

Soul Hygiene and Longevity for Teachers

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*J*ack and the Beanstalk, as told by Andrew Lang, contains a subtle message for teachers seeking to have long and healthy careers in Waldorf schools. Jack trades a white milk cow for three beans and subsequently grows an immense beanstalk that stretches through the clouds into an unknown realm. Faith, childhood wonder, and trust allow Jack to make his beanstalk grow and to undertake his adventure. Eventually, he gains treasure in the form of a basket full of golden eggs.

The soil has to be robust to provide for his beans' healthy root growth. This is where it all begins. The first and most important lesson for teachers is that we must enter the first day of our teaching profession, and each day thereafter, with our feet firmly on the ground. We need to be fully present and wakeful in all that we do with children.

But what about the beans and the beanstalk that grows from them? What can we use to allow us to climb as Jack did? Fortunately, we have many meditations, exercises, and thoughts from Rudolf Steiner that we can cultivate, like Jack's three beans. With effort, steadfastness, and ever-renewed striving, we can grow our own beanstalks and ascend from everyday consciousness to an experience of our higher selves and the transformation of our habitual life of thought. This acquired consciousness transcends the day-to-day; it is empty and free and is achieved by concentrated attention and active, dedicated, inner work.

In the fairy tale Jack possesses a playful spirit; this mood is indicative of the gentleness of will that we cultivate as we enter into our meditative, transformative work. We create a space, as that of a child in quiet play, and allow ourselves to arrive at this space empty of judgment and expectation. Knowing this is a first step, but in doing it we face obstacles.

Many teachers in North America find it a challenge to establish and maintain a meditative practice. Western culture presents us with a host of distractions to the development of our meditative work. As we work to develop the refined soul force of imagination we are

flooded with diverting pictures from television, billboards, and movies—media that can easily fill our souls with falsehoods. It makes sense that the medieval monks took oaths of poverty to help them, absent everyday distraction, to gain this higher imagination. Further, a rhythmical cloistered life was conducive to purification of the astral body.

As we strive to awaken to the higher soul quality of inspiration, we are bombarded by a cacophony of sounds—sounds from the technology with which we live, music in every store in which we shop, and the omnipresent, isolating “iPod.” This constant barrage of noise blocks or muffles our ability to listen to our own thoughts. The monks took oaths of obedience in order to cultivate higher inspiration and used chants and prescribed prayer from the Abbott in order to listen inwardly.

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The higher soul power of intuition, an act of union, is dulled by our society's fixation on sex—a yearning for union made physical—alcohol, and drugs. All of this becomes a distraction from higher intuition. The monks, of course, took vows of abstinence. Modern men and women look in vain to places other than themselves to hear the words of the gods. We are not permitted an Essene existence, nor the protection of the abbey wall—we must transform ourselves and develop amid the dissonance and turbulence of modern life.

Our own childhood mis-education continually surfaces and threatens to influence our teaching. Our habits of thought cloud the philosophical foundations to which we dedicate ourselves. Our biographies present us with challenges at every turn. Each of these challenges also presents opportunities for growth. Given these overwhelming obstacles, however, how can we help ourselves to become the best Waldorf teachers we are capable of becoming?

When we first encounter Waldorf education we experience a curriculum that is both powerful and unique; but a curriculum alone does not make our schools special. What we, as aspiring Waldorf teachers, do is equally important.

We soon realize that Waldorf education is not a method alone; it depends upon active individual deepening and development through personal study and active involvement in spiritual science. A teacher's inner

work energizes the curriculum and makes Waldorf education stand out from other edu-

cational philosophies in that every subject is related to the evolving human being.

Today, the world and everything in it have become subject to question. The manner in which questions are posed, however, leads us deeper into chaos instead of toward resolution. Unexamined assumptions about the control of nature, the separation between human beings and the cosmos, and the lack of meaning in existence threaten our ability even to ask proper questions.

Expanding conscious-

ness requires the right questions.

Fortunately, Steiner offered some simple and helpful ways to develop our consciousness and to strengthen our soul forces. Working out of anthroposophy, each of us as a striving Waldorf teacher needs to take three particular steps in anthroposophical training if we wish to expand our everyday consciousness. These steps involve concentration, meditation, and active participation in our own moral development and may be described as follows:

- Concentration, in which we focus our consciousness on a freely chosen object and hold it fast;
- Meditation, in which we stay in our thought powers with an object, living with it but not pondering it intellectually; and
- Life-Guidance, in which we take ourselves



on in our own moral development and actively guide ourselves in developing our own capacities for love, patience, and perseverance.

Athletic training exercises the muscles required for a particular physical skill. The development of consciousness also requires training, and the three steps listed above are exercises toward the attainment of a higher perspective and inner strength and mobility.

We know that who we are as striving persons is as important as what we teach. Anyone who has taught children can confirm this. Children see right into our inner core, and we reach them in subtle ways beyond the mere presentation of a clever lesson plan.

As teachers it is also necessary that we look after our own personal hygiene, soul and body, so that we can be properly present for our children. How we re-create ourselves is important if we want to succeed in our work. Cultivating interest in the arts, music, sculpture, painting, crafts, and reading are all activities that rebuild forces that we exhaust in our teaching. Especially in our modern age, which often centers on passive entertainment, artistic activity is a potent healer. Conscious artistic development is an activity that rewards us with newfound strengths.

John Gardner, a pioneer in Waldorf education in North America, offered the following maxims for hygiene of the will:

- Always have in mind an aspect of yourself that needs strengthening.
- Always do what you promised yourself to do.
- Fight to establish order and rhythm in your life.
- Keep in touch with nature.
- Always be engaged in some form of creative art.
- Honor and properly prepare for sleep.
- Learn to pray.
- Do not squander strength for the illusion of pleasure.

Reflecting on my own teaching from first grade through twelfth grade, I recognize helpful rhythms of the year. The summer, when many external pressures are removed, is best for creating an overview for the coming year. We do our background reading and gather our resources. We can use the summer's outbreath to prepare the mood for the year. We can separate essentials from non-essentials. We are carried by the enthusiasm of the coming new year. During this time I like to prepare, as completely as possible, each block or course up to holiday break.

Once the academic year begins we have to take each day one at a time and pay attention to detail. In the autumn I feel my will forces to be strong, but by Lent I always feel weaker. During the holiday break I prepare my blocks up to the mid-winter vacation. Then I try to organize details up to the spring break, during which time I am finally able to prepare for the period lasting to the end of school. At this time I always begin to feel restored by the forces of spring and the returning light of the sun. We must learn to observe our own rhythms and plan our preparation time accordingly, allowing for months that may be difficult for us.

Each year, when extra meetings and late night preparation begin to sap our strength, I remember that the prime sleeping time occurs in the hours before midnight, and I try to take advantage of this with an earlier bedtime. The average person requires three successive nights of such sleep for self-restoration. I have always found that I can restore myself when I do this.

Steiner emphasized the importance of walking in the morning before meeting our students. This allows our thoughts to stir about in us and our ideas to metamorphose and transform. It is especially important to plan time specifically for ourselves and to be firm about holding to it. This will bring energy to our tasks and allow us to discover other aspects of our own being.

Establishing, maintaining, understanding, and working in harmony with our bodily rhythms help to keep us healthy. Every day brings profound changes in our mental and physical condition as our body and brain alternate between states of high activity during the waking day and recuperation, rest, and repair during nighttime sleep. These cycles are not a passive response to the world around us—they are prearranged and driven by an internal clock. Have you ever noticed that you can wake up within minutes of the time you intended to get out of bed? How does this happen?

Our organs and mental powers show evidence of more than one hundred circadian rhythms. These are monitored in our brain by a type of “clock” called the suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN), a pair of pinhead-sized structures that each contain about 20,000 neurons. They are located in the hypothalamus, just above the point where the optic nerves cross. They monitor the firing of nerve cells that are associated with our personal circadian rhythms. One of the triggers—called a *Zeitgeber*, “time giver”—that sets off the nerve cells is daylight. Other triggers, among many, include sleep, meal times, and social encounters. The SCN also monitors functions that are synchronized with the sleep-wake cycle, including body temperature, hormone secretion, urine production, and changes in blood pressure. Pulse, blood pressure, respiration rate, body temperature, and urine excretion all have higher levels—called “peaks”—that occur during the day, and lower levels—called “troughs”—that occur at night. The most well-known circadian rhythm is that of body temperature, which varies daily by a degree or two in a healthy person, peaking in late afternoon and troughing in the early morning hours. This rhythm persists even if an individual is confined to bed for the entire

**The highest reward
for man’s toil is not
what he gets for it,
but what he
beomes by it.**

— John Ruskin

twenty-four hours, or if the time of meals is varied, or if the person fasts. Pulse rate and blood pressure also peak around the same time as body temperature. According to research, most normal skin cells divide between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. The senses of hearing, taste, and smell are more acute at certain times of day. Studies show sensory acuity is highest at 3 a.m., falls off rapidly to a low at 6 a.m., then rises to another peak between 5 and 7 p.m. This cycle is related to the hormone cycle; when steroid hormones are released, sensory acuity falls.

No area of our body is unaffected by circadian rhythms. Athletes seem to perform best in the late afternoon, when strength, body temperature and flexibility peak. Pain tolerance is generally highest in the afternoon. Brain wave activity, hormone production, cell regeneration, and other biological activities linked to a twenty-four hour cycle all show clear patterns. Disruption of circadian rhythms usually has a negative effect. For the past five decades, investigators have questioned whether abnormalities in circadian rhythm regulation might be involved in the pathogenesis of mood disorders, including rapid-cycling bipolar disorder.

We each have internal prime times during the day when we are mentally alert and fresh. We also have external prime times when we need an external stimulus or interaction to motivate us. We need to pay attention to these biological times and prepare ourselves. Keeping a weekly log can help to identify individual peaks and troughs. Other external rhythms affect us as well.

The week also has rhythms within it. In antiquity the 7 days of the week were named after the planets: Monday for the Moon, Tuesday for Tyr or Tiwaz or for Mars, Wednesday for Wotan or Odin or for Mercury, Thursday for Thor or Jupiter, Friday for Frigg or for Venus, Saturday for

Saturn, Sunday for the Sun. Studying the qualities of the planets gave the ancients the astral characteristics of each day and their influence on the feeling life of human beings; these influences work beneath the threshold of waking consciousness. The seven days of the week also accord with the laws of the musical scale, which ascends in 7 notes and reaches the beginning again with the eighth, one octave higher. This pattern may be imagined as a corkscrew spiraling upward.

The days of the week have the following overarching qualities for a teacher:

- Monday is a day of reflection.
- Tuesday is a day of will.
- Wednesday is a day of movement.
- Thursday is a day of future promise.
- Friday is a day of enhancement.
- Saturday is a day of heaviness and rebuilding.
- Sunday is a day of peaceful contemplation and uniting with nature.

Sadly, the Sunday experience has been greatly diluted in our busy modern times and we can renew it only through effort.

The moon rhythm affects our entire being. It is a rhythm roughly equal to four times seven, or twenty-eight days. Human beings have evolved and become largely free of nature's control, but the moon exerts tremendous power over the fluid elements of the earth as seen in the ebb and flow of the tide at the seashore. Some claim that the moon's cycles affect our powers of imagination and spiritual productivity. Practicing self-observation helps to make us aware of these subtle effects on us and of how we can use them to advantage.

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The rhythm of the sun brings us to a full awakening in our earthly bodies. As mentioned above, light activates our circadian rhythms. Sunlight affects our moods and is necessary for our sustenance. Imagine what

the power of light-filled thought does for the health of our souls if we apply it. As the sun is necessary for the heliotropic upright tendency in plants, the sun in its yearly rhythm supports the uprightness and health of our etheric beings.

Children need the etheric strength of their teachers. After the school day is completed, teachers frequently feel drained and tired. This is because the children have sapped our etheric strength. The way to rebuild this is through the activity Steiner referred to as the "Rückschau," or review. This activity, usually done in the evening, consists of going backward through the day in memory, capturing significant activities without passing judgment on those activities. Many teachers have found, however, that it is also strengthening to do a Rückschau right after school has ended. We set aside a few moments of quiet time for this. Then we can become quite refreshed before meeting our family and other obligations. A regular Rückschau is still performed in the evening as well. Other exercises in Steiner's *How to Know Higher Worlds* can help us to build up our "etheric insulation."

If we teach older children, those who are entering or in puberty, then we need to strengthen our astral bodies. Adolescents swim in astrality and it is their right to do so. They need teachers who are able to remove subjectivity from their thinking, who strive to work objectively. Steiner's *Practical Training in Thought* is an important aid to accomplishing this difficult task.