

Encountering the Individuality of a Child

by

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An Image of Adoration

One can hardly tear oneself away from the enchantment emanating from the crib of a newborn baby. It is what underlies everything that nurtures the child, albeit in different ways. The shepherds kneeled down in humility to adore it; the kings bowed their heads in reverence; Mary expressed in her posture a gesture of devoted, fulfilled adoration and Joseph one of reflective meditation. Even we, if we go deeply into the wonder of a birth, cannot resist such a moving impression.

What is it then that inwardly seizes us in these moments? It is surely not the reflexively released protective, mother instinct that is supposed to befall our species when we are confronted with a baby. That is an activity found with chimpanzee babies, puppies, and kittens, and it is felt to be not only cute but also human-like and driven by an instinct to protect. It is hardly conceivable that that activity could be the reason shepherds and kings made their way to the cradle of the infant Jesus. The reasons lie deeper than that and are not to be found in the unconscious, vegetative processes and reflexes of our physical bodies. Higher motives apply here:

the shepherds enthusiastically bringing the news of the healing, world-changing power for the future that was seminally dormant in the child; Joseph considering this mystery; the kings gaining certainty “from the stars” that in this child the “times have been fulfilled” and that world destiny would work in Him in a special way, and Maria’s awakened devotion to the child—all lend the fleeting moment space and continuity through spiritual presence. These gestures are thoroughly familiar. Through them the significance of birth is constantly renewed for us, and they determine the aura of the encounter between a child and adults. If a certain motif is preponderant then it is often one-sidedly effectual as a pedagogical program. Such paradigm shifts can be observed in pedagogical history.

The Child as a Hope for the Future

Foremost, this is the current thought: The newborn, innocent, God-near child is the bearer of hope for a paradisiacal new beginning. It is in a position to be that to which previously born adults did not succeed. But, at least they do not see the child as having the ability to make improvements by the child’s own powers. Maria Montessori saw the Messiah in every child: “But the child always appears again and always returns, fresh and smiling, to live with human beings. Like Emerson said: ‘The child is the eternal Messiah that always returns to fallen human beings to lead them into the kingdom of heaven.’”¹ Expectations of the little one’s (socially) healing powers permeate the adult’s attitude towards the child. Preservation from aberrance and contemplation of that which the child hides within himself, which is seen as the mystery of our own humanness, are the motifs of an education begun at kindergarten age with extraordinarily positive effects. True humanity that is obviously still pristine shows itself in the child. Here the child is ahead of adults who can learn from him: “He saw that his child was ahead of him in many things. And, he was thankful for this time, the present.”² This enthusiastic, almost religious attitude toward

the child is robbed of its spiritual motif and comes to us today in the form of senseless catch phrases such as “children are the future.” If this thought is carried to its consequential end, then it leads to a revaluation of the generations; everything can be expected from a child and nothing more can be expected from adults. And the apparent perceptions of the current generation confirms this. Traditions count for little, experience nothing, the old is devalued and the new is always better (no matter what defects). How can an adult still be a role model?

The Child as a Genius

One has to admit that this attitude of adoration resides in the heavenly regions of the child’s being. It becomes more grounded when one begins to concretely observe and search out labels for these forces upon which such great hope rests. Obviously, it is just such forces that children bring with them that constitute childhood and over which adults no longer have command, forces that voice hope for the future, zest for life, lightheartedness, joy in movement and variety, over-the-top imagination, speech and thought variations to an unheard of degree, and the capacity to follow only the living logic of the moment and not yet the abstract thought that is beholden to pure utility. All of these lavishly available qualities paint the portrait of a child. Are not here the criteria for ingeniousness met? Berthold Otto, a reforming pedagogue, is convinced that “every child, without exception, is a genius until age six.”³ Goethe saw the above indication but was pessimistic about future adulthood, noting that “if children continued to grow in the manner indicated, then we would have nothing but geniuses.”⁴

Experience shows that somewhere during the transition into school, children reach a threshold that arrests a further overflowing of their surplus life force, reins in the thinking, and settles lightheartedness. This developmental process can be perceived not only in a child’s behavior but

also in the closure and transformation of growth forces that take place with the change of teeth. Here is a licit compliance that distinguishes all living development: the attainment of a higher level of consciousness. In child development, for instance the freeing-up of certain powers of thought during the transition into the seventh year, this attainment of a higher level of consciousness happens at the expense of overflowing life force. Instead of posing questions such as, "Which learning methods are appropriate to this transition?" and "What material would aid here in further development?" the search is on to find those responsible for the "disaster in education." The guilty party is quickly named: school as a whole. Artur Fischer, an inventor, remarked, "Children are full of ideas. But after a few years of school that is all over because they are pressed into a corset that doesn't fit." Boredom and soul suffocation threaten; school does not prepare children for life but only makes life known through its hardship.

If school can take the most lively thirst for knowledge within a child's soul and suffocate it in boredom, then perhaps just this is its purpose: to introduce naïvely happy, growing children to the disappointments of life. All of the accumulated grievances build, as if by chance, a deep and hard experience. The child enters this stretch of bondage with its own dramatic intensity in order to leave it, injured in a way that is hard to understand and armed against all the injuries to come in the years that follow. . . . And the unforgettably long hardship of school becomes one with the long hardship of life.

— Giorgio Maganelli, creator of Pinocchio

Educational reforms of previous centuries have fed upon this experience and come up with differing approaches. Education "from out of the child" always translates into an attempt to rescue childhood forces and interweave them into the work of the school years, and, at the same

time, pilot children with these forces intact through the difficulty of learning the material and the alleged seriousness of life.

The Child as an Individual

Disillusioned and unnerved by the failure of diverse models and curriculum revisions, one can acknowledge that a supporting basis is missing which could give the admittedly inspiring, but diffuse, “from out of the child” approach a solid foundation. Then, what *childhood* actually is can be considered—perhaps it is an adult invention to define its position of power—what a *child* actually is, considered from a legal standpoint or from a family-sociological standpoint. The dilemma of trying to get at the obviously draining reality of school is clouded rather than effectively worked through by programmatic paradigms such as lifelong learning or the call to teach the basics. This observation signifies for the competent infant, who takes her development into her own hands, relief from the forward look to school, which is unforgiving and paralyzing in its rigidity. The child in general is no longer visible, but rather the individual shines out from behind this self-powered control. What for decades has been indicated by experiments and claims that school should function simultaneously as an individual learning program can now no longer be disposed of by alluding to parental egotism. We are obviously dealing here with an effectuality that did not appear out of nowhere sometime between kindergarten and school, but rather was there and individually active from the beginning.

The Preschool Years as a Learning Environment

The assurance emanating from an infant’s active urge to explore and zeal for learning focuses interest anew on preschool development in the hope that here the key to successful learning can be found. If the kindergarten is already seen as being hardly threatened by formal learning,

then how much less so the first three years of life! Many would like to ascribe everything to these first three years and nothing to later development stages. Proponents of early learning programs such as Head Start in North America legitimize what they are doing by pointing out the educational potential in early childhood. A look at the formation processes of the brain during this time span (especially nerve cell linkage on a grand scale by synapses in the outer cortex) reveals potential that, if not engaged within a certain provisional time window, will atrophy. Is this an invitation to unlimited utilization and stimulation of the early childhood urge to explore so that no resources are lost? This path was quickly trodden. The spirit of exploration no longer lodges in the shoes of a child, but rather in the baby's diapers.⁵ "Instead of peacefully sleeping infants or plump, healthy, apple-cheeked babies, we see slim babies sitting up by themselves; 'competent infants' contemplatively wrinkling their brows . . ."⁶ The child up to age three and her brain development are understood to be synonymous.⁷ In the euphoria over astounding feats of learning and toddler competencies, one can overlook differentiating limitations that are critical of the research methods (for instance, the lack of long-term studies on childhood up to youth and the uncritical application to humans of certain statements about rat brain changes). Acceptance of a fundamental brain plasticity, with its attendant possibility for life-long learning, is something of a hindrance to early childhood advancement as stylized by experts! However, these important indications break through the protective encirclement of the cradle during early learning programs. The kindergarten years reveal themselves to be the period when it should to have what schools must be kept from if they remain as they are: A field of social experimentation and an Eldorado for the joy of discovery.

Time for experimentation, time for mistakes, for practice and repetition—the kindergarten offers all of these things as well as a fundamental introduction to the natural sciences, language and art. In

kindergarten the world can become a laboratory, a studio, or a workshop for the children, or a forest, or the moon.⁸

Donata Elschenbroich in *Weltwissen der Siebenjährigen*, (*World Knowledge of Seven-Year-Olds*) enthusiastically speaks about the variety of possibilities suitable for today's children when children's desire for life experience is met as detailed in her concept of preschool/kindergarten. This is unlike formal schooling's depressing threshold where this desire for experience is not met. Who would not want to be in a kindergarten where foreign languages are delved into through songs and games and where children are animated to sing, speak, dance, and move through rhyme, tone, and rhythmic speech and music? Who would not want to enjoy painting and be where beginning attempts to write are honored and led into suitable written correspondence without being tied to a right or wrong? And where, without competition, regard for the achievements of other children is instilled as is the ability to forgive? To have time for "mistakes, for practice, for repetition—the kindergarten offers all these things."

Elschenbroich's book has five pages of suggestions, and there one finds obvious but almost forgotten provocative ideas about what a seven-year-old child could or should experience, for instance, seesawing, a pillow fight, cooking with Dad, woodwork, making a bed, cleaning, making butter, whipping cream, elementary care of the sick or injured to get a feeling for the fact that the world changes, send and receive mail, learn curse words in two languages, use the telephone, and basic concepts of what the computer can do, and so forth. Some suggestions are thoroughly questionable and should be rejected. For instance, there is no rationale for having computers in the kindergarten. This comes from a passing comment that children are completely capable of handling this technology. However, the most impressive thing is her attitude towards the child. The child is taken seriously in his originality and his subjugation to childhood.

Reverence for the Individuality

The kindergarten fails as a bearer of hope when the reality of school does not honor children's world knowledge. Elschenbroich's impulse comes to a standstill when it encounters this depressing experience, and here it becomes evident that pedagogy is indivisible. Experience tells us that, above all, education in many of today's schools takes away the motives to gain world knowledge and stands in obstructive opposition to the child who expects and needs motivation, encouragement, and enhancement. This lack of reverence for childhood forces, suited to the state-regulated school system, can only be reversed when the puzzle of child individuality is not exhausted by genetic programming. In that respect, one must more exactly and seriously ask the question of "where does the child come from?"

In Greek philosophy the soul is in a process that runs through three phases of reintegration (metoikesis)—preexistence, existence, and post-existence. Unfortunately, the knowledge of preexistence has fallen away from humankind. In this regard Sloterdijk spoke of a birth-oblivion. It is time to come to grips with this consciously suppressed reality because we can imagine what "could be learned and developed about depth of understanding for oneself and others, a comprehensive humanization, with that kind of expanded memory."⁹

This is also the central motif of the pedagogy of Rudolf Steiner. In Waldorf education the individuality does not exhaust itself in living in the here and now, but rather Waldorf education considers the experiences that the individuality of the child brings with him from his preexistence, revealed in the form of abilities and life impulses. With an attitude that looks only to the future and to what one would like to attain with the child, one cannot do justice to the child's own life intentions. No justice is done with an attitude of one being simply at an observation post where much is seen and little noted. Trusting in the genius of the moment seems too risky within all of life's changes.

Rudolf Steiner gave to Waldorf teachers a meditation with three attitudes to prepare for encounters with children: "Reverence for the child's being that existed before birth; enthusiastically pointing toward that which will succeed the child; protective activism for that which the child experiences."¹⁰

For a long time now, Waldorf education has not been alone with these motifs but they are still not a matter of course, having been only somewhat introduced into modern school practice. The rediscovery of the importance of the first seven years has opened up a more general willingness by non-Waldorf educators to confront uncomfortable questions that cannot be answered by reductionistic experiments. Pedagogical events and programs should be waived in order to make room for the needs of each child's individuality. There is a cosmos of childhood experiences and actions that "no child psychologist or pedagogue has ever been able to measure. Namely, a *realm of competence* that belongs to the child, is self-created, trodden, and ruled by the child. We can only be visitors who wonder at and enter with reverence this realm and who hold within *the echo of our adulthoods* those conditions perceived as positive by the children. We can only be those who protect this realm from insubordinate intrusions (from sexual violence to pedagogical functionalization) and at the same time lead the children into new connections of discovery through an *encouraging setting-free* resulting in an expansion of their competence."¹¹

The attitudes that make isolated appearances in the Christmas motifs, referred to at the beginning of this article find their spiritual synthesis in the encounter between Mary and the Child. The encounter between mother and child reveals a gaze that utters the knowledge that every moment one is facing the full individuality that fatefully joins past, present, and future.

Footnotes:

¹ Montessori, Maria. *Kinder sind Anders (Children Are Different)*.

² Handke, Peter. *Kindergeschichte (Stories of Children)*, 1980.

³ Berthold Otto (1859–1933) founded a school in Berlin in 1906. He represented a kind of pedagogy that included the concept from out of the child through natural learning within a loosely structured instructional framework.

⁴ From *Dichtung und Wahrheit [Poetry and Truth]*.

⁵ This expression was borrowed from the title of research done by Gopnik, Kuhl, and Meltzoff.

⁶ From Elschenbroich in *Die Zeit* 44, Oct. 25, 2001.

⁷ From the beginning of part I of a UNICEF study (about children's situation in the world), "Children Need a Good Start in Life." It reads, "Brain development is essentially completed during the first three years of life. Long before many adults are even clear about what is going on, the child's brain cells reproduce at a frantic pace. Countless synapses are formed and the pattern for a whole lifetime is imprinted. In only thirty-six months children develop the ability to think and speak, to learn and draw conclusions. At the same time the foundations for values and social behavior are imprinted," (p15).

⁸ From Elschenbroich in *Die Zeit*.

⁹ Elschenbroich in *Weltwissen (World Knowledge)*.

¹⁰ Steiner, Rudolf. Lecture, September, GA 302a (Complete Works), 1920.

¹¹ Baacke, Dieter. *Einfuehrung in die Probleme der fruehen Kindheit (Introduction to the Problems of Early Childhood)*, Basel: Weinheim, 1999.