The High School Years

Douglas Gerwin

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
– Robert Frost[1]

In a lecture entitled "Education for Adolescents," Rudolf Steiner describes how, from puberty onwards, "latent questions" begin rising in the minds of young adults concerning all aspects of life in the world. Steiner says that the teacher must help adolescents articulate these questions—without, however, falling into the trap of answering them—"so that riddles arise in their youthful souls."[2]

If riddles do not come to consciousness in the growing teenager, then the soul forces that would normally give rise to these life questions run the risk of being diverted in two directions: toward a lust for the erotic or toward a lust for power. In other words, with puberty a creative urge awakens in teenagers that can realize itself in both senses of the verb "to conceive"—that is, in the capacity to give birth to abstract ideas as well as the capacity to create new human life. Starting with this age, we are able to conceive our own thoughts no less than our own offspring. If these burgeoning powers of abstract thinking—a thinking saturated, to be sure, with deep feeling and yearning for ideals—are thwarted, then they may be redirected to one or the other form of lust.

Though they share a common origin, the lust for the erotic and the lust for power manifest themselves in the human soul as opposites. The lust for the erotic may be felt as erupting out of deep and mysterious depths, like a volcano overwhelming the conscious mind with feelings that carry the searing heat of desire:

From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.[3]

By contrast, the lust for power may be felt as a powerful intellectual force of cognition descending as though from above, taking hold of our will with an icy calculating intention born of cold hatred.

But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.[4]

Generalizations are risky, but boys are probably more likely to divert this creative intellectual energy into a pursuit of the physical eroticism, girls into the pursuit of psychological power. You will more often discover pornographic

magazines hidden beneath the beds of the boys, for example, than of the girls, and the legion of X-rated sites on the Internet is far more geared to lure male than female visitors. On the other side of the sexual divide, the sometimes catty and even cruel behavior more typical of young adolescent girls may be understood as an expression of a lust for power.

It is important, though, to remember that both erotic and power lusts originate in the same capacity of soul—namely, in the capacity to conceive. In this context, one may ask how this capacity can be exercised without being prematurely drawn into physical expression or behavioral perversion.

Here Rudolf Steiner points to the redemptive value of beauty for engaging the erotic sense before it is diverted into the sensual and to the value of deeds of altruism in harnessing the lust for power before it is turned to selfish purpose. Ultimately, lusts of any kind stimulate a craving that can never be satisfied. In contrast, experiences of beauty and altruism yield nourishment that is deeply and lastingly satisfying. [I wonder if prophylactic can be deleted without losing the meaning. Condoms are often called prophylactics!]

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For insight into the more general latent questions that live just below adolescent consciousness, we may turn to the Waldorf high school curriculum and the riddles it can inspire. In their specifics, these questions will take on an individual character in the mind and heart of each teenager who poses them. But in general it is perhaps possible to identify four simple yet archetypal questions that are bound to arise, and which the Waldorf high school curriculum is designed to address at each level of a student's four-year high school career.

Each year of the Waldorf high school curriculum embodies, in broad strokes, an underlying question or theme that helps guide students, not just through their studies of outer phenomena, but through their inner growth as well. These themes and methods are adapted to each specific group of students and take account of the fact that teenagers mature at varying paces—hence the "broad strokes." And yet, one can identify struggles common to most any teenager. Even though adolescents pass through developmental landscapes at varying speeds, they all nonetheless will cover similar terrain.

Grade Nine

As freshmen plunge into the high school, they are also plunging with new intensity into the materiality of their bodies—with the unfolding of puberty—and into the immateriality of abstract thinking. There is tension in this opposition, often struggle, and occasionally even revolt.

The ninth grade curriculum is designed with these tremendous developmental changes and struggles in mind. It allows the students to see their inner experiences reflected back to them in outer phenomena. In physics, for instance, students study in thermodynamics the opposition of heat and cold; in chemistry, the expansion and contraction of gases; in history, the conflicts and the resulting revolutions in the United States, France, Russia, China, and Iran; and in geology, the collision of plate tectonics.

Through the chaos and tension of these struggles, students are summoned to exercise powers of exact observation; in the sciences, to describe and draw precisely what happened in the lab experiments and demonstrations (without, adding, from the outset, an overlay of theoretical explanation); in the humanities, to recount clearly a sequence of events or to describe the nature of a character without getting lost in a plethora of details. The objective here is to train in the students powers of exact observation and reflection so that they can experience in the raging storm of phenomena

around them the steady ballast of their own thinking. Strong powers of wakeful perception form the basis for later years of study, well beyond high school.

One may summarize the content and approach of this freshman curriculum with the underlying question: **What?** *What happened? What's going on here? What did you see and hear?*

Grade Ten

Emerging from the turmoil of grade nine, the tenth grader may begin to discover a certain balance point between the violent collision of opposites. Physically, the boys may achieve a steadier gait as their legs thicken and catch up with their oversized feet, while the girls may appear more poised and upright. Mentally, the sophomores may begin to bring a certain order to the confusion of their thoughts, a calming mid-point to the turbulence of opposites.

The curriculum responds to this search with subjects that incorporate the comparison and balancing of contrasting opposites: in chemistry, the study of acids and bases; in physics, the principles of mechanics; in earth sciences, the self-regulating processes of weather patterns; in astronomy, the co-equality of centripetal and centrifugal forces; in embryology, the play of masculine and feminine influences.

Through the study of balance in natural and human phenomena, students can begin to find their own fulcrum. In so doing, they are called to exercise powers of comparison and contrast, weighing in the balance contrary phenomena to determine their value and significance, as well as their origin.

Students may discover that in this balancing of opposites, new forms can arise—in clouds and tides, or in planets and solar systems, or in male and female sexuality. This discovery may in turn prompt the desire to explore the origins of things, to find the source of these forms in the beginnings of the universe or of history or of human language. In other words, the study of ancient times can now be taken up at a deeper level.

One may summarize the themes of this grade with the underlying question: **How?** *How does this relate to that? How do these contrasting phenomena interrelate? And how did they come about?*

Grade Eleven

As adolescents enter the second half of their high school career, generalizations about their development become increasingly difficult. The strokes must grow ever broader. "Sweet Sixteen" and beyond, however, is a typical time of newfound depths to the inner life of thoughts, feelings, and deeds. Deeper—and more individualized—latent questions may begin to burn. This may be the year in which students feel the urge to change schools or even to drop out of school altogether. In these inner promptings, a new and urgent voice speaks: "Leave behind what you have been given and get on with your own journey!" Outer statements of growing independence (already visible in earlier years) may also abound—in dress, hairstyles, the pursuit of part-time jobs, and what used to be the most exciting and sometimes premature token of maturity—the driver's license.[5]

The curriculum for the junior year allows students to cut free to a greater degree from their peers and set off on their own uncharted course into the invisible recesses of life within. The junior year curriculum could be characterized by this theme of "invisibility": namely, by the study of those subjects that draw the student into areas not accessible to the experience of our senses. Such a journey requires a new type of thinking—thinking no longer anchored in what our senses give us—as well as a feeling of confidence that this type of thinking will not lead us astray.

In literature, this journey to an invisible source is captured in the main lesson blocks devoted to the Grail legends and to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Other subjects, however, call