

## *Deepening Our Capacities to Meet the Children in Our Care*

*Notes from the 2010 East Coast Early Childhood Conference*

• Nancy Blanning

*The content which follows comes from lectures presented by Dr. Gerald Karnow at the 2010 East Coast Early Childhood Conference in Spring Valley, NY, on Feb. 12-14. This presentation concluded a three-year consideration of the young child's journey into incarnation of the "I" and how we can observe this unfolding.*

Secretly, began Dr. Karnow, we should consider early childhood as the most important work in Waldorf education. The experiences in early childhood provide the foundation for all of life and are most crucial in facilitating healthy incarnation of the human being. Last year the work in our kindergartens was characterized as "priestly." A picture from Steiner's *Cosmic Memory* describes a grove where the priestess sings her listeners into becoming the vehicle for the incarnated spiritual "I." Her priestly deed was preparation for the human being to be able to say "I." Likewise, the task of Waldorf early childhood education is incarnation of the "I" in the children.

Another component of this secret is that it requires the greatest amount of selflessness on the part of the educator. What matters is not so much what we *know* as what we *create* around the children so the "I" can find the proper residence in the physical organism. We are the midwives, the priests, and potentially also the physicians for the children we work with—and for the parents and ourselves as well. This selflessness has to do with creating an environment that permits the "I" to experience itself. A powerful example of how the child comes to experience himself comes in Steiner's lecture, "Self-Education in the Light of Spiritual Science" (Berlin, March 14, 1912). Spiritual science appreciates that there is a higher Self acting upon the child outside of his normal self.

*Besides what we take hold of as educators developing out of our normal consciousness,*

*something is already working on the child as a higher being outside of his normal self. If we focus on this, we will perhaps find another kind of education at work on the child, whereas in our normal education we turn only to the personal self of the child.*

*Where do we find what works on the child as a higher Self, and which belongs to the child, but doesn't enter his consciousness? Astonishing but true: it is children's play, the meaningful, well carried out play of all children that the higher Self works on. With the child's play we can only create preconditions for an education. What is accomplished in play happens basically through the self-activity of the child, through everything that cannot be confined to strict rules. Indeed, the essential, educational aspect of play is based on the fact that we call a halt to our rules and to all our arts of education and leave the child to his own impulses. For what does the child do when we leave him to his own impulses? When playing with external objects the child can try out whether this or that will work through his own activity. He brings his own will into activity, into movement. Because of the way in which the external objects behave under the influence of the will, it then happens that the child educates himself for life, simply through play, in a completely different way than through the influence of an older person or of someone's pedagogical principles. For this reason it is so very important that we mix as little of the rational or intellectual as possible into children's play. The more that play has to do with what cannot be comprehended but is simply beheld in its living character, the better it is.*

We have to set ourselves aside to permit the real being of the child to enter; this can only happen during the first seven years. We selflessly remove ourselves to create an environment in which we can perceive the true being of the child through his play.

What is this environment in which the child can “self-educate”? The classroom during free play can seem a chaotic mess, yet it is a “mess” in which there lives order. There are little clusters of activity here and there. It is an incredible cauldron of chaotic but organized activity. At a secret sign, the classroom is miraculously brought back into form through an orderly activity. The differentiated chaos is brought into a social unity. In witnessing this himself, Dr. Karnow realized that the whole organism of the class—a new creation—is being entered into by the children; the past which the children bring with them is entering the present. The teacher provides the right circumstances that permit this entry to happen into a highly differentiated way. This entry happens through the portals of the foundational senses of touch, life, self-movement, and balance, which the children need to experience in both the indoor and outdoor classroom. The consciousness of the teacher in holding each child in mind and her conscientiousness in guiding all that happens during the day creates a “kindergarten bubble,” a protective sheath that surrounds the group.

As the child is “self-educating,” he is also being formed through the experiences that come to him through the environment. In the first seven years the child is literally forming as well as growing the physical body. What we are doing in Waldorf early childhood education is so transformative that it changes the physical body. That is part of the secret of our work. All the child experiences through the senses and the more subtle aspects of mood, warmth of soul, joyfulness, and rhythmic order influence how the child’s body develops toward a healthy incarnation. As we understand this, we can appreciate how we can bring healing influences toward the children in our care. Rudolf Steiner learned this through work with his first student, Otto Specht, a boy with hydrocephalus who no one thought could be educated. Through Rudolf Steiner’s pedagogical methods, the size and form of the boy’s head shrunk and he eventually became a medical doctor.

This series of conferences began two years ago with considering “difficult children” (based on the title of Henning Kohler’s book, *Difficult Children: There Is No Such Thing*.) Otto Specht was Rudolf Steiner’s “difficult child” through whom he developed the basis for what became Waldorf education twenty years later. Now nearing a century since the founding of the first Waldorf school, we encounter increasing

numbers of children who fall into this “difficult” category. These are children whose incarnation is not going right; they struggle to find a comfortable and harmonious inhabitation of the physical body with their “I.” That the child is having some incarnational problem is seen quickly through our irritability or annoyance because a child is not doing what he is supposed to. We lose patience and want to know what to do.

One step toward knowing what to do is to look to the child’s bodily form as a way to understand the behaviors that perplex and challenge us. Consider that we have two children in a class displaying opposite tendencies. One is fearful and retreats into a corner. Another one annoyingly jumps right into everyone’s face. We worry about both, wanting to encourage the first and contain the other so that we can create a whole, harmonious organism. As a physician, Dr. Karnow sits and watches and notes the polarities of the two different children. He works from the idea that every behavior has its roots in the morphology, the form and structure, of the body. So he looks at forms, specifically the form of the face. On the quiet child he sees that the facial features are a bit flattened, as though held back. The child running around has a face that comes forward, enters into space. He looks at the forms and the child’s movement or lack thereof—chaotic movement, headless movement. He begins to find a connection between outer behavior and the child’s physical form. He comes to a preliminary conclusion that the quiet individuality is holding back from really being incarnated, is not pressing his features out into the world. The other gesture of form is “I will stick myself into your business all the time and will not stop.” This is an organic behavior that places itself into the classroom. This knowledge comes out of an inner participation in the form of the child, which can tell us a secret of how that individuality is entering into the body. This insight comes not out of judgment or criticism but of out of a deeply warmed interest in wanting to understand the child’s formative gesture.

All of our observations, to be humanely objective and morally upright, must be founded on what Dr. Karnow calls “the rock.” This “rock” is the image of humanity as a three-fold being shared with us through Rudolf Steiner’s insights. This is the image of mankind as a spiritual being. Through this image we hold and behold the child in reverence, not judgment. We can discover huge secrets about what an individuality brings into this life if we stand upon

“the rock.” In our observation first we *look*, then we *see*, and finally we *behold*. These are all different activities, focusing our attention more and more intently. In the wonder of beholding, we become what we behold. Through our eyes we enter into what we are looking at. We experience what we behold as if we were that ourselves. We become “one with” through this process. We often “look” and do not “see.” But when we “behold,” we become “one with.” This is the mood that must permeate our looking at a child so intimately. We must stand upon ‘the rock’ to make discriminations in our beholding.

If we look at children’s heads, we see how highly individual they are. The head is differentiated into regions that reflect thinking (forehead region), feeling (central part of face), and willing (the jaw area.) If, for example, we looked at the upper lips of children in the class, a short upper lip might suggest that maturation stopped and kept the lip up. Another one keeps the lip down all the time; what impression does that convey? A lower jaw thrust forward looks as if it will attack. If the behaviors fit these impressions, we can see that an aspect expressed in the form of the body has emancipated and expressed itself psychologically in behavior.

We can use this approach to observation in contemplating the form of the child—not only the face but also the whole head, ear, three-foldness of head-trunk-limbs, and so on. Then we see what imagination these suggest. What comes of imagination, coupled with objective but warmed consideration of the behaviors emancipated from the body form, can lead us to the inspiration and intuition of what to do for the child. What can we emphasize within or bring into the kindergarten environment that will have a balancing and harmonizing effect? How can we bring healing in the pedagogical realm?

A big question confronting us is when it is appropriate to bring in other therapies. Dr. Karnow’s answer—when the child cannot be contained in the “kindergarten bubble.” If the child’s capacity to imitate does not fall within what we provide for the class, the child steps outside of our pedagogical domain and cannot relate in an ordered way to the breathing “chaos.” Then we have to come to an understanding, a diagnosis (which literally means “understanding through and through”) and see where we can bring something to achieve balance. We can seek the support of anthroposophic medicine and therapeutic eurythmy. In some cases, sensory

integration/sensory processing therapies are allies where the child’s issues lie beyond what can be sufficiently addressed through our classroom environments.

Throughout this lecture series, we have considered the first seven years as the time the child grows the healthy physical body through the support of the etheric body. Everything of the physical body has to be imbued with the etheric. The body creates its form and grows. When certain stages of growth are completed, the etheric body is emancipated from that task and becomes available for other activities. Previous lectures<sup>2</sup> have described this process and how the forces of the etheric body are birthed in three stages, ultimately to be available for use as thinking forces. We can have a glimmer of this invisible etheric world when we look at a colored disk and then see the complementary color magically appear as a glow when we then gaze upon a white surface. Something of this freed etheric force we project outward, allowing us to participate in an invisible world.

The etheric body is hard to speak about because, though we live within it all the time, we are unaware of its presence, “asleep” to it. But we can wake up to this reality. Through our thinking forces, we actually take hold of these emancipated forces that rise out of our body. When we realize that we can consciously relate to what the etheric is, we have tools that we *can* and *do* work with, whether we know it or not. We must know as educators that what we do with our emancipated ether body affects the world around us and every other human being we meet. For example, we can send our gaze to another—an etheric encounter—and that person experiences it. Through our work with the child in the first seven years, we are working to assist the proper emancipation of the child’s etheric through the environment and our actual being. As we create the space and present ourselves, we work deeply into the being of the child. We can do that more consciously and effectively when we understand the subtle distinctions of the etheric body—the four ethers themselves.

We know that the physical body is highly differentiated. It has aspects relating to the four elements—mineral, water/fluid, air, and fire/warmth. The etheric body is also differentiated into four aspects that relate to the elements. The solid, mineral substance of the physical body has to be drawn into a living state. If a mineral part of the human being is

not lifted up, it literally becomes solid, like a kidney stone. The aspect of the etheric body that lifts the solid into life is the *life ether*

This is also true for fluids. Water also has to be kept alive and maintained in a living state. We know the truth of this when we see its failure in an older person with heavy, swollen legs. The ether which brings the fluid into life is known as the *chemical/sound/tone ether*. It is the *light ether* which works in the air, which we can read about in *Cosmic Memory* or *Occult Science*. Air and light ether work as opposites. Air fills in the space between things; light separates and creates borders, reveals distinctions. We experience *warmth ether* when we take outer warmth and make it inner warmth. Through the interaction of these ethers with earthly elements, we have forces that bring our bodily substance into a living state. We can positively support the living state of the child and his incarnation into earthly life when we intentionally work with the ethers in our classrooms.

Where are the ethers in the classroom? We can first consider warmth in both the physical and soul warmth we have in our classrooms. Warmth in whatever form influences all the children. Each child has her own warmth organization but is also affected by outer warmth in the room. We must make sure the children are warmly dressed. Whenever we consider these issues of warmth, we are working with the warmth ether.

How do we work with the air? We need to tend the physical air itself and then go to the light ether. We think we see light but rather we experience the effects of the light ether's activity, which reveals things and brings about separation. The air has to be circulating and light ether present in the lighting of the room. It must not be too light or too dark.

Is there fluidity in the room? Rhythm, the interdependence of everything we have in the classroom, how we can go from one play area to another so the children can move with social harmony—these are all expression of the chemical or tone ether. Yet it is not just harmony of objects and implements in the room but harmony of the being of the teacher and the harmony between teachers that also matters.

And what is the life ether? It is joy. The life ether is that which always permits the creation of life. It is unending and always present.

All of these are practical things we can consider. How we work with these etheric subtleties in our

thinking also offers the children something to grow upon. How can we get to know the ethers from the inside out? Of the warmth ether we ask, "What permeates everything?" It is the warmth ether that can penetrate everything. So when we enter a class, we send the warmth of our thought into everything, filling the space. Warmth has no barriers but lifts and permeates all.

In order to get inside the light ether, one can ask, "What is revelation, what is unveiling?" Here we can experience our thoughts as making discriminations in our environment. We can see what is out of order in the environment, in relationships.

The chemical ether poses a question of what is harmonization, order, interdependence, transformation of one thing into another. How is that living within the room, within the children, within oneself?

And of the life ether, we ask what is self-creating life?

The theme throughout the three-years' presentation of lectures has been how we can bring healing and wholeness to the children on their path into incarnation. The challenges thrust upon the children seem to grow only more complex and subtle. They sometimes seem even phantom-like, living in shadows that our light of ordinary thinking cannot reveal. To meet these darkened forces, the children need champions. Dr. Karl König, founder of the curative education Camphill movement, expressed this in a verse that Dr. Karnow shared.

*There is a knighthood of our time  
Whose members do not ride through the  
darkness  
Of physical forests as of old,  
But through the forests of darkened minds.  
They are armed with a spiritual armor  
An inner sun makes them radiant.  
Out of them shines healing—  
Healing that flows from the knowledge of the  
Image of Mankind as a spiritual being.  
They must create inner order, inner justice,  
Peace and conviction in the darkness of our  
time.*

We have to form a knighthood where we can all shine our inner sun, no matter what is happening outside. Whatever we do in relation to the ethers will work deeply into the bodies of the children in our care. With these we are taking in the forces of the

sun and permitting something to grow and thrive that will not otherwise work. Then we will be what Dr. König calls the knights who have “an inner sun.”

Dr. Karnow reminded us of our indebtedness to Rudolf Steiner. From him we have the “Image of Mankind as a spiritual being.” There is nothing we do in Waldorf education that is not founded upon the insights of anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner so generously offers to us. We must never cease deepening our relationship with these fundamental sources. These insights are the “rock” upon which this new knighthood stands.

## **References**

Rudolf Steiner. *Self-Education in the Light of Spiritual Science* (Mercury Press).

Dr. Karnow’s other lectures in this series are summarized in *Gateways* issues 54, 55, and 57.

**Nancy Blanning** *has been teaching in Waldorf Early Childhood for over 25 years. She is also a teacher trainer, mentor, and remedial consultant to other Waldorf schools, as well as a WECAN board member.*