

Empathy

by

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‘Empathy’ is a word which has been used fairly frequently over the last few decades. I think one can consider the meaning of this word when thinking of the tremendous change that R. D. Laing’s work has brought about in the psychiatric understanding of mental illness. Up to about ten or fifteen years ago when one studied any textbook on psychiatry, then mental illness, schizophrenia, psychosis, was a condition in which a person dropped out of a context that was humanly understandable; he became ‘insane.’ That was a universally held view but one which has been removed. One can imagine that there were hundreds of thousands of such people at any moment on the earth who were completely incomprehensible, ‘mad.’ Now that is different because of the intense empathy of some men. Empathy has brought about the possibility for not only psychiatrists but also so called ordinary people to understand a great number of their fellow men.

I have drawn on what I have absorbed of Rudolf Steiner’s teachings in my approach to the problem of empathy, and the first question that arises is whether or not empathy is the beginning of what Rudolf Steiner describes as the natural, psychological condition to which mankind will attain in the next epoch, the condition of total compassion. Rudolf Steiner has said that in the total change of human consciousness, in the human mode of experience, what will increasingly come about within the next few thousand years is that one will not be able to see the suffering of another person without experiencing it exactly as much as if it were one’s own suffering.

Whatever one could say about present day problems, there is, nonetheless, a remarkable increase in the presence of total compassion compared to fifty years ago. Fifty years ago it seemed to almost everyone that it couldn’t be helped if there were people who were poor. The poor were always there, and this was felt as an accepted thing by any normal, mature person. Poverty was part of the world. It couldn’t be helped that millions died of starvation in China and India. As a mature person one accepted that, that was the course of life, poverty had to be.

This way of thinking has become unacceptable today for a vast majority of people, not *for* any specific ideological reasons but because they *feel* differently about it. One must only think that a century ago slavery was a matter of course. The ideals of Plato's *Republic* were based on slavery, but this would be totally alien today. I mention these things so that you can see there has been a natural progression in human evolution in total compassion and in social conscience. I think it is right also to assume that empathy is a phenomenon which has to do with this general development.

Empathy, as it should be understood, is not just a feeling, not just the putting of one's self into the other's situation. It has a therapeutic connotation as well as a cognitive one. It is an understanding that arises out of a feeling effort. I would like to remind you of Rudolf Steiner's description of empathy in the Second Lecture in *The Curative Course*. He speaks there about quite concrete but basic conditions in developmentally handicapped children, and gives a foundation for curative education as a practice for therapeutic understanding. He says the following:

If the teacher can feel his way right into the situation (of the child), if he is able himself to *feel* (what) the child feels, and *able* at the same time out of his *own* energy to evoke in his soul a deep compassion with the child's experience, then he will develop in his *own* astral body an understanding *for* the situation the child is in, and will gradually succeed in eliminating in himself all subjective reaction of feeling when faced with this phenomenon in the child. By ridding himself of every trace of subjective reaction, the teacher educates his *own* astral body.

One could not really put this in more concrete detail. That is the most concise description of how one brings about empathy. It is the basis of the therapeutic educational approach.

One can ask what Steiner means when he stresses that we must "wipe out sympathy as well as antipathy" in order to gain differentiation in our possibility of understanding and experience so that we can help.

It is a fact that in modern psychology today one speaks of the ambivalence of emotions, that *one* can, in one's love, hurt someone. If one thinks as long as a person loves, it can only be good, it can do no harm, then situations arise in which one's development can be halted.

After Steiner has spoken about our wiping away all traces of sympathy or antipathy, of subjective reactions to the child's situation, in order to work on ourselves, he says that as long as the teacher or the person working with the child has a sympathetic or antipathetic reaction to the child's situation, then "so long

will he remain incapable of making any real progress with the child.” Then he says: “Not until the point has been reached where such a (child’s) phenomenon becomes an objective picture and can be taken with a certain calm and composure as an objective picture for which nothing but compassion is felt; not until then is the necessary mood of soul present in the astral body of the teacher. Once this has come about, the teacher is merely by the side of the child in a true relation and will do all else that is needful more or less rightly.”

One can also be helped in understanding what Steiner means by ‘wiping out sympathy and antipathy’ if one considers what he says about these two phenomena in his lecture cycle *Psychosophy, Pneumatosophy and Anthroposophy*, where he speaks of sympathy and antipathy as the two primary forces in our soul. He takes tremendous steps to help us get away from the idea that this has to do with the feeling known as sympathy or the feeling known as antipathy, which one usually thinks these two to be. In actuality, he describes the force of sympathy as the will, and the force of antipathy as our intellectual life. He relates the force of antipathy to our central nervous system, and therefore to our death processes. From the moment of our first breath, he tells us, not one nerve cell is born any more but from the moment of birth every day hundreds and thousands of nerve cells die. That is only the case with the nerve cells, however, all the other cells in the body multiply. Therefore we grow, we put on weight, because the cells other than those in the nervous system multiply, our organ systems develop. There is only the one organ system in us which dies, and this is the nervous system.

Through concepts such as these Rudolf Steiner has put into the world the possibility to understand the human being, and if such possibilities would be used it would bring self-knowledge as well as psychology ahead with a tremendous step. In terms of what we know as psychoanalysis, Freud tried, for instance, to describe this polarity, but on the other hand I feel one has to bring to such terms what we can gain from Anthroposophy. Freud tried, for instance, to describe this polarity not in terms of sympathy and antipathy but as ‘Id,’ the entirety of instinctual life which included the ‘Libido,’ or sympathy and love, and an opposing force which he called ‘Thanatos,’ the death drive. Steiner, as I described, indicated that our consciousness is not a phenomenon of our life function but of the ‘death’ within our life. I know of no other writer or philosopher or psychiatrist who has said that consciousness is based on the death processes in us, quite physically in the nervous system. If the brain cells die a man immediately loses consciousness. This is the case too if one breathes pure oxygen, and the death process is halted, but no one thinks of it in terms of consciousness because we are beset with the idea that consciousness is produced by the body, that, as the kidneys excrete urine, for example, the brain excretes thoughts.

Rudolf Steiner, in the third lecture of *The Curative Course* speaks of morality, and speaks of it in quite a unique way. He says we do not bring morality with us into our present life, and he links it to our will. Thoughts, he says, can never be wrong because they are cosmic. They can be distorted in us because we mirror them wrongly. Nevertheless, by themselves they are always right, and in the Spiritual World will can never be moral. He says when we are born we bring with us will which has no morality, morality must be acquired by us on earth. That which we have had as morality in our former incarnations, we have used up between death and birth when we were concerned with building up our body:

Ethics and morality have to be acquired anew in each single earthly life. This has a very significant result, namely, that inasmuch as we come from pre-earthly existence without morality, we have to develop intelligence in our will. We enter with our will into our organs, and in our will we must develop intelligence for what is brought to us in the way of ethics and morality. We must develop a 'sense' for it . . . It is quite wonderful, how moral and ethical impulses pour into the child when he is learning to speak.

At first it seems that Steiner means specific moral codes. In connection with this, one could say if I have had my last incarnation for instance two thousand years ago, what was then moral is today not necessarily the case; I can't bring moral codes with me. But Rudolf Steiner doesn't mean that. He does not mean the comments of morality, which are relative to the age in which we live.

Morality is the sensitivity for the understanding of moral codes that are brought to us, and Steiner says that this sensitivity comes about when the small child learns to speak. In his lectures *Study of Man* (Stuttgart, 1919) he describes how the forces of sympathy and antipathy must meet, how the acquisition of speech and language is the most specific integration of these two forces. There, he says that these forces by themselves are neither good nor bad but are forces. He describes how the force of sympathy is both love and hate, aggression, destruction, and it is simply will. The force of antipathy is not will but mirroring, and this means that the former is bound up with life and the latter with death. The one is being, the other, not-being.

If one employs empathy in order to understand mirroring, one can perhaps come to understand empathy itself in a better way. By feeling one's self into a mirror, one can experience it as still, smooth, cold, as totally exposed. It does not accept anything. Everything which gets in its way is reflected. This is an image of the force of antipathy. That force does not go against or towards, but is its own density, its own closed-ness, and the closed-ness brings about the total mirroring. The force of sympathy is outgoing. In love, sympathy, aggression, devouring,

there manifests the taking-hold-of, the aiming, the continuous doing and undoing. Sympathy and antipathy are the two basic forces of our soul existence and they must be integrated, brought together. They must really be transformed, and in this integration and transformation there arises our thinking and our emotions and our actions, each as an integration already of the two forces.

The original idea of morality, in Freudian theory had to do with the three-cornered relationship between father, mother, and child. That is the age-old myth of the Oedipus saga and I think it is helpful to realize it. In his treatment of neurotic patients, Freud found in a vast majority of cases that they seemed to have inner conflict and problems because they didn't trust their own capacity for love. They were uncertain about it, and some developed certain mechanisms of self-punishment such as those found in certain types of neurosis. At the root of it, the patients will describe situations, usually with their parents in quite early infancy, which they couldn't really master. From his cases, Freud concluded that the Oedipus saga is not only just a majestic story of what once happened, but that it is the description of an unavoidable, always necessary situation; namely, that the young helpless child experiences that there are certain possessive qualities in his natural love for his mother, and feels that he thereby comes into conflict with his father, although he loves his father. He is put into this difficult situation in which his conflict gives him the first inklings of guilt.

That normally solves itself somehow and we derive our normal potential of morality because we somehow learn to cope with the fact that our love contains elements that are necessarily negative. An infant's love for his mother is primary. It is not love in the sense of Saint Paul, but it is biological love, instinctual love which has its roots in the force of sympathy long before sympathy is mitigated by the force of antipathy. If it goes wrong, it causes both illness and many problems, but if it goes well we acquire the ability to feel guilt, to feel that some things are good and others bad. We are not born with that ability but we develop that in our mastery of the Oedipal situation, in our transcending and understanding that our love does contain aggressive elements, and that thereby we create and have to endure conflict. If we learn to deal with it, we mature, and we mature morally.

Steiner describes in *The Curative Course* that the source of the power of empathy is that maturational process which consists in our learning to tolerate and to accept the ambivalence of primary forces in us. Love as a primary force, not when it is sublimated and differentiated and tempered by our understanding but as a primary force, is always and unavoidably aggressive and destructive. Otherwise it could not be a force. There is a statue by Henry Moore which can be disturbing when seen. It is a mother with her infant, the infant formed like a picking bird with a wide open beak, who is held away by the mother at a dis-

tance. Moore has made many Madonna and Child images but this particular one points to what I have described as the untempered elements, necessary elements, of love. That can be subconscious, but a real mastery and conscious handling of the force of empathy can only arise out of our consciousness of the ambivalence of basic emotions.

We must come to understand that our love can perhaps hurt another person. There is no insurance that because one has good will, that it can only bring about pleasure. That is a childish idea. To the extent to which we have learned within ourselves to cope, we can then extend empathy, we can meet others and help them to cope as well. In our learning to understand, to tolerate the ambivalence of our emotions, an ambivalence unavoidable and necessary, we can also accept it in others, without blaming them, without meaning to show them where they have gone wrong, but with understanding.

While love is often impatient,
empathy is patient.
While love is often aggressive,
empathy is kind.
While love is often generous,
empathy envies no one.
Love is often proud,
but empathy is never boastful nor conceited.
While love is often selfish and very easy to take offense,
empathy is never selfish and never takes offense.
Empathy keeps no score of wrongs, does not gloat over
other men's sins, but delights in the truth.
There is nothing empathy cannot face.
There is no end to its faith, hope, and its endurance.