen to twenty-one, the I or ego force is working to grow and strengthen independent thinking forces which can flow into deed through the human will. When each of these “invisible” bodies has completed its work in these ways, it is liberated for new tasks in the soul life. These soul elements of thinking, feeling, and willing are not only rooted in the physical body but undergo liberation and transformation when bodily processes complete their phases of development. The energies which have been dedicated to physical growth become available for new processes in the soul life. Specifically, the first seven-year period completes the forming of the child’s physical body through the activity of etheric growth forces. Then the forming activity is transformed into powers of thought.

This is described in the first chapter of *Fundamentals of Therapy* by Rudolf Steiner and Ita Wegman:

Forces functioning in the ether body are active at the beginning of the human being’s life on earth—most distinctly during the embryonal period—as the forces of formation and growth. During the course of earthly

life a portion of these forces emancipates itself from this occupation with formation and growth and becomes forces of thinking, just those forces which, for the ordinary consciousness bring forth the shadowlike world of thoughts.

It is of the utmost importance to know that the human being’s ordinary forces of thinking are refined form and growth forces. A spiritual element reveals itself in the forming and growing of the human organism. And this spiritual element then appears during the course of later life as the spiritual power of thought.

That which forms the body comes to a level of completion and is now available to be forces that allow us to have content in our mind. We have a visible human being forming—the physical body which we can experience with our physical senses. As this attains completion in its formation, the “invisible” human being is being born. The true bridge spanning the past into the future manifests only when the invisible I or individuality is born. Before the birth of the I, everything is from the past. Our capacity to think comes from the transformed forces that have formed and grown the physical body. How we think is grounded in what type of form we have accomplished in the physical body. If we can observe and understand the *form* of the body, then we can develop windows into understanding how thinking, feeling, and willing manifest themselves. The physical human being has a physical physiology; the invisible human-coming-into-being also has a soul-spiritual physiology. As we observe children’s behavior, we are actually talking about an anatomy of the soul. This anatomy of soul is rooted in the physical body, in the substance of the human body.

Now Steiner takes this picture of the threefold human being yet a further step. He points out that each of the seven-year periods has within itself a threefold aspect as well. He states in *Soul Economy*: “One can recognize such seven-year periods throughout the entire course of human life, and each of these periods again falls into three clearly differentiated shorter periods” (110). The big seven-year phases mentioned above follow the developmental motifs of nerve/sense system, rhythmic system, and metabolic/limb system respectively. Yet within each seven-year period, there is a mini-recapitulation of these developmental

motifs.

Since our work as early childhood educators is primarily concerned with the time from birth to age seven, we will use that as the focus for our consideration here. From birth to two years and four months, development concentrates upon the nerve/sense system and is most visible in the development of the head. From that point until four years and eight months of age, the rhythmic system is in the forefront, and changes in trunk are the visible physical expressions of development. In the final stage, which lasts through the seventh year, the maturation achieved in the metabolic/limb system shows itself through structural changes in the arms and legs.

From this physical picture, let us return to consideration of what is happening with the “invisible” soul development for the child. When this growth task is completed, the etheric forces become available for use by soul activities. Steiner states: “Now, at the end of the first seven-year period, most of these etheric forces are released to flow into the child’s soul and spiritual nature.” He points out that

*. . . a supersensible contemplation of man will reveal to us, apart from his physical body, another finer body which we have called the etheric body or the body of formative forces. From this etheric body spring not only all the forces sustaining nourishment and growth, but it is also the source of the faculties of remembering and of making mental images, of ideation. It becomes an independent entity only during the change of teeth, at which time it is born in a similar way in which, at physical birth, the body is born from its mother. This means that up to the change of teeth the forces of the etheric body are entirely working in the processes of the child’s organic growth, whereas after that time—though still remaining active in this realm to a great extent—they partly withdraw from these activities. These released forces of the ether body now begin to work in the soul realm of mental picturing and memory, as well as in the many other nuances of the child’s soul life. (Steiner, *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, 110).*

When the etheric forces have achieved a certain completion in growth of the physical body, those forces are liberated for the soul activities of thinking, feeling, and willing. With each visible, physical

completion come changes in the behavior and consciousness of the child. This is true for each full seven-year cycle as a whole and also for the threefold divisions of each larger cycle. As the etheric body completes its growth tasks, this body of formative energies becomes available for soul activity in thirds as well. So we will see changes in consciousness, emotional and will life in distinct thirds within each seven-year period, too. The more we study human development, the more we will be able to observe the changes in consciousness that correspond with physical developmental completions. The changes in physical form will guide us into knowing whether different soul capacities have been liberated for the tasks of school, for example. If the physical development is incomplete or atypical, as will often be true with the “difficult” child, we can begin to understand why and how there may also be unusual aspects of behavior and consciousness, which are the expressions of the “invisible” human soul. By looking at outward forms of the human body, we practice a special kind of perceiving. Dr. Karnow described this as a flexible “seeing thinking,” a kind of conscious clairvoyance where the thinking is willed into us by the child.

Dr. Karnow emphasized Steiner’s insight that points of physical development and changes in conscious soul life are not only related but are interdependent. If we truly school ourselves to know what these changes are, we will have a map guiding us in our child observation. We must know what is normal and typical for the child and appropriate to each age phase before we can begin to observe deviations or exceptions which the difficult child might present. Knowing the hallmarks of these nodal points is essential in helping us observe whether developmental completion has been achieved and a child is ready to go on to a next step, such as going on to first grade.

A primary source for understanding the threefold division of the seven-year phases is Dr. Bernard Lievegoed’s *Phases of Childhood*. Dr. Karnow has added this volume to the pedagogical “bibles” of *Study of Man* and *Education for Special Needs: The Curative Education Course*. Dr. Lievegoed took the indications so briefly sketched above and gave detailed descriptions of how these developments are manifested in both the physical body and in the soul life in thinking, feeling, and willing. It

is not possible in this article to do justice to the detailed and precise descriptions he offers to guide the teacher's observation of the child. The book is a masterwork that deserves dedicated study. Below are offered only some of the basic motifs to help us develop a framework for organizing our own picturing of these processes.

Dr. Lievegoed begins by pointing out how the proportion of head size to the rest of the body changes. In a baby the proportion of head to body is 1:4. Up to about two years, the head predominates as the focal point, due to its size. By two years, the ratio has changed to 1:5, and by age six to 1:6. Until a new growth spurt begins at about age two, with growth in the trunk area, the upper half of the baby's body predominates. "The upper half of the body runs ahead of the lower half; the head in relation to the trunk, the shoulders in relation to the pelvis, the skull in relation to the facial structure, the eye sockets in relation to the lower jaw, and so on" (Lievegoed, 31).

From about two-and-a-half to five years, the toddler figure is evident. With the head-to-body proportion now reduced to a 1:5 ratio, growth is seen in the trunk. At this time growth in height occurs mostly through stretching in the trunk region, not in the limbs. There is primarily growth in breadth of the body, with a characteristic large tummy, and the angle at the bottom of the rib cage still flat. On the head, the chin has come more forward and gives the face more expression.

From five to seven years, there is dramatic growth in the limbs, as they grow longer and more slender. A waist develops, the stomach grows flat, the spine develops an S-shaped curve, and the collarbones become more pronounced. Body movements appear more angular and more purposeful. The body develops greater freedom of movement and there is much motor activity of the whole body.

The school-ready child will show physical aspects, as the face begins to change around the age of seven, marking the beginning of a whole new phase. By this time the head to body ratio is 1:6. The eyes, which have been below the halfway line of the head until now, have moved upward, making the forehead less dominant. The eyes now appear smaller in the face and can look expectant and more conscious, observing the world with some judgment. Dr. Lievegoed describes that "the whole impression is

one of slim agility and easy, comfortable mobility, of an elegance which was lacking in the toddler." Children tend to be rather thin at this stage, as well.

There is parallel development of soul life of the little child as well. Up through the first two years at least, the child is an open sense organ who responds through the body to all things that come into her sensory life. Experiences and expressions of pleasure or pain, joy or sadness are body-based. Emotions depend on the state of the physical organism. Behavior is based on drives of the body.

The toddler, in roughly the second third of the first seven-year period, begins to become aware of the world as something separate from her. She is not only influenced by the world but begins to influence it as well. Play arises in an exchange with the environment. The imagination for play arises out of what is in the child's surroundings, not out of an inner imagination which marks the next step of development. The child can respond to the world only in the present moment. She plays with things in her horizon, with what is available *now*. Play can take on a rhythmic quality that seems to flow in an imaginative stream. Behavior is no longer based primarily upon drives. The child at this age loves to live in rhythms which can smoothly carry her along.

With the beginning of the final third, a big change comes in play and imaginative life. The child is able to take a step back from the world and consider it, rather than be so directed by it. Lievegoed calls this "creative imagination," which stands separate from the world and which can imaginatively change the environment as play dictates. The environment is used to create the inwardly-held play imagination rather than suggest or even dictate to the child what to play. Play has a goal directed by the child's will. In practical life, the child begins to be aware of what he can do and be frustrated by what he cannot achieve according to his own expectations. He begins to look to the adults in his environment and to respect them for what they *can do* rather than by what they intellectually *know* or attempt to explain to him.

Dr. Lievegoed summarizes: during the period from birth to seven, the first third is dedicated to developing the foundation of the nerve/sense system of head, senses, and nerves as the foundation for later thinking. At its conclusion, the etheric force births itself from the head region. The second

third shows development in the young child's feeling life and the emergence of creative imagination. The etheric forces liberate from the trunk region at this phase's end. The final third shows development of intentional will, as the child forms an inner imagination which he then executes in the world through his will. The final partial birthing of the etheric forces is achieved when the limbs show the mature and elongated form of the school-ready child.

A general summary relating to each of the seven-year phases from birth to twenty-one is further given by Dr. Lievegoed:

Every metamorphosis in thinking coincides with an important change in the appearance of the head, the expression of the face.

The periods of the changes in feeling correspond to the periods of growth in breadth of the trunk.

The critical periods in the development of the will coincide with moments of growth in height, when the limbs in particular grow much longer.

As shown above, this is certainly true for the first seven years. It also applies to the changes in physical growth and of consciousness seen during the cycles of the school-aged child and of the adolescent.

This consideration began with the image of a "bridge" which connects the past with the future. Dr. Karnow stated that the true bridging occurs with the birth of the I, the true individuality of the human being. What have been described above are all steps along the way to the resounding birth of the I at age twenty-one. How well that event will occur depends mightily upon how each of these earlier steps and developmental phases were completed. As teachers, we are "incarnational" guardians for the children. What we provide for them in early childhood is important for the whole of life, not just for this immediate time during which they are in our care. We serve the children well when we know what archetypal developmental stages are, both physically and in terms of consciousness, in emotional life, and in the expression of the child's will. Only then can we observe when development is proceeding in a healthy fashion and when there are impediments to the incarnation process. If we know the hallmarks of development, we can observe where things are on an archetypal course and where there may be delays or incongruities. If we can observe the match or mismatch of chronological

age and developmental manifestation, we can gain a sense of where the child may be frustrated or stuck in development and gain sympathy for his or her struggles. This opening up to the child's situation can inspire insight into the "difficult" child and guide us to help the child move beyond the obstacle in his or her path.

This series began considering the inner work of the teacher. This educational guardian must strive to develop a selfless emptiness, which becomes an open space into which the being of the child can speak. This second article has attempted to expand our understanding of what is a true picture of the human being in early childhood. This concluding thought from Rudolf Steiner ties these threads together:

*What really matters in education is the mood and attitude of soul, which the teacher carries in his heart with regard to the being of man. . . . What really matters is that each teacher carries within himself a true picture of man and if this picture stands there before his inner gaze, he or she will act rightly, though outwardly possibly in very different ways (Steiner, *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, 110).*

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- Schoorel, Edmond. *The First Seven Years*. Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press, 2004. This excellent book gives a comprehensive look at the birth of the etheric forces from birth to seven, in regard to all of the phases described in this article.