

June 2002, Volume 7, #2: “Let’s quickly go over that again....”
Recapitulation and the Waldorf Curriculum

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The idea of recapitulation has always seemed to me such a natural and fundamental part of teaching. As a matter of course teachers review what has already been covered before introducing the next step. Waldorf pedagogy has made an art of this methodology and it is found in Waldorf school classrooms from kindergarten to twelfth grade, in the practice of rhythmical repetition and enhancement. We also find the idea of recapitulation in Steiner’s descriptions of the processes and rhythms of child development, the cultural epochs and, ultimately, in the anthroposophical perspective of the evolution of the Earth itself.¹

Historically, evolution was not a part of the Christian worldview. Indeed when Darwin’s idea of ‘evolution’ first appeared after the middle of the 19th century it was vehemently condemned by the Church. Christian thinkers were used to looking at human history, at least until very modern times, as a divinely inspired drama characterized by events such as the Fall, Incarnation, Redemption, and Judgment. This is in contrast to the perspective of the ‘great recurring cycles of time’ held by some Eastern religions. Steiner is probably the first Christian thinker who fully accepted the reality of the evolutionary process.²

Rudolf Steiner was convinced that the theory of evolution, of which Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel were the pioneers, should be absorbed in the modern consciousness.³ Already in his early works, Steiner accepted the fundamental notion of the evolution of life.⁴ Although he was highly critical of Haeckel as a philosopher, Steiner saw the value and praised highly Haeckel’s thought on evolution. Steiner considered Haeckel’s thinking on phylogenetics the most significant fact of German intellectual life in the second half of the 19th century. In Haeckel’s phylogenetic law, Steiner could see a support of his own views on the evolution of human consciousness. That Steiner was aware of Haeckel’s law indicates that he kept abreast of developments in scientific thinking⁵ and was able to see how bridges could be found between natural science and spiritual science.

Of immediate relevance to the theme of this article are Steiner’s ideas concerning the development of the human being during a single lifetime, the development of the human species as a whole, and the correspondences and parallels between them. More pertinent still will be the need to identify how this is relevant to an understanding of curriculum development in Waldorf schools.

According to Steiner, there are distinctly discernible life phases within the span of a normal human lifetime that correspond to historical epochs lasting several thousand years. The idea that in one’s lifetime one goes through stages of development that correspond to historical epochs of development is not unique to Steiner, however, but has its basis in 19th century thoughts on evolution.

As a result of the strange hybrid of evolutionary biology following Darwin’s evolutionary

theory, and embryology following the discoveries of the German embryologist Karl Ernst von Baer⁶, there arose the theory of ‘racial recapitulation’ or ‘parallelism’⁷. The chief credit for popularising it must go particularly to Haeckel who formulated ‘the fundamental biogenetic law,’ which maintained that there was ‘the closest causal connection’ between the ontogenesis of the individual and the phylogensis of the tribe. In Haeckel’s words;

[O]ntogenesis, or the development of the individual, is a short and quick repetition (recapitulation) of phylogensis, or the development of the tribe to which it belongs, determined by the laws of inheritance and adaptation. ⁸

The theory of ‘racial recapitulation’ had great suggestive power, especially when applied to the twin fields of child study and education. The work of Herbert Spencer, especially his *Essays on Education*, published in 1861, helped to spread ‘recapitulationist’ views all over Europe as well as the United States, where it became immensely popular⁹. The German version of the theory became known to educationists as the theory of cultural epochs and was disseminated in the latter half of the 19th century by Ziller, a disciple of Herbart¹⁰, and by Ziller’s own follower Wilhelm Rein¹¹. In 1893 Rein wrote:

We find that this idea of the analogy between the individual and general development of humanity is a common possession of the best and most noted intellects. It appears, for example, in the works of the literary heroes Lessing, Herder, Goethe and Schiller; with the philosophers Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Comte; with the theologians Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Schleiermacher; with the Darwinists Huxley and Spencer;...with the pedagogues Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Diesterweg, Herbart, Ziller and others.¹²

The theory of cultural epochs held that there was an analogy between the development of an embryo through evolutionary stages and the growth of a child through certain cultural stages. This theory was taken seriously at the time and soon appeared as a basis for school curricula. Subjects taught in each grade were coordinated by concentrating upon a core of cultural material that in successive years would draw the child along the path traveled by the human race. In Rein’s view probably the most suitable material for instruction aimed at developing character was the history and literature of the children’s national culture. He suggested that this should be presented from its beginnings up to the present time, following a succession of cultural epochs that corresponded to the stages of psychological growth observable among children.¹³

Rein’s view of an appropriate course in the moral-historical side of education for the first eight years of the common school is described in his *Outline of Pedagogics*, and is set out in the table below. ¹⁴

Grade schools	Content for German schools	For American
1	Fairy Tales	Fairy Tales
2	Robinson Crusoe	Robinson

Crusoe		
3	Thüringer Tales	Indian Legends
4	Nibelungen Tales	Pioneer Stories
5	Christianising of Germany	Settlement of
America		
6	Emperors; Kaiser Period	Colonial
History		
7	Reformation	
Revolution		
8	Nationalization	Nineteenth
Century		

Rein's Moral-Historical Curriculum for the First Eight Years of Schooling

This scheme was part of mainstream primary education in Germany (and beyond) in the late 19th and into the 20th century as far as the 1950s. The general plan has elements of story content that are similar to the Waldorf *Lehrplan* which is used as a basis for curriculum development by many Waldorf schools. It is highly likely that Steiner was aware of Rein's general plan because Rein was the foremost exponent of Herbartian pedagogy, and although Steiner did not think much of Herbart's psychological theories, he commented that Herbart's pedagogics 'was excellent in its day'.¹⁵

As a philosopher, Steiner identified largely with the German idealist philosophers. He took the Renaissance and Enlightenment beliefs in social progress, in universality, and in regularity as the unquestioned givens of the natural, human, and spiritual world. With regard to social progress, he believed that children in the West advance physically, intellectually, and spiritually in ways that roughly parallel the evolution of Western societies.¹⁶

This is an evolution that may be characterized as a gradual separation of consciousness from an original holistic union with life. Humans began to build an identity of their own from within, no longer deriving it primarily from the cosmos, the gods, Nature, the ancestors or the group. The loss of participation in a cosmic consciousness was also accompanied by the appearance of a new kind of thinking.¹⁷ These developments may be observed by every class teacher as being repeated, to varying degrees, in the development of children throughout their school life.

Steiner described the evolution of consciousness in the West as proceeding from, though not beginning with, the prehistoric Indian cultures. These were followed by the prehistoric Persian, the Egypto-Chaldean, and Greco-Roman, culminating, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in the cultures of Central and Western Europe. He held that the current cultural epoch, which had already dawned in the 15th century, would emerge into a world culture characterized by greater cosmopolitanism and individualism. The 'moral-

historical' curriculum of the Waldorf Lehrplan follows these cultural epochs, though not rigidly, year by year. At first this scheme seems appealing for class teachers and useful for their ordering of yearly curriculum content.

Steiner explained that as human beings 'we carry within us the work that has gone into the whole past evolution of the world, upon which countless generations of the spirit have worked' and that 'behind the realm of sense-perception lies the all-embracing life of the spirit...a hidden spiritual environment [which] carries even now in its womb man's future evolution.'¹⁸ Thus Steiner described two fundamental principles upon which world-evolution and human evolution are founded. 'Man bears within him the past of the world; the outer world is the bearer of his future.'¹⁹ That the past is recapitulated in the early stages of every new development is expressed as a cosmic law of evolution in *Occult Science*, so it would not be surprising that the same law would apply to the developmental stages in childhood.

Steiner stressed, however, that it was important to differentiate between the two different aspects of human beings' development: the biological and the soul-spiritual. To confuse these, he warned, would lead 'to a false trail'. In a lecture in 1920 Steiner asked some Swiss teachers the question: 'How could one justify a parallel between the soul-spiritual development of the individual human being and the biogenetic principle?'²⁰ The idea that the development of the child repeats the development of the whole human race can easily be put forward, explained Steiner, 'but it is a flight of fancy which does not correspond to the facts.'²¹ Unlike recapitulation in embryonic development,

...when observing the child during the first years, one cannot detect a repetition of aboriginal human conditions nor, as the child grows older, a repetition of later phases of mankind's evolution. In order to discover such features in the child, it would be necessary to introduce imaginary forces and processes into his development. It was a beautiful invention of [some] educationalists, when they asserted that during their development children passed through the same stages of barbarism as mankind did long ago; or that at certain stages of boyhood, the Persian culture was being relived. One can of course conjure up all kinds of poetical pictures of this kind, but they are nonsense because such ideas do not correspond to reality.²²

It is evident from the above that Steiner did not advocate a naïve recapitulation theory. The idea that the child repeats, in his or her individual development the developmental patterns of human history-as indicated in the line of thinking from Haeckel to Spencer to Rein (is described as a 'beautiful invention'. How then are Waldorf teachers to understand what Steiner meant when he said "such ideas do not correspond to reality?" What are the elements of the reality that should be considered?

Waldorf educators who have been applying Steiner's ideas, and finding that they do work, want to know why they work. They want to understand for themselves the meaning of their own observations. Over the years teachers in Waldorf schools have observed, and continue to observe, the very definite changes in soul mood from year to year as children progress through the stages of the incarnation process in their transition from early childhood to primary and high school grades.

David Elkind, a Piagetian psychologist and critical friend of the Waldorf movement, commented, Steiner argued that the child's developing needs and interests are the best guide to choosing the curriculum materials for any given age period. It just so happens that the sequence of materials best suited to the child's developing needs and interests follows a roughly historical pattern..²³

The writer shares this view and also concurs with Brien Masters, a well-known English Waldorf educator, who writes that, there is still mileage to be gained in Steiner's stage theory, provided it is liberally interpret-ed...an Ariadne thread to take as something of a guide into the fascinating labyrinth of child development...²⁴

Masters goes on to caution those who would fabricate 'hard and fast' parallels between children's development and the epochs, implying that convenient schemes, as in all areas of the curriculum, can limit teachers' creativity and appear anachronistic.

Evolution is a process in which we all participate. When we come to birth we do so at a time and in a place with a specific physical, socio-cultural and spiritual ground. The soul pictures or images in the astral body, inspired by the hierarchical beings (particularly the angels), who guide the soul in the incarnation process, are a way of 'speaking' to us. They are revelations about the mysteries of our time and place. They are the 'mythologies' that we live. When children come to earth today their inner experiences should be complemented with appropriate images and content, and this is something that Waldorf teachers strive to develop. Helping to 'member' children within the evolutionary stream of time will require traversing the past and presenting an imaginative retrospective of the descent from a spiritual all-one-ness to an earthly alone-ness. The idea that children recapitulate the old is, I believe, both partly correct and partly speculative and it will be each Waldorf teacher's challenge to 'receive' appropriate images and create enlivening pictures for now. They may draw on the past, but it will not necessarily be a past neatly packaged into epochs.

This article has attempted to place the ideas of recapitulation and the evolution of consciousness in the context of the history of educational ideas of the last century. I have tried to show that some of what exists in the content and method of Waldorf pedagogy has its origin in both mainstream and progressive educational theory and practice. Among Steiner's many contributions to education was to acknowledge this and to create a unique synthesis of good practices with the addition of the insights and fruits of spiritual scientific research..²⁵ I believe that the further development of Waldorf education depends on this research method being adopted and continuously practised by the community of Waldorf educators.

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- 1 Rudolf Steiner, *Occult Science: An Outline*, See Chap. 4 on 'The Evolution of the Earth'.
 - 2 Rudi Lissau, *Rudolf Steiner: His life, work, inner path and social initiatives*, Hawthorn Press, Stroud, Great Britain, 1987, p. 74
 - 3 Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), Charles Darwin (1809-82), Ernst Haeckel (1834-1910)
 - 4 Johannes Hemleben, *Rudolf Steiner: A Documentary Biography*, Henry Goulden, East Grinstead, Sussex, UK, 1975 pp. 55-56
 - 5 Steiner's own university degree was heavily weighted in the sciences. Among the subjects he studied were zoology, botany, geology, physics, chemistry and mineralogy.
 - 6 Karl Ernst von Baer 1792-1876.
 - 7 John Cleverley and Dennis Phillips, *Visions of Childhood*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987, pp. 42-43
 - 8 Ernst Haeckel, *The History of Creation*, vol 1, ch. 13 (originally published in 1873), cited in Cleverley and Phillips, *ibid* p.44
 - 9 Herbert Spencer, 1820-1903. Spencer's *Essay on Education* were translated into fifteen languages and by the end of the 19th century had sold over 50,000 copies in England alone (which in those times was 'a mammoth best seller'). See Dennis C. Phillip, "The Idea of Evolution in Educational Thought," in Edgar L. French, Ed., *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 1965 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1966), pp. 93-98; It would be well to note Steiner's critique of some of Spencer's educational ideas in "The Pedagogy of the West and of Central Europe: The Inner Attitude of the Teacher" (Stuttgart, 15/9/1920) in *Meditatively Acquired knowledge of Man*, Steiner Schools Fellowship Publications, Forest Row, E. Sussex, UK, 1982, Chapter 1, especially pp.6-7
 - 10 Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) was Professor of Philosophy and Pedagogy at Gottingen. Tuiskon Ziller (1817-83) was Professor of Pedagogy at Leipzig in 1864.
 - 11 Wilhelm Rein (1847-1929) studied and worked with Ziller, became Professor in Education at the University of Jena and made a systematic study of curriculum and teaching method.
- Alduino Mazzone • 29
- 12 Wilhelm Rein, *Outlines of Pedagogics*, (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1904), cited in Cleverley and Phillips, *op. cit.* pp. 47-48
 - 13 W. F. Connell, *A History of Education in the Twentieth Century World*, Curriculum Development Centre, Canberra, Australia, 1980, p. 57
 - 14 Wilhelm Rein, *Outlines of Pedagogics*, 2nd edition, trans. C.C. and Ida J. van Liew, Sonnenschein, London, 1893, pp. 118ff. The suggestions for English and American schools were made by the translators who acknowledged the help of J.J. Findlay. Cited in Connell *ibid* p. 58. The source document also lists the curriculum guidelines for Religion lessons and stories for English schools.
 - 15 See Steiner's *Practical Advice to Teachers*, RSP, 1976, p. 38
 - 16 David Elkind, 'Waldorf Education in the Postmodern World', in *Renewal: A Journal for Waldorf Education*, Vol. 6, Issue 4, Spring 1997, p.5, The Association of Waldorf Schools of North America.
 - 17 Douglas Sloan, 'Reflections on the Evolution of Consciousness', in *Research Bulletin: Waldorf Education Research Institute*, June 1996.

18 Rudolf Steiner, *The Evolution of Consciousness: as revealed through Initiation-Knowledge*, RSP, 1966, p.170

19 *ibid*

20 Rudolf Steiner, *The Renewal of Education Through the Science of the Spirit*, (14 lectures to Swiss teachers in Basel May 1920), Steiner Schools Fellowship Publications, Forest Row, E. Sussex, UK 1981, Lecture 4 but especially. pp. 55-56.

21 *ibid*, p. 55

22 *ibid* pp. 55-56

23 David Elkind, *op. cit.* p. 5

24 Brien Masters, *An Appraisal of Steinerian Theory and Waldorf Praxis: How do they compare?*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Surrey, United Kingdom, 1997, p. 137

25 Rudolf Steiner, "The Science of the Spirit and the Practical Life" in *Education as an Art* (Paul M Allen, Ed), Rudolf Steiner Press, NY, 1970, pp. 20-21