Contemplative Work in the College Meeting

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Introduction

The possibility of developing a successful collaborative, spiritual-leadership model depends on the participants' ability to become, collectively, a vessel for wisdom greater than their own. This wisdom may reveal itself in fundamental insights (Moral Intuitions, in the language of *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*[1]), creative visions for addressing the ramifications of those insights (Moral Imaginations), or plans for incarnating the visions into the specific reality in which the school is operating (Moral Technique). While individuals may well be capable of achieving some of those steps on their own, the fundamental idea of the collaborative model is that single capacities can be enhanced through collaboration. Furthermore, collaboration may indeed allow individual capacities to reach their full fruition by providing the listening attentiveness that often holds the key to sounding out one's inherent potential.

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A second facet of this model is the spiritual dimension: The group is engaged with spiritual beings, and this engagement implies spiritual effort. This dimension is the one with which this essay is primarily concerned. The third facet is the element of leadership; the model is meant to offer guidance that can be followed by the school. Engaging in spiritual work, even in a collaborative fashion, is insufficient in itself; the group still needs to provide leadership. The guiding imagination for this model, at least in Waldorf schools, is the so-called College Imagination, delivered by Rudolf Steiner at the inception of the *Study of Man* course in 1919.[2]

Steiner describes a circle of teachers, with each member's Angel standing behind him/her, placing a hand on the teacher's head, and allowing strength to stream forth. Steiner later refers to this as "the spiritual meeting of each individual with his angel." This strength allows imaginations to stream into the pedagogical work. Above, Archangels are gathering the strength, which "has been enhanced through uniting with all the others," and make "a chalice of courage" out of it. Into this chalice, Archai (angelic beings of a higher order than the Archangels) allow a drop of light to fall. Light is a spiritual term synonymous with wisdom, and the process of helping teachers become recipients of light in the manner indicated by the College Imagination is the main goal of this essay. For the full text of the College Imagination, see also the appendix to Roberto Trostli's article in the previous issue of the *Research Bulletin* (Volume XVI Number 2).

Crucial for the idea we are trying to develop here is Steiner's description of how the capacity to receive intuitive wisdom ("drop of light") is preceded by the forming of a vessel ("chalice of courage"), and how this vessel is composed of "what is coming to birth through the spiritual meeting of each individual with his angel." It is clear that this *spiritual meeting* is the very foundation of the collaborative spiritual model being inaugurated. I would suggest that this meeting consists of inner, meditative work.

The space here is too limited for a full discussion of the nature of inner work, yet a few germane points can be singled out. One such point is what Steiner calls "the gate of

humility."[3] When one practices humility in the pursuit of wisdom, an enhanced ability to relinquish a supposed ownership of ideas, or to allow better ideas to improve and/or change what had been brought into the discussion follows. The very notion of reaching for higher wisdom suggests that there exists a wisdom higher than what one may presently possess. Absent this practice, one may cling to one's "own" ideas out of an all-too-human vanity. But one learns on a meditative path to release one's attachment to ideas-as-possessions. Ideas are placed at the service of others, or, in this instance, of the leadership process. This is, I believe, what Steiner meant when he spoke of the Archangels carrying from one individual to the other "what is coming to birth through the spiritual meeting of each individual withmhis angel." I will refer to this later in this essay as "freed spiritual substance." It means ideas that have been freed from ownership. Together a group of such ideas can serve as the preparatory vessel, or chalice.

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A second contribution of the inner path is the notion that one's colleague is also "on the path." Sensing that the other, too, is working to become a better vessel for the spirit increases the willingness to be patient with his or her idiosyncrasies, since there is hope that the gaps that yawn between colleagues may narrow in the next minute (or the next year). Colleagues are less likely to view each other as forever destined to remain the same. Sustained over years, colleagueship in Waldorf schools needs the optimism that the hope (indeed the anticipation) of change brings. Group processes can otherwise suffer "occlusions of the light" born of the blindness people always have for the "better angels of (each other's) nature." The willingness to see—and the practice of seeing—the good in one's colleagues forms an essential aspect of what Steiner calls the reverse ritual, meaning the elevation of the striving community to the company of spiritual beings.

The most important contribution that a meditative practice offers a collaborative spiritual-leadership model, however, is the presence of concentrated, receptive attentiveness. A meditative path begins with exercises to improve the focus of one's attention. Once attention is focused on a "something," we can remove that "something" and have a moment of becoming aware of attention itself as a form-free *capacity. Empty, receptive attention* is the pre-requisite for new ideas. When a group can develop an "empty attention," when it is available and willing to receive new ideas, it has also developed an essential aspect of the "chalice of courage." The surest way for developing this collective capacity is for the individual members to engage in developing their own capacities.

We can say, therefore, that for this collaborative spiritual-leadership model to succeed, the members of the leadership group should be actively engaged in a meditative practice. It is indeed my view that most of the failings of Colleges of Teachers in Waldorf schools can be traced to the absence of sufficient meditative work. Freed spiritual substance (created and freed through the individuals' meditative efforts) is then missing for the chalice-forming activity of benevolent spiritual beings, and the members of the College are then left with nothing but their too-limited earthly powers. "Drops of light" can be difficult to receive without the spiritual chalice having been formed. Even when individual members receive new ideas, the receptivity of the group is not sufficient for these ideas to become fruitful.

Assuming that the collaborative-leadership model depends on individual meditative practice, a new difficulty arises. An individual inner path is difficult to establish. During

teacher-preparation courses, many a student focuses on other aspects of the profession, and the habit life of a meditative practice is not firmly established. Afterwards, many new teachers make an attempt, encounter the inevitable obstacles, and essentially give up on a regular practice, perhaps replacing a cognitive path with prayer. Such individuals may even be quite gifted teachers, but their capacity to serve as contributors in a chalice-forming process is undoubtedly compromised. Sooner or later they come up against obstacles (some alluded to here, others elsewhere in this publication) and, absent the tools developed through inner practice, may either burn out or burn others out. Burnout is essentially the consequence of an inability to renew oneself, and renewal, in this context, means tapping the source of new ideas.

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Sometimes a school will have a few 'old timers' who have an active meditative life that allows them to carry the spiritual essence of Waldorf education and serve as pillars for the work of the College. But as they begin to retire or move on to other chapters in their biographies, a kind of spiritual implosion results. Colleagues, parents, and former students may remark that the school "doesn't feel the same anymore." Whereas the implied change is not necessarily bad, it may point to a kind of active absence, if you will, of that "something" that made the school work more deeply in the past. Peripheral teachers are asked to become central pillars and leaders of chalice-forming practices, yet they lack the foundation of an independent spiritual practice. This possible picture is not to suggest that every old-timer is a meditative practitioner, or that newer colleagues are not meditants, but merely to point towards a phenomenon that may illustrate the role of meditative practice in the collaborative spiritual-leadership model.

Practicing exercises and engaging in contemplative work in groups can be of great help for those trying to launch an individual meditative life.

If we agree that contemplative practice is crucial to successful leadership in Waldorf schools, and that establishing this practice is fraught with challenges, are there steps that can be taken to support individual teachers attempting to develop such a practice? Practicing exercises and even engaging in contemplative work in groups can be of great help for those trying to launch an individual meditative life. The reason might be that successful concentration is often easier to achieve when undertaken with others. Whereas as physical organisms we are always separated from one another, in soul and spirit we are more woven together; the efforts of those around us can help draw our spiritual capacities in the desired direction. There are legitimate concerns about doing this work in groups, and some of those concerns will be addressed below, but once individuals experience what a concentrated state 'feels like,' they are more likely to persevere in attempting to reach it on their own. Put another way, once we know what we are looking for, we may have more patience trying to find it. Even for people with many years of faithful practice, doing contemplative work together can provide enhanced strength, often leading to new and surprising directions in their individual work. Hearing how another has approached a verse or an image is helpful when the sharing is done with the proper restraint, but actually practicing *that* approach with them seems

to offer a gift, a benefit born of their many years of practice. One feels "gifted" by one's colleague, and deeply thankful.

In my own experience, a College that had struggled for years to overcome personality-driven conflicts and endless debate was transformed within a matter of weeks into a far more receptive and cogent leadership group once various forms of inner work were practiced during the opening segment of meetings. In my view this occurred because the shared substance of the opening segment was already uniting the individuals' higher capacities by the time discussion of school matters began. The College members had engaged a demanding text or an exercise, had spent time reflecting on the content or the experience, and had dedicated themselves and their efforts toward the wellbeing of the school. A shift had occurred in their consciousness and mood. The daily hubbub of teaching and the experience of interacting with people on the level of intellectual, informational consciousness had been replaced by a period of intentional dedication at the contemplative level. The ground was then prepared for a different kind of interaction.

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It might be argued that shared substance can also be created through ordinary study. The essential difference, however, is that in contemplative work the shared substance is actively taken into each individual's inner life, and the attempt is made to understand the "content" at the level from which it originated. Rudolf Steiner (or another spiritual researcher) had experiences across the threshold, and then had to "clothe" those in words; our task as students is to proceed in the reverse direction, starting from the words and reaching across the threshold to the experience. A conscious effort is undertaken as well to invite something more than one's ordinary understanding to enter the process, something that transcends what the individual is already thinking. In some "regular" studies, the discussion rarely, if ever, transcends the informational, content level. This informational level of consciousness is the level of arguments, not the level of humble receptivity indicated by the chalice imagination. But a group of people that has engaged in a period of contemplative practice is primed for a meeting that can become something more than "just a meeting." We can get a feeling for the difference from a lecture Steiner gave on February 28, 1923:

> And if several people come together with what they have from their everyday consciousness, and don't with full sensitivity lift themselves up to the supersensible world, if such people meet together merely to hear the language of the supersensible world in the everyday state of soul, then there is an infinitely great possibility that they may begin to argue, because in the most natural way they become egotists in relation to each other. …If people take their normal soul life into their supposed understanding of the teaching from higher worlds, then of course this leads to egotism and argument.[4]

Objections and Dangers

Some people might object to the idea of contemplative work in groups because "Rudolf Steiner did not do this kind of work in groups, and therefore it is not appropriate for us to do it." This kind of orthodoxy is dangerous, since it restricts anthroposophy to precedent rather than allowing it to meet the moment, but it also misses an important factor: the effect of Rudolf Steiner's personal presence at the first Waldorf school. Anyone who has worked with a genuine spiritual researcher (e.g. Jørgen Smit

or Georg Kühlewind) knows that listening to such a person is in itself a meditative exercise. His thoughts blaze a trail of light that has to be followed by attentiveness unlike the one we use for ordinary intellectual content. In *How to Know Higher Worlds* Steiner says of the communications of the spiritual researcher:

> For such instructions are culled from the living inner word…they are themselves gifted with spiritual life. They are not mere words; they are living powers. And while you follow the words of one who knows…powers are at work in your soul which make you clairvoyant.[5]

When Steiner assembled the first Waldorf school teachers and instructed them, the "content" was given in the *Study of Man* lectures and other such pearls of higher knowledge. When he subsequently attended their faculty meetings, the discussion was sometimes entirely practical, but then would veer into insights that could not be properly received without subsequent meditative reflection. Steiner assumed that the teachers were meditants, and he gave them "content" and even mantras to support their work. He spoke directly about the need to meditate on the "content" of his lectures:

> And it is especially interesting to allow everything I have presented today to work on you; let it invigorate you. … If you bring all these things together and form mental images of them in *active meditation*, you can be sure that the vigorous power of ingenuity you need when facing the children you are educating will be kindled in you.[6] [Emphasis mine]

In the absence of a spiritual researcher to guide the teachers in a school, other forms of support for the faculty members' meditative work may well be needed, and the exercises discussed here could be one approach for providing such support.

Contemplative work in groups does present some legitimate dangers, however. Those dangers are born of the temptations that beset the path toward higher knowledge, and just as the presence of others may help along this path, it can also exacerbate some of the pitfalls. A few of the potential dangers are discussed below, and a group that intends to pursue this kind of work is encouraged to discuss these and reach a set of agreements to mitigate them. This set of agreements may be spoken at the beginning of each session, or in some form be mentioned as a reminder to those present

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~Danger: Contemplative work in a group infringes on individual freedom by coercing a person to engage in it when s/he might not want or feel able to do so. Such a person would either engage in the practice against his/her better judgment, or, if the practice is expected of everyone, leave the group altogether. One possible solution is to engage in this work before the official beginning of the meeting; another option is to allow members to excuse themselves; a third possibility is to allow members to be present quietly without engaging in the work. Each group should decide how to handle this difficulty.

~Danger: Since work in groups is easier for some, individuals might choose to replace their personal practice with group work. This is not what anthroposophy should promote. Anthroposophy is an individual spiritual path first and foremost. The group should discuss what, if anything, the members might commit to doing outside the meeting. In my view, some form of commitment to individual practice should become one of the agreements.

~Danger: Individuals sometimes suggest or imply that they have achieved more in their practice (or during the group exercises) than is actually the case. This brings an element of

untruth into the very heart of the school and creates a mood around the spiritual practice that is harmful rather than helpful. Absolute honesty, integrity, and humility must pervade every aspect of this work. Of course, these attributes are generally expected of College members, but a special emphasis should be placed on them in this context.

~Danger: Details of people's individual spiritual life might be shared during parts of these sessions, leaving those individuals open to a breach of trust. Thus what was offered in full confidence can end up coming back in a completely different context. If the group discusses the question of moral character (see below), then additional aspects of vulnerability are placed in trust. Some form of agreement regarding confidentiality is needed. This might include provisions regarding (not) sharing with members absent from the group, and of course (not) sharing with non-members, including spouses. It cannot be overemphasized how important this agreement is for the long-term health of the group.

If these four dangers, in whichever form College members opt to address them, are countered, then I believe the group may safely engage in contemplative work together. As already mentioned, it is a good idea to have a short reminder of these agreements at the beginning of each session. Obviously, in specific circumstances additional agreements may be necessary, and every group is free to create and amend any agreements it makes.

Examples of Formats and Practices

A group will usually assign an individual to prepare and lead the sessions. This assignment may last for just one meeting or for an extended period of time. The group has to determine the scope of the leader's mandate in terms of choosing the themes and formats of the sessions. Some experimentation is recommended so that the comfort zone of a particular group can be established. Some groups need parameters set in advance (e.g., length of time for each session, length of assignment of leading the sessions, restrictions on the themes for meditation, and review format), while for other groups a more open-ended beginning is preferred. Even in open-ended beginnings, a review of the practice should be planned within the next two or three months, if not sooner. Inner work is delicate, and we do not want members of the group to have growing frustrations or resentments over issues that could be resolved through a review. A sensitive leader will seek to navigate the practice so that individual concerns may be addressed before they become festering problems, but a regular review is also important.

There are many ways to engage with contemplative content, of course. For the purpose of the work discussed here, three steps seem basic enough to be regarded as fundamental:

1. Centering: concentration exercise/s to focus the attention
2. Engagement (with the theme)
3. Review

There are other steps that could be considered. It is possible to begin a session with a dedication. The members dedicate the work to the school/organization and renounce personal gain or attachments. Another step that can have a profound effect is "stooping through the gate of humility." Members remind themselves of their own shortcomings and of the notion of a wisdom higher than one's own. By remembering Steiner's exhortation to take three steps in the perfection of one's moral character for every step taken in spiritual development, participants can think of three moments in the past day/week/month during which they fell short of their moral ideals. One then resolves to place three balancing gestures into the world during the following day.

However the session is opened, the first step in the actual work is centering. There are many examples of concentration exercises in the anthroposophical literature. Of particular note for all three of the steps mentioned above is Georg Kühlewind's little booklet, *The Light of the "I."* [7] It contains a wealth of practical guidance and examples of exercises, as well as advice on dealing with obstacles. The period of concentration cannot be too long because of time constraints, but it should not be shorter than a minute. A 2–5 minute timeframe is usually sufficient. Members may concentrate on a simple man-made object, the movement of the second-hand of a clock, or other non-interesting subject. The point is that the attention is focused through one's effort and not through the object's being interesting.

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The second, central part of the session is engagement with the theme. This theme may be a verse (such as one of the *Teachers Meditations*), an image (such as Michael and the Dragon, or the *Rose Cross*), a theme from a lecture (such as the physiological locations of auditory and visual processes described in the third lecture of *Balance in Teaching*), or a phrase (such as "Wisdom lives in the Light"). The leader suggests a manner of working with the theme for that session, and the group engages. One example of working with a theme is to "condense the verse" into its verbs only, so that the meaning is sought through the movement of the verbs. If that is successful, the verbs, too, can be removed and the whole theme is held in wordless attentiveness. As with all meditations, the theme itself has to be removed after it is beheld wordlessly. Most people are not able to have an empty attentiveness for more than a brief moment, so one returns to the theme, reduces it, and tries to reach the empty state again. It is important that one is not worried about "getting somewhere" during this period, but simply engages as far as is possible on that day.

Another possibility is to imagine that one is writing the verse: Each word is "selected" from amongst other words in the "meaning vicinity" so that this word is chosen as opposed to that one. Thus "*Spirit* beholding" at the beginning of the second Teachers Meditation is chosen instead of "*soul*" or "*inward* beholding." Next, "*beholding*" is chosen instead of "*meditating*," or "*remembering*," and so on. The experience of "writing" the verse in this way gives one an intense level of identification with the text, much as one would have when writing a poem. One can contemplate a line, a section or an entire verse in this manner. Again, once the meaning has been explored, a wordless beholding should follow, and finally a removal of the theme itself.

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There are many possibilities of working with themes, and the two chosen above should be taken only as examples to illustrate the process. Steiner's books, as well as those of other anthroposophical authors, offer an abundance of themes and instructions. In addition to the Kühlewind book mentioned earlier, Dennis Klocek and Jørgen Smit have also published excellent instructions. It is left for each group to determine, or leave it to the leader to determine, how long the engagement should last. A general suggestion is 10–15 minutes.

When the engagement period is over, some review should occur. The review can be brief or prolonged, done inwardly by each member or through a verbal exchange, but

it should happen. It allows each member to re-cognize what just transpired, and to thank the spiritual world for its help. If the review is conducted through conversation, the tone should be restrained and reverent. Questions, insights, or suggestions may be shared, but the conversation should not lapse into casual chitchat. There should also be a clear ending for this part of the meeting. The session leader or the meeting chair should clearly separate the meditative segment from the rest of the meeting. It may even be good to stand and stretch, or read a verse, in order to transition out of one mode of conversation and into another.

Concluding Thoughts

Waldorf education is nearing the hundred-year anniversary of its founding. In some respects, it is a mature movement with traditions, standards, and habits. In its essence, however, it is meant to be ever the newborn creation, mediating the intentions of spiritual beings directly into the physical world. I believe that the sine-qua-non of Waldorf education is the teachers' meditative lives. Unless a conscious path is cultivated for spiritual beings to support the human being, "Waldorf" will become ever more a noun, a thing. It is a bit better when used as an adjective, but perhaps we should aim to make it into a verb. We should aim "to Waldorf," meaning to actively connect a child to his/her pre-birth intentions, to work in such a way that our work is "a continuation of what higher beings have done before his birth" (Study of Man, Lecture 1). I hope that the path offered in this essay can support for this intention.

Endnotes

1. Rudolf Steiner, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1995).
2. Rudolf Steiner, *Study of Man* (Forest Row, Sussex, UK: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2007).
3. Rudolf Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1994).
4. Rudolf Steiner, *Awakening to Community* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1974).
5. See note 3 above.
6. Rudolf Steiner, *Balance in Teaching*, Lecture 3 (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 2007).
7. Georg Kühlewind, *The Light of the "I"* (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 2008).

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