

Understanding Imitation through a Deeper Look at Human Development

Joop van Dam

The little child is a will being. The truth of this struck me when my little grandchild sat at the table and banged on it again and again with a spoon. He was placed on the floor, but continued to move his arm. So much movement—as if he were moving towards the future. Then he began going up the stairs, upwards, upwards until the moment came when he fell down the stairs, but that did not bother him. He began to climb again.

This is the will that is so associated with the body, but there is another will, too. It is like the other leg on which the child walks or the other wing with which it flies. This is the tremendous trust and confidence with which the child meets the world. This openness and trust is so great in the small child and is one of the reasons a very young child can seem so large. He embraces the world. A family went to visit friends who had a newborn baby. One of the visiting boys said to his little sister, "The baby is so small." "Oh, no," the girl said, "my brothers are small, but the baby is very big."

Imitation lives and moves in the child with these two legs or wings: that which opens to the world inwardly from the body and that which opens to the world in trust. Where do these two forces come from?

What do the scientists today say about the child? The old theories are disappearing. Before, it was said that children develop according to their instincts and drives. Then, the environment enters and the child learns to hold its instincts back. Out of this process conscience develops. Today, science acknowledges a third element that is most important. It has to do with the I, or individuality, of the child working through and finding its way in the world. This is the power of initiative that is there from the beginning.

American Professor of Psychology, Daniel N. Stern, MD, wrote an excellent book entitled *Diary of a Baby*. It describes how the baby is full of initiative from the beginning onwards. From the seventh month, the child begins to notice something in itself and also something in its mother. The child begins to seek its mother with full trust and confidence. She is the one who guides the child, and there is a time around the eighth or ninth month when the child wants only her mother. After this time, the child opens more widely again to others.

Through this trust, the child orients very strongly to human beings. He finds his way into the world as he gazes at the face of his mother. There is a very important law at work here—through other people the child develops his own individuality. Through the warmth of others, his

own warmth develops. When I visited Monte Azul in the favela of Sao Paulo, the center developed by Ute Kramer, I was deeply impressed by the clinic where children are born. The mother and baby stay there for three days, and the fathers can also sleep there. It is a wonderful place, and for three days the infant can experience the world in its warmth and beauty. The child can open in full trust.

Between child and parent there is a very subtle but very important dialogue which takes place. The child begins the conversation when it comes down to earth to the parents. Rudolf Steiner, when lecturing in the Hague, said, "From the spiritual world the child has come to you." Now the mother can answer, and it is important that she does. She speaks, and how she speaks is of the greatest importance. It is not what she says that matters, but how she responds to her child. Modern science calls this the intuitive response of the parents. The child also has an intuition that arises from its will. The mother is able to perceive what her child needs. How does she do this? She does it through love. The child has a love for the whole world, and this is echoed by the love of the mother for the child. A deep love is created for this child who has selected her as a mother.

In this dialogue, there are two voices. The child begins, and the mother answers. Her being is a complement to the child's trust that helps the individuality of the child incarnate into the world in his or her body. Children are not fully in their bodies but hover above it, looking down on themselves. A man described two strong experiences he had which appeared to be memories of how he viewed himself from above as a child. In one, he saw a sand hill and he saw himself as a child climbing the hill, viewing it from above. On another occasion, he saw a grandfather with a baby on his lap and realized that he was the baby as seen from above.

The role of the mother, or guiding person, was observed by Dr. Spitz, who compared two

children's homes. They were very similar in terms of hygiene, etc., but one was an orphanage for children without parents, while, in the other, the children were visited twice daily by their mothers who were in prison next door. What happened to the children? Those in the orphanage were much slower in their development. They learned to walk and talk much later than the children who saw their mothers regularly. A third of the orphans died before age six. They did not find their way into their bodies. A child needs a guiding person in order to incarnate into the body.

When I was a boy and was ill, my bed was moved next to my mother's. I welcomed this and expressed it by saying, "My mother sleeps me healthy again." Through this openness to the world and the subtle dialogue with the mother, the child finds its way to its own body, but Rudolf Steiner spoke of more than just the physical body. He also spoke of the etheric or life body, the astral body, and the I. What does it mean that the etheric is born around age seven? The etheric body has two aspects. One aspect has to do with the nature or natural side of the etheric that helps to build up the physical body.

There is also a cultural side, however, which relates to the development of consciousness, for it relates to memory and thinking. We experience this side when we are tired and find we can't remember things. It's easier to think in the morning when the etheric is refreshed.

The birth of the etheric in the child occurs in stages. During the first third of the first seven-year period, the etheric frees itself from the head. We see this in the children's drawings—all those circles! In the second third, the etheric of the middle system is born. Now rhythmic play begins, and one sees the middle realm develop in drawings. In the final third from roughly five to seven, the etheric frees itself from the limbs and metabolic system. Now the will develops much more strongly, and children stay with a task much longer. Also the question of death arises

at this time. A five-year-old, for instance, spoke of "lebensmittel." This German word for food contains "leben" in it, which means life. "Lebensmittel," said the child, "That's what we eat so we don't die, right?" This is a typical remark of this age.

Also during this final third, the children enter their limbs more fully. We see them becoming school ready in areas of physical development, social life and thinking. Now the child wants to learn. It has occurred to me, while looking at the first grade of a school, how closely related to the kindergarten the first grade is. There is still much play, and also a fabric is being woven through storytelling. The stories being told are fairy tales the same as in the kindergarten. Fairy tales are stories with true pictures that arise out of the deeper essence of the human being. The inspiration for them came not through intellectual people, but through very simple people who heard the stories and repeated them. These are true fairy tales. There are also fairy tales that are thought out, in particular the Anderson fairy tales, but also stories by Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.

After hearing an Anderson fairy tale, a child said, "That story makes me so tired." Delicately, the adult asked, "Why don't the other fairy tales, like Hansel and Gretel, make you tired?" "Oh," said the child, "because they think like I think."

Sometimes, fairy tales are viewed from a soul or psychological point of view. Truths may be found this way, but fairy tales also have a physiological basis. For example, *Snow White and Rose Red* offers wonderful pictures of the forces of sympathy and antipathy. Snow White always maintains a distance. When she encounters the dwarf, she takes out her scissors and cuts off part of his beard. At night, it is she who closes the door of the house. She is the winter child. In contrast, Rose Red is the summer child who awakens early and goes out to pick flowers for her mother. She opens the door when there is a knocking. When she meets the dwarf, she

wants to fetch others to help. She is the outgoing one—full of the forces of sympathy.

The flowers she gathers are probably of all colors—they are as varied as all the processes in the digestive system: green like the gall, red like the blood, brown like the intestines. In *The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids*, when the wolf comes in, the seven goats hide. One hides in the washing bowl, one in the stove, one in the clock case, and so on. There are pictures hidden in the fairy tales, and one could also say: one hides in the kidneys, one in the liver, one in the heart, and so on. This joining of psychology and physiology means that the etheric forces, that are called upon when the fairy tale is told, are never torn away or "abstracted" from the body. After they have been in the consciousness (as consciousness-building forces), they find their way back to the physiological processes to which they belong and where they build the body.

Now let us return to the I, or ego, and the way it incarnates into the etheric body and through it to the physical body. It does so in three stages:

In the first 2 1/3 years, the senses awaken.

In the next 2 1/3 years, fantasy and play help build the body.

In the last 2 1/3 years, work and play related to adult work help build the body.

For all of this to happen, a special atmosphere is needed. It is an etheric atmosphere such as in a garden. This special garden atmosphere needs to be created in a kindergarten. How can we picture this? As we picture a plant, we see it going through its stages of growth from seed to plant to blossom to fruit. This takes time, and the nature of the etheric pertains to time. If something is to thrive, it takes time. Growth processes are also related to cosmic time and the working of the sun, moon and planets. Etheric time is also unhurried. Hurry comes from the astral body, which tells us, "Do this, do that, but before that,

do this, and so on." Etheric processes need time for ripening—steady, constant time.

In my own childhood, life felt timeless and eternal. Now as a doctor, I find that when I have an appointment with a child and her family, I must be careful not to lose track of time. In the presence of a child I can easily let the appointment run much too long. This timelessness lives in fairy tales and can be heard in the closing line, "And if they have not died, they are still alive today," or "They lived happily ever after."

When one enters a Waldorf kindergarten, one can feel this etheric mood. Timelessness exists. It's like lying on a mountain meadow and "hearing the grass grow." One hears a certain hum in the kindergarten. During a transition time, the hum may stop, but then it begins again. The kindergarten teacher learns to work with this etheric atmosphere. If it feels too cold, she warms it. If it's too fast, she slows it, and if it's too slow, she quickens it.

In reviewing again the three phases of the first seven years, in the first phase, there are the sense impressions. Everything is taken in through the senses, and the physical should reflect the etheric. The season table is a picture of this with its changing array of shells, nuts, turnips with candles, and the many other things that find their way there through the year. It is life, a picture of Paradise. On the wall the Sistine Madonna or a fairy tale picture can hang, but it should have a timeless or eternal quality, such as the Sistine Madonna.

The clothing of the kindergarten teacher is also of great importance. The draping of Greek garments or the robes still worn in the Middle East by men are all a picture of the etheric body. This is also why angels are always portrayed with robes. In eurythmy, too, the garments worn reflect the etheric and have no division between the legs and not a strong division of the legs from the body as a whole. Clothes are associated with different forms of work and play an

important role in life. This applies to the clothing of the kindergarten teacher, as well. Children remark on their softness, their color and other qualities.

In the second phase of early childhood, speech and language play an important part in building the physical body and also in the movement of the etheric body. The future intelligence of the child has to do with language that enters the etheric body and grows into intelligence. A rich language helps develop the body and the intelligence. Language arises in the child when the hands and arms are freed from locomotion. It is a creative process. From the Word, all is created.

When a word is full of pictures, a child experiences this and wants to speak it. This, too, builds the body. Hermien Yserman is a Dutch writer of children's books with a special relation to language. Children take great joy in her books and the wonderful way she uses words that come alive. Rudolf Steiner described this living aspect of a word in relationship to the German word for bath—*bad*. The sound of "b" surrounds us, the "ah" covers us with warm water, and the "d" encourages us to stay down in it.

One also feels the magic of the word in the Grimm's fairy tale of *The Little Hut in the Forest*, where a line is repeated several times: "My pretty hen, my pretty cock, my pretty brindled cow, what are you saying now." "Duks," they answered. "Duks" is not a word, but everyone understands it.

Another aspect of these middle rhythmic years is that dance is so important. It would be good if parents could do eurythmy with their children, for it builds organs. But what sort of eurythmy would this be? Not a eurythmy for the stage, but a special eurythmy that children could imitate. With a simple gesture, one can show a cat licking milk from a bowl. How the children enjoy the "m" for milk and for "meow."

Rudolf Steiner has compared children's growth with plant growth. Very small children

are like mushrooms, for they are still asleep. Then come the ferns, and the kindergarten children are like the evergreens. Only in first grade, do we come to the flowering plant. For the kindergarten child, everything must still be in the green etheric realm. Their eurythmy must also be suited to them and not yet be dramatic. Drama begins to enter with the blossoming of the flowers, which is related to the astral realm. The little child is still living in the etheric realm and the growth forces connected to it. The children dip into the etheric and live there.

Today, there is so much of the dramatic already in the kindergarten child. They are blossoming prematurely. Let them sleep again, and this means engage them in "doing," for in the will we are asleep. Let them engage in all the wonderful activities like bread baking, cooking and the like. In olden times, people lived into their work and had time for it. In Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, she describes the wonderful rhythm of the housework that began with washing on Monday and ironing on Tuesday and ended with baking on Saturday and rest on Sunday.

Whenever children have the chance, they will eagerly watch a craftsman at work. They see the blacksmith, for instance, and drink in his gestures, and, later, they will play them out. These work gestures build the body. When a child has the opportunity to do many kinds of work in the first seven years, then she is able to build up her body in differentiated ways. Her body becomes

an instrument with all kinds of tones and colors. This is a body the individuality can enter and live in for a lifetime.

In conclusion, one can say that children today are born into a world practically without sheaths. The sheath of the family is not there as it once was. The sheath of the Church is largely gone. All such sheaths have disappeared, and this is appropriate, for this is a time of the individual. But for the child, it is a sheath-less world. One could say that the modern child is homeless.

What is being asked of us? First, to create new sheaths, to create a surrounding which is worthy of imitation. In addition, we can recognize that the child is homeless because it has another home, and that is in the spiritual world. The child comes to earth with a plan, an intention; she wants to do something here. Each has her own intention. The world is made young by these newborn children. It is continually made new. When we truly listen and hear, then we can help each other to realize our intentions.

If we know this, then a sound rings forth. Rudolf Steiner said, "The child has come out of the spiritual world to you. You need to solve its riddle from day to day and hour to hour. That is our work."



Joop van Dam was a physician in Holland and former General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in that country. He presented this lecture at an International Waldorf Kindergarten Conference in Eindhoven, Holland in October 1994 and was summarized by Joan Almon.