

Education Towards Health Is Education Towards Freedom: Salutogenesis as A Measure for the Quality of Our Work

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Editor's Note: *In this article, Johannes Denger reflects on the concept of "salutogenesis" as providing a grounding and guide for a truly human and healthgiving education. As we discuss in the section "From the Editor" in this issue, the concept of salutogenesis has begun to emerge in Europe as a new foundational paradigm in both medicine and education. The combination of two words-Latin salus or salis, meaning health, and the Greek genesis, meaning origin or beginning-directs primary attention to that which promotes health. Johannes Denger reflects on the concept in its significance for education.*

Is freedom still a topic of discussion today?
Is education towards freedom still a meaningful aim in our time, an aim from which we can derive much-needed motivation and strength for the daily practice of our profession as educators? As teachers, we find ourselves faced with an interesting challenge: in all areas-in science, politics and the social sphere-meaning is increasingly being eroded in all possible ways, yet the teacher is supposed to transmit to the children that learning is good, makes sense and leads to success! Norbert Bolz pointedly puts it as follows: "Searching for meaning is in fact an attempt to escape from complexity. Hence looking for meaning is the same as turning away from postmodern society." I am sure that the miserable state of education also has structural and financial grounds, but we are primarily

dealing, in Europe at least, with a lack of meaning and motivation. This deficiency not only weakens our capacity for work, but also makes us ill. This goes both for pupils, teachers and parents.

Education — to what end ?

We can ask this question in two ways today. We could ask why we educate at all, and what we aim for in education. In education, posing any clear goal — say education towards courtesy or towards achievement of excellence or criticism of authority — would be anathema in postmodern society. It would be politically incorrect, because it would be out of step with the existing pluralism of values. In our time, we are faced with the dilemma that, on the one hand, we find one *specific* value objectionable because it is too restrictive; while, at the same time, on the other hand, there is a yearning for meaning which is stronger than ever before. "The scarcest resource of the future will not be oil or any other form of energy, but meaning."² We find ourselves in a situation which is somewhat like crying out for love in a world without love. Yet the point is that the world will be more filled with love when one gives love. The same goes for meaning: it cannot be simply demanded or consumed, it has to be created. In the modern world, the human being becomes a "meaning-designer." Therefore an education which takes its orientation from both the universal and the individual human being-one could also say an

education to actually become a human being — is more relevant than ever. Such an education has been founded by Rudolf Steiner.

Factors which promote health

Aaron Antonovsky, a medical sociologist working at the Ben-Gurion University in Beer Sheva, Israel, has been developing a highly productive approach since 1970. Up to now, medicine has been researching the causes of illnesses and the possibilities to prevent them (pathogenesis). His question, however, became: how does health actually originate?³ With the immense amount of pathogenetic factors we are faced with, such as germs, viruses, psychological and social factors, it seemed miraculous to him that health is still the norm.

The human being is exposed to a large number of stress factors that cause inner tension. The question as to whether this situation results in pathology, a neutral situation, or health, depends on whether the tension is dealt with adequately. *General resistance resources* such as ego strength, social support, cultural stability and money can help us cope with this tension in a positive way. The decisive factor, however, is whether I can see a sense in the stress which works on me, or, going one step further, whether I can give it meaning. When I do not succeed in this, the result will be *dis-stress*, which causes illness. When I do succeed in giving meaning to it, the stress will be resolved and give way to a feeling of belonging to the world, one in which the individual and the world harmonize: "...A penetrating, steady and at the same time dynamic feeling of confidence..., which brings structure into the inner and outer challenges one meets in the course of life, enabling one to anticipate them and understand them; a sense that the means to deal with the demands of life are within reach and that these demands are challenges which are worthwhile."⁴ Correspondingly, health is not a state of being, but an individual state of balance which each human being has to constantly establish anew in meeting the world. This view corresponds to the way anthroposophically extended medicine understands health.⁵

Teaching which promotes health

The quote cited above could be taken as a motto for every class which a teacher prepares, and one could

ask oneself questions such as these: Are the demands I place upon the students sufficiently structured and organized? Are the pupils able to master the assignments? Are the challenges I pose worth the students' efforts?

According to Antonovsky, there are three conditions which lend meaning to stress factors. Tasks must first of all be comprehensible; secondly, meaningful; and, thirdly, feasible. It is inspiring to recognize in these three factors the threefold structure which is the hallmark of good teaching in a Waldorf school.⁶ Do I speak in such a way that the pupils can understand it? Is the content meaningful?

Does the teaching result in something the pupils can actually have in hand? In such a way, thinking, feeling and willing are each equally addressed.

Risk and resilience — the uncertainty concerning the effects of pedagogy

Salutogenesis has given us new insight into health as an individual state of balance; this new insight and the fact that different people react quite differently to the same stress factors can help us understand the big riddle of the Kauai research project which spans a long period of time. In this study, 698 children from the Kauai Island of Hawaii, all born in 1955, were checked at birth and at the ages of 1, 2, 10, 18, 32 and 40 years. Research was carried out into a number of biological, psychological, and sociological risk factors, and took into account both critical events and protecting factors in the subjects' developments.

About 30 percent of the surviving children in this group were highly at risk in their development because they lived in chronic poverty, they had had birth complications and they grew up in families which were burdened with parental psychopathology and continual disharmony. Two-thirds of these children, who had already been subjected to four or more risk factors at age two, developed severe learning disabilities and behavioral problems in school, had a run-in with the law and had psychological problems as children. One-third of these children, however, developed into capable, reliable and caring adults in spite of the considerable risks to which they had been subjected.⁷

I find the result of this study remarkable because it brings to mind what one experiences in pedagogical work every single day. Development cannot be grasped

by the simplistic cause and effect thinking which is still applied widely today in regard to questions of education; things are obviously more complicated than that. When, despite the expectations, a third of the children develop into harmonious adults, we are indeed faced with a big riddle!

“Such paradoxical examples do occur in the field of education, and, even though they run counter to the expectations we have of the effect of our pedagogical actions, they should again and again spur us on to reflection. In that way, rather than being irritants, they can be transformed and become productive.”⁸ Let us try to do that!

Concerning the risk of being disturbed

The cause of irritation lies primarily in the fact that we tend to think we know quite well what a child needs for its development; in fact this knowledge is confirmed in the study under consideration by the majority, namely two-thirds of the subjects, who grew up in relatively controlled circumstances. The remaining third we mentioned above, the children who were at risk, can be subdivided into two groups, one of which confirms our expectations — negative, in this case — whereas the remaining group did not show a negative development. It was actually very positive. How can this be?

Let us now look at this from the standpoint of salutogenesis, as we have expounded it above. It seems as if Antonovsky's basic thought is being confirmed here, that comparable stress factors work differently on different people, depending upon how adequately tension is being worked through. (The Germans say: “Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stark,” meaning “if it doesn't kill me, it will make me strong.” In the challenge to grow from problematic circumstances, we do of course see an opportunity to make them meaningful. This is an opportunity which has been taken away from many children who live in countries saturated with affluence. This is yet another clear indicator that the individuality of the child is decisive: how I develop does not depend on heredity or environment, but depends essentially on the way I relate to the world and on what I make of my circumstances. Above all, however, this makes it clear that children need both protection and risk in order to develop resilience and resistance.

Stressing the need for protection and the right to a child-appropriate environment is highly necessary in our time,

especially during early childhood. Overprotectiveness, on the other hand, is the other danger.⁹ Therefore one can speak of a “right to risk.” Children and adolescents who grow up in totally secure circumstances will, if need be, seek risk in extreme sports, skateboard jumping, or drug abuse.¹⁰ Hence the increased tendency in schools to offer additional challenges in circus clubs, mountain climbing and high ropes courses (even though some educators question the necessity to offer such activities); such challenges offer threshold experiences.

Modern brain research also supports the hypothesis of protection and risk. At a conference for school doctors in Dornach, the invited lecturer, professor Gerald Huether of the Department of Neurobiological Basic Research of the Psychiatric University Clinic in Göttingen, made it clear that the former dogma of the immutable nature of the human brain is no longer tenable.¹¹ It is gradually being replaced by a more dynamic model. As in the social sphere, interrelationship is essential within the brain. The building of synapses, which is necessary to accomplish this, remains possible up to old age. The problem lies in the fact that we like to rest in the existing neural pathways.

As a rule, change needs a stimulus from the outside. In order to maintain the world picture we have had up to now, any disturbance to it is blocked out as a first reaction. If the disturbance is so overwhelming that it is impossible to block out, the possibility exists for it to result in either sickness (even death) or a new orientation. The stress factors trigger an emotional response leading to an enhanced production of neuroplastic substance to facilitate signal transmission. As a result, synapses can be formed which open up new pathways in the brain. Hence the crisis can always be an opportunity. Three things support the positive digestion of stressful situations: Faith in one's own capacities (knowledge and experience), faith in the capacities of others (relationship) and faith in supersensible powers (knowing that one is carried). One could also say: Faith, Hope and Love.

The question of meaning in the first seven years of life

In what way do we have to ask the question regarding meaning in the development of intelligence during the first seven years of life? The famous child psychologist

Jean Piaget (who also concerned himself with epistemology, i.e. he thought about thinking as such) distinguishes three phases, which repeat themselves three times in relation to the world of objects around us, the social environment and thinking.¹² In the first phase — Piaget calls it *egocentricity* — the child experiences herself as the center of the world and only observes objects in relationship to herself. (For example the rattle, which has slipped under the covers, is not there, because I don't see it.) In the second phase, *relating and moving*, the child begins to understand that the objects also have a relationship among themselves. (Now she understands that the cover hides the rattle, but that the rattle, even though it is not visible, exists, nevertheless, as a permanent object.) Finally, in the third phase, she also understands herself in her actions as forming part of a *system*. (The cover moves because I pull it and hence I can make the rattle appear and disappear again.) Piaget here points out an astonishing and exciting parallel: the development of intelligence in the individual human being corresponds to the development of the way humanity's view of the universe evolved! People first saw the earth as the center of the universe and related everything to the earth, with the planets doing the most amazing dances! This geocentric view corresponds to the egocentric phase. This was succeeded by the heliocentric worldview with the sun in the center, to which other planets — independent from the standpoint of the observer on the earth — related, inasmuch as they moved around the sun (*relating and moving*). Today we know that our solar system forms only a very small part of an incredibly large universe (*system*), one of approximately 20,000 million suns which are moving around in this system.

Preparing for this lecture allowed me to discover something extremely interesting. The central exercise of looking back on one's life, a practice which Rudolf Steiner highly recommends to educators, among others, follows these three phases once again!¹³ The educator who deals with a certain age group should first of all remember how it was to be that age. The memory of certain situations will appear, to begin with, in the way the situation was experienced at that age, that is to say, I experience myself right in the middle, and other people are grouped in a "stationary" way around that experience. Then comes the second step of the exercise (coming after the initial remembering), whereby one uses the distance gained by the years that have elapsed

since the pictured event. Looking back on it later from a higher level, one has gained a perspective from which one sees oneself as one among many, and has reached a more objective consciousness (Rudolf Steiner calls it "peeling the ego from its experiences"). In the third step, one becomes aware that one owes to other people nearly everything that one has learned in life and that one has become. In this way, the exercise comprises both individual child development and humanity's development of consciousness in general. This is a combination which gives the educator an exciting impulse for development!

During the first seven years, meaning is given naturally by the ether body, which is organized. The question of meaning only arises when the ether body frees itself for thinking. Seen in this light, the task of education in the kindergarten is to build up protective layers in the child. *The task of the kindergarten teacher is, in fact, very simple: just do nothing wrong, and everything will be all right!*

It is characteristic of a present day human being not to be really fully in inner harmony. This problem of harmony does not apply only to the relationship between the individual and the world, but also within the individual human being, namely between the soul-spirit and the physical body. In the *Philosophy of Freedom*, Rudolf Steiner writes: "In a human being concept and percept are *actually* separated to begin with, in order to be *actually* combined by him....The human being must actively connect his concept with the percept of the human being. Concept and percept will only overlap, when we make them overlap ourselves. We can only do this, however, when we have found the concept of free spirit, that is to say: our own concept."¹⁴ Now one could bewail this fact of not being really aligned with oneself, but it is a typical human trait. We are creatures who are unfinished, but we are, therefore, capable of growth and development; we are perennial children to a certain degree. That is where self-education comes in!

Seen this way, self-education is not merely a personal aspiration nor is it a categorical imperative which could be imposed from the outside. It is an impulse arising from deep within, the never-ending longing to be able to be aligned more strongly both with the world and oneself.

People who work as caregivers and educators are particularly endangered where it comes to living with

the tension between ideal and reality.¹⁵ We are especially in danger when it comes to very high ideals, such as the ones anthroposophy can foster for dealing with the prevailing feeling of meaninglessness. We can err on the high side or the low side. Faced with high ideals, someone who tends to depression is likely to say, “I can never live up to that, I don’t even need to try.” Or the opposite: one could cherish the grandiose illusion that one embodies the ideal. Many people swing between the two extremes. The challenge is to develop an ongoing, living relationship towards the ideal; on one day a person will be closer to it, at other times further away from it, only to come closer again at a later time. The ideal could be pictured in such a way that we compare it to what the North Star used to be for the sailor in former days. It served as a point of the reference for him so that he could orient himself and find his way while on the ocean. Nobody would have thought of blaming him for the fact that he would never be able to reach the North Star with his ship.

How to avoid being reduced to objects

In his chapter, “Developing a Feeling of Harmony,” Aaron Antonovsky writes:

There are many experiences in life that may be consistent and balanced, but which nevertheless cannot be attributed to things we have done or decided ourselves. With regard to every single experience in life, we can ask the questions: whether we have decided to have this experience; according to which rules it will take its course; and how are we to solve problems and challenges that result from it. When other people decide everything for us — when they set the tasks, formulate the rules and manage the results, and when we have nothing to say in the matter—we are reduced to objects. A world, which we thus experience as indifferent to our actions, will become a world without any meaning. This goes for direct personal connections, for work and for everything else, which is human. ... It is decisive that we as human beings approve of the tasks we have to carry out, that we have considerable responsibility for carrying them out, and that what we do or do not do, makes a difference in the results.¹⁶

At this point, it becomes obvious what part salutogenesis can play in self-governance and what it can bring about. But the above quote would certainly also

be an excellent starting point for upper school reform.

The work with salutogenesis is confirmed by recent brain research and studies about resilience; all three point to the need for both protection and risk for individual development. To different degrees, this goes for both children and grown-ups. By implication, it also goes for movements like the Waldorf school movement. Do we close ourselves off, or are we in open communication, welcoming every disturbance which helps us to develop ourselves?

Meaning-implying, in essence, the ability to understand our world-is something we cannot live without. Our constitution is, so to speak, designed for understanding. (Even one who denies the existence of any meaning will claim that statement to be meaningful.) Meaninglessness creates illness. The postmodern waning of this resource, mentioned at the beginning of the article, is a deficiency which should be taken seriously when we look to the future of mankind. This deficiency signals the challenge to create meaning (to become a “designer of meaning,” a “maker of meaning”). In this time of the development of the consciousness-soul, we must be ethically productive individuals!¹⁷

Education to bring about health equals education to bring about freedom. Maybe the research into salutogenesis will help us to discover the central impulse of Waldorf pedagogy anew.

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