

RUDOLF STEINER AND THE NEW EDUCATIONAL PARADIGM

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I read the article by Stephen Keith Sagarin, “No Such Thing: Recovering the Quality of Rudolf Steiner’s Educational Work” (*Research Bulletin*, January 2003, Volume VIII, Number 1) with great interest. I would like to make a few comments about it, as Stephen Sagarin’s work raises an important issue. Isn’t it true that every active teacher confronts again and again the questions, “What is truly authentic in my work?” “What is original and new?” Often these questions manifest only as a feeling that our own work is not authentic and original enough, because we know that authenticity and honesty are needed in teaching. I can understand Stephen Sagarin wanting to call our attention to this, because Waldorf schools as institutions do not provide a guarantee for quality; for quality is found only in teachers.

However in my opinion, the question about whether the educational indications of Rudolf Steiner are new, is actually a different question. And I would like to contribute an answer to this question.

Stephen Sagarin’s essay reminds me of a discussion that took place in England in the 50’s of the last century. The subject of the debate was whether William Shakespeare actually ever existed. Confronted by an unimaginably vast literary accomplishment, one had to ask who is it who actually achieved all this? In the historical documents available at that time the genius of Shakespeare himself

was not recognizable; thus the question of authorship was raised. However, the question was meaningful and meaningless at the same time; the works *did* exist, and the arguments against Shakespeare’s existence were thus unjustified. The significance of the question becomes apparent when we recognize that what is missing was not the author, but the means for recognizing genius.

There is a similar situation today with Rudolf Steiner; he has become a historical fact. We stand before an incomprehensibly vast accomplishment and ask ourselves, who is it who accomplished this? Attempts are made to answer the question with the conventional instruments of historical comparison and to find compatible thoughts in the works of Aristotle, Emerson, Jean Paul, Pestalozzi, John Dewey, Piaget, and among contemporaries from Howard Gardner. The question then arises what is actually new or unique about Waldorf education?

I would like to respond with the following. We can readily assume that the quantitative magnitude alone of the life achievements of Rudolf Steiner is beyond the grasp of conventional historical methods; they simply exceed conventional understanding. As with Shakespeare, we are confronted with

an exceptional case. Rudolf Steiner himself once remarked that not only was it a possibility for him to build upon what already was in existence in any particular situation, it was a necessity. The path of anthroposophy is one of evolution rather than revolution. An individual such as Rudolf Steiner also sought among his contemporaries for kernels to which he could add his thoughts. This was the method of his work.¹ However, we will never grasp the essence of his work if we take this aspect to be the whole reality.

In order to answer Stephen Sagarin's question about what is really new in the Waldorf school, another thought must be added. We must distinguish between the outer *form* of Waldorf education and the underlying *impulse*. And then, based on how the form and impulse relate to one another, we can see what we are dealing with. Now, if we thus call the *form* the Waldorf school, we can call the underlying *impulse* the art of education. Without judging whether the form (of any particular Waldorf school) corresponds to the impulse, we can now take up the question of whether or not the impulse itself is new.

If we look at the pedagogy, then we see that the art of education has to do with a complete paradigm shift from that which existed in cultural history prior to Rudolf Steiner. Rudolf Steiner described it in the following way: the child's intelligence as such we can never educate, the child's feeling only to a certain extent - only the child's will is completely open to being educated. To my knowledge, no educator before or after Rudolf Steiner has ever said anything like this.²

1) No education prior to Rudolf Steiner took into consideration the emancipation of the physical body, etheric body and astral body.

2) And likewise no prior educational approach existed that took into account the effects of particular aspects of curriculum on these emancipating aspects of the human being.¹

1 And there was no education before Steiner that distinguished between subjects arising out of cultural needs and those corresponding to the developmental needs of the developing human being.

4) In short: what other pedagogy demands that education continue to develop capacities whose foundations originated in pre-birth existence?⁴

Let's turn to the practice of education. A key methodological element in the art of education is the so-called "three-part lesson" that, according to Steiner, is a valid approach for every cognitively based lesson. This has to do with a method that insures that the lesson content can be taken up by the etheric body as well as by the astral body. This three-phased approach to the assimilation of lesson content is unique in the history of education.⁵

There has never been another method of education that takes subject areas such as reading and writing, which are inherently detrimental to the child, and artistically transforms them as Rudolf Steiner did, so that what is unhealthy becomes health-giving. And is there another educational approach, in addition to that of Rudolf Steiner, in which the child learns to read out of the activity of writing?⁶ Has there ever been an approach to arithmetic with a moral element present from the very beginning, and that does not begin with addition?⁷

I would like to point to two other facts: Stephen Sagarin correctly states that working with the idea of the repetition of the development of the species by the individual - ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny - is not new in educational history. However what *is* new is that this is not imposed *onto* the curriculum but arises naturally *out of* the health- engendering sequence of the curriculum. (The fact that some in Waldorf education call Grade 5 "Greek" would never be found in Rudolf Steiner's works as his intention.) The theme of the temperaments is also often used to show how Steiner simply adopted things out of past traditions. However, this misses the fact that he alone recognized that the temperaments arose out of the workings of karma (in other words, that something is present in the human being that corresponds to pre-earthly existence) and in addition, that he developed the temperaments as a methodological approach to teaching, concerned with the *use* of the temperaments in the lesson.⁸

I have mentioned only a few examples here. I would like to draw them together into an image. We have the minerals feldspar, quartz and mica.

Each is a mineral unto itself, yet together they form something completely new - granite.

Let us return to our starting point, the significance of the teacher. The impulse of the art of education must be realized and fulfilled in the teacher through this “granite,” given to us by Rudolf Steiner. That is the task. Along the way, we teachers are in a process of becoming, just as our pupils are in a process of becoming. Each teacher who dedicates him or herself to the Waldorf impulse must find his or her own way. The essence of this task is formulated by Rudolf Steiner in the first sentence of the *Study of Man (Foundations of Human Experience)*: “We can accomplish our work only if we do not see it as simply a matter of intellect or feeling, but, in the highest sense, as a moral spiritual task.”⁹

And what about the *form*? An impulse that does not create form remains impotent. But form can also oppress and smother the impulse. We therefore have the task to create forms that serve the impulse. In addition to the self-education of the teacher, this is our most important task today - to create forms in which the impulse can live. For the Waldorf schools this means forming and transforming.

When approached in this way, this task liberates us from the unfruitful discussion about whether the Waldorf school is old-fashioned or avant-garde. When seen in the way described above, Waldorf education is absolutely contemporary.¹⁰

References

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