

The Quest for Wholeness in the Waldorf Curriculum

by

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With puberty starts a process which leads the adolescent more and more into aloneness. The human being stands alone, separated from the world, and faces it. This process allows the adolescent to see the world with new eyes – parents and teachers and most of all one's own self. One's own abilities are recognized but also – and with particular accuracy – the limits of one's abilities. Having to deal alone with these new experiences is a deeply painful fundamental experience. Without help one has to establish the personal relationship with the world and with human beings. There are no up-front guarantees. It remains to be seen if and how this endeavor succeeds.

In this time it is particularly important in the development of the curriculum to recognize a particular need determining the soul life of an adolescent: The quest for wholeness. What does that mean? First, this striving manifests in the youth's wish to experience the multitude of possible soul stirrings. On all levels the adolescent pushes for primary experience in all areas of life. He or she seeks out even extreme life experiences. But the quest for wholeness has yet another face. Thinking, feeling and willing are often in conflict with each other. Is there a balance possible between the different poles of soul life? How can it be achieved?

Polarized formative tendencies are already expressed in the physical being. The nerve-sense system is a very different instrument for the soul than the metabolic-muscular organization or the rhythmic system of the human being.¹ The activity of the soul is reflected differently in these three systems. Only with the aid of the nerve-sense organization, daytime consciousness is reached. It provides sense impressions, imagination and ideation. To put it precisely: the results of thought activity are entering into consciousness in the form of image-like concepts.

Something very different happens if the soul seizes the rhythmic system. Then feelings, moods form the response to the experiences in the world. Both these world tonalities ring back into the soul, rendering their specific harmonies. One speaks of intellectuals engaging in activities of the head (nerve-sense) system; we know of 'feeling types' in whom all experiences

elicit strong feeling reactions, who let ‘the heart speak.’ Frequently these different types clash in real life. The ‘intellectuals’ are critical of the indifference in the judgments of the ‘feeling types,’ the latter reproach the ‘cold intellect’ of the former. But one thing also becomes apparent: whenever the human being develops just one or the other of these three modes in an unbalanced way, a deficiency is engendered.

A third relational development arises when the soul seizes upon the metabolic-muscular system. Activity is sparked. With this activity of the will we impact the world creatively. It is a mystery how thoughts seize and direct the will and motivate it because the process of willing is outside of direct observation and thus of consciousness. Only the results of this process rise into consciousness. We are fully awake while forming thoughts, but we “sleep” when we activate our will and dream in the realm of feelings.

There is also the personality whose faculty of will is so strong that he does not hesitate to act where others would deliberate. That is why this type is often experienced as being brutal, since he does not take into consideration the soul experience of others.

Ideally, the human being should develop each of these three systems in a sound way, but also that they should be formed in harmony with each other. We know through life experience that a comprehensive and balanced development of the soul is difficult to achieve. Our life circumstances challenge us into manifold specializations, which in turn leave their marks in the forms of strong and often one-sided developments. We can avoid these consequences only if we strive consciously for life experiences that can counterbalance such one-sidedness.

Hunger for balance

In school education already the curriculum itself gives us cues as to whether serious consideration is given to the soul’s quest for wholeness. Are all three relational systems (i.e., thinking, willing, feeling) stimulated and properly attended to? Or is it apparent at first glance that the curriculum carries the stigma of the deplorable distinction between main and minor subjects? The so-called main subjects focus on the acquisition of knowledge; thinking is developed and cultivated through practicing ideation. The reason for such a division is simple and convincing: knowledge is needed and useful. We could counter polemically: and what about compassion and a well-tempered faculty to act – are those not needed and useful? A critical analysis of our times leads to the assessment: now more than ever! The widespread fanaticism currently tyrannizing the world shows, for example, traits of heartlessness and of an emotionally overstimulated will, i.e. a terrifying one-sidedness to human nature.

The observant examiner of the Waldorf curriculum finds that all three faculties – thinking, feeling and willing – are cultivated in a balanced way. The artistic subjects play an important role in this, as they cannot exist without cultivation of the feeling nature or without constant activity.

Behind the thoughtful and focused change in the different modalities of practice, another realization dawns: If I practice mastering and disciplining movement, i.e., the will aspect – for example, through eurythmy – I engender the hunger for the opposite soul faculty. In other words, if I want to stimulate the will to learn a mental subject, then I have to set the student the task of engaging in artistic and practical activity. Therefore there are in reality no main and minor subjects. Rudolf Steiner expresses this fact in an aphorism: The physics teacher is enlivened in his teaching by the eurythmy teacher.

Furthermore, in the intentional alternation of activities the ‘I’ is stimulated to be active in the full spectrum of soul life. The participation of the ‘I’ in the learning process intensifies if the quest for wholeness is taken into consideration. This may be thought to be of small importance, but in reality the harmonious relationship between the three faculties of the soul is the foundation of human education and of forming the human being. When we study the horrible cataclysms of the previous century such as the Holocaust or Hiroshima, we will come to realize that these events originated in thought activity in complete disregard of compassion or morals. This kind of thinking coldly calculated the results of those actions with no qualms about perpetrating such inhuman horrors.

Today the three faculties of the soul are more than ever in danger of dissociation. Thinking is being dulled more and more into mere absorption of information, feeling becomes more and more subject-oriented, and willing is becoming more and more the servant of an unbridled egotism. With that the ‘I’ loses all sovereignty. All that which is essential to true education, the mutually permeating and enlivening three faculties with which the soul relates to the world and their focused use by the ‘I,’ atrophies.

Yielding and setting boundaries

Another polarity of soul life is found in opening to the world, i.e., the interest in the world and the retreat into the inner self, into self-contemplation. These two poles are in need of balance as well. Neither the blindly active nor the excessively pensive person is desirable. The human being is in danger of getting lost in the world through one-sided yielding to its attractions. He is swept away by the torrent of external events, without using the power of his individuality to form these events. In extreme cases he becomes the victim of circumstances. If one is too focussed on oneself, self-contemplation leads to becoming a prisoner to one’s own sensibilities. Once again it is desirable to move between the poles. The more decisively the swings of the pendulum are set in motion by pedagogy, the stronger the ‘I’ can take hold of the soul life. Steiner describes this rhythm by citing an example from religious science instruction. This instruction aims at turning inwards, at quiet reflection. But hunger for this kind of reflection is only evoked when focused attention is directed at the outer world. Quiet reflection is not evoked by stern admonishments and certainly not by moral demands. The hunger for inward contemplation emerges when the outer life is approached enthusiastically –

for example, by demonstrating how a steam engine works or by exploring the importance of commercial banks. That is what fosters openness for that inner reflection, which the religious studies instruction is designed to further. This is one reason why the curricula demand a link to practical life for all major subject classes. Mathematics, for example, should lead to talking about financial institutions and of accounting.

The topic for the sixth grade Geography classes is to talk about the earth as a whole system. The vegetation zones of our planet are to be understood in respect to the sun's position and movement. Elementary level astronomy shows how the earth reacts to cosmic forces. The relationships between the vegetation zones are a result of the movements of sun and earth. These movements give rise to distinctively different systems of agriculture, for example. The resources of the earth are also distributed in various ways across the regions of the earth. When I study the natural resources I also dwell on nature. Such explorations bring us to recognize the natural phenomena as the origin of various crafts and professions. Mining industry only develops where there are deposits of coal, salt, metals, clay or kaolin (porcelain clay), and mining these raw materials often determines the character of an entire region. The coal in the Ruhr area was used to smelt iron, which had to be brought in from afar. The processing of iron and its refinement into steel in turn attracted a whole range of crafts and industrial firms. Just think of the rolling mills and extrusion plants, the various metal forges, the new forms of architecture made possible through the use of iron and the manifold products from knives to industrial cranes. These products could not be 'used up' by the local population alone. So the numerous industries became the basis for trade which exported the end products into lands far away. The streams of commerce carrying raw materials and processed goods form a network covering the entire globe. They are part of the whole system earth. How interesting are these great streams of trade transporting oil, spices, wool or cotton, copper, coffee and so on. All these trade routes have their own, dramatic histories. They are facilitated by the streams of money, flowing in opposite directions. Such explorations allow us to gain true insights into practical life.

Understanding and changing the world

The most important thing however is that we as human beings do not leave the earth in the same condition as we find it. People change the gifts of the earth. A new world of commerce springs up in close connection with the underlying natural resources and climates, and yet relatively independent of these factors as well. The human spirit creates this structure. Countless inventions have been made to produce commercial goods, starting with simple things, like the transformation of kaolin into porcelain, and ending with complicated space technology. We must not only talk about the 'Natural World,' but also about the 'Human World.' This is the basis for the study of economics. In this class we talk about the deeds of the human spirit which

have shaped the world. We also deal with the destiny of social currents which are dependent on the order of economic life.

Now back to the subject of religious instruction. The need for inner reflection grows in direct proportion to the student's being introduced to the world of economics, which always also engenders social questions. It soon becomes evident that the so-called social questions cannot be solved without employing 'objective models.' We should beware of providing this ethical answer; rather it should grow out of an exploration of the facts. Again we are faced with a paradox: the lively description and the reflection on that which we call the 'Human World' will stimulate the need for inner contemplation.

Caroline von Heydebrand, classroom teacher of the first Waldorf school, tells an elucidating story. In the middle of a presentation deep sighing was heard throughout the class. Questioned why they sighed, the students answered, "Oh, Dr. Heydebrand, if you would just tell us about the Zeppelin in just such a wonderful way!" Here we clearly see reflected the student's yearning for experiencing the world as a whole, for understanding the cultural history of mankind as a totality.

Here too Steiner urges us to take active hold of the issue and not stay stuck in contemplating it. Commercial orders, customer service problems, order cancellations, and so forth, must be expressed in precise, understandable written language so that such letters leave no doubt about what the writer intends. Writer as well as recipient must take clear facts for orientation; emotion and sensibilities must not interfere. Particular scenarios from social life are explored. This type of instruction should be complemented by elementary vocational instructions. In these classes we investigate and discuss the function and organization of production technology. Throughout the ages people have made use of technology without really understanding how it functions. This lack of partaking in the 'human world' undermines social understanding and awareness. Steiner clearly points to this fact: "The worst thing is to live in the world shaped by humans and yet not to care about that world. We can preempt such mis-development only by instructing children in the most important processes of human life; such instruction must begin early in the last level of elementary school education, so that fifteen-, sixteen-year-old student will not graduate without such knowledge. Such instruction will give rise to yearning, to curiosity and to a thirst for knowledge, prompting the young person to further expand his or her knowledge of the world. Towards the end of school [meaning the last third of childhood] we should therefore employ the various subject areas in a holistic sense for the social education of the human being."²

What intention does Steiner express here? At the moment when the light of consciousness projects its rays forward during the phase of pre-puberty (starting around the sixth grade), the exploration of the natural world should be complemented by social studies. The experience of the laws of nature now stands side by side with the understanding of how the human being shapes the world. The students should gain an experiential understanding of

how the inventive human spirit uses the natural laws and how our social order develops hand in hand with this process. History as a subject offers the opportunity to awaken such understanding at this grade level by dealing with the age of industrialization and the connected social issues. But it is not the only opportunity – all other subjects must be dedicated to this goal as well. The impulse of letting economic and social viewpoints unfold in other subjects can fully expand only if the teacher increasingly experiences the soul's quest for wholeness. The teacher is often a casualty of traditional methods of teaching, which do not offer economic and social sciences until the higher grades (high school). The traditional curriculum does not teach these subjects during the pivotal phase of pre-puberty, when dawns an awakening to the world of human creative energy and when it becomes necessary to begin to answer the students in their quest for wholeness. In this time the light of consciousness already casts ahead its rays, but the egotism accompanying puberty is not yet developed. Therefore this phase offers a unique opportunity to plant the seeds of a holistic world experience. This is a second reason why social education is especially needed in this phase of life, and taught in a comprehensive way and not through personal moral admonishments.

Endnotes:

1. We describe all body processes in the torso field as 'metabolic' (digestion, reproduction, etc.) and with 'muscular' the extremities (movement oriented system). The rhythmic system covers the respiratory-circulatory organization (lungs, heart, the entire chest area) and the nerve-sense system refers to all nerve processes (brain, the entire head area with its sensory organs). These three organizing systems have a close affinity to the three basic soul competencies: The metabolic-muscular system corresponds to willing, the rhythmic system to feeling, and the nerve-sense system to thinking (ideation).
2. Rudolf Steiner: *Erziehungskunst, Methodisch-Didaktisches*, 12. Vortrag (March 9, 1919), GA 294, S. 162 f., Dornach: 1990.

About the author:

Erhard Fucke, born 1926, was a classroom and high school teacher at the Freie Waldorfschule Kassel until his retirement. He was involved in integrating professional education into the Waldorf school. For twelve years, he served as a consultant to South American and South African Waldorf schools. He wrote numerous publications on anthroposophical and pedagogical topics.