The Adolescent Years

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The transition from childhood to youth brings many problems. The critical faculty is awake but not yet maturity of judgment. The impact of life becomes deeply personal but the direction in life is in no way clear. The most familiar relationships fall subject to question. The young person needs guidance but jibes at authority. He guards jealously the little flame of independence of which he now becomes aware. There is a longing for self-expression and little ability to express—this gives rise to all manner of crudities. There is quick resentment over little things. Moods swing easily from elation to depression. The will to love and be loved brings confusing emotions and desires, if not actual eroticism, nursed to profusion by our "sexy" age. Ideals and aspirations wrestle with worldly ambitions, "castles in the air" are rife. Even the intelligent youngster is not secure from sudden follies. To understand is not to conform. Temptations come strong. Vanities play their part. In a chaotic environment where the adults themselves live in fear, anxiety and contradiction, what can these young folk do? The pronounced delinquent of the headlines covers incipient ills that are far more widespread than is generally admitted. There is much corruption

everywhere. Moral appeals may bolster up "the good" but they have little effect on "the wicked." Where is the method? Things that were once considered "bad" are now considered "not so bad." Alternatively, placard morality is busily in search of scapegoats. Meanwhile the adolescent, no longer just a child to authority and not yet an adult responsible to himself, does as best he can; for the most part he seeks refuge in his own kind. But the sensitive and susceptible suffer acutely. A disturbed life of youth may easily wreck a whole lifetime. Theories do not help. For the youngster most of all, proof of the pudding lies in the eating.

Two questions occur:

How can we best prepare for adolescence?

How can we best educate the adolescent?

Waldorf education claims that childhood makes one whole. As surely as a plant has root and leaf and blossom and yet is indivisible in its unity, so surely does childhood comprise its three main phases, pre-dentition, elementary years to puberty, and adolescence, each succeeding the other in the one great process of becoming man. The ideal of such a school can only be to guide the child through all the years from kindergarten to college entrance. Exceptions there will have to be—children have joined our schools as late as the eleventh grade with happy results—yet the ideal remains. In this total range of childhood there is a natural progression from limb to heart to head. That which the little child can learn to do, that which the elementary child can learn to feel, the adolescent can learn to understand. Almost ninety years of work, spread today through some 900 schools in many lands, have brought much evidence in their wake.

The little child lives primarily by imitating all that is around him. His open consciousness, little aware of "self," allows the world to stream into him just as it is; in this sense nothing escapes him. For him the world is

action: thoughts and feeling also act upon him. This immense receptivity and power to cope bespeak a devotion to life and a trust in man comparable only to a religious attitude of selflessness at its highest level. The power of the spirit in these years is strong. The little child grasps the world with fearless hands, transmitting all things to the depths of its own inner being; that which is thus received in infancy is uttered forth in latest maturity. The child that has learned to pray in his earliest years will know how to bless in his old age, says Rudolf Steiner. The little child carries within him an unconscious faith that the world is grounded in goodness. The adult who admits the truth of this in heart and soul, striving to think, to feel, to act accordingly, striving also to create a harmony of life in the environment, removing all nervous influences such as radio, television and the rest, will be best able to help, guide and encourage these early growing years.

The child in the elementary school years lives first and foremost by his feelings. What we remember best in later years are the things we felt most, whether in people, in circumstances or events. In these years, education is of the heart, not by precepts but by an appeal to the imagination. The ideas of good and bad mean nothing to a child of seven; but a story with contrasting characters, the one "good," the other "bad," though the words be never mentioned (it is best to leave the story to speak for itself) will go straight to the child's heart. There are colors that live harmoniously together and others that clash; there are tones that merge in happy concord and others that are strident and discordant; there are actions that are beautiful in themselves and others that are ugly. The child, wakening from infancy, builds up an inner world of impressions penetrated with feeling; more and more as he grows older, this becomes his refuge and his home. Even as he approaches the more thoughtful years from twelve to fourteen, it is still a "felt" thinking, a thinking with the heart. For the adult this is the gift that makes him an artist or a poet; for the child in these years it is natural. The ideal that lives below words in these years is that of beauty. In

all that is 'beautiful' in thought, in word, in action, in nature itself, we behold more than the outer eye can yield; here the spirit shines into the world of the senses. It was a scientist who claimed that "art enhances consciousness." The teacher must above all work as an artist-he describes all life with all its many faces, be it in literature and history, be it in the kingdoms of outer nature; he brings the precious intangibles of the world to the child's powers of apprehension. The scribes and the Pharisees of our times will regard this as fanciful; they are wrong today as they were of old. One who has witnessed health and strength and cheerfulness and confidence entering into a child's looks and gestures as the years go by must know them wrong. The story of man, rooted in depths, powers and dimensions of creative existence beyond his knowing, is itself the revelation of a mighty and transcendent work of art.

Then comes the birth of independent thought, the love of the abstract and non-sensory, following as near as possible the phase of puberty. Here disturbance makes itself felt at once. There is much on record to show that puberty may set in too soon and true adolescence correspondingly too late, making an uneasy gap where many harms arise. Then education needs to be alert and therapeutic; but we are concerned now with the normal. The adolescent looks outward with a new gaze and also inward. All that he has quietly assimilated through his childhood years, all he has learned and felt and practiced, the capacities he has been able to develop, the difficulties he has had to encounter—these now meet him at the level of thought. He enters upon the phase of learning to know himself, of having to learn how to face himself. At the same time, his environment lights up for him with a new interest—it pulls him to itself. He recognizes his world, the world he is to enter fully one day, the world of enterprise in which he must play his part. This birth to a life of independent thought does not come overnight, nor does it come equally to all children. It is generally blurred in the ninth grade, comes to clarity in the tenth, and grows to relative strength in the eleventh

and twelfth grades, but it invariably brings with it a force of personal enthusiasm for life. If it does not, then something is badly amiss already. The adolescent wants to believe in the world, he wants to love and approve his age, he wants to have confidence in life, to enjoy and admire and even idealize the achievements that confront him. He wants to be modern, to accept what is there as his right, his heritage, and careless opposition on the part of his elders will easily drive him to rebellion. The ideal he brings is for truth. The first assumption of his nature is that the world is built on truth. His spontaneous aspiration is to be a true man, to live in truth and to expect truth in others.

But now, by degrees, there come the contradictions. She reads the headlines and dives down beneath them, sees the inconsistencies in adult life, is first astonished, then bewildered, and then unhappily dismayed. In her first burst of confidence she may easily mistake good for evil, evil for good. She is met with a presentation of life where spirit is denied and matter exalted. Is the human an animal after all? The learned say so; true, the human is something more, but how much? She begins to question her childhood faith—then she believed because others believed, but now she wants to justify belief. She questions her dependence on her parents—is she not herself and why should she not have her own way? She questions the authority of her teachers—are not they, too, only humans? As she enters her most sensitive years at seventeen and eighteen, she nurses many a doubt and sorrow in secret. She wants a hero she can trust and follow, one of her own choosing. Where can she find this hero? Is there truth? If so, what is truth? What is life really based on? Youth is naturally introspective. Is there a soul? Is there a God? What is she herself apart from heredity and environment—is she anything at all? How can a human being's statement be more than his opinion? Who knows?

Not all will place their questions as radically as this or as consciously. Some will, but all carry them in mood and feeling; this is the bond of

communion the young have with one another, fellows in adventure, and the loves that follow. This is where the problems begin for the adolescent himself, for his parents, his teachers. What can life offer? At the same time life does offer many attractions and rouses many desires and longings; healthy youth is virile and has wants and tastes and appetites. Even these bring inner conflicts and moral doubts and scruples. One of the most honest lads I know confessed he thought himself a liar and he suffered from it. Another, realizing for himself that all desire was selfish, fled from love and then asked whether desire for an ideal was not also selfish. At eighteen, beginning for some with the thought of national service and all its implications, life suddenly seems conditioned against one's will. The reverse is to abandon oneself to mere living, taking all things as they come. Are there not theories today to excuse almost any line of conduct? Chastity, it is taught, belongs to the Middle Ages. Gratification relieves repression. How are the young to know? Some turn religious; many go the other way. We adults must admit that life is a welter—we do our best, but our own premises are often none too strong. Life is sadly inconsistent, yet we want strong men and gracious women and a generation that loves the truth.

All this puts the greatest possible burden of responsibility on education itself. If the adolescent has been rightly protected in his kindergarten years, if he has been rightly guided through his elementary school years, if in these earlier years he has felt the force of goodness and the strength of beauty, he will also find his way to truth. Then the security of the heart will come to meet the doubts of the head and the turbulence of the will. He has been taught through art and can be further taught to develop a sense of fitness in life itself. He has been taught in such a way that he can clearly discriminate between fact and theory, that fact will always hold the truth in itself but theories have changed and will change again. He sees as a matter of course that life is a conflict and always has been and that it must be so. There are thoughts that add to the content of life, that make it nobler,

and others that take away, reducing man to an ignoble thing. There are dragons to fight in this age as in all ages, and the call for knighthood is as strong as ever.

The animal lives by desire; humans can acquire motives to combat desire. The plant lives by necessity; humans can call to their aid powers of self-determination. The crystal is bound to its form; humans can strive for inner form and can also transform. Creation is bound in law, and humans are also bound—but we can unbind. Defeat is not the end but only the spur to further effort, and there have been victories and human beings have never yet been finally defeated. In the end all rests on the initiative of mankind, whether we can draw up from the depths of our own being the powers we need to humanize existence. Goodness, beauty, truth—these are his attributes, his childhood faiths before he is a man; these he can apprehend in consciousness and translate into life and so declare himself and find his way to freedom. The greatest have known that freedom can be born only from within even as manhood itself must be born from within—nothing can make for true manhood other than man himself. But then goodness, beauty, truth, expressed in religion, art and the search for knowledge, themselves give evidence of man's real being—he has engendered them and through them he is related to his source. If education can lead to this synthesis of confident striving within the soul of the human being, it has surely led to something.

In a Waldorf school, instruction is a means for education, and education has to do with a right growing into life. There is no indoctrination, only the aid a child needs at the different levels of his growing to discover his own inherent powers, so that in adult life he or she may truly find him/herself. For the adolescent the teacher should be a witness for truth. His knowledge needs to be rooted in the realities of human nature, realities that far transcend the light of common day. The knowledge that Steiner has given, of man as a being of body, soul and spirit, that knowledge the teacher

can make his own, and with that he can work. It is a knowledge that brings illumination to human life and shows the way to inner freedom, a knowledge that enables the teacher to address himself in confident mood to the highest potentialities in the child, making of himself the gardener of the most precious plant of all. The perilous years of adolescence require such a knowledge in the teacher; then the stability engendered in the first years of childhood, the training in social relationships and heart-fitness of the middle years with the class teacher, flower into a right independence of outlook, right discrimination and judgment, right confidence and right initiative in the adolescent. But that this may come about at its best, we need to guide the child progressively through all his years of schooling.

In the ninth grade the child begins to waken to himself, in the tenth grade he begins to waken to the earth as a whole, in the eleventh grade he begins to question into the meaning of life, in the twelfth grade he may come to the assurance that the ultimate answer rests in man himself. He has learned to understand the descent of the human being to earth, he has learnt to love the kingdoms that surround him, and now he can foresee the means for man's re-ascent. He has learned to appreciate the scholarship of his day and to view it as a transition process to an age of new discoveries when religion, art and science which appear to have fallen apart will one day be reunited to give new insights to the meaning of life on earth. He has learned to see that the contradictions which surround him are of human making and may be resolved again, that in this lies the task of evolution and that life is a call to action. He has learned to value each person for him- or herself. This his childhood will have given him to take into adult life. The details he will by then have forgotten but the attitude and the endeavor he will remember. He/she will have been prepared to enter life.