

Carving a Manger in the Heart: A Place Where the Child Can Move to Become

• Laurie Clark

Colette Green, a good friend of mine who is a Waldorf nursery teacher, relayed this anecdote to me from a four-year-old child in her class. He began by saying, “Everythin’ in the world is changin’, you’re changin’, I’m changin’. The whole world is changin’!” He paused for a moment and then said, “We just have to remember what we once were.” This is a profound statement “out of the mouths of babes.” What did he mean when he said, “Remember what we once were?” Was he pointing to the memory of the spiritual world and the resolves that we brought with us into earthly life?

The etymology of the word “remember” is an interesting one; *re-member* (*re*: back; *memoris*: mindful) means to look back and be mindful. The original intentions to incarnate have to do with the essence of the will in each individual making the decision at the midnight hour in the life between death and rebirth to return to earth. This is an essential movement where the marriage of the heavenly forces and the earthly life is consummated. The Rosicrucian principle of bringing spirit into matter and the hope of bringing matter into spirit becomes a deep resolve. The young child who has just come from the spiritual world is fresh with this memory as a living epiphany in his entire being. He seeks the archetypal match in the human beings that surround him to reflect this resolve. The world as it is now is not a place that reflects this truth, with its virtual ways and its fast-paced materialistic life. Early childhood teachers can be mediators who honor this kind of “re-membering” and mirror this resolve in their own soul life in order to be the true introducers to earthly

life for our little friends who have come here to join us. In holding these truths close to our hearts, we can assure the children that they have made a good choice to incarnate and truly welcome them.

The last sphere that the human being goes through before coming to earth is the moon sphere. Here we pick up our gifts and often a full basket of struggles. The basket of struggles is very heavy to carry for some of the children that are coming to meet us. Many of these children have difficulties finding a true “home” in their bodies, feeling uncomfortable and unable to fully “move in.”

When we look at an archetypal child’s drawing of a house we find the bottom half is a square. These four walls should offer a sense of protection and security. One way to think of this is to imagine that each of these four sides represent the four lower senses, which when well nurtured give a strong foundation for life. This square is a crystalline form and can symbolize the physical/etheric body. The triangle roof shape points up to the heavens and symbolizes the soul/spiritual nature of the human being. Perhaps we can picture that the four higher senses reside in this roof form. These higher senses give the possibility of social graces and spiritual capacities for the future. From inside the house the middle senses act as mediators between these two. How can we as teachers find ways to helpfully invite the children to “fit” into their house with a sense of well-being?

When entering a house or any room, one has to cross the threshold. A threshold is a point or a place of entering from outside to inside. As adults, we can

picture how hard it is to step into a room where we must face a difficult situation. For children who are hesitating to move into their bodies, any transitions from one place to another are exceedingly difficult and painful. Their movement becomes static when asked to cross from self to environment or from environment to self. These “threshold children” often have a hard time entering into the kindergarten, moving from parent to teacher, and extreme difficulty in simply stepping into any new situation. Sometimes these threshold moments are unpredictable and are characterized by obstinacy, tantrums, even hitting and kicking. It is a way for the child to say, “Stay away, I don’t feel safe. I can’t move out of myself into the world, I don’t fit into the environment yet. I cannot make myself step over the threshold.”

How can we as teachers help these children move through the many thresholds that life brings? Letting go of any preconceived ideas we have about the child is essential in order to begin to make room for the child’s experience to live within us. Henning Kohler describes what the teacher must do to receive the children each day in a gracious manner: “In the evening of every ending day, I must strip the past of its power. I must literally watch all grudges that have accumulated melt away, everything in the way of habit and routine that has crept into my relationship with the child—all this I must watch melt away before the unprecedented event of warmth that consists in the child giving itself to me again day after day. Is not the durability of this trust striking, when I consider how often I lack patience and understanding?” (Kohler, 2003, p. 123) So it is that every day we have the opportunity to redeem ourselves from the mistakes we have made the previous day and strive to understand the child in a new way. This warmth that Henning expresses is a healing force that can pervade everything that we do with the children. When the teacher offers a soul-warming approach, it entices the child from self into the environment. This ability to receive and give warmth to others is similar to the chimney in the child’s house drawing that indicates the warming inside of the house all the way up through the top where the smoke is reaching up to the heavens. The sense of warmth comes from inside the human being and reaches out and connects to others. When warmth is consciously permeated in the realm of the higher “I” of the individual, it inspires enthusiasm and true joy.

In the second lecture of *Education for Special Needs* Rudolf Steiner describes the soul process the teacher must undertake to help the child who gets stuck and cannot move through a situation. He explains that if the teacher can deeply feel the same stoppage the child feels

and simultaneously develop utter compassion in her soul for the child’s experience, understanding for the situation the child is in will develop. Every trace of subjective reaction must be eliminated. When the teacher is able to meet the situation without any excitement or irritation but with a calm and composed attitude then progress can be made with the child. The teacher educates herself and carves an opening in her own being for the child to move through. It is like a kind of conscious imitation that Steiner asks of the teacher—just as the young child unconsciously imitates adults in order to feel what it is like to be like them, a kind of slipping into our skin. Perhaps it is a conscious imitation that is being asked of the teacher, to be able to feel so deeply *with and into* the child that the necessary mood of soul is created and a raw openness to the child’s being is recreated in the teacher in order to understand the child from the inside out.

A practical way to help children move across thresholds is to consciously make sure that the rhythm of the kindergarten day breathes and moves from one activity to the next in a hygienic manner. The way the kindergarten day is structured can give the balanced doses of an in-breath (a structured group activity) and an out-breath (creative independent play). Receiving the children in the morning with warmth of heart and perhaps warm, sweet herbal tea helps the child take the first step into the room and facilitates the separation from mother to teacher. After a long car ride and a rushed morning, it is a welcoming gesture to move into the day with an early morning walk. Kierkegaard said, “Every day, I walk myself into a state of well-being.” Even in an urban setting there are visits to make; Mrs. Magnolia Tree waits for us to arrive each day, the squirrels and the birds in the trees are in a garden around the corner from the school. There we close our eyes and listen to the song of the birds. We point to where we hear them singing. This is a practice of moving our listening from outside, moving it into inner hearing and then reflecting and digesting the sound and moving it back out. The possibility of knowing which direction a sound comes from is part of the sense of movement. Later, this can metamorphose into the ability to truly hear another person, to be a receptive vessel. In order for this to happen, one must achieve balance in oneself and create the inner hearing space to be a receptive vessel for another.

Circle time follows the walk and is a great opportunity for integrating and orienting the body in space with true archetypal movements, gestures and imaginations. It is a way of inviting the children to “move into their house.” Movements of the muscles contract

and expand and are pulsed through by the will of the individual. The entire movement organization is in the service of the “I.” Edmond Schoorel says “When movements and the sense of movement are well developed, the sense of freedom will arise as a capacity of the soul” (Schoorel, 2004, p. 141). Later in life this sense of movement will give us the ability to change the direction of our life, to put one foot in front of the other in difficult times, and to be able to move towards the future. These are inner movements that can blossom as an adult when the sense of movement in childhood is healthy and free.

Snack time is an important aspect of early childhood pedagogy. Food is quite a difficulty in these recent times with allergies galore, limited food choices, and touch sensitivities in the mouth with various textures of food. The middle senses of smell and taste take substances from the outside world directly into the body—a huge threshold to cross. How can we help the children move across this abyss with food and entice them so that they can be nourished? Is it still a sustainable idea to just serve a grain at snack when many of the children do not eat it? Often, those who do not eat the food that is offered are the very children who have these sensitivities. In the activities that follow snack, these children often fall apart as their blood sugar drops. Finding creative solutions such as having lovely cooking smells when the children enter the room (toasting almonds), adding proteins (considering allergies) such as cheese cut into sticks, seeds, nut butters, and yogurt are worth considering. Adding lovely seashell noodles to the soup with the vegetables cut very small helps some children feel more comfortable to try the vegetables, as many are just noodle eaters. Later in life, the sense of taste will become an inner perceptibility. To have good taste in an artistic sense is a social grace.

Creative play moves the inner imaginative life out into the social environment. Often, when children play together, they use the phrase, “Let’s say that. . .” and then go on to describe the next event in their game. This means, “You come into my world while I say what happens,” and then the companion player will take over to add, “Then, let’s say. . .” which means, “Now you come into my world.” This is a way for the children to cross over to one another and learn to give and take, moving back and forth cooperatively.

All of the activities in the kindergarten morning give ample opportunity to practice moving through the many thresholds that a young child must cross in early childhood. Each of the children who come to meet us holds a mystery. How will we know what to

do with each of these children who have various needs in our care? Steiner asks this question to the teachers in the tenth lecture in *Education for Special Needs*. He asks how they can come to intuitive perceptions about the children and assures them that it is possible. He implores them to act with esoteric courage and in a spirit of self-sacrifice and to say to themselves over and over, “I can do it.” Then he reveals how they “can do it” in a meditation for the teachers that is the heart of this lecture course. Every evening one is to picture a blue circle with a yellow point in the middle and say to oneself, “God is in me.” In the morning, one pictures a yellow circle with a blue point in the middle and says to oneself, “I am in God.” It is a practice of turning inside out and gives mobility and flexibility in order to acquire inner intuitions and inspirations with the children. That which was a seed of God’s light that was with us at night shines around us like a bright sun during the day. It is like a heartbeat, a spiritual muscle that develops. The living light of God that brought insight during the night leaves me pregnant with possibilities and potential for birthing these insights out into the day. In attempting this practice, the teacher consciously moves across the greatest threshold that exists, from the self to the divine and from the divine to the self. This striving of the teacher stands as a living example and can be brought as a humble offering to the children who have a painful experience of threshold crossing. Steiner gives us this great treasure to practice, so that we can carve out a manger in our heart where the child can find a safe lodging—a hopeful place where the child can come to be and move to become.

References

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