

Getting Over Easy

Challenging Ourselves to Learn New Things

• Cynthia Aldinger

I was in my late forties or early fifties when my eldest son taught me how to fry an egg over-easy. Up until then I had always scrambled. All my attempts at turning an egg had ended in the necessity of scrambling anyway. Recently, while preparing breakfast eggs for my husband and myself, I noticed how, with great ease, I can now turn an egg. In fact, my over-easy eggs are rather lovely! I remarked to my husband that I cannot understand why it was so difficult for me before. Seemingly without thought, I can turn an egg! With his marvelous scientific background, my husband explained to me that over time I have developed an awareness of the right amount of butter in the pan, how to crack the egg with ease, the way the egg looks when it is really ready to turn, how to slip the spatula under the egg without breaking it open, and how just the right motion of my arm and wrist flip the egg gently over – easy!

Together he and I are having a similar, though not quite as easy, experience with our current study of Rudolf Steiner's book *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. Decades ago, while studying this book with my fellow students at Emerson College in England, I considered the possibility that I might go stark raving mad before I would ever actually understand this content. Over the years of teaching in adult education, I dreaded the idea of being asked to lead a study or try to teach this content to others. In fact, I am still unprepared to do that. But, guess what—I am actually beginning to understand what Dr. Steiner wrote in this wonderful book.

So what, you may ask, do turning an egg and understanding a book have to do with one another? Nothing for most people. They have to do with my specific biography. However, we each have those things in our lives about which, upon first encounter, we feel “This I cannot do.” Stubbornly, I held to that conviction about eggs and about that book for many, many years even

though I could do other things with eggs, and I loved and understood other Steiner books and lectures.

What changed? I think that what changed was my desire to know combined with my willingness to fail. I really loved the eggs my son made for me, and I wanted to be able to do that in my own home. I became okay with failure, knowing that my failures would still yield nice scrambled eggs. Then one day, the egg turned without breaking. Then that began to happen more and more. My mind and my body began to synchronize a new capacity. Risking failure and trying and trying and trying again became acceptable due to my desire for the new capacity.

Studying *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* has been a slightly different experience. Yes, I was willing to face the possibility of not understanding it again. But there was another level: fear. I needed to face my fear of feeling confused or crazy as I considered *thinking about thinking* and the relationships between dualism and monism, naive realism and critical idealism, and other amazing constructs. Facing my fear required trust—trusting my life's path, trusting my study partner, and trusting the spiritual beings who guide and protect me. Trust also included letting go of a specific outcome. My comprehension is still fuzzy in some parts, but the joy of learning overrides the fear and, yes, embarrassment of feeling muddled at times.

There is another important aspect to what I am learning from these two experiences. That is that not everyone learns in the exact same way or even draws the same conclusions from similar experiences. There are surely a variety of ways to ease an egg over to the other side, just as there are different ways to take up an esoteric study. It would be egotistical on my part to assume that another person's *aha* moments will be identical to mine. If I am not careful I can instruct someone

else to turn an egg just so—my way— or it will not work; better that I teach by example and try to figure out a few key components to success that I can share, leaving the rest for the other person to *discover* on her own.

Recently I was part of a collegial conversation on how to involve the children in clean-up time. One colleague, to whom I have looked for guidance over the years, was concerned that the idea of children learning by imitation was falling by the wayside. She was aware of a number of adults who were beginning to verbally assign tasks to the children, rather than trusting that they would eventually become involved via imitation. Her concern resonated in me, and I shared that I often did a specific task myself for weeks before really expecting the children to participate. In that way the imprint of the activity was in the physical space for the children to enter. However, I also noted that sometimes I would assign specific things to five- and six-year-olds in the springtime, when they were like little billy goats, and they loved the challenge.

Not long after this conversation, I received a beautiful image of a task chart created by another colleague whom I admire and respect. Pictures painted on carved wooden rounds illustrate the tasks. She noted how a new boy in her kindergarten, accustomed to the push-button world of today, was very soothed by this chart and could participate in the care of the space without her having to offer any verbal commands.

Another colleague expressed concern about the diminishing use of pentatonic and mood-of-the-fifth music, noting how soothing it is and how peaceful the children are in the care of someone who has really embraced this understanding of music for young children. Again, I felt resonance with this concern, specifically noting the difficulty people seem to have with using their kinderharps around the children, even at naptime when all that is needed is gently strumming. Also, I noted my experience of working with the Wilma Ellersiek gesture games and music and the calming effect it had on the children.

Then I remembered how another colleague had discovered that many of the old lullabies use minor thirds, rather than the pentatonic scale, and how soothing are these tunes for infants. And

I remembered fondly being in the presence of caregivers gleefully singing some old-fashioned children's games or folk tunes with the children, not with silliness but with joy, and having the awareness that these children were also content. Most likely there were other times of the day when they sang in the pentatonic scale.

How could these seemingly contradictory approaches healthily serve the children? It reminded me of a conference I attended over twenty years ago when many of the leading Steiner early childhood teachers from Europe came over and shared their expertise with us. Each morning we heard an inspiring lecture, sometimes with very contrasting ideas from the person we had heard the day before. It was both freeing and confusing. I found myself thinking, "Maybe I can really do whatever I want, take it easy on myself and just do what I am comfortable with." At the end of the week, Dr. Werner Glas spoke to us and noted that we had heard many differing things from these experts in the field. Then he said something I have never forgotten. He reminded us to remember that these individuals succeeded in what they did with young children due their depth of understanding of the children in their care and their ongoing devotion to deepening their work.

The easy way was not going to be the answer. In reality, there were fundamental principles of child development upon which these stellar teachers agreed, to include the understanding that young children learn through imitation and that mood-of-the-fifth music is the best developmentally-appropriate music for them. It was in some of their practices that there were obvious differences. Perhaps some were purists in their approach and others were interested in exploring whether there was a middle ground that also served the children.

As it turned out, I was still going to need to push up my sleeves and stretch myself, somewhat cautiously at first for fear of failure as mentioned above. It has turned out to be a lifelong dance— learning how to learn and how to relax and enjoy life at the same time.

Perhaps because of my somewhat sanguine personality, I find myself attracted to the idea that as adult learners, maybe there is something to be considered in the following:

1. Strengthening our desire to know or learn something new combined with a decreased fear of failure
2. Learning to trust and let go of specific outcomes
3. Observing the full picture of how others bring their gifts into the world

When we do this, we increase our capacities and our repertoire of what we can truly offer to ourselves and to the children in our care. Rather than continually feeling “less than” around someone who has accomplished a skill we do not yet have—like turning an egg or bringing mood-of-the-fifth music to children— we allow our interest and our desire to learn to push us forward in our efforts *over time*. It took me years of practice before I could create pentatonic songs with relative ease.

It also took me years before I gave myself permission to sing an occasional seasonal song—like “Jingle Bells”— with the children just for fun during clean-up time. Learning the difference between singing “Jingle Bells” because it was comfortable and familiar or singing it because it was joyful was an important step for me. In setting



myself up to be the *perfect*, non-risk-taking early childhood teacher, my joy was diminishing. Getting to the point where my authentic self could bring beautiful pentatonic and mood-of-the-fifth music to the children and could also sing a traditional tune with them was a big step for me.

A next big step was to learn that some people who only bring pentatonic and mood-of-the-fifth-music to the children are also authentic and joy-filled. There is no need for them to bring the folk tunes. I’ve also met master teachers whose children have learned to read their slightest gesture to indicate that cleaning is happening now, and it unfolds beautifully. I also know caregivers who have created supportive work songs or task systems in which the children appear to thrive.

Years ago I wrote an article encouraging teachers and caregivers to not get caught up in thinking there is a *one and only way* to do our work. It seems I am learning now that another step in development is to stretch ourselves and not just be comfortable with those things we already can do well. Particularly if we are to be true to the children in our care, understanding their need to learn through imitation, thrive in a variety of healthy sensory experiences, and be bathed in music that is developmentally strengthening for them, we want to stretch ourselves to learn how to offer this to them.

We want to be able to offer our best selves while we are becoming our next level of best selves. Letting go of fear, strengthening our desire to learn new things, entering with interest into the understanding of other people’s developed skills, and forgiving ourselves for our *not-quite-there-yet* stage of being can go a long way toward sustaining us in our work and our unfolding journey of life.

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