

Teacher Self-care

— Kathy Rinden

Waldorf early childhood teachers take on a special role in the lives of young children and their families. Great attention and effort is given to many areas within the role of teacher. The rooms to which we invite children and families are designed to be imbued with warmth, love, and beauty. Classroom materials are chosen and often made with great care as to how such items will affect the development of the young child. The rhythm of the day, week, and seasons comes into our consciousness in a deep way, so as to result in routines that will promote health and provide support.

In our daily work with the children, we spend time and careful thought in bringing activities that we hope will serve the children in the best way possible, and in telling stories and performing puppet shows to bolster the children's soul life. Teachers work diligently to make the right choices within the curriculum for each constellation of children in their care, year after year.

Parent work is of great importance in these early years, and educators in early childhood programs not only work to “hold” the children during the school day, but to find thoughtful ways to bring basic aspects of child development in the light of anthroposophy to

the parents through conferences, parent meetings, and individual conversations.

As Rudolf Steiner developed the first Waldorf School, one hundred years ago, he envisioned the need for teachers to be involved in every aspect of school life, helping with administrative duties. While this is a great honor and responsibility, extra meetings and committee work take much additional time, which can result in a further taxing of one's etheric forces.

While there is indeed a great deal of reward in doing this work to the best of our abilities each day, we need to become aware of how this earnest striving to serve young children, their families, colleagues, and the school takes a toll on our own personal lives and health. How can we refresh ourselves on a regular basis so as to sustain longevity for this work? Where can we find guidance in strategies to rejuvenate ourselves, thus preserving our love for and ability to participate in this educational movement?

Luckily, Rudolf Steiner has given us some very valuable insights to consider in his description of the Pedagogical Law within his book, *Education for Special Needs* (also known as “The Curative

Course”), and his lectures on “Faith, Love, and Hope: The Third Revelation,” given December 2-3 1911 in Nuremberg. Both of these sources provide fundamental anthroposophical information that confirms the importance of teacher self-care.

In the Pedagogical Law, Steiner shares his insight into how the teacher’s ego, astral, and etheric bodies work to support and develop the four bodies (physical, etheric, astral, and ego) of the child.

Any one member of the being of man is influenced by the next higher member (from whatever quarter it approaches) and only under such influence can that member develop satisfactorily. Thus, whatever is to be effective for the development of the physical body must be living in the Etheric body – in an Etheric body. Whatever is to be effective for the development of an Etheric body must be living in an astral body. Whatever is to be effective for the development of an astral body must be living in an ego; and an ego can be influenced only by what is living in a spirit-self.

A diagram is added to further clarify what the Pedagogical Law is expressing.

Child	Teacher
Physical Body	Etheric Body
Etheric Body	Astral Body
Astral Body	Ego
Ego	Spirit-self

Thus it can be seen how the teacher works to influence the proper and healthy development of the child through his or her own forces. But how does this come into play as a guide to a teacher’s own need for self-care?

The Pedagogical Law helps us to see how we can work in the realm of our own personal self-development. Parents and teachers understand how much young children under the age of seven pull on the adult’s etheric forces each day, while they are creating and defining their own physical bodies. Children at this stage require caregivers who can provide regular and consistent rhythms, health-giving nutrition, and plenty of opportunities for vital sleep in order to grow and thrive. As the providers of these

forces, we must continually focus on maintaining these capacities within ourselves. When our own strength is compromised, we have little to provide to the child. How can we expect to give to others when we have not replenished our wells? If what we have to offer the child is not rich with life forces, we then become withered and dry.

Thus it is imperative for us to commit to taking the time to make sure that our own etheric forces are full of nourishment. This becomes a path of self-development and discovery to learn what will restore and maintain us. Steiner suggests the importance of the gift of humor to sustain our personal etheric capacities. He is quick to clarify that humor is not that of cynicism or sarcasm, but true humor that lifts, lightens, and comforts. We need next to bring our efforts of self-development into the area of our astral and ego bodies. Our astral bodies can be further developed through the practice of balancing our antipathies and sympathies, creating greater empathy for what the child is going through. This is accomplished by developing a real interest in the child and through learning to truly observe, in equanimity, what the children are showing the teacher in their movements, speech, and actions. When a teacher can see, with balanced compassion, what a child is expressing, then there develops the capacity within the teacher for greater understanding and knowledge of the child. This interest living within the astral body can then be warmed by our ego, leading to vigorous enthusiasm for our work with the child and family.

In 1911, Rudolf Steiner gave a lecture entitled, “Faith, Love, and Hope: The Third Revelation,” in which he provides a picture of the crucial value of these three forces in every human being’s earthly life.

Faith, love, hope, constitute three stages in the essential being of man; they are necessary for health and for life as a whole, for without them we cannot exist. Just as work cannot be done in a dark room until light is obtained, it is equally impossible for a human being to carry on in his threefold nature if his three sheaths are not permeated, warmed through, and strengthened by faith, love, and hope.

How can we work to bring faith, love, and hope into our daily lives, thus enlivening our astral, etheric, and physical bodies?

I suggest that we can make a concerted effort to think in terms of how and what we choose to believe and practice. Do we choose to walk towards an attitude of hope each morning as we awaken to a new day? How can we truly thrive in our day-to-day existence if we do not choose to bring a feeling of hope into our vision for the future? Because we have free will, I believe that we also have the ability to choose our thoughts and actions. We are capable of filling ourselves with positivity, joy, and openness to possibilities in our daily outlook. Humor, warmth, and comfort can color our point of view. It is very important that we see that this practice is not selfish, but rather giving first to ourselves those qualities we wish to share with others. Find out what nourishes you.

We can then extend ourselves outward in love by showing deep interest in others and in the world around us. How can we accomplish this? Find something that interests you that is beyond yourself. Open yourself to travel or study beyond your own culture and nation. Become involved, on some level, with an organization that you feel is doing important work. Learn a new skill, such as a language, craft, art, music, cooking. Create and care for a garden, or become involved in a local community organization. Find out what it is in you that sparks interest outside of yourself.

Now we come to the quality and practice of faith. As we move through dark and difficult times, can we maintain our values and beliefs in the face of cynicism, doubt, and despair? Each time we practice such faithfulness, we defy negativity, skepticism,

and despondency. Instead we choose to imbue our thinking, feeling, and willing with sustained resolve. Find clarity in what you value, believe, and hold true. In his article, "Working with the Pedagogical Law," Cornelius Pietzner describes faithfulness as a conscious daily activity.

This aspect of faith has an active quality of steadfastness and perseverance. It is a conscious willing effort, and has the character of 'wrestling' to hold onto the higher image in moments of darkness. Faithfulness is a striving. How many times can the apparent vicissitudes of a budding and boisterous astrality call on us to hold this higher image, and, from the balancing force of ego, wrestle for serenity, peace, and clarity? This is a wonderful picture for us, yet one we must practice ever and again!

Thus we can now clearly see that the health and development of others lies first in our own self-development and transformation. Self-care and our sense of wellbeing are crucial components in fully maintaining our own ego, astral, etheric, and physical bodies. Receiving and giving go hand in hand to promote balance in healthy living. Perhaps now, we can reframe the need for self-care as not a selfish activity, but rather a necessary part of our teacher preparation. Through the knowledge of the Pedagogical Law and the practice of faith, love, and hope, we can begin to create better balance for ourselves, thereby enriching the lives of our own families, and of those to whom we dedicate our work. ♦