

Elemental Beings Are Real for Many Children

Conversation with Katharina Dreher-Thiel

Translated by Genie Sakaguchi

It is not only Waldorf Kindergartens that are populated by dwarves, elves, and gnomes. Many classic children's books such as *The Root Children* by Sibylle von Olfers and *Children of the Forest* by Elsa Beskow enjoy uninterrupted popularity despite opposition from rational thinking. From research in child development we know that for children all things and beings, especially in nature, are alive. The following is a conversation between a staff member of the journal, *Erziehungskunst*, and Katharina Dreher-Thiel, a class teacher of many years' experience, and now a support teacher (*Förderlehrerin*) at the Free Waldorf School of Bad Nauheim, about her dealings with nature spirits in her lessons.

Interviewer: Why is the perception of elemental beings (nature spirits) more than childish animism?

Katharina Dreher-Thiel: Because there really are nature spirits in the etheric world. Others knew this besides Rudolf Steiner. Many people of earlier cultural epochs, up until the 15th or 16th century, were able to perceive nature spirits. This capacity disappeared more and more with the beginning of modern times and our rational way of thinking. We have preserved the remembrance of these beings of the etheric world like a collective memory in our fairy tales and sagas. Today it appears that the ability to perceive the etheric world, and interest in nature spirits, is growing again.

Interviewer: Do dwarves, elves, and other beings still have a role to play in the lower grades?

KDT: Yes. In the narrative material of the lower grades—the fairy tales, sagas, and meaningful stories—they play a very central role. These wonderful pictures fulfill an important task: They “nourish” and structure the soul being of the child. Children always open up with joy to these elemental beings, so one

can use them to carry pedagogical material. This works, however, only when the knitted dwarves on the classroom's seasonal table are not gathering dust, but rather, are involved in and allowed to live through rituals and routines in the lessons.

Interviewer:: How far is the children's relationship to the elemental world taken into account in the lesson plans?

KDT: Young children live strongly in their environment and are much more connected with it than adults are. In this dreamy consciousness, the figures of the fairy tales and sagas live, and with appropriate openness it is possible for children to perceive the elemental beings. This condition of consciousness continues to have an effect in the First and Second Grades. The lesson plans take this fact into account through the artistic methods of teaching, whereby the picture-forming capacities play an especially important role, for example in the introduction of the letters through pictures. A further central factor is the already-mentioned narrative material.

Interviewer: Do the children speak of their "supersensible" perceptions?

KDT: Seldom. These perceptions are not supersensible for them, but rather, real experiences. Moreover, they often discover that they cannot speak with adults about these things. I once had the great good fortune to have an open conversation on this topic with my Seventh Grade class. Shame-faced and with a chuckle, they told about experiences from their childhood: young girls who had played with elves in a flowering meadow, and one young boy who, while having a high fever, saw his guardian angel and spoke with him.

Interviewer: What are the reasons why these capacities are lost in later stages of life?

KDT: The feeling-impressions that the children have experienced through the fairy tales and stories sink down and are forgotten, but they continue to work on, building and structuring the children's soul-life. Many children lose the capacity to see nature spirits around the age of nine or ten, when they gain some distance from the environment and develop a more wakeful consciousness for the sense world. Others at this same age become aware of the special nature of their perceptions and continue to interact with these beings as a matter of course—at least, that is what Waldorf students have told me—in the past and today. I think that in the face of the increasing intellectual demands of the upper grades, spiritual perceptions fade into the background, or perhaps disappear altogether. In adulthood, however, these perceptive capacities can come alive again. These capacities are lost earlier, the less they are "nourished" or encouraged.

Interviewer: When cute dwarves and rough hobgoblins lose their attraction, how does the teacher awaken the feeling for nature spirits?

KDT: Through teaching that is pictorial, artistic and full of imagination, in which the themes of the lessons are characterized in a lively way. When plants, animals, personalities and historical times, chemical elements and physical laws are characterized with all their special aspects in a lively manner, and brought as a soul experience, then the students sense, unconsciously, that nature is alive in its essential being.