Contemplative Practice and Intuition in a Collegial Context:

An Action Research Project in a Waldorf School

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Intuition is a form of knowing-in-practice. It means knowing the right thing at the right moment. It is obviously helpful in understanding children, classroom practice, lesson preparation, and so on, but it is also crucial to the challenges of collegial work in teachers' meetings where intelligent decisions have to be made, problems have to be solved, complex issues resolved, prejudices overcome, and people with different backgrounds, views, and energies have to find ways of working together. This is a field that requires just as much inspiration and intuition as the classroom.

Guy Claxon[1] defines intuition in education as "immediate apprehension, without the intervention of any reasoning process." Intuition belongs to the field of what Michael Eraut[2] calls "ways to knowing" that involve recognizing previously unrecognized patterns, connections, and meaning, finding novel and creative solutions, grasping complexity, seeing things holistically, making quick decisions, and doing things that can be described as expertise that do not call for lengthy reflection, deliberation, or weighing up of options. Most theories of intuition assume that it draws on existing knowledge and perceptions that we are not aware of in the moment of intuition in a way that enables us to recognize new patterns. Over the past decade there has been an increasing number of studies on the nature of intuition in education,[3] medicine and nursing,[4] psychology,[5] and business.[6] There seems little doubt that intuition as a basis for action, decision-making, and judgment is widely acknowledged as a valid counterpart to more rational and systematic forms of knowledge.

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There are a number of ways in which intuition can be enhanced. Noddings and Shore[7] speak of the importance of acknowledging the validity of intuition as a form of knowledge, and Gill Gregory[8] speaks of developing trust in one's ability. McMahon[9] reports on two other factors: reflection on practice and finding periods of inner calm. Peter Lutzker[10] has shown empirically that artistic activities such as clowning and improvisation have helped Waldorf teachers gain "enhanced openness and attentiveness, a heightened sense of empathy, a larger degree of presence…and played an important role in helping teachers learn to address their own uncertainties, anxieties and mistakes in a constructive and creative manner." Rudolf Steiner's approach, discussed below, adds to these elements the activity of meditation and the notion that the human mind has access to spiritual knowledge in intuition.

Spiritual knowledge and teachers

As I discussed in a previous article,[11] Steiner described how teachers can learn to develop the intuitive abilities to know what a particular child needs or what the essence of a lesson should be in a few seconds by practicing *meditatively acquired knowledge of the human being*. There is no doubt that Steiner understood intuition as having a spiritual source; it is our way of grasping the spiritual dimensions of reality. He also made it clear that Waldorf teachers need to gain access

to spiritual knowledge and that this is the main reason why schools should determine their own curriculum and approach. The core aim of Waldorf education is both social and individual. A healthy society can arise only when each individual is enabled to develop his or her potential rather than fulfill the wishes of parents to reproduce their values or meet government targets and measureable outcomes. The potential of the next generation is by nature unpredictable and therefore cannot be predetermined or molded by existing forms, but Steiner had trust in this potential. The only people who can know what helps young people realize their potential in education are their teachers,[12] and they will know this only through intuition, which is a way of knowing that includes the future. Steiner told parents at the first Waldorf school:

> It should be characteristic of our teachers that they draw again and again from the living spiritual sources. In doing so they must feel responsible to the spiritual life and know that the spiritual life is free and independent. The school must be self-administrating; teachers cannot be civil servants. …The activity of teaching, if it is to be really independent, requires this direct connection to the sources of spiritual life.[13]

The question then for Waldorf teachers is: how can this connection be made effectively? In the course of my research with Waldorf teachers over the past few years I have encountered many theoretical explanations based on readings of what I have called elsewhere[14] the *Waldorf body of knowledge*, which includes Steiner's works as the primary source. However, hardly anyone I surveyed said they had independently gained access to spiritual knowledge. Given Steiner's commitment to the parents cited above, this ought to be worrying. However, I suspect that we are dealing with a mistaken interpretation. In my view, every teacher who experiences a profound insight or an intuition that later appears to have been pedagogically fruitful has been working with direct spiritual knowledge which they generated without recognizing it as such. Perhaps many Waldorf teachers are so daunted by Steiner's massive contributions that they expect spiritual knowledge to have a different form. Perhaps that makes them overlook the small everyday moments of spiritual insight that accumulate to make a significant difference in Waldorf education and that are not just simply the reproduction of Waldorf traditions. In the end this spiritual insight is what makes the difference between good teaching and good *Waldorf* teaching.

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Whilst there is no doubt we can improve the quality of our teaching through more systematic work with intuition, school leadership and self-administration—the other core activity of teachers—seems to have far greater need of attention in this respect. My research[15] has highlighted considerable dissatisfaction with forms of collegial working, decision-making, leadership and self-administration in teachers' meetings, and there is very little evidence of teachers actively working to enhance intuition in this field.

Steiner and intuition

In his book *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity,*[16] Steiner posits the possibility of human consciousness being able to free itself from sensory, temporal, and spatial boundaries and become able to apprehend concepts and ideas that cannot be perceived using our senses but can only be thought. In Steiner's epistemology we are able to grasp concepts through intuition. He wrote: "The manner in which the content of thought first appears we

will call intuition. Intuition is for thinking what observation is for perception. Intuition and observation are the sources of our knowledge."[17] If we think about what the relationship between observing and perceiving actually is, we realize that seeing is not the same as perceiving. *Observing* is more than seeing; it is focused looking. *Perceiving*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is becoming aware or conscious of something and even realizing or understanding it. Applying the analogy to the other side of creating knowledge, to the thinking side, we can thus understand intuition as the focused act of consciousness that reveals something in the form of a whole concept or idea that we then become aware of in thinking.

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Thus one could say that without intuition we would see only the pixels and not the content of the picture on an LCD monitor, or only a canvas covered in colored patches of varying sizes and not the painting. Intuition reveals to us not only the image, but something of the being, meaning, or consequences of that image. I say the *consequences* because intuition enables us to reach into the possible future inherent in what we experience—not the actual future, just the potential future. Without intuition, we would lack a sense of the whole, our relation to it, and its potential meaning for us, and indeed this is generally what happens when we are confronted with totally new experiences. Thus intuition, according to Steiner, is firstly the ability to grasp the whole inherent in a conglomeration of parts. This process starts at the mundane spatial level of being able to recognize objects and images in our field of perception and with practice extends to the ability to grasp non-visible processes such as the passage of time or the processes of development, metamorphosis, and evolution in living beings. This means being able to grasp connections and meanings over time and space, and this is the level we need as teachers if we are to understand people as they develop and recognize their unrealized potential. We need it to follow navigational ideals, such as social justice, and to understand complex phenomena in the world such economics or history that call for long-term awareness at multiple levels of complexity.

Steiner[18] calls this intuitive activity spiritual, not only because it draws on a non-material context, but because as an activity it is transformational. We generate knowledge by engaging our minds with the sense world. Rather than gaining knowledge directly from the sense world, which we experience in effect only in the form of pixels or their equivalence in sensory data, we construct knowledge in matching perceptions with what our mind already "knows" or at least has access to as a realm of ideas. In doing so, new experience occurs which changes us. Because these processes constitute spiritual reality, each new experience by a human being changes the world content in some way. Knowledge is constructed in the encounter of the world of ideas (accessible in thinking) with our experience of the world as revealed to us through observation and perception. The world content is nourished by human experience and revealed through intuition. The stage upon which this process occurs is the human mind, or in Steiner's terms, the soul. That's why we are not merely passive observers of events, simply computing quantities; we are living actors participating in the drama of life—feeling, knowing, and creating qualities—and the script of the drama is intuition.

Steiner gave teachers a methodology for receiving meditatively acquired knowledge[19] (study, meditative contemplation, and creative remembering). This methodology is an exercise

that helps us intensify experiences gained through textual study, observation, child study, discussion, and our own questioning curiosity. In meditative contemplation we focus our inner energies on an image (or words expressing a thought) drawn from these experiences. Steiner suggests that through contemplation we can arrive at a meditative understanding of what we have studied. Thereafter this process enters our whole rhythmic system and goes yet deeper into our being below the threshold of consciousness. Steiner says that this may be followed in some situations by an awakening, a remembering out of the spirit that brings new impulses. My own reading of this process is that in forgetting we allow the meditative understanding or insight into what we have reflected on to sink into unconsciousness, where the processes of assimilating, contextualizing, and connecting carries on beyond our daytime consciousness in what is, in effect, the spiritual dimension. Steiner speaks of meditating in the evening and knowing in the morning, using the analogy of nutrition, much of which is unconscious. Since our physical self is permeated with spirit, the meditated theme becomes literally embodied as a part of our organism, like a disposition.

Furthermore, since the spiritual world permeates all of us, such dispositions become distributed amongst all those people connected with us, such as pupils or colleagues. The community becomes sensitive to this new potential; the classroom or the meetings become primed and charged with affordances—that is, opportunities and preconditions for potential to be realized, like the conditions a seed needs to germinate. Intuition, when it occurs, is not merely a solitary event in an individual; it is always situated in a context related to it; otherwise, its meaning and potential would not be recognized or recognizable. Many intuitions are probably unfruitful because the situation is not fertile for them; only we don't notice.

When we engage in practice with the world (meeting a pupil, planning a lesson, working to find a decision in a meeting), our preparation makes us sensitive to the situation in ways we call intuition. The solution to the problem is intimately related to the problem. The mind—yours or mine—is the place where they meet and become conscious through us. An intuition about a pupil can occur only because of the spiritual (i.e., unconscious, non-physical) connection between seer and seen. Intuition always has both a subject and an object and both are reversible. The solution to the problem seeks me as much as I seek the solution to the problem. The one who is seen is as much a part of the process as the seer, though probably not consciously. This is why such processes (e.g., child studies, reflecting on children, considering applicants for a teaching post) need to be handled with the utmost ethical propriety. Thoughts are as real as physical deeds.

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Summarized and simplified, the sequence leading to intuition may involve:

- engaging in study, observation, discourse, gathering data
- consolidating and concentrating what we have learned into representations such as words, ideas, or images
- undertaking regular meditative contemplation of these understandings, which may further clarify themselves through repetition
- allowing this process to sink deeper into unconsciousness
- experiencing intuition during professional practice

The intuition is also the start of a new cycle of knowledge since it has changed me and, especially if acted upon, has altered or at least affected the subject of my intuition. In my view, the cycle should always conclude with a critical review of the process, leading to new questions. Not all intuitions prove to be true, or we may interpret them inappropriately, and not all experiences we take to be intuitions are indeed intuitions. Whatever the case, it is wise to reflect rationally and honestly on what has happened.

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Contemplative practice

Many teachers appear to be unfamiliar or uncertain about how to meditate and relate this to study and practice. I was fortunate to have been shown a simple way of practicing meditative contemplation at the outset of my career many years ago, and I decided to write down some basic instructions, which I called *contemplative practice*. I also drew on Arthur Zajonc's inspiring book *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry*,[20] which provides a culturally rich context for contemplative inquiry as well as guidance on its practice. I have introduced this practice in several schools and in various countries.[21]

The exercise requires one to create and visualize an image relating to the topic or theme one is studying or working with. This is then the focus of contemplation for around ten minutes. During this time each person keeps his or her focus on the image and observes compassionately, i.e., with care and interest but without judgement. Then the image is allowed to dissolve. The person then remains observant of the inner space that is created for a further ten minutes. This activity is repeated daily and requires only a brief period of quiet relaxation beforehand and afterwards. Before starting the teacher recalls, and records in a journal, relevant events and experiences since the last time the exercise was practiced.

It is important to stress that this form of contemplative practice does not focus directly on finding solutions. The "observer" observes his or her own thoughts and feelings as they arise in this context, without judgement, but with interest. Arthur Zajonc describes this process as follows:

> If we hold to the phenomena, they gradually become intelligible. We begin to see the relationships and patterns of appearance, and in this way work ourselves up to a high level of perceptive judgment that sees the coherence or meaning in what initially was indecipherable. (Zajonc, 2009, 148)

In this contemplative approach one is not striving to solve problems or riddles with rational thinking but rather engaging with the phenomenon in a conscious and attentive way. It is not an interrogation of the phenomenon but rather an invitation for it to show itself. The "observer," who at the same time constructs the mental image, seeks to engage in dialogue with the phenomenon by observing both the image and her or his own inner responses to it. The field of this dialogue is the individual's consciousness, during the first part of the exercise in wakeful consciousness, in subsequent phases at an unconscious level in forgetting.

Contemplation in this sense differs from meditation since it does not use mantra or breathing exercises to enter into a deeper state of consciousness. Thus one should not meditate intensively using images of pupils or other people because meditation is a powerful medium and as such can be invasive of other persons' intimate spaces, especially since

they are unaware that it is happening. The exercise described here is carried out in full consciousness and can be done even with eyes open. The images chosen should also therefore relate to school situations or pedagogical ideas and should avoid being too personal. We are part of such a situation, and the contemplation is only a few degrees more intense than observing the situation in a classroom or meeting. It involves more the quality of thinking *about* than thinking *into*. It may even take the form of carrying on the conversation about the subject internally. It assumes a good degree of observation and preparatory thought beforehand.

An example of contemplative practice

In the final part of this article I wish to report briefly on the outcome of an experiment with contemplative practice in one school that I twinned with a small-scale action research project to explore how contemplative practice can enhance the quality of problem solving in the teachers' meeting. The teachers involved agreed to follow every day for a period of several weeks a practice I had described. On the day this was to be introduced a crisis occurred involving the implementation of rules banning smoking on the school's grounds, which were being ignored by pupils and not consistently implemented by teachers. This topic had regularly been divisive, controversial, emotive, and the unsuccessful subject of repeated discussions over several years. It had now re-emerged and needed to be dealt with urgently. It was decided to use the contemplative practice method to enhance the discussions on this subject. The aim of the exercise was to come to a manageable and sustainable solution for the immediate problem and to implement this within four weeks, with three weeks being taken for the discussions. I gave each colleague a short written introduction to the contemplative inquiry method. Every Thursday about 45 minutes was devoted to the discussion of this topic.

Each week following the discussions in the meeting, each individual undertook to select an aspect of the discussions or topic itself and make this the subject of his or her meditative focus. At the beginning of each subsequent teachers' meeting, each colleague shared his or her experiences with one other colleague but otherwise these experiences were not discussed. What people would choose for their contemplative image was left open. Some chose to imagine actual situations on the playground, others focused on the discussions in the college, and others observed their own thoughts and feelings on the matter. Towards the end, most people said they focused on imagining the conditions necessary for possible solutions to the problem. I had not anticipated that the image might be an imagination of what was necessary, in other words an image of the future.

At the end of the process all those who had participated agreed to answer questions about their experience using a questionnaire, with open and closed questions, designed to establish whether the teachers thought the process had been fruitful and worth continuing, as well as to garner what they had experienced and were willing to share with the researcher.

A week after filling out the questionnaire, the teachers reviewed the process in a meeting and agreed to continue using the method with subsequent themes in the meetings. Following that I presented them with a summary of all the answers to the questionnaire, anonymously and mixed so that it was not possible to identify who had made each comment. 16 people participated in the process and 13 filled out a questionnaire. In addition, five people were then interviewed by me in follow-up to the questionnaire.

Most (11 from 13, with 2 "don't knows") of the participants felt that the exercise had been helpful, meaningful, and had enhanced the discussions and outcome. Typical comments included:

- The topic was more thoroughly brought into movement. The discussions however were less emotional, and there was a greater willingness to listen to one another.
- The "outcome" was experienced as the result of a working together.
- New ideas came; one could experience distinct changes in feeling and thinking.

Most of the participants felt that the exercise had enhanced the quality of discussions in the meetings (of the 13 questioned, 5 said yes definitely, 7 said probably). Asked to describe the process, the following descriptions were recorded:

- Predominantly goal-focused
- More consensus, less determined by personal feelings
- Over the course of the week an ever-growing clarity about the given theme, including suggestions for solutions and a surprising and astonishing clarity in the gathering and distributing of suggestions for solutions
- More courage in speaking [about my views] or saying anything at all
- Greater trust in what arose. Perhaps an "Aha" effect with more weight than usual
- To the theme: I had the impression that the discussions were generally and, for the first time, more possible without the emotional resistance of the participants. Basically (or in general): that has to do with one's own feelings and thoughts about the theme. If I become more conscious of my fears, defensiveness, tension, and rejection, etc., then I can relax more ("Aha! So that's how I think."). Through this relaxation, trust grows that that which happens is the best that can happen. That doesn't mean that I don't care about everything, but rather it means that I can wait with awareness in a relaxed way until I perceive the moment in which I can make my strength and ability available to what has to happen (from a higher perspective, that is, not only my opinion).
- Calming, gathering, accelerating, keeping the goal in view.

The sixth comment above expresses very well the subtlety of the increased self-observation process that was associated with this exercise.

Some of the participants described the process of creating a suitable image for the contemplation, though only briefly. These comments showed that, with increasing experience, greater certainty in the choice of image was achieved, which is only to be expected in what for many was a new experience. The extent to which the newness of the experience led to heightened awareness and how much was due to the contemplative practice is at this stage impossible to judge. The perceived effectiveness of the exercise in so short a time was also no doubt due to the careful leadership of the meetings. This factor, though desirable in itself, does not, however, explain the fact that most participants felt better prepared inwardly for the meetings. For the record, this exercise did not solve the smoking problem. Sadly, the pupils still smoke. However, they do so now in a designated area, and it is easier to regulate this and deal with those underage smokers by applying clear rules. What changed was the collegial atmosphere and the sense that it is possible to find working solutions in a constructive way.

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Conclusions

In this case contemplative practice seemed to support the process of collegial deliberation mainly by enabling the participants to focus on the issue and recognize, overcome, or revise their tacit and implicit attitudes, knowledge, and assumptions, thus making them more open to new ideas and possibilities. A wide range

of creative solutions came up, which suggests an increase in creativity. It also highlights the point that complex problems are less likely to be solved by a single intuition, but rather from several individual intuitions that relate to aspects of the situation. The teachers' group was markedly coherent and collegial. I think one can tentatively say that the exercise helped create conditions within which individuals could gain more confidence in their intuitions, and the group of teachers was able to find creative solutions more quickly than usual. Even after a relatively short time teacher learning within the community of practice was enhanced, if only temporarily. Obviously continuing the practice would be recommended. In other experiments being carried out, contemplative practice is supporting child studies, curriculum studies, and in some cases management decision-making.

Endnotes

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18. Ibid., p. 269.
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21. Space does not permit a fuller description of the exercise here. The text given to teachers may be acquired from the author by email at rawsonmartyn@hotmail.com.

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