

Aspects of Adult Education in the Light of Anthroposophy:

A Former Student's View

By Norman Davidson

More than twenty years ago, when I was a Waldorf teacher in England, Friday nights were sacred. For six years nothing could keep me from walking about a mile to the country railroad station and taking a train to London. There, the subway rattled me to the graceful city gardens and quaint sidewalks of Bloomsbury, where I climbed to the top room of a huge Victorian building where evening classes were held by the Inner London Education Authority. Sometimes I was late and could hear the strong Swiss accent of the maestro booming within. Behind the door, the room was full of points, lines, planes, chalk dust, and a lively crowd of people from all walks of life.

This was my weekly plunge into the exhilarating world of projective geometry, taught with full humanity, intensity, and humor by a master of the subject—the anthroposophist and mathematician Angelo Rovida. I start this article with this picture because these Friday nights contained living examples of at least two important experiences connected with anthroposophical adult education.

Norman Davidson began his Waldorf career as a teacher trainee at Emerson College, England, thirty years ago. Without warning, a geometry class given there demonstrated that parallel lines intersect at infinity, and he has never been the same since. He then attended the projective geometry classes of the mathematician and artist Angelo Andes Rovida (1908-1998) in Bloomsbury, London, and was a Waldorf teacher in England for sixteen years. He emigrated to the United States in 1986, was director of teacher training at Sunbridge College, Spring Valley, New York, until 1998, and is now semiretired, having more time to write and to solve geometrical problems on restaurant paper napkins.

Because new students joined the class at the start of the school year, the teacher had to start from the same, or similar, elementary aspects of the subject each September, before expanding it later in a variety of ways. There was a group of us who wanted to experience these expansions, which developed over a number of years, but to link in with these we had to start the subject each year from the beginning. Yet every September, to my surprise, I found myself running to the railroad station just as fast as at any other time, to experience the elementary classes all over again.

This was the first important experience for me as a student in adult education. The teacher was presenting things in such a way that I was moved to open myself without judgment, and mostly in silence, to someone's leadership in elementary things that I already knew well. His mastery of the subject, the aliveness of his approach, brought me to lay down my past knowledge and experience, and voluntarily follow him as my teacher as if it were for the first time.

I might learn, over and again, that (in general) three points in space lie in a plane, or that three planes in space pass through a point. I couldn't have it taught often enough by this person (or by others of similar approach), because it was always taught as something new. The teacher and I were both adults, we were equal in our rights and, in this case, equal in our knowledge of elementary projective geometry. As one might say, we met "ego to ego." Yet I voluntarily handled myself in such a way that I allowed something other than his ego—something to do with the being of a teacher—to step forward and enrich me anew each time out of transformed soul forces: out of soul forces that his ego had raised to a "spiritual self." This, in turn, brought me to raise my own inner life.

This was the first thing that I learned about the psychology of a successful adult education—

that I had first to open myself, laying aside my own subjectivity—and genuinely listen to the other human being: to hear the “spirit” of the other person bringing something new. The inability or failure to do this can be a problem in adult education today. We may not properly listen to or receive the individuality of the other person. And yet, people may not always speak or act in such a way that they can be properly listened to or received.

Instead, an overbearing “democratic” spirit can take too strong a hold within adult education, so that students are considered to be “equal” to each other inwardly, and teachers to be similarly equal to students. Everything is leveled in a realm where the individual should really reign supreme, as student or teacher. The discussion or discussion group can quickly become too dominant an element in a learning process which aims to give people freedom of expression and therefore access to their individuality, but in which something quite different is actually inclining to occur.

Individuality has a primary place in the psyche of the human being. The world of opinion, of subjective feeling, of past ideas, and the like, which a typical discussion may often arouse, is the very area that the individuality leaves alone. The individuality, which has to do with the whole human being, is nourished by the wholeness of human life, by the mystery of the individuality's oneness, within which multiplicity, paradoxically, resides. The word *discuss*, on the other hand, rightly comes from a Latin word meaning “to shake apart.”

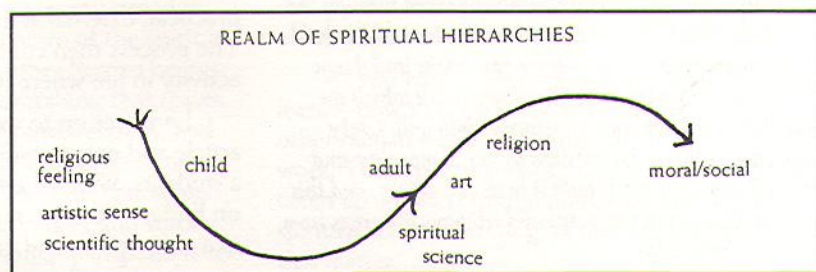
Not that one should not discuss. There is a definite place for it. We must be able to express our opinions freely, to analyze in a group, to preview an event, and so on. But the main questions concern learning: how one learns, and what are the different stages of learning.

For the adult, an important aspect of learning is self-education—though the child self-educates too, and self-education does not constitute the difference between these two age groups when they learn. The question then is: What are the best circumstances in which an adult may learn, particularly in a college setting? One could begin

to answer this with another question: Why should an adult want to learn, particularly at a college working out of spiritual science or Anthroposophy?

In answering this, one might say that a successful student at an anthroposophical college can be one who—consciously or unconsciously—has experienced, or is experiencing, a change concerning his or her inner life and the outer world. In a sense, the individual comes to outgrow aspects of a conventional social environment, and this has its connection with what Rudolf Steiner called a reversal of the will. A new path, a spiritual direction, in one's relationships and activity, is sought.

This situation brings it about that adult education born out of spiritual science is the opposite to the education of the child. The teacher of children accompanies a descent from



the spiritual hierarchies into the world; the teacher of adults, at first, accompanies an ascending mode. The diagram gives an indication of this process, and the quoted text that follows amplifies it.

Firstly, with its innate spiritual/religious feeling, the young child seeks the world. Later, the adult seeks the hierarchies again and out of this can bring spiritual content into life tasks.

In a “free transcription” by the English Waldorf teacher, Jesse Darrell, of an article in German by Helmut Kugelgen, one of the original Waldorf teachers in Stuttgart, it is said:

Today, with the renewal of the Mysteries through the work of Rudolf Steiner—and education is a part of this—the adult must develop himself in the opposite direction from that present in the old Mysteries and active in the growth of the child, art and religion must now be illuminated by spiritual knowledge, if unity once more is to prevail between the three realms of the cultural life.

The article continues:

Rudolf Steiner describes the way of the adult by saying:

*"Anthroposophy at every point begins with science, enlivens its mental images artistically, and ends with religious deepening; begins, that is, with what the head can grasp, moves on to what over the widest field the word can form, and finishes with what fills the heart with warmth, with what leads it to certainty, so that the human soul can find itself at all times in its real home, in the spiritual realm. Thus along the way of Anthroposophy we are to learn to take our start from knowledge, raise ourselves up to art, and end in religious inwardness." **

This point is further developed in Steiner's lecture of August 5th, 1923, in Ilkley, England, where he says:

We need a harmony between knowledge, art, religion, and morality. In a new form we need this way which leads from the earth and along which we win our knowledge, passing through Inspiration and through the arts to the direct life in the supersensible, to a taking hold of the supersensible—so that we can again lead down into social life on the earth the supersensible which we have felt in religion and transformed into will. Only when we see the social question as one of morality and religion can we grapple with it in its full depths, and this we cannot do until the moral and religious life arises from spiritual knowledge.

The foregoing gives a picture of the direction that the inner life of the modern, spiritually seeking adult can take when approaching an educational institution—though for each individual's course of study much will depend on what experience, talents, and aspirations he or she brings. However, a certain healthy curricular archetype exists, and there are many instances in which a student's alive new working at something already familiar has been a rewarding experience as well as an extension of the student's capabilities.

Appropriate in this college context would be a foundation period of unspecialized Anthroposophy covering a wide range of subjects taught for their own inherent value—a whole from which specialization can, in its time, healthily and organically emerge. These foundation activities form the spiritual heart of the college, and in them can be found the adult's propensities as indicated in the diagram. A second period of specialization—in teacher training, for example—could arise out of this, and could include practical

work in schools, followed by an apprenticeship in a school and the start of a new career.

This threefold process follows the one used by Rudolf Steiner in the main presentation of his own teacher training course in Stuttgart—the lecture course published as *Study of Man* (retranslated and issued as *The Foundations of Human Experience*). Here Steiner divides his course into three parts, the first concentrating on the soul (feeling) aspect of the human being, the second on the spiritual (levels of consciousness) aspect, and the third on the physical aspect. In life, these three aspects, or stages, overlap, and all three can occur, in various forms, simultaneously. However, a recognition of these three stages can be found in a college with an unspecialized foundation period where the heart and mind of the student is first reached out to in a variety of activities; a second period of fully conscious motivation toward a specific area of life; and a third period where practical, external activity is properly entered. The process then continues into work or career activity in life where it finds its fulfillment.

I now return to the opening themes of this article and my encounter with adult education as a student. When the Bloomsbury class was over on Friday evenings, most of the students gathered in a café nearby and continued the subject into ever deeper realms of geometry, covering paper napkins, or whatever came to hand, with lines and points—some of the lines mentally reaching across London and England to infinity and some of the points residing at infinity itself. This activity risked my missing the last train home, but it was worth it, and each of us stood the others a round of drinks until about midnight. One night I went up to the counter for an order, and the waiter leaned over and asked rather shyly: "What is it you people talk about here every Friday? Is it religion or something?"

"Why religion?" I asked.

"Because," he answered, "you are always so enthusiastic and wild over what you discuss."

"It's geometry," I said.

"Never!" he answered, wide-eyed. "I don't believe it."

What causes such enthusiasm and involvement in a subject—any subject? One factor is the student. The student must give the teacher something, ego to ego, as a social equal. Today the

student must learn how to learn, and this involves giving the teacher the opportunity of being allowed to be a teacher in the proper sense—being allowed to be someone who has researched his or her subject in an independent way and has something individual to bring. The student must lay aside past knowledge and allow the teacher to be someone from whom one can learn anew. This means listening out of strength, not weakness. The strong, healthy listener is able to lay aside, when required, personal prejudices, opinions, and attitudes.

Given this situation, the teacher can outwardly speak or work in a way that transcends his or her ordinary, everyday self. Words and actions can take flight in freedom, and the individual spirit of the teacher can find expression. This can have a connection to what Anthroposophy calls the "spirit self." Through self-development in spiritual science, something beyond the merely personal can be active, but not in any superior sense. On the contrary, the nature of the spirit is to lay itself at the service of other human beings. Then students can receive something that leaves intact their own individuality and freedom, and out of this they can make the subject their own. This calls upon the spirit self and the individual initiative of the student, and teacher and student are working together on a mutually inspired level.

This process is usually quite different from formal group work and discussion, which also have their place in the adult educational scene. But before there can be true interchange, there must arise something out of the realm of individual initiative and research, however it is presented—in lecture form, seminar, Socratic exchange, or in some other form. This can be followed, at best, by human conversation and then by the individual taking away inner thoughts and feelings from the educational encounter, living with them, and allowing them to grow.

I choose the term "conversation," the word having originally been associated with people living or "turning about" (Lat., *verse*) with each other, later being applied to talking together. I interpret a conversation as a living, free sharing of thoughts and feelings between people who are all "equal as egos" to each other. Hence the lively "religious" conversations in the Bloomsbury café after an experience of active receiving in class, and followed by a week of personal inner work,

often with pencil and paper.

The important thing today is that adult education is an alive and human activity, and a vital aspect of this, among others, is speech. Speech is a living thing, a force, which can work between people whether in quiet exchange or in a presentation. It can work if the person has something original and human to convey, which is allowed to live in the speech, and if the listener is active in listening. There can be shortcomings on both sides, ending up in the abandonment, for example, of formal verbal presentations.

In education today we also often want to make things easy and pleasant, forgetting that education is not simply the acquisition of factual knowledge and skills, but involves the inner development and growth of the human being. Because of this developmental aspect, both educator and educated learn and grow together. The aim should be that the student comes to surpass the teacher—though the student may have already done so in many ways.

As said earlier, we have to learn again how to learn—how to open ourselves and receive the other human being. Learning is work, teaching is work. These two activities, between adults, can be taken up with a common understanding within a spiritual scientific setting, or any other setting for that matter.

No authority is sought by the teacher. He or she seeks only to cultivate a mood of genuine service to, and listening inwardly to, the needs of the student. This results in the student remaining inwardly free and independent, and able to work on a spiritual level equal with the teacher.

Out of this spirit of inner freedom and independence, the student can give the teacher the opportunity of being able to take responsible initiative (out of research and spiritual work) in a new sense—arising out of loving insight into the subject and reverent service to the student. The outcome is that the deeper needs and questions of the student are, in fact, reached in a direct way, and a spiritual event of adult education has taken place.
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* From "The Religious Element in the World School Movement," an article in *Towards the Deepening of Waldorf Education* (Dornach, Switzerland: Pedagogical Section of the School of Spiritual Science, Goetheanum, 1991).