Waldorf Teachers – Artists or Mooncalves: Parzival and the New Knowledge

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> As a mere scientist you are just a mooncalf.[1]
>
> Only … when your knowledge takes on artistic form do you become a human being.[2]
>
> – Rudolf Steiner

The 2015 National Teachers Conference of South Africa closed with a lecture in which the Waldorf school was described as a "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), with the teachers—each in their individual way—being its co-creators. Such grand words are entirely appropriate for the closing lecture of a national conference, and reminding ourselves about such high ideals is absolutely necessary, but, in being uttered, the words call up the question: How close are we to realizing this in real, rather than merely cosmetic terms, and what does it really mean?

To answer the second part of the question first: What it means is a school composed of the collective actions of a group of teachers whose knowledge has, in Steiner's sense, "take[n] on artistic form." This is easy to say, but doing it is another matter. In this, the answer to the first part of the question is already implied, for how many of our teachers could say of themselves that they have achieved this ideal state, or that they even understand what is meant by it?

So the big question here is: How does knowledge become artistic?[3] Or even: Is there such a thing as artistic knowledge, and if so, what is its nature and significance?

I would like to address these issues with a consideration of the Parzival story as a possible source of artistic knowledge. Initially, however, I need to back up a bit, for before our knowledge can "take on artistic form," we need a better idea of what is involved here.

The quotation cited above becomes particularly poignant when it is seen in relation to the crisis in modern biology. The crisis in modern biology? Well, does a constant stream of findings that call the central theoretical framework of biological science into question constitute a crisis? Doubts are being voiced on all sides in many leading journals, and the interesting thing is that these doubts are being fueled by the new experimental techniques available to biologists. In other words, our ability to analyze genomes and their associated processes in detail is what has created the crisis. Multiplying the data is not going to solve it. Perhaps it is time to take the step from "mooncalf" to "human being." This will require not a shift in experimental technique, but a shift in epistemology.

Is there such a thing as artistic knowledge, and if so, what is its nature and significance?

My awareness of this I owe almost entirely to the writings of Steve Talbott.[4] In a series of articles that have appeared over the past ten years, he has documented recent developments in molecular biology, and the story he tells is highly illuminating. In doing so he has provided us with a resource of inestimable value, and one which teachers worldwide should be aware of, especially if their knowledge is to "take on artistic form." What he has been doing is working his way through thousands of scientific papers published in molecular biology journals, summarizing and commenting upon what he finds there. Essentially, he has documented the continuing fall-out from the Human Genome Project. This, if you remember, was going to deliver us the "holy grail" of biology—full molecular working

knowledge of the human genome. It has done nothing of the kind. Instead, it has done something much more exciting and unexpected. It, and the research following on from it, has uncovered untold layers of complexity at the intra-cellular level, and through these revelations the "unquestionable certainties" of the gene-centered theory of evolution (i.e., neo-Darwinism), which have dominated biological thinking for the last 40-odd years, have begun to totter: DNA can no longer be regarded, in any sense, as the master molecule of life; epigenetic effects upon the genome—formerly ruled out in principle—are now commonplace; the concept of the gene as a causal reality and its code nature are being called into question; the notion of random mutation as the driving force of evolutionary change is now virtually untenable. In such a climate the standard neo-Darwinian "algorithm" of random mutation plus natural selection is hard to maintain.

Perhaps the greatest discovery, however, has been that everything at the microbiological level—just as much as at the ecological level—is *context-dependent*. As a group of French researchers[5] recently put it: "It appears that everything does everything to everything." Chromosomes, it would seem, are not rigid, robotic controllers, but rather are enmeshed in a complex, constantly shape-shifting "dance" orchestrated by cellular "music" from many different sources both inside and outside the nucleus. The more this dance is analyzed, the more partners join it, and the less it is susceptible to analysis. As Steve Talbott eloquently puts it: "Having plunged headlong toward the micro and molecular in their drive to reduce the living to the inanimate, biologists now find unapologetic life staring back at them," and this life seems to be that of the *organism as a whole*. We may well be witnessing the demise of the gene and the rebirth of the organism.

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With this discovery—or perhaps I should say, re-discovery—of context-dependency, analytical reason in biology seems to have arrived at an impasse. There are just so many variables, so many regulated "regulators," so many ways in which the same molecular configuration can mean different things, so many cellular and chromosomal topologies tailored in the moment to fit unique circumstances, that in the end the complex multiplicity of interpenetrating contexts simply defies analysis—and not merely in fact, but in principle.[6] This state of affairs creates a certain epistemological pressure. If one style of knowledge—analytical reason—is here experiencing the limits of its reach, extending that reach any further will require a different style of knowledge. The extension in question is that of apprehending an ever-widening context, widening to encompass the organism as a whole, and then further. In other words, a style of knowledge is required that can generate knowledge of the Whole.

It is perhaps worth mentioning in this connection another radical aspect of this state of affairs. This is the fact that, having sought the fundamental at the micro level and persistently failed to find it, we are now being forced, by the phenomena themselves, to recognize that the *Whole is what is fundamental*. And how are we to arrive at knowledge of the Whole? Knowledge that does not replace, but rather enhances and extends analytical reason?

The initial answer is that knowledge that has "take[n] on artistic form" would do just this. I realize that this sounds like a rather bland anti-climax, but that is partly the point. This style of knowledge is not necessarily spectacular, but it fits the bill, and how it does this will, I hope, become clear in what follows. Moreover, it would appear that the artistic sensibility that enables a school to be a total work of art and the style of knowledge required

to extend the reach of modern biology are one and the same.

Knowledge of this kind is closely akin to what comes upon us sometimes as a sudden state of heightened awareness.[7] Such experiences, which have been known as epiphanies ever since James Joyce applied this term to them, are often provoked by a natural phenomenon of some kind—a landscape, the song of a bird, or any number of other phenomena. Whatever the catalyst, what we feel at such a moment is that we have been touched by the intrinsic meaning of some greater presence. We have been visited by the Whole, of which the phenomenon in focus is—while the moment lasts—a particularly striking representation. Experiences like this are entirely individual, but they nonetheless have some features in common: They come to us "at a tangent," completely unbidden; they are participatory[8] (in other words, they dissolve our normal alienation from our surroundings, making us feel at one); they are unrepeatable and yet they call forth a longing to repeat the experience. Indispensable as they are, we cannot base a system of knowledge (to say nothing of education[9]) upon the elusive vagaries of spontaneous epiphanies. The question therefore arises as to whether it is possible to induce what might be called the "achieved epiphany." An answer to this question is given by Goethe:

> There is a delicate empiricism that identifies itself so profoundly with the phenomenon that it becomes its own theory. But such an expansion of consciousness belongs to a highly cultured age.

The expansion of consciousness arrived at by the practice of delicate empiricism, which involves the disciplined application of what Goethe calls "exact sensorial imagination," is what I mean by an "achieved epiphany." The effect of the achieved epiphany is the same as that of the spontaneous one: direct participatory contact with the Whole, through one of its representations. This, of course, does not give us knowledge of the Whole in any analytical sense; rather, what we arrive at is an awareness of super-ordinate presence,[10] which is akin to the enhancement of sensibility produced (or not) by a great work of art, be it musical, poetic, or visual. The Goethean practice of delicate empiricism is, in effect, "knowledge tak[ing] on artistic form."

Art is human culture's perpetually forlorn attempt to express some greater reality, and at least it knows that some kind of groping expression is the best we can do.

This knowledge is never complete; indeed it mostly defies articulation. No one could ever claim to have knowledge of the Whole, but the continual effort—as the poet Louis MacNeice has it—to "eavesdrop on the Great Presences"[11] gives us a sense, or inkling of the Whole, which can permeate, inform, and fructify all our thinking. To have a sense of wholeness as it lives in the individual phenomenon upon which our attention is focused is the essence of artistically formed knowledge. There may well be pathways to this other than the Goethean one, but it is clear that if teachers (specifically science teachers) who have to teach their students about the "parts" of nature are to be human beings rather than mere mooncalves, they need to have this living sense of what is fundamental.

While art can no more give us working knowledge of the Whole than can science, art is by far the more realistic in its approach to this problem. Art is human culture's perpetually forlorn attempt to express some greater reality, and at least it knows that some kind of groping *expression* is the best we can do. Science, driven by analytical reason, is forever trying to eliminate the great mystery by reducing the greater to the lesser. It is the attempt to arrive at the literal, fundamental parts (a.k.a. "basic building blocks").

If modern physics, and now modern biology, have shown us anything, it surely must be that there are no such "blocks."[12] The deeper we probe into the "mechanisms" of the cell, the more the mysteries multiply. We look for fundamental parts and instead find fundamental wholeness staring back at us.

One of the great works of art that seems to have been written (I'm not suggesting that it was) with this in mind is Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival.* I have had the privilege of working with this story for over a decade in a variety of schools and other contexts, and during this time it has become increasingly clear to me that "Parzival" is something of a paradigm of artistic knowledge, as I have been speaking of it here. Many features of the hero's journey are like stations on a path towards this goal, and I would like to outline them briefly.

In the realm of participatory imagination we can have clarity without definition, for here we have the rational as the servant of the artistic.

Parzival does not have a courtly upbringing. He grows up in the Forest of Soldane, to which his mother had moved with all her household in order to prevent her son from ever learning about knighthood. Instead of courtly life, nature is his teacher. In portraying Parzival's childhood in this way, Wolfram is saying something rather radical for his time, and also about himself. In another poem he writes:

> Every plant, scent, every kind of stone
> Is fully familiar, Lord, to you …
> I feel your presence through my senses,
> For what is written in books
> To me has always seemed strange –
> My senses[13] have been my only teacher.

When we consider that in the medieval worldview nature was the fallen, sub-lunar world of death, temptation, and evil, it is extraordinary to find Wolfram speaking in such terms and making nature the teacher of his greatest hero. Through this natural education Parzival may have learned much about the seasonal life of forests and their animals, but when—having heard, as was inevitable, about knighthood—he sets off to become a knight, he is still in a state of radical ignorance as to the ways of the world and even of his personal identity. He knows nothing of his family, nor even his own name. His training in the arts of knighthood remedies the former to some extent, but does nothing to allay the latter, although he had at least learned his name.

It is in this state of radical ignorance, which is also a state of openness, that Parzival experiences the ultimate epiphany: He stumbles upon the Grail castle Munsalvaesche (although only later does he learn its name). He comes into this visionary landscape in the true style of the spontaneous epiphany—he has been riding all day (in a love-trance) without holding the reins and in this way "finds" the castle which cannot be found by diligent seeking, but must be come upon unawares. Here the drama, grandeur, and solemnity of what he witnesses overwhelm him to the point of speechlessness, and although he has a sense of having experienced something of very profound meaning, he has no idea what that meaning is.

Finding himself cursed on all sides for his failure to come to terms with this situation, there awakens in him a very strong desire to find his way back to Munsalvaesche and the Grail, but the experience he was granted, like all spontaneous epiphanies, is unrepeatable. So now the path he follows is necessarily one towards an achieved epiphany, and the rest of the book is the complex story of how this comes about.

The path towards this ultimate consummation is arduous and tortuous, and never are we given the impression that the outcome is a foregone conclusion (which is entirely in keeping with the way things are in real life, where no outcomes are guaranteed). This path requires

dogged determination in the midst of doubt and despair—on the way he meets the allegorical figures of Lady Love and Lady Reason—and it encompasses initiation processes for the book's two main characters, i.e., Gawain[14] and Parzival himself.

From a Goethean perspective the episode involving Lady Love and Lady Reason is highly instructive. First of all, very graphic expression is given to the participatory relationship to the world remarked on earlier. The fact that our perceptual intentionality is active in the *construction* of reality is signified in this episode by the mirroring of Parzival's mental state in the external image of snow—where he is it has snowed, whereas at Arthur's encampment nearby it is flowery May-time. The coldness of Parzival's self-punishing thinking is intensified by the fact that, as he sits there alone waiting out the night, a falcon (lost the previous day by King Arthur's falconers) perches on a branch above his head. Thus we have the striking image of the hero, stuck in his cold, lonely, inner-outer wasteland with a falcon—the intensified extension of his mental state—above his head. It is through the falcon that a change occurs. In the first grey of the dawn a flock of geese fly by. The falcon tries its luck on one of them, but only succeeds in wounding it, and three drops of blood fall down on the snow before Parzival. He contemplates this phenomenon, identifying with it so completely that he "loses his senses," although he is actually using them with falcon-like intensity. He is now described as "in thrall to Lady Love." The "theory" that emerges from this intense practice of delicate empiricism is the image of Condwiramurs, Parzival's wife.

The story of Parzival is something of a paradigm of artistic knowledge.

But then comes a challenge from beyond his sphere of attention. Contact with the three drops of blood is broken, Lady Reason re-asserts herself, his "senses" are restored, and he is able to engage in a joust. Having completed this task, Parzival trots back to the three drops of blood and is once again in thrall to Lady Love. Three times Parzival goes through this transition from total perceptual identification (Lady Love) to rational detachment (Lady Reason); the third time his "senses" are restored he finds himself face to face with Gawain, with whom his path towards the goal will henceforth be inextricably linked.

The parallel in the paths of these two heroes is very striking. It would go too far to list all the details, but it can nevertheless be said that while on his parallel path to Parzival, Gawain tends to follow the dictates of his heart—he is ruled by Lady Love—whereas Parzival, despite his susceptibility to love trances, tends to be a follower of Lady Reason. All this has been set from the beginning in a symbolic context involving the polarity of black and white as contrasting yet complementary aspects of the soul. The goal is not to eliminate the one or the other, but to balance them, and the same goes for our two allegorical ladies. The processes of initiation for these two heroes are oriented, each in their specific ways, towards this goal.

The goal is not to eliminate Love or Reason, but to balance them.

In following his heart, Gawain finds himself facing a series of trials, which end in his being granted "vision" (by looking into a crystal pillar that gives him a panoramic view of everything happening for six miles around). Meanwhile Parzival, in addition to grimly seeking and accepting any contest of arms that offers itself, undergoes what nowadays would be called an extensive therapy session. In a long, difficult, and painful conversation with the hermit, Trevrizent, Parzival is brought face to face with himself, both in terms of his deeds and of his ancestral identity. He is also told much about the nature of the Grail. Surprisingly, in this story the Grail is a *stone* with properties that give it a very wide frame of historical and mythic reference.

Armed with this new knowledge, Parzival leaves Trevrizent much more at peace with himself, but still following his lonely quest.

Whereas Gawain, the "heart-knight" has acquired, through his trials, a measure of "vision," Parzival, the "head-knight," has acquired, through this first phase of his own initiation, a greater degree of "heart." Both are now more balanced than they were before, and it is at this point that these two, as a result of a very elaborate train of circumstances, meet in battle. When they finally discover who it is they each have been fighting—this moment comes when Gawain is on the point of defeat—they abruptly break off the contest. Now they both express the same sentiment: "I have been fighting against myself." From here Parzival again goes on alone, but he has now fulfilled the second stage of his own initiation: He has come to terms with, and fully integrated, the "Gawain" within himself. Thought has become permeated with feeling, and vice versa.

Gawain, the "heart-knight," acquired a measure of "vision;" Parzival, the "head-knight," acquired a greater degree of "heart."

Now he is ready for the next stage—yet another battle, this time against a figure who bears all the marks of a much more profound layer of the human soul than Gawain. This next character is an image of polarity, but one in which the poles abut each other in stark contrast, for his skin is both black and white. His dark armor is studded with jewels of many colors, as is his sword and the apparel of his horse. He is the commander of a vast army composed of men from 25 different peoples (of Africa!). If ever there was a consciously constructed image of the naked, dynamically polarized power of the human will, this surely must be it. This is Feirefiz, Parzival's half-brother, and it is the "Feirefiz" within himself that Parzival is now called upon to master. Once again both knights utter the same symbolic formula: "It is against myself I have been fighting." Parzival does not defeat Feirefiz, but certainly proves himself his equal.

The battle with Feirefiz is brought to an end when Parzival's sword breaks. This actually signals the end of his career as a knight, and he has in fact come to a kind of still point. He remains entirely in the dark as regards any outcome of his quest, but in mind, heart, and the depths of his will he seems at peace with himself. Only now, with this "integration of the personality," is he called to the Grail castle, and the great consummation of the narrative unfolds.

Despite this consummation, however, the central focus of the narrative, namely the Grail, remains as much a mystery as it ever was. We have gleaned more *information* about it along the way, but this does not make its existence and its nature any less of a mystery. All along it has been the central symbol of the story, and yet at the end of the tale it still remains—a symbol. Wolfram allows this symbol to dissolve into the natural and cosmic background out of which it first emerged. In this quality of fundamental inscrutability it merges here with what I have been saying about the quality of the Whole. The Grail, as it appears in the Parzival story, can stand, like no other I know, as a master symbol of the Whole.

In presenting this very short account of some of the salient features of this story, I have been trying to show how Parzival moves from the primary experience of the spontaneous epiphany to the mature perspective of the achieved epiphany. Each stage of this path both deepens his self-knowledge and brings him closer to knowledge of the Whole.

To experience and study the Parzival story is to have direct experience of the nature of artistic knowledge. Artistic sensibility approaches the Whole and expands the mind into the realm of Wholeness, but without delivering any analytical knowledge of it, or indeed any hope of doing so. With analytical knowledge you know *how*, whereas with artistic knowledge you simply know *that*.

We are in the realm where Lady Love—participatory imagination—holds sway, and although she cannot articulate anything without the help of Lady Reason, the latter's sphere of influence with its tendency towards abstraction and its desire for clear definition must be held in check. In Lady Love's realm we can have clarity *without* definition, for here the normal epistemological tables are turned, and instead of imagination eking out a meager existence along the margins of reason, we have the rational as the servant of the artistic imagination. The artistic imagination does not deal in facts but in meaningful expression experienced in the moment. To hear, read, and study a work like *Parzival* is to experience such an epistemological inversion in action.

A style of knowledge is required that can generate knowledge of the Whole.

A similar inversion is required if conventional scientific sensibility is to be transformed into artistic sensibility. The practice of what Goethe calls "delicate empiricism" is a way of doing this. On this path we may not encounter three drops of blood on snow, but if we persist we will soon come to the realization that all apparent "things," all phenomena, are in one way or another *expressions* of the greater context in which they are embedded (ultimately the Whole). Expressed artistically, this means that all phenomena are *natural symbols.* The English poet and philosopher, S.T. Coleridge, puts it like this:

> [A] Symbol is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. … It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible, and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part of that Unity, of which it is the representative.

"Things as representations" is a major implication of contextual thinking. There is, as Owen Barfield says, "no other thinghood."

This translucence of the greater context within the lesser appearance seems to apply at all levels of reality. This is precisely what molecular biologists are being confronted with in their discovery of all-pervasive context-dependency. The problem is, with their seemingly unshakable allegiance to analytical reason and their use of mechanistic terminology, they do not have an epistemology (or, for that matter, a language) that can make sense of this. But if knowledge were to "take on artistic form," for instance, by embracing such a process as is exemplified by the Parzival story, then the necessary epistemology would be in place. They would know that their desperate search for ultimate causal bits was futile, and that the path of knowledge rather lies in penetrating with the questing imagination into ever-widening contexts.

Such a change, sorely needed now, would give researchers the ears to hear what the phenomena they study are actually saying to them. If they listened we might be able to step back from the brink of a world governed by transgenic organisms, nanobots, and robotic hybrids,[15] and move instead towards something more like Goethe's "highly cultured age."

Waldorf teachers, in becoming human beings rather than "mooncalves," have a chance to make an essential contribution to this change, while at the same time creating schools that are "total works of art."

ENDNOTES

1 "Mooncalf" is what the drunken Stephano called the man-monster Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest.*

2 From *Balance in Teaching*, lecture 2 (GA 302a).

3 It is worth noting at the outset that while the Waldorf world has done a lot of thinking, writing, and talking about making teaching artistic, it has done comparatively little in this direction in the case of knowledge.

4 The series can be found under the heading "Toward a biology worthy of life" on the website of The Nature Institute: natureinstitute.org. [Talbott has written for the *Research Bulletin* as well: www.waldorflibrary.org – Ed.]

5 Dumont, Jacques E., Fréderic Pécasse and Carine Maenhaut (2001) "Crosstalk and Specificity in Signaling: Are We Crosstalking Ourselves into General Confusion?" *Cellular Signaling,* Vol. 13, pp.457–463.

6 When there are so many contextually responsive variables in play, it becomes impossible in principle to predict outcomes.

7 The English poet, Wordsworth, spoke in this connection of "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused"; Freud referred to this as "the oceanic feeling." There are probably as many names for this experience as there are writers who have spoken of it.

8 This term is taken from the writings of Owen Barfield (e.g., *Saving the Appearances*). He has very convincingly shown that all our normal experience is participatory, although modern consciousness has developed in such a way that we are not aware of this. The epiphany is a moment when we become directly aware of the participatory nature of our experience.

9 In a certain way, of course, we do do this. An intrinsic feature of the art of Waldorf pedagogy is the designing of lessons so that moments of epiphany are rendered possible. That they will actually happen is never a foregone conclusion.

10 Andreas Suchantke calls this "das übergeordnete Ganze" in Ch. 5 of *Metamorphose – Kunstgriff der Evolution* (Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 2002), translated as *Metamorphosis – Evolution in Action* (Adonis Press 2009).

11 This phrase comes in the first stanza of his poem "Entirely."

12 If this seems something of a bald assertion, it receives very convincing support from an article by Henri Bortoft: "Counterfeit and Authentic Wholes" in *Goethe's Way of Science,* ed. David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc (SUNY Press 1999).

13 The expression in German here is "mein Sinn," which could be construed as something like "my own native intelligence," but I have chosen its other meaning.

14 The actual spelling is "Gawan," but I have always felt that "Gawain" sits better on the English ear.

15 If you would like to check out the delights that artificial intelligence has in store for us, take a look at *The Singularity Is Near* by Ray Kurzweil (Penguin 2006).

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