

Free Schools & The Free Spirit

The Radical¹ Resource² of Anthroposophical Ideas

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“Every idea that does not become your ideal
kills a power in your soul;
every idea that becomes an ideal engenders
life-forces within you.”³

Dr Steiner clearly intended the educational impulses he was initiating, to respond to the demands of our times. His understanding of the evolving nature of the human being led him to the view that fresh capacities of soul were beginning to emerge in the fifteenth century C.E. – and that they would continue to do so well into the fourth millennium. With a high degree of prescience, Dr Steiner initiated the ‘model’ school in Stuttgart in 1919 with some distinctive organisational features intended to engage, promote and support the development of these capacities in the present and into the future.

Three of these are discernible as essential for the cultivation of these emerging soul capacities, which he called the ‘Consciousness Soul’. These soul forces demand inner freedom of thought, impartiality in the evaluation of others’ views, despite whatever sympathies or antipathies they provoke in oneself, and self-reliance in the formulation of one’s own judgements whether for the purposes of knowledge or moral choices.

1. Anthroposophical Sociology

The first of these features is born out of Dr Steiner’s sociological analysis and his picture of the three-fold membering of society. In his ‘conditions’ for involvement in the new school, was this unusual demand that, “the teachers, who carry the daily responsibility for educating the children, would be free to teach and run the school free of *government* or *economic* control.”⁴

‘Free’ in an anthroposophical sense is to be

carefully distinguished from licence. It does not imply a school that arbitrarily flouts government legislation or economic realities, but that it does not submit to being *controlled* or *directed* by them.

To grasp this clearly, some understanding of Dr Steiner’s penetrating social analysis is helpful. He distinguishes between three discernible, though interpenetrating spheres in social life; the cultural life (scientific, religious, artistic and educational endeavours), the ‘rights’ life (government, legislatures, courts, law enforcement etc.) and the economic life (commercial, financial and economic activities etc.). Overall social health is measurable by assessing the extent of the articulation and autonomy of these respective spheres and how effective the structures and facilities are, for mutual consultation and communication.

Dr Steiner’s ideal was always that *cultural* organisations direct their work without influence from the state or the commercial realm, that they do not become vocational training centres or institutions that instil civic virtues or nationalism at the expense of the individual and their self-realisation. This feature of the school’s arrangements was essential for this ‘education towards freedom’ – you could argue it is the very *raison d’être* of his educational initiative, indeed of his entire cultural endeavour. “The growing human being should mature with the aid of educators and teachers independent of the state and the economic system. Educators and teachers can allow individual faculties [of students] to develop freely *because their own have been given free rein...* it must be made possible for the free spirit in every human soul to make itself the guide of life.”⁵

This finds expression in Steiner schools when the teachers and educators direct the life of the school. An educational institution must be pre-eminently directed by educators and teachers if organisational health is to prevail. We would

1 ‘Radical’ from Latin *radix* – ‘root’ of plants or ideas or movements.

2 In the sense of returning to the source of the original inspiration (the Spring of Karnant).

3 Steiner, R (1993) [1906] *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, (GA 10) London, United Kingdom, Rudolf Steiner Press.

4 Staley, B (1998) [Introduction] In R. Steiner, *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner*, vol. 1 (GA 300a, pp.xviii-xix). Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

5 Steiner, R (1996) [1919] The threefold social order and educational freedom, in *The renewal of the social organism* (GA 24) London, United Kingdom: Steiner Books.

expect any contemporary commercial enterprise to be directed primarily by members of the business community unhampered by cultural constraints or undue interference by legislators, nor would we expect our courts of law to be overseen by any other than suitably qualified judges who maintain their independence from the state and from corporate influence.

2. Republicanism

In the welcoming address, the evening before the courses for the first teachers even began, we hear Dr Steiner emphasising the need for this republican approach in the life of the school.

“We shall not run our school on the lines of a government department but shall administer our affairs in a ‘republican’ manner. In a genuine teaching-community we cannot shelter behind the protective cushioning afforded by a Headmaster’s rules and regulations, but we must bring our own contributions towards solving our problems in full personal responsibility. Each member must be fully responsible for his or her deeds. Instead of receiving orders from above, we shall work together in a common purpose.”⁶

It is important to note that *republicanism* is not *democracy*. Leadership roles are necessary in all areas of social life, but in a republic, the members of the republic make the appointments and the appointees are ultimately responsible to the electorate. If the positions of leadership in a school are appointed by a Board or Council, and not by the teachers and educators, you do not have a republic. If the mandate is not granted by the teachers and educators, whom they are appointed to serve and to whom they are responsible, then it is not republican, despite the innovative – and often euphemistic – titles and justifications that at times are resorted to.

This republican form of management in an institution makes demands on two distinct characteristics of the consciousness soul of those working within it:

“We are now living in the age of consciousness soul development, a condition of soul wherein the all-important thing is for individuals to draw their own conclusions and learn to give facts an unprejudiced hearing, so that they can then make fully conscious

judgements.”⁷ No thorough consideration of all the facts from all the points of view represented in the College of Teachers is possible without the exercise of this faculty. The temptation is always present, to curtail these comprehensive discussions for time-effective considerations – it has been my experience that half an hour saved in a College meeting at the cost of someone’s voice being heard, or sought, often embroils the community in subsequent conflict and disharmony which can collectively cost the school untold hours – and sometimes days and years – of unnecessary turmoil and dissension.

“The truth is true even if all personal feelings revolt against it. That part of the soul in which this truth lives will be called consciousness soul.”⁸ No successful decision-making and no effective implementation of resolutions is possible in a republican College of Teachers without the exercise of this quality.

This leads to the third feature at the very heart of a Steiner school’s integrity and this, perhaps the most important, in as much as all others are ultimately derived from it.

3. Anthroposophy at the Heart of the Impulse

“The Waldorf School, is one where the teachers themselves, not so much in what they teach as in how they do so and in the whole way in which they exercise the art of education - are permeated in their faculties with that which anthroposophy can give them... As Waldorf teachers we have to be - in our inner being; in our heart - true anthroposophists in the deeper sense of the word.”⁹

The organisational features that Dr Steiner insisted on in his ‘model’ school provide *forms* in which the consciousness soul can develop in a healthy and progressive manner but anthroposophical spiritual science provides the inner *impulses* for its realisation. Many mistakenly attribute flaws in these original ideas to the historical failings of ‘Steiner’ schools but in every case it has been the unmistakable lack of implementation of *all* the essential elements in an *integral* model – it has not been the failure of the ideas but rather the *lack* of them in the schools which is grounds for concern.

A school can only claim to be a Steiner school if it is inwardly and externally *striving* to realise these impulses towards freedom in the individual and in the social life of our time.

6 Steiner, R. (1998) Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner. Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

Volume 1 (1919-1922) ISBN 0-88010-421-X; Volume 2 (1922-1924). ISBN 0-88010-452-X (GA 300a, August 20, 1919).

7 Steiner, R. (1974) [1923] Awakening to Community (GA 257, lecture 2 January 30, 1923). Hudson, NY: The Anthroposophic Press.

8 Steiner, R. (1970) [1904] *Theosophy* (GA 9, ch.1, sect.4). London, United Kingdom: Rudolf Steiner Press.

9 Steiner, R. Cognition of the Christ through anthroposophy (GA 211, lecture 2, April 15, 1922). London, United Kingdom: Steiner Books. <http://www.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA/index.php?ga=GA0211>

Adoption of corporatised constitutions – suited to the commercial sphere from whence they derive – usurp the teachers’ and educators’ legitimate leadership role in a cultural initiative. If a school Board, constitutionally or not, assumes unilateral direction of a school, it is in breach of one of the essential tenets of a Steiner School’s mandate as an educational institution which is no longer managed by teachers and educators. If, in addition, a Board’s independence is compromised by being subject to the patronage of powerful investors or sponsors, then the hegemony of the *commercial* sphere over a *cultural* institution, is complete. If a Board finds itself responsible for the overall direction of a school then they will increasingly feel their lack of knowledge and insight and call more and more on external authorities and professional bodies to reassure themselves that they are up to the job in the eyes of the community. The school becomes increasingly dictated to by the demands of external agencies, financial institutions, educational associations and government departments, all with their own objectives which are almost always in stark contrast with the ideals of the free schools and free spirits of the Steiner school movement. If we are to truly restore the organism to health and not just remain at the level of responding to symptoms, an effective diagnosis must penetrate beyond these, to an understanding of the systemic ailment.

In my opinion, a school which is not run on Republican lines, is subject to a Principal, is no longer financially independent and is not staffed by “anthroposophists in the deeper sense of the word”, will confront grave difficulties in calling itself a *Steiner* school.

Any impulse which fails to understand its origin, is in danger of losing touch with it and then it is only a matter of time before its life-giving waters will falter and cease to flow. We are reminded of this in the potent image of the Grail Sword in the tale of Parzival which illustrates what can happen to spiritual initiatives when perpetuated without re-invigorating them in the well-springs of their original impulse. Once renewed in their own well-springs they are as effective as they were in the beginning.

“That sword¹⁰ holds good with the first blow
On the next it will shatter:
A spring rises near Karnant,¹¹
If you will bring it back there,
It will be restored by the flowing waters.”¹²

Rod lives on the Far North Coast of NSW with his partner and children. He has been involved with the Steiner schools in Australia in various capacities over the past thirty years, as a class teacher, class guardian, Board member and as a parent. His earliest encounter with Steiner education was with the pioneering group of Tarremah in Tasmania. He taught at Lorien Novalis in Sydney and then at Shearwater the Mullumbimby Steiner School. Since 2011 he has been conducting professional development at Steiner Schools in the area, teaching at the Grail Quest Teacher Training in Byron Bay and tutoring in maths.



Rod writes:

“My intentions in writing this article were to review some of our departures from Steiner’s original ideas and to seek out some of the ideal directions we could be striving in, when opportunities for change arise.

In my experience many Waldorf teachers, parents and Board members fail to appreciate the depth and significance of Steiner’s vision for a renewal in education and persist in compromising it unnecessarily because of *perceived* expectations of the community, or the state, who would, in my view, as readily respond to a vigorously argued case for Steiner’s ideas.

Rudolf Steiner’s approach strives to realise the progressive ideas of our time, by extending and building on the reality that we find ourselves in. This is in striking contrast to the oft-heard descriptions of his more challenging ideas as unrealistic ‘idealism’, or obsolete ‘ideology’.

While social change is as inevitable as change in the natural world, in the social sphere it is human-initiated, and may be evolutionarily progressive or regressive.

When change and development is required, we want to know in which direction to proceed, in full cognisance of the realities before us and the ideal possibilities available to us.” ♦

10 The Grail sword or sword of the word, the archetypal realisation of the spirit in the world.

11 The Spring where the sword was originally forged.

12 Eschenbach, W. von. (1980). *Parzival*, (transl. A.T. Hatto), V, 254. London, United Kingdom: Penguin Classics.