Developing Coherence:
Meditative Practice in Waldorf School Colleges of Teachers

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Rudolf Steiner refers to his practical suggestions in a wide variety of fields as "indications" (*Zeichen*: literally, "signs"). Understanding what is meant by an indication may help to explain some of the tangling to which Waldorf school collegiality is prone. What does it mean that Steiner describes his propositions for the conduct of the first school as indications? What are the implications of indications?

In broad terms, Steiner's lectures and books are primarily concerned with providing readers with the big picture, the universal dimensions of a question. A lecture cycle such as *Education as a Social Problem*,[1] for example, has relatively little to say about the specifics of national or international politics of the time. Steiner presents an overview of global or cosmic trends. In particular, he presents a threefold description of (in)human potential: the animalization of the body, the "vegetablization" of the soul, and the mechanization of the spirit, which he associates, in turn, with the "East," "Central Europe," and the "West." Such characterizations are powerful, but they are "meta-statements," and are not directly applicable in, say, schools. To put it crudely, I do not look at my American colleagues and say, "Ah, here are mechanizing spirits," nor do I conclude that my German friends have vegetable souls, or my Asian ones animalized bodies. As a pragmatic Anglo-Saxon-Celt, there would be little purpose in my starting a campaign to halt the mechanization of the spirit; I may, however, meditate on what this means and attempt to bring active spirit into my relationship with material things.

In addition to statements of this sort, we find, scattered through Steiner's lectures and in sources such as the records of the teachers' conferences of the first Waldorf school, his indications, practical propositions, hints, and suggestions. These indications range from relatively detailed solutions and problems to apparently instantaneous inspirations in the moment. Waldorf educators, however, rarely use the concept of indication in such a nuanced way, nor do they always heed the warning implied by the concept of indication. Steiner says, in effect, "As I see it, the nature of the problem is such and such, and in the current circumstances you might try the following starting points." The inference is that teachers should try these out, contemplate their results, and develop their practice accordingly. This means that Steiner frequently gives detailed exposition at higher or contextual levels of a question and sample propositions for practical application.[2] Indications remain fragmentary until united with relevant concepts through meditative activity.

Steiner exercised spiritual tact and moral technique in communicating his research and insights. He emphasized that the modern spiritual investigator has to be particularly wary of acting in a way that would reduce the freedom of those who follow them. In particular, the challenge for Waldorf school teachers is the collegial co-creation of forms and procedures that are reliable in the present but capable of evolution, both dynamic and sustainable.

The following brief quotations are examples of Steiner's indications for school administration, and they inform the discussion that follows:

> The real purpose of the college is to study human development so that a real understanding of human nature is continually flowing through the school.[3]

> These meetings are really the living "High School"...a permanent training academy, as it were.[4]

> The soul of all the instruction and education in the Waldorf School is the college meeting.[5]

> It is really true that the spiritual forces of the college are carried by the sharing of inner scientific experience... [6]

Coherence

Before developing these ideas further, however, I wish to examine the question of coherence. In the sense in which I am using the word here, a coherent organization is one that closely resembles the functioning of a healthy living organism. The activity of each organ or process is balanced by another. In digestion, for example, stomach acid, necessary for the breakdown of food, has to be neutralized by alkaline bile, which also furthers the digestive process. Too much acidity or alkalinity can be detrimental to the system they serve. Healthy processes tend toward disease if they are not balanced by others. The integrity of life at each level thus consists of an interior ecology that is related both directly and more subtly to the ecology in which the organism is embedded. A rhythmic interplay of interdependent processes takes place within the physiology and environment of an organism. Similarly, in an organization, coherence is an equivalent condition of balancing counteractive processes within an active constitution. Initiative calls for accountability; freedom of action is offset by duty to the whole; development of self is contingent on professional responsibility; and so on.[7]

A coherent organization must integrate diverse perspectives if it is to succeed, just as, by analogy, flour, sugar, eggs, and so on, make sponge cake. With heat, the resulting cake transcends and forms a greater whole than the individual ingredients. In a social cake, however, the ingredients, while integrated, are not entirely subsumed. They serve as viewpoints, or sensory organs, for the inner and outer status of the organization.

Coherence is important here for two reasons. First, while Steiner's presentation of the task of a Waldorf school is coherent on the meta-level, his indications for the practical tasks of educating and running a school leave it to the creativity and endeavour of each generation and each teacher to develop practical coherence for their work. Second, meditation and contemplative inquiry contribute to and increase personal and social coherence.

In *The Foundations of Human Experience*, Steiner describes the importance of logic for teachers:

> Where thinking-cognition is concerned, humanity's challenge is to infuse this with logic. . . . As teachers you need to know about logic, even if you must keep it in the background in your interaction with the children. . . . It must be brought to the children only through your whole attitude. For as teachers you will have to be masters of logic.[8]

Where coherent integration is lacking, dissonance occurs; the school is divided. As a result, the values and intentions of the curriculum are overshadowed by a "curriculum" of implicit assumptions and relationships that communicate lessons contrary to those intended.

We may call coherence a contextual logic, a thinking-feeling, or a heart-mind communion that informs the conduct of education. This is important in a classroom, and it may be even more important in the organization of a school. Where coherent integration is lacking, dissonance occurs; the school is divided. As a result, the values and intentions of the curriculum are overshadowed by a "curriculum" of implicit assumptions and relationships that communicate lessons contrary to those intended.

Steiner saw the teachers' meeting as the core of the school—I would say, the source of its coherence—and he proposed a form of collegial action research as a continuation for the initial courses he gave before the Waldorf School opened its doors:

> Instead of a school director or head teacher we have teachers' meetings in which there is common study and common striving toward further progress. There is therefore a spirit, a concrete spirit, living among the teachers, which works freely, which is not tyrannical, which does not issue statements, rules or programs,

> but has the will continually to progress, continually to make better and better arrangements, in meeting the teaching requirements.[9]

Members of the staff are responsible for reflecting meditatively on their work, while continual "progress" occurs if the staff collectively supports and is hospitable to the activity of each individual.

In my view, if there is a rationale for a college with a task lying beyond that of a general (or departmental) teachers' meeting, this task lies in a commitment to promote and sustain the inner orientation of the school. We may call this task "pedagogical governance." The work of such a college is thus primarily meditative, and a criterion for membership is the commitment of each individual to, we might say, professional meditative activity.

The outer role of such a college may consist of regular review and support of professional development, including the induction of new members of staff, peer mentoring, and collegial appraisal—that is, to give concrete expression to "the will continually to progress, continually to make better and better arrangements, in meeting the teaching requirements." There is no requirement that such a college be separate from a general teachers' meeting—it depends on the temper and constitution of the school.

Accordingly, membership in the college may involve a statement of intent predicated upon the "pedagogical imagination" given by Steiner at the foundation of the first Waldorf School. Such a statement may take a form similar to the following:

> I wish to join with you in contemplative inquiry, in the service of the good spirit of our time. I do so with good intent and striving toward the ideals and principles of Waldorf education to the best of my ability. My intent is to set aside, in freedom, personal ambition, and to act, to speak, and to conscientiously reflect on our collective work for the betterment of the young people in this school and in the wider world.[10]

How to Know Higher Worlds and Steiner's other work on the subject demonstrate clearly that meditative development calls for and stimulates increased personal coherence.[11] Certain cardinal virtues or qualities of mind, for example, are attendant on inner work:

- Enhanced qualities of attention, equanimity, and intention, and with them, internal virtues or conditions, such as mental and physical health, responsibility, gratitude, and patience;
- Virtues, such as reverence for the world; and
- Enhanced capacities for perception, including awareness of and receptivity to spiritual realities.

[T]he activity of contemplative inquiry is key in keeping in view the aspirations of a Waldorf school.

Regardless of college constitution or function, however, the activity of contemplative inquiry is key in keeping in view the aspirations of a Waldorf school. Members will treat questions related to the core purpose of the school as a process of contemplatively informed action research.

A College at Work

A mundane example will highlight the practicality of the meditative engagement of a college of teachers. Examples of this sort may challenge coherent action. They may attract fly-swarms of self-interest. Yet the ability of a school body to work through complex, if matter-of-fact, issues says a great deal about its ability to make better arrangements for teaching and learning.

A number of teachers in a small Waldorf school observed that the children in their classes tended to appear pale and tired at the end of some school days and less so on others. Other staff members reported an element of fractiousness, particularly when their classes had afternoon language lessons. The College discussed this and decided to study the question.

Two members of staff, seen as among the most neutral, one having a mainly administrative role in the school, were appointed to facilitate the process. At an open, organized meeting, teachers shared observations. Language teachers were consulted and student work from language lessons

held in the morning was compared with work completed during the afternoon. One member of staff prepared a summary of this research, and another offered research on the theme of diurnal rhythms, drawing from Steiner's suggestions and current research on metabolic rates in young people at different times of day. Another member of staff compiled and conducted a survey of staff and older pupils. Much work took place in other school meetings, including the general staff meeting and meetings with parents.

As a result of this work the question was asked: "Should we change the timetable [schedule] to take more account of daily rhythms?" Members of the College resolved to contemplate the question and return to it at the next weekly meeting. Following further communication, the decision was made to find a way to move language lessons and certain other topics out of the afternoons so far as possible, replacing these with lessons involving crafts, artistic practice, games, and other more active lessons. A member of the school's personnel team was delegated to discuss the matter with part-time teachers and others who would be affected by the change. The finance team was asked to assess financial implications of this decision. The colleague responsible for this was asked to draft a timetable implementing the change.

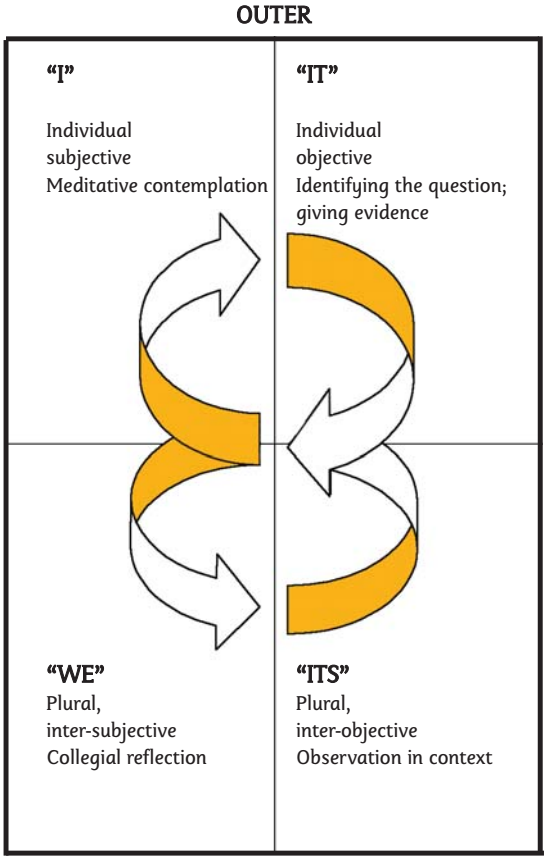
The outcome was a decision to make a small modification during the summer term for the younger classes, where concern was greatest, with a more complete change to be implemented at the start of the new school year. Following implementation, the new arrangements were reviewed at mid-term. This review included a study of the effectiveness of academic lessons in the subsequent school year.

As result, the new timetable was confirmed and further alterations proposed, including a proposal to establish a "multi-crafts afternoon" combining the four older classes in ways that provided a greater range of activities—drawing in skilled members of the wider school community—and made more efficient use of teaching strengths.

Here are the components of this example:

- A question distilled through contemplative inquiry
- Observation or evidence-gathering, including appropriate formality and record-keeping
- Collegial reflection without any attempt to connect these or arrive at concepts. This involves the exercise of moral tact as colleagues invite one another to listen for implicit or explicit assumptions. Where these enter the conversation, an attempt is made to reverse the flow into the sphere of observation. In order to do this, specific training may be helpful. Torin Finser, for example, describes a training exercise of this sort, used in his Leadership Training Program, in *School Renewal.* [12]
- Collegial reflection, now with the aim of recognizing inter-connected images or events
- Meditation or reflection on these interconnected pictures
- Decision
- Implementation
- Review
- Adjustment

The process prior to decision begins and ends with meditation, and may therefore be recursive, a lemniscate. The results of one pass through the process may become the beginning of a new process. In schematic form, this part of the process may be represented like this:[13]



Conclusion

Steiner and Waldorf schools seek practical ways to place reflective and meditative work at the heart of pedagogical governance and to do this through spiritual-scientific action research. Its systematic and effective practice provides a model for building an associative and collegial foundation for coherent school function. Finally, this model provides a heart-centered process capable of enabling effective self-evaluation, peer-appraisal, and school development.

Footnotes

1. Steiner, Rudolf. *Education as a Social Problem*, Anthroposophic Press, NY, 1969.
2. *The Curative Education Course* provides an interesting complement to this. As in many of the "Conference" discussions, we find Steiner fully engaged in finding solutions to practical problems in a collegial way. These help to highlight the particular nature of the indications that form such a large part of the background from which Waldorf educators work.
3. Steiner, Rudolf. *Kingdom of Childhood*, Anthroposophic Press, 1993. Editor's note: UK English translations use "collegiate" for Collegium in the original, while US English translations use "college." The word Collegium is Latin, not German, and, as Nancy Parsons Whittaker and Robert Lathe have pointed out, refers to the teaching faculty of a school, not to an inner circle.
4. Steiner, Rudolf. *A Modern Art of Education*, Rudolf Steiner Press, 1995, p. 207. Note that a high school or Hochschule in Germany was a post-secondary technical or professional college; that is, we could say that Steiner wanted faculty meetings to be, literally, a teachers' college.
5. Steiner, Rudolf. *The Child's Changing Consciousness*, Anthroposophic Press, 1996, p. 178.
6. Steiner, Rudolf. *The Conferences*, vol. 2, SWSF Publications, 1989, p. 38.
7. A corresponding argument to this is advanced from the perspective of cultural theory in Thompson, Michael. *Organising and Disorganising*, Triarchy Press, Axminster, 2008.
8. Steiner, Rudolf. *Study of Man*, lecture VIII, RSP, London, 1966, p. 126. Author's rendering.
9. Steiner, Rudolf. *Human Values in Education*. RSP, 1971, p. 192.
10. A statement similar to this one was adopted by one of the newer UK schools for the foundation of its Collegiate (college of teachers). A staff member stepping down from the Collegiate or leaving the school was given the following in recognition of this: "I relinquish in freedom, the undertaking I made upon joining this community, absolving myself of all obligations and responsibilities pertaining to the Collegiate of ....School."
11. See *The Heart Math Institute*: http://www.heartmath.com.
12. Finser, Torin. *School Renewal*, Anthroposophic Press, Great Barrington, MA, 2001, pp. 155–156. The exercise involves setting out questions around a topic, then stopping to examine the assumptions at work in those questions before proceeding to "solutions," advocacy, or advice.
13. This semiotic rectangle is similar to those used, for example, by Ken Wilbur and Jürgen Habermas—from whose work Wilber partly derives his work. Wilber and Habermas, however, emphasize the distinct qualities of each quadrant. Habermas's three validity claims, which do not distinguish the singular and plural qualities of the "outer," right-hand half of the quadrant, is thus a triad: truth (objects), truthfulness or sincerity (subjects) and rightness or justice (intersubjectivity); Wilber's rectangle (See Wilber, Ken. *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, Shambhala, Boston and London, 2000) draws the distinction of singular and plural objective realms. While Habermas's concern is primarily sociological or socio-philosophical, Wilber's fourfold perspective provides a psycho-spiritual basis for his developmental "integral philosophy." (See Wilber, Ken. *Integral Psychology*, Shambhala, Boston and London, 2000.)

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