

Parenting the Will

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Talking with parents in a universal language

By the time children begin their schooling a great portion of the journey of early childhood has already unfolded. It is the parents who lay the foundation of the education of the will.

Rudolf Steiner has helped us to see how it is the will that must develop first and be the anchor, for without the integration of thinking and feeling with action and deed, a truly moral and responsive adult cannot emerge.

It is thrilling to examine the dictionary definition of will: '(n) impulse to act; conscious adoption of a line of action'. Right there lies the enigma of the will: that it can be both unconscious and conscious, for the definition of impulse is a 'sudden strong urge to action; tendency to act at once without deliberation', quite the opposite of a conscious line of action which is defined as 'knowing and aware'.

This most concrete and mainstream revelation of the fundamental polarity of the will is in perfect resonance with all that Rudolf Steiner had to say about it, and is the foundation of my work. In my struggle to find a universal and accessible language for parents there has arisen a simple polarity which they can clearly grasp: the **Little Self** is the basic, instinctive pole of self-focus, self-protection and reaction that we all begin with (the 'Lower Self', the animal/nature pole) and the **Big Self** is the evolved, uniquely human, conscious, mindful, higher intelligence (The Higher Self, the spiritual form of will) which has self-control and is able to selflessly act for the good of the whole.

Steiner described that at the end of life human beings come to an awareness of what they have not achieved and what they wish they could have done, and this mysterious wish germinates into a gathering of impulse to incarnate again with fresh intention. This thought can become a vigorous inner activity for those who work with parents out



of anthroposophy, but it does not need to be imposed upon the parents. If they wish to further pursue these distillations represented in common language and universal experience then they are free to do so.

So how do we help this fresh intention which the child brings? How do we parent the will and educate it for the best possible outcome? Will is a word that many parents find difficult to use. Often, however, ordinary words that the 'parent in the street' can grasp can be found in the layering of Steiner's descriptive sentences beyond his initial statements. These include action, doing, deed, urge, drive, movement, body, instinct, impulse and habit. Will is primarily a movement.

From here-on in this article I will use the language that I use with parents. Taking examples from the world that the parents live in we begin with the body-based drive or urge to go and get the world, which is there at birth.

A **Little Self** is primarily **urge** and **action** plus **desire**.

First let's look at the urge or drive: it is unstoppable from the moment the children wake till the moment they go to sleep. It flows like a river unchecked. It is unconscious and learns only through experience.



The body builds its knowledge through imitation and repetition of the actions and responses of others. Its job is simply to go, either towards something that is attractive (in sympathy) or away from something that is repulsive (in antipathy). It is connected to the primitive reflexes of the hindbrain, the fight-or-flight reactions of the cerebellum. The body does not do complex reasoning. It 'reads' the experience perfectly, without words, and adjusts. It learns to recognize what is safe and unsafe. It can act on its own in emergencies to get the child to safety or it can be directed by the feelings or thinking.

The urge to act is a power can be likened to a horse that needs a rider. In early childhood there is no rider yet: the 'true child' is coming slowly over the horizon and arriving bit by bit. (This concept helps parents as they often confuse their child's Little Self with the Big Self 'true child' and therefore do not want to 'crush the child's spirit' by imposing their parental direction upon it. This of course results in many parents avoiding boundaries.) Current brain research shows that the brain is not adult (Big Self) until after 25, as Steiner described.

Throughout childhood, parents need to develop the 'dream horse' so that it becomes responsive as well as spirited.

Desire is unconscious, self-focused and self-serving. Its job is to never be satisfied. It simply wants (out of sympathy) or doesn't want (out of antipathy) and it cares about nothing but itself. It has no restraint, cannot listen and has no tolerance for frustration. It can be likened to a mischievous imp. The 2 year-old having a tantrum because she wants another ice cream right after the first, is completely ruled by desire. Because its nature is to never be satisfied the child whose desires are always indulged is not a 'happy camper'. The classic example is the girl in 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' who demands 'I want another pony!'

So the Imp (desire) gets on the Bull (urge to go) and 'tally-ho!'...off they go on a rampage into the world, simply wanting everything (or not) and wanting it now (or not!). A bit like Thing One and Thing Two in 'The Cat in the Hat'.

With the development of each of the three gifted abilities of action, feeling and thinking there is always first a stage of 'making it one's own'. This is the 'me' phase and is most strong about 2 years into each 7-year cycle of development, after which the child begins to gradually accommodate others. The 2 year-old is the classic Little Self. The 9 year-old is the 2 year-old of the emotional development phase (7-14 years) and the adolescent is the 2 year-old of the thinking development phase (14-21 years). Each of these 'me' nodes are crisis and transition points with the behaviour being classically Little Self each time. (This concept helps parents enormously in disengaging their anger and engaging their empathy for their children.)

The Little Self can be likened to Gollum in 'The Lord of the Rings'. The scene of Gollum going up the mountain with Sam and Frodo, fighting between his Little Self who desires the power of the ring ('my Precious') and his Big Self who is desperately trying to do the right thing, can bring us to tears of compassion for him as he struggles and gradually loses the fight.



Little Self is very reactive and cannot put others before itself. It says ‘you hit me... I hit you back’. Big Self on the other hand is fully conscious and aware of its actions. It can discern weigh, judge, defer, give and share. It has self-control, overview (the big picture) and its thinking, emotions and actions are all communicating to each other and are integrated. Big Self says ‘you hit me... but I **choose** to not hit you back’.

This illustration helps parents to understand the problem of choice in early childhood. The child under 7 is mostly a Little Self. When we give choices to children under 7, particularly before the appearance of reasoning around the age of 3.5 years, we are giving those choices to Little Self, i.e. to **desire**. Choosing means standing outside of subjective experience and separating oneself into an objective position in order to weigh and judge. Little children are not ready for this and are burdened and stressed by the act of choosing. They cannot see the possible outcomes yet and are dominated by their desire which usually wants

it all and wants it now, or not! Choices at this age cause desire to grow bigger, to become empowered and selfish. As the child grows and the ‘true child’ or ‘baby adult’ tries to arrive and ride the horse, he or she finds that the horse is used to choosing whatever it wants to do and will not be directed into anything difficult or challenging. This results in an adult who cannot truly meet the other and respond.

From here the parents are taken into a study of what helps the Little Self to grow into a Big Self and how stress and anxiety cause regression in both children and adults. How the children react to stress depends upon their genetic make-up, sensory-motor function, individual history, temperament and environment (not to mention their spiritual make-up, spiritual history, karma and destiny!). The parent’s inner reactions and thoughts are as hugely influential on the child’s development and wellbeing as the outer circumstances. The parent is the ground under the child and it is the parent who must transform first. This is why parenting the will is truly a path of initiation. ◆

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She draws on 33 years of anthroposophy and other fields, as well as experience in nursing, midwifery, early childhood teaching, facilitating Steiner playgroups, teaching parenting courses, parenting counselling, writing and lecturing.

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Reference

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Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy

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