

Head, Heart and Hands:
Balance in Waldorf Education
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Education for Renewal / Action Research, Spring 2013

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the innate human acts of thinking, feeling, and willing and how they are viewed within Waldorf Education. What does it mean to educate the “head, heart, and hands?” Rudolf Steiner emphasized the importance of balancing the flow of thinking, feeling, and willing and how each of those correspond to the cycles of child development. As many Waldorf schools advertise as an education of “head, heart, and hands” or as being a balanced or holistic education, this paper seeks to uncover the mystery of *why* reaching the child through thinking, feeling, and willing bears significance. The importance of this balance in the classroom via the medium of the teacher is also explored.

Author Note:

As thinking, feeling and willing correspond with the head (thinking), the heart (feeling), and the hands (willing), these terms will be interchanged throughout the paper. In addition, this paper assumes that the reader has some familiarity with the ideas of Rudolf Steiner and

Anthroposophy.

Seedling, Child, and Balance

A seed is newly planted in the ground. The seed strives for the upright and reaches toward the sun while the gardner faithfully and patiently waits. This seed takes from the elements -- earth, water, fire, and air -- sprouts in vivid green, and eventually grows to blossom. The very nature of the seed is to grow.

Behold the newborn child, newly planted on the earth. The round and sleepy child strives to first lift her head for the upright, and the parent faithfully and patiently waits. That child takes from the elements in the same manner of the seed -- earth, water, fire, and air -- and those elements nurture the child. The caretaker provides love, attention, and affection and the child thus thrives. The very nature of the child is to grow.

While both the seed and the child require nourishment to thrive, that nourishment must be supplied in the proper dosage. For example, if this seed has been given too much of one element it may perish; the sprout withers away under too much sun and drowns beneath an excess of water. To help sustain that similar balance, the child depends upon the guidance of an adult to tend to her needs.

The Significance of Thinking, Feeling, and Willing

“If we would be educators in the true sense, we must have neither a one-sided regard to thinking nor a one-sided regard to willing, but we must envisage the whole being, in all its aspects.” --
Rudolf Steiner, *The Emancipation of the Will in the Human Organism*

Rudolf Steiner stated that in order to become true teachers, we must view the child as a “whole being.” Anthroposophy acknowledges not only the physical being that embodies spirit

and soul, but also that the idea of reincarnation and a pre-earthly existence. Therefore, providing nourishment to only the physical organism will not suffice, the soul must also be nourished.

To think, to feel, and to will are natural propensities of the soul. In his lecture “Thinking, Feeling, and Willing as Two Poles of the Human Soul-Life,” Rudolf Steiner describes how the life of the soul lies on one pole or plane that hold the thought element, the feeling element, and the will element. Below is a view of how that “soul plane” might look like:



These three soul-faculties are never working independently. Each is using the forces of another on the plane to act. For example, Rudolf Steiner states again in the same lecture, “Will remains even in the thoughts...will holds sway within the thoughts in the way we chose one thought over another,” so despite one element being dominant at a given time, another element is also at work. In addition, Steiner describes the importance of giving each of these elements proper time to develop during the three stages of childhood.

Ages Birth to Seven Years and Will Development

The first seven years of life are designated to will development in a Waldorf school. The first seven years would represent the “hands” portion of the “head, heart, and hands” equation. The children in the Waldorf Early Childhood classrooms are busy working away at beeswax modeling or dough kneading, or they are outside in the schoolyard raking leaves or shoveling sand, using not only their hands, but engaging their entire physical bodies. These are activities are helping the children develop a sense of physical self. The children are building the stamina

necessary to heartily develop healthy physical bodies and etheric bodies, another developmental aspect of this childhood stage. Such hearty hands-on activities beckon outsiders to marvel at what seems only natural to the children. The young child enjoys her main “work,” playing and imitating, and does so with youthful vigor and joy.

Yet while the child is finding joy in these activities, she is doing a very meaningful and purposeful job. In the early childhood years, the child is working to fully incarnate, at each moment she is working to “fit” inside her body. Thus the work of the young child corresponds to both incarnating the physical body while building the etheric and the will-forces.

Because the will exists as a soul-force, it needs only to be properly developed and formed. With this in mind, the child in a Waldorf school is able to thus move freely through the important steps of young childhood -- growing from a baby to an upright toddler to a verbal and vibrant kindergartener -- without coaxing or hinderance. This includes developing a steady daily rhythm and limiting the intake of intellectual activities or thoughts or ideas that bring the child out of the physical/will realm and into the “head” realm.

While through an Anthroposophic lens it is easy to see why academics should be excluded in the early years in order to encourage will development, it can be a difficult concept for many people to understand. In a culture that is turning more often to the idea that “early is better” and the concept is that if something is to be done, why not offer academics as early as possible? To this question, Rudolf Steiner had many answers. Yet it is not just Steiner that answered that question, mainstream educators and researchers are discovering on an increase the importance of holding off on early academics. For example, Dr. David Elkind, chairman of the Department of Child Development at Tufts University, spoke to the modern phenomenon of

“progress” in early childhood education; Dr. Elkind believes that there is a need for a developmentally appropriate curriculum in modern education, which includes the recognition of *how* the child develops. (Elkind, 1997)

The opinions supported by Dr. Elkind’s research compliment the ideas of Rudolf Steiner -- that in order to be real educators, we must first look at the whole child and *how* the child develops. If we look at how the child develops, we can observe the natural timeline dedicated for working in the realms of thought, feeling, and will. In this way, Steiner urged against intellectual development during the early childhood years and proposed that children should be first planted firmly in their bodies with a strong sense of self (will) before taking in intellectual concepts.

Of the will development in contrast to intellectual development, Rudolf Steiner said, “We must delay as long as possible the giving of mental concepts in purely intellectual form...man should fully awaken later in life, but the child must be allowed to remain as long as possible in the peaceful, dreamlike state of pictorial imagination of the early years. For if we allow the organism to grow strong in this way, he will develop in later life the intellectuality needed in the world today.” (Steiner, 1923)

If the imagination is encouraged to develop without intellectual interference, Rudolf Steiner noted, that the brain will then “develop in such a way that the spirit dwells within it and gives birth to intuition.” (Steiner, 1923) Intuition is the will-impulse of the soul, one of the two poles of human soul-life. With the balance of will development comes the balance of the whole child that is available through Waldorf education.

Ages Seven to Fourteen in the Feeling or Heart Realm

As the first seven years of life are related to will development, the second seven year cycle (ages seven to fourteen) are related to the heart or feeling realm. René Querido describes in *Waldorf Education: A Family Guide*, “Emphasis in the middle years (Grades 1-8) of the Waldorf curriculum is appropriately placed on the feeling-filled experience of knowledge,” reinforcing the idea that knowledge obtained during this time enters the child in the Waldorf classroom through the feeling realm. The Waldorf grades curriculum offers vivid story telling infused with arts, rhyme, and music, the grades-aged children first “feel” the information that they take in.

Storytelling through vivid imagery is what Rudolf Steiner emphasized during the second seven-year cycle of child development. (Steiner, *Kingdom of Childhood* pp. 30-33) It is through this imagery that the child connects to the feeling realm and memory is developed. When the child is given pictures rather than hard intellectual facts and concepts, she is using the process of pictorial imagination that has been developing in the early years. Where the children worked through imitation in the early childhood years with a sense of goodness all around him in her physical surroundings to help support the “whole sense-organ” as he took everything in from the external, the sense-organ is now turning inward in the years following the change of teeth. (Steiner, *Kingdom of Childhood* p. 23)

After the change of teeth, the child is continuing to work with her immediate surroundings. By listening to stories that involve familiar concepts, the child creates vivid inner pictures. Mental pictures that arise from hearing familiar stories rather than stories about abstract concepts do not to intellectualize the soul-image of imaginative picture. In *The Education of the Child*, Rudolf Steiner described of teaching in these years, “The world of *feeling* is developed in the proper way through parables and pictures...and especially through the pictures of great men

and women, taken from history and other sources and brought before children.” (Steiner, 34) The concrete concepts of history themselves are not what is necessarily important; it is the memory formation and the type of imprint on the soul that is paramount to concrete facts. The children at this time are developing their intellect through the feeling realm as they shape and mold their own moral sense by hearing historic tales that are age appropriate. These stories reach the seven to fourteen year old child on the level of heart, and thus create the balance that fits to this age where everything to these children is felt with vigor.

The child is taking in a subtle sense of morality through feeling-evoking pictures rather than through concrete facts in the form of an historic timetable. The capacities for judgement will come in the later years, when the child can use the intellect to guide through moral issues. In the meantime, the child is understanding “I feel growing strength within me,” (Steiner, *Education of the Child* p. 36) it is through the use of the will within the feeling realm that the child has the capacity for pictorial development and memory capacity.

Further development of the memory comes in this age-range through experiencing music and the arts. It was the recommendation of Rudolf Steiner that the child should, just after the time of the change of teeth, take up some musical activity. This might be simply a song or perhaps might be, as is the case in many Waldorf schools, the pentatonic flute. Yet it was not simply the music itself that Steiner emphasized, it was even more so the quality of music -- the child will take in the quality coming from the teacher, and that the music should reach the feeling realm of the child. Because the soul as a growing organism in and of itself, the music will reach the child on the soul level and will fill a sense of deep satisfaction, or as Steiner stated in *The Kingdom of Childhood*, “the children really come to possess all these things [arts] as an inward

treasure.” (Steiner, 99) Such an inward treasure is a satisfied soul that is able to recognize and appreciate beauty, gifts that engage the heart of the child, a balance that is a significant feature of wholesome human development.

Ages Fourteen to Twenty-One in the Thought Realm

“When children come to the age of puberty, it is necessary to awaken within them an extraordinarily great interest in the world outside of themselves.” -- Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood*

While the typical young teenager might not seem incredibly thoughtful (he is still very much in the feeling realm as a young teen), the older teenager is moving into the thinking realm. Her thoughts might be engaged in academic study or in the logical thinking and complex decision making that is required to move out of the family home and into the world as a freestanding adult. Her thoughts can now guide him as he begins to cross over the threshold from child to adult.

The words of Rudolf Steiner regarding thought “That which we introduce into the outer world as thought emanates from our inmost being” (Steiner, 1921) show that thought, will, and feeling are connected; thoughts are created by the use of will, and thus pass through the feeling realm. When the will and feeling have been developed in the early years of life, thought can then use the will to discern judgement and make moral decisions. Children at this age (teen) are famously opinionated, often stubborn, and steadfastly searching -- the entire being of this older teenaged child is absorbed in what is fair, wrong, and right in the world. Children at this age are actively pondering the world around them while searching deeply for a sense of fundamental and universal truth. The picture of the idealistic teenager is not simply a cliché, it is an accurate picture of this stage of development.

Where previously the children were either working out of their immediate environment or formulating mental pictures that are still related to the life around them, the high school aged students are venturing into the world around them. Through puberty the children are now reaching out into the far realms of the outside world. There is a great importance to this outward movement; the astral body is now freed and the forces of thought are now open to exploration.

Yet it is important for the child to explore the world *outside* himself rather than taking the focus inward. The tendency to brood and become moody is often noted of pubescent children. However, during this time of searching for universal truths, the answers to the riddles of earthly life must be sought in the world outside the self. Thus the teacher becomes a guide to the moral inner life of the child, and the curriculum supports both the teacher and the student. Through the exploration of the humanities, practical and artistic mathematics, the sciences, foreign language, music, physical education, and often community service projects, the older child is met with the universal truths of the world.

It is essential that the thought-life of the child be engaged and guided in the proper way. The pubescent child must be actively engaged with thoughts that are well-rounded while guiding in the direction of what all children at this age are looking for -- universal truths. True balance in the thought realm engages the soul-life of the child while he eagerly looks outside himself to answer her own questions, and to form a moral sense that is based on the beauty and goodness that he has experienced in the younger years.

Balance Within the Three Stages of Childhood

It is important to note how these soul-faculties of thinking, feeling, and willing do not work alone, independent of one another. In fact, thinking, feeling, and willing act together

throughout each cycle -- it is not that the child is simply “willing” during the first stage and is not thinking or feeling. On the contrary, thinking, feeling, and willing are always working together while one in particular is emphasized during a given cycle: “What actually takes place in the life of the soul during the waking state is never entirely one-sided; thinking is not present by itself, nor willing by itself, there is always a mutual relationship and interplay between them.” (Steiner, 1921) And as the child grows, the developmental achievements of the previous cycle serve as a foundation that is constantly being built upon and returned to.

As feeling is centered in the middle of thinking and willing, the will must pass through the feeling realm in order to connect to thinking and vice versa. When one of these aspects is developed, the proper formation of thought or the proper direction of willing will be the end result. For example, if the older child (pubescent) is trying to make her own sense of the Civil Rights movement of the United States history, she will need to first use her will to direct her thought, and in doing so she will pass through the feeling realm.

Waldorf teachers may introduce the concept that the feeling realm lies in the middle of thinking and willing to guide their lesson planning, often called “threefold lesson planning.” According to Steiner’s indications about the age-appropriate development of the three, the teacher leads the class based on what stage they are working in. For example, the grades teacher is not only teaching to the heart realm, but is using the concept that the children are in this “feeling” phase and working with that. The head, heart, and hands are each engaged, but the teacher is “reaching” the child through arts and not on an intellectual level. If the grades teacher keeps the focus on the arts and strives to bring an artistic element into each part of teaching, the feeling or heart realm is automatically present in the teaching.

If the child has been educated in this way so that the proper formation of thinking, feeling, and willing are honed within the designated cycle of development, she can then form independent moral conclusions. When the feeling realm has been developed in the proper manner, she can inwardly acknowledge the beauty of the word. At the same time, she relies on her moral development that has come as a result of working on the will in the early childhood years, the idea that the world around is a good and beautiful place, and that “I” am standing firmly in it. Thus the full balance of thinking, feeling, and willing come full circle and reach to the depths of the soul as truth, beauty, and goodness.

Truth, Beauty, and Goodness and Balance in Action: A Moment in the Waldorf School

Plato described the “three verities” or three eternal ideals as Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Rudolf Steiner made a direct correlation between these three ideals with the use of the head, the heart, and the hands or the principals of thinking, feeling, and willing. (Steiner, 1923) In this way, goodness corresponds to the early childhood years of will development, beauty to the feeling years, and truth to the last stage of child development. These “three verities” manifest in the classroom as one of the many underpinnings to the curriculum. Let us explore a classroom through the lens of goodness, beauty and truth.

The Early Childhood teacher is working to create an environment that supports the child’s inner belief that the world is right and good around him. Envision the class celebrating the birthday of one child. The cake has been baked and the scent of vanilla and cinnamon fill the air. The teacher lights a candle, relays the story of the child’s journey from the spiritual world to earth, and there is a mood of reverence and excitement. Each child comes to understand that he or she is a special soul that has origins that reach beyond this lifetime on earth. The child is

revered, and the teacher is revered by the child in exchange. With that reverence comes the impression of a religious origin onto the child, something that Rudolf Steiner emphasized the importance of during the early years. The sanctity of a childhood preserved through goodness is tangible. The will development here is through the feeling “the world is good and I have my work to do in it.”

Meanwhile, the third graders are hard at work on their Native American studies. These children are beginning to explore the outer world, ever so gently and with a familiar tone. Next year, they will begin to study local geography and their wise and thoughtful teacher has begun to speak to them about the Iroquois longhouse, the customary house of the Natives of their region. The teacher first relates to the class a story about a young child, nine years old, that is experiencing much of the same emotional confusion as these third graders might be. The teacher does so through vivid imagery, never through direct fact giving. There is a gesture of comfort and a sense of understanding. The children come to “see” the vision of the longhouse as a picture in their minds, and then work with the teacher as he walks them through a drawing. The entire lesson is given with artistic feeling in speech, through drawing, and ends with a song. Beauty is prevalent in this classroom. The feeling realm is connected with the sense of “the world is beautiful and I too can create beauty in it.”

At the same time, the high school students are reading Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. The struggles of Heathcliff, the antagonist, are familiar to the class -- they struggle each day with good and evil, as they work to find truth in the types of injustices they read about in *Wuthering Heights*. Questions about injustice lead them to come to their own conclusions about truth. The hard facts that are being presented in the Chemistry lab tangible examples of firm, solid, and

unbreakable laws of nature. This is the sort of truth that these children need in order to direct their moral decisions. They are going outward into the world and can do so with the sense of goodness and beauty that they have earned during the younger years. Meanwhile, the gesture in this classroom is “there are universal truths in this world, and I can help to preserve them.”

The Teacher and Balance

As a student of Anthroposophy, the teacher is always striving for balance within herself. She is working under the indications of Rudolf Steiner, performing meditative exercises that strengthen the will. Any of the meditations that Steiner recommended as the review exercises work on uniting the will with the thinking and feeling realms in a balanced way. In his book *Strengthening the Will: The Review Exercises*, Rudolf Steiner goes into detail about how these meditative practices come into the life of the teacher (or any adult) as uniting thinking, feeling, and willing.

The teacher works to add the artistic element into everything that she presents to the class. In this way, the three soul-forces are connected; we explored this idea above in the picture of the “soul-plane” that thought passes through feeling on the way to will and vice versa. The teacher also becomes adept at managing the particular needs of herself, and also of the student. Perhaps, for example, the child seems particularly or abundantly “in her head.” The teacher can often identify that, and can work with the child accordingly. Because as we seek balance in Waldorf education, if one of these thinking-feeling-willing forces is outweighed by another and thus out of balance, it is the work of the teacher to help bring the balance as needed.

Conclusion

Balance can be elusive. Particularly in the case of a delicate child, it might be difficult to figure out just what an individual child needs, as each child is so different from another. However, the indications given by Rudolf Steiner that present themselves in the Waldorf curriculum are a blueprint for how balance for the child might be achieved. By understanding the concept that each child has an age-appropriate time in which to develop the will, feeling, and thinking as soul-faculties, the teacher has a great tool that aids in achieving such balance. While the concept and underpinnings are subtle, the results are nonetheless manifest in the child.

As Waldorf educators we strive to create balance for each child in our care by nourishing the soul-faculties of thinking, feeling, and willing through the head, heart, and hands. The soul is fed when this balance is sought and is nourished by truth, beauty, and goodness. United in the soul -- a mind that is sharpened with a wise and thoughtful intellect in the head, a soft heart that recognizes the beauty of the world, and strong hands that revere the strength of humankind. This is balance in Waldorf Education.

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