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What are the Physiological, Soul, and Spiritual Changes in Youth Today?

by

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I would like to elaborate further on some thoughts brought by Dr. Michaela Glöckler concerning one of Rudolf Steiner's most esoteric lectures, "The Human Heart." Not being a scientist or a doctor, I would like to add a teacher's perspective to this lecture as well as including particular issues concerning today's teenagers.

This lecture is inspiring and at the same time it is a great puzzle. During my forty years as a Waldorf teacher I have continued to try to understand what Rudolf Steiner means by the etheric and astral bodies.

There are so many different ways to consider these aspects of the human being. Dr. Glöckler described that the astral forces penetrate into the organs until they have completely penetrated them, and this marks the completion of puberty. In his talk, David Mitchell said we are nurturing the gestating astral body from 7 years to 14 years. That image of pregnancy is a most helpful image. We can take hold of the fact that during the nine months of pregnancy the physical body of the fetus is in gestation along with the sheaths (of the etheric and astral bodies and ego.) When the child is born, the physical body is freed, and in time the etheric body, astral body and ego will be also.

Around fourteen the astral body is freed and the ego which is still in gestation is freed at about twenty-one years of age. The etheric heart carries the imprint of all the deeds of humanity. That seems to be similar to Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious. Jung describes that we have access to the history of humanity in our dreams, in sleep, and in archetypes of stories and myths. Rudolf Steiner also describe that we have access to the etheric heart in similar ways.

Dr. Gloeckler described that the child in 4th, 5th, and 6th grades needs to see beauty within tragic images. When we tell stories that contain images of good conquering evil, of goodness, of kindness, we affirm the images that the child carries in his or her heart. When we tell biographies in 7th and 8th grades we are showing in the every day life of a human being that there is the capacity to overcome obstacles and that the overcoming is beautiful. Every story that affirms the overcoming of obstacles gives the child strength.

The child experiences the model of the physical heart from the parents, and in adolescence the teenager is building the etheric heart.

The astral body contains everything that happens in relationship between myself and others, between myself and myself, and the tensions that occur between people. In our astral body we carry the condensed seed of all of our interpersonal interactions as well as all that happened in past lives. When the astral forces completely penetrate into the organs, that is the ending of childhood. Now we can say puberty is over and there is the beginning of adolescence. The ego is carried through the blood working below the diaphragm in the metabolic/limb system. It is through our limbs that we meet our destiny. The heart becomes the doorway through which we create new karma. The freeing of the astral body around fourteen brings a concentrated seed of past karma and the possibility of stepping into future karma.

After the end of our last life, our etheric body dissipates into the etheric sphere of the universe. Then we experience the actions we make towards others coming towards ourselves. On different spiritual levels we meet people with whom we shared family connections, with whom we shared ideas, with whom we shared common values. We will probably all meet each other again since we share a common philosophy as well as being members of the Michael School. After a period of cleansing and experiencing what it is we brought to each other, we take on resolves to come to earth again and do better, to make up for what we did to others, to work with particular people to accomplish something meaningful.

At the cosmic midnight hour we yearn to incarnate again for it is only on the earth that we can be free. We start to make the journey from the spiritual world to the etheric world to the physical world. We pass through the planetary spheres that we had gone through on the journey upward. In each sphere there is a dynamic energy with a certain quality that we experience as needed for our next life. For example, if we were timid and we needed courage we might have a more intense experience in the Mars sphere or maybe because we need to develop a greater connection with wisdom we would have a more intense experience in the Saturn sphere. Imagine that we are weaving our astral body for the next life - a mosaic of heavenly qualities that the spiritual world is making possible based on what we have done in the previous life.

Thus we form the astral body and this is contained within the sheaths until around the age of fourteen when it is released. At this time we can begin to live out our karma. We carry the planetary attitudes from our journey to earth. We can think of the planetary attitude as the personality or character of adolescence. It is a colorful atmosphere of soul that we express in our interactions with others.

For example, some of our high school students are very inward and they like things to be exactly the same way. If we change anything they get very nervous. These students give back precisely what we have given them in previous lessons, but they struggle with creative thinking. This would be an example of a Moon quality. Another teenager had so much compassion when a friend needed her that she had difficulty getting her homework done. Her priority was to console a friend whose dog was run over. When this behavior becomes a pattern it may be an expression of a strong Venus soul attitude.

Each adolescent has an individual expression of a soul attitude, or several soul attitudes. We adults are working with our temperaments, our soul attitudes, and our intellectual point of view. The complexity of the interaction of these qualities in our thinking, feeling, and willing are set within a context of our gender, bodily constitution, nationality, and historical perspective. Through all of this our individual ego organization is going its work.

In addition to the planetary influences affecting the teenager's personality, these forces also influence us in the different stages of our lives. In the first seven years the influence of the Moon quality, imitation, is a major factor. In the second seven years the Mercury quality of lightness, flexibility, and healing predominate. In the third period, from fourteen to twenty-one, a strong Venus attitude influences all adolescents to some degree. It is during this adolescent time that young people exhibit the Venus quality, being in love with love, most strongly. The newly awakened romanticism and the idealizing of the world

are examples of the Venus influence. We never want to completely lose this quality as we age or get cynical about love. As we move into adulthood from twenty-one to forty-two, the Sun influence shines into the person and helps establish balance. The Mars influence works on us from forty-two to forty-nine, the Jupiter influence from forty-nine to fifty-six, and the Saturn influence from fifty-six to sixty-three.

Rudolf Steiner describes that the astral body, sometimes called the star body, has its origin in the spiritual world. The astral body spans a great emotional distance from the furthest realm of the cosmos where the adolescent is inspired by the greatest ideals to the lowest realm of sensuality. We could say the youngsters with their newly released astral body live in two places—with their feet in the mud and their heads in the clouds. The same student who has the highest ideals of saving the planet can be obsessed with pornographic literature.

I taught a sixth grader who was a very pure child with a rich spiritual life. One day I found a note on the floor that she had written. I was shocked by the vulgarity of it. Yet in the complexity of awakening puberty she lived within contradictory aspects of her soul life. This girl went on the path to become a nun although she did not take her final vows. We have met in her adult years and she hardly remembers some of the things she felt or said at that time.

So it is with many of our high school students. They live within the contradictions of highest ideals and explorations of sensuality. If we overhear a high schooler saying something disgusting in a conversation, we high school teachers have to be so careful not to fix an image of the student while the student may be dabbling in the lower element of life, while is still carrying high ideals. We need to leave open the question, Who will the high school student become? The etheric and astral forces are working, shaping, and opposing all the time.

Rudolf Steiner describes the battle between the etheric forces as the forces of growth and vitality and the astral forces of consciousness and differentiation during the years leading up to puberty. We might think of the character in the fairy tale who represents the growth forces—the giant—who grows beyond the normal size of an adult. On the other hand, the character of the clever little tailor might represent the astral forces of consciousness. What two strong forces do we see working in puberty? Growth and consciousness. Children begin to change physically, becoming taller, rounder, their feet shooting out, their hands getting larger. One never knows when all this growth will end. Will the youngster grow to be seven feet tall or will he or she remain the smallest in the class? At the same time different astral forces are awakening as the youngster matures in different ways in different parts of his or her body. At the same time, he or she is trying to differentiate social interactions, bring consciousness to who is "cool" and who is not, and trying to differentiate himself or herself from the parents. Differentiation and growth are in constant dynamic interaction just as the etheric and astral bodies are in dynamic interaction with an awakening soul attitude—in the new personality of the adolescent.

Because of these changes, it is important that the high school teacher be prepared and open to experience the incoming ninth grader in a new way, not limited by what the eighth grade teacher has said about the student in the lower school, or by past behavior. We need to carry an inner question, "What will this young person become?"

The ego has the incredible work of taking charge of this dynamic, confusing struggle that is going on in the young adolescent. One can observe an aspect of this in attending high school basketball games and noticing that on the junior varsity team the youngsters are gangly, their arms and legs seem out of proportion to their heads, they almost fall over themselves in their lack of coordination. The ego has not penetrated into their fingertips and toes. The senior varsity players who are more usually seventeen and eighteen years old have achieved impressive grace and skill. They pivot, pass, maneuver their backspace, and master their bodies. One can sense their ego has penetrated their sense of movement.

Rudolf Steiner describes that in the ninth and tenth grades the ego is busy trying to harmonize the physical body, the etheric and astral bodies, and there is not a lot of energy or ego surplus to deal with self-control or self-discipline. So when we tell ninth graders to control themselves, they don't know how to do it. Or the parent says, "What were you thinking when you behaved so thoughtlessly? The reality is that they didn't think.

During these early high school years, we need to bring the world to the students, set boundaries and structures from the outside while the ego is busy restructuring these inner relationships. I remember a colleague describing that youngsters during this time should carry a sign that reads, "Closed for Reconstruction." During the transitional period of sixteen-seventeen, the ego is becoming ready and accessible for thinking that goes beyond following rules to evaluating, assessing, and considering situations from the inside out. What has begun as outer structure slowly is internalized and forms inner structure as a vessel for the incoming ego.

Let us use these aspects of adolescent development to consider some of the issues of adolescence today. Some of these were mentioned by the teachers at the beginning of this session or at the Andover conference.

Many of these topics are part of the third grade curriculum when the student is going through the nine year change and finding a new relationship to the earth. Just as those experiences help the child experience being at home on the earth, the high schooler would benefit from similar experiences taken on an appropriate high school level. The third grade curriculum addresses food, clothing, and shelter as necessities human beings had to learn after being driven out of Paradise.

The first issue has to do with food. Food has become such an issue for teenagers. Food should be a natural part of life—we eat because we are hungry, we need strength, and we enjoy food. However, many young people are frightened of food—they are so conscious of what they eat because of the fear of all the additives and preservatives that are ready to poison them. They may have become vegetarians or vegans and view other diets with suspicion or hostility. Food has become an issue, yet it should never be an issue at this age. What kind of trust can we have when we have to be concerned about everything we take into our bodies because it could hurt us. The other aspect of the food issue is the array of eating disorders adolescents are experiencing.

How can we work in a healing way with food in the curriculum? Gardening needs to become so much more a part of the high school curriculum - growing food and preparing food. In the third grade the children raise food and cook often- why are we not doing that in high school? The teens are not coming to school having eaten breakfast but with coffee and perhaps a doughnut. Many don't have lunch and get whatever is available. It is not surprising they are tired or have too much nervous energy. Let us rethink the idea of food in school - have a prepared breakfast so the students can start the day in a healthy way. We could have a healthy lunch offered, served on a nicely prepared table, with enough time to eat and have conversation, as well as expressions of gratitude toward the cooks. Of course, some schools are already doing this, but it could be more explicitly integrated into the curriculum.

Extending the high school consciousness to food could involve studying the role of food in the world. Why are different kinds of foods used in different parts of the world? How does that affect the people and the culture? Why is there such a discrepancy of availability of food? Students could study issues of world hunger and agricultural resources. Perhaps the students could bake bread and bring it to soup kitchens so that they were involving their will activity and not simply discussing these issues intellectually.

Another issue for teenagers is clothing. Here we can strengthen the students' relationship to the craft curriculum. In addition to designing and sewing costumes, crafts skills can be used for social concerns such as making blankets and hats for homeless children. High school students can learn how certain kinds of clothing are made around the world, the production of natural and synthetic fibers, and child labor issues. Crafts, technology, and social and economic issues would be integrated in such a study.

In addition to food and clothing, a third issue is housebuilding. Straw bale construction, adobe bricks making, post and lintel construction are all skills high school students can learn and use practically. In addition, carpentry, welding, blacksmithing can be applied to practical objects. Activities can include building a playground or participate in Habitat for Humanity. Learning plumbing, electricity, and roofing all give adolescents confidence in their own abilities while developing skills to help others. High school students are longing for this.

These three areas, first introduced in the third grade curriculum, can be a source of learning that includes geography, history, mathematics, physics, crafts, and cultural studies.

In addition to working with the curriculum, there are other concerns with adolescence which need to be addressed.

Teachers all over the country are concerned that adolescents are not getting enough physical exercise due to their hours of sitting in front of computers or television or at desks in school. Obesity in children is a growing concern. Some schools are introducing movement classes before main lesson starts or integrating movement into the main lesson. More movement needs to be integrated into the main lesson subjects to enhance the thinking process. We can no longer assume students are walking or bicycling to school. Many are being driven by car, and therefore they need movement to stimulate their circulation. Movement activities could include hiking, climbing, circus, swimming, boating, as well as spatial dynamics and sports.

Another concern in our high schools is increased nervousness due to the students' focus on media. It won't work to tell high school students not to use computers or watch television or play computer games. Our task is to intensify the artistic activities in the school by doing fewer activities but doing them more often and with greater emphasis on developing mastery.

Another significant change in adolescent life has to do with the breakdown of the structure of the family and of society. Students are very sensitive to these changes and to the fragility of relationships in the family. This generation is very aware of what can go wrong and the possibility that, in fact, they cannot count on marriages lasting or parents continuing to keep a connection with their children. Particularly vulnerable are the boys who lack a model of masculinity through their father or other close relative. The lack of understanding what it is to be in relationship with a man shows up in the relationships of men teachers and boys. Boys who are brought up by their mothers but have not had the straightforward approach of the masculine, can be uncomfortable and resistant to male teachers. Much depends on the attitude of the single mother who may want to protect her son and try to intervene with a male teacher's disciplinary action or straightforward approach. The mother may want her son to be treated in a more feminine way, excusing behavioral aggression and making excuses for his lacking of following rules or doing homework. Of course, many single mothers do a fine job of involving their sons with positive male role models. Nevertheless, I am deeply worried about the boys of this student generation in our society.

A contrast to the boys is the stronger attitudes of many of the girls. Within the school life they create a bubble of safety in which they care for their friends, support each other, and often parent each other. Yet outside the school, they are more risk-taking than girls of the past. Many have a fearless attitude, travel around the world by themselves, set ambitious goals which they set out to accomplish (and often do.) The bubble of safety often includes parents. Many of our young people feel they need to parent their parents. They are not sure their parents can be strong adults so they tell them, "It's ok—I know its hard to be an adult today." This is the legacy of 60's. The parents from the 60's don't want to hear about loving authorities. They resist anything that smacks of being an authority. Many struggle with the meaning of being an adult.

Ever since the sixties there has been a loosening of the etheric body. Many young people have out-of-body experiences. They have more trouble getting grounded. As the

society became more materialistic, the desire to break through to the spiritual world became intensified, often through drugs. Many young people with learning problems are more loosely incarnated and have trouble being fully present in their studies. Talk of reincarnation and angels is more common today, even on the television and in the movies. At the same time, many are crossing boundaries—boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate sexual activity, boundaries between adolescent and adult, boundaries between student and teacher. The old separation between generations is less formed today as teenagers feel they are equal to adults. They like and respect adults who are "walking their talk." They want adults to be real, be genuine, be consistent, and not say one thing and do another.

Are we walking our talk? What can we do to support these changes adolescents are experiencing? We need to become more a part of our local community. Our young people want to take responsibility. Of course they make mistakes and don't accomplish everything they are given, but they have to take responsibility for their actions and learn through that.

We teachers are challenged to involve the students more fully in the learning process. Are we doing too much work for them? Are they being spoon-fed the material? What role do they have? How conscious are we as to what each subject offers the adolescent's development. How open are we with our colleagues to dialogue about these issues?

Spiritual changes can be seen in the sweeping away of all old religions. Many students are against old religions. They hear the words and get hives. They want to go behind the traditions of religion to the universal, to the spiritual in all people, of every color, gender, and ethnicity. They have a kind of antenna that bristles at sectarianism or dogma. Instead, they have a Michaelic consciousness in which they embrace their brothers and sisters all over the world, and at the same time they often feel the loneliness of being an individual. They want individuality but feel the emptiness of it. All the time they are watching with open eyes and looking at us. Who is this adult? Are those yellow notes from the last time that person taught this class? Is the teacher shaping the class to meet who we are? High school students yearn to meet people who take life seriously and are authentic.

Two of the many inspirational situations that occurred this year in one Waldorf school follow. A grandparent of a student who was a retired doctor became aware that in Southeast Asia there were high numbers of amputees from the war whose only means of getting around was to lie down on a board mounted on roller skates and push themselves around by steering the board. The grandfather thought about that and collaborated with an engineer and developed a machine that could make prosthetics very inexpensively using all local materials in Vietnam, in Cambodia and Laos. A computer mounted on a truck is used to design the prosthesis so that an amputee can have an artificial limb made in a couple of days for a minimal cost. This technology and the low cost has changed thousands of people's lives in remarkable ways. The high school students were so touched by this example of a person who carries ideals into practical work.

Another moving example occurred through a contact I had made. I was stranded in Los Angeles and since my flight had been cancelled, I was upgraded to first class. The gentleman who became my seat-mate was an African-American general. We talked all the way to our destination and kept in touch afterwards. After the first three weeks of symptomatology discussing contemporary issues of class and race I faxed this general asking him to come speak with my twelfth grade class. One of the moving stories he recounted to the class involved being shot down in Vietnam along with his co-pilot of the helicopter. As the two men survived for a long time in the jungle, they had to penetrate each other's minds and come to trust each other implicitly. This was particularly difficult since he was African-American and his co-pilot's family was connected with the KKK. He described being put back in touch with his co-pilot some years after they had been rescued from the jungle and the continuation of their relationship.

He also told about growing up poor in Alabama during the 40's and going to live with his grandparents in Mississippi. He had been excited by seeing a film about West

Point and decided he would excel at math and science in order to gain admission. He accomplished this goal but could not get a white congressman to recommend him. He eventually made his way into the army. He told them he often talked to students in inner cities and tells them it doesn't do any good to blame others for one's own lack of accomplishment. Our high school students were listening intently to his recounting of his experiences. They asked him questions about 9/11 and he was very honest with them about his feelings about homeland security and about the army in general. One boy in the class who was very anti-American said afterwards that this was the first moment he was proud to be an American. I am sure many of you have your own stories about adults who "walk their talk."

In the high school we have a special task with our students. The class teacher has the task of being the gardener of the soul, tilling the soul with rhythm and music to refine the gestating astral body. The elementary school teacher guides the children with loving authority while they are building the etheric heart. High school teachers have a very different task. Adolescents are under the influence of Venus and are a listening ear to the world. The high school teacher has to have a listening heart so that the adult's heart touches the student's heart. Many high school students today are asking the Parzival question, "What ails thee?" of the adults in their lives. We adults need to provide guidance without judgment for our students. Our words develop weight in ways we can scarcely imagine. I will cite two examples out of my own teaching experience. I'm sure you can add your own.

A girl came into the school in the tenth grade from a troubled home. She had no idea of appropriate dress and often came to school dressed like a "hooker." She had few academic skills and often didn't finish her work. I tried to encourage her and was very sad when she disappeared after a few months. Her family didn't keep any connection with the school so we didn't know what had happened. Almost ten years later she wrote me a letter. She said she had run away to San Francisco and lived on the streets, cleaning houses to earn money. She wrote, "I was scrubbing a marble staircase in a very fancy house, and I heard your voice saying "Sarah, you can do better." So I got up, threw out the bucket of water and left that house and enrolled in Community College. I never forgot what we learned about the history of art so I then went to Italy, and you'll never believe it, my professor, with whom I had an affair, was named Michelangelo." Since then she has come back to Sacramento, settled down, has a family and is doing well. We have no idea how powerful our words can be for a student.

A boy came to the Waldorf school in the seventh grade. I took over the class and in came eight new boys. This often happens when a the new teacher comes to a class. He was a talented boy, a risk taker, and idealist, and he has become a successful industrial designer. When he left twelfth grade he wanted to experience the world so he took his guitar and went to New York. When he arrived at the airport someone came up to him and said, "I see you are a musician. Come and jam with us." So he naively followed, and then discovered he had been taken in by the Moonies. They wouldn't let him out of a fenced compound, and they started brainwashing him. His parents had no idea where he was. In the brainwashing he was told what he could wear, what he could take off and when. On a warm sunny day this California boy wanted to take off his shirt and enjoy the warmth. The woman he was with told him he could not take his shirt off. About a year later he described to me that when she forbade him to remove his shirt, he heard my voice from one of our classes saying, "Always remember you are free in your thinking." He said it was so strange because he heard these two voices at the same time. The more the woman repeated her instructions, the more he heard my words countering them. He fought the programming and eventually made his way over the fence.

Although we teachers do a lot of talking, we don't often get to hear the results of our words. These two examples are just a few situations where words spoken in everyday situations became meaningful to some students.

To conclude, students today do not want to be considered lower than the teachers. They wish to co-create and make Waldorf education even more effective than it has been. A group of seniors put together Ninety-five Theses (shades of Martin Luther) organized according to different categories including: Some Truths, Starting the Day Right, Teaches, Attitudes, Policies and Programs, Icing on the Cake, Academics, Freshman Year, Senior Year, College Preparation, and Last Thoughts. These included their suggestions, some very constructive in general, and others more aimed at specific situations. A few of their Last Thoughts included: "Ideally Waldorf education tries to expose us to many different perspectives and opinions, which is crucial to a good education. The school should strive to cultivate this ideal.

Continue to involve students in every aspect of the school. They probably have some creative solutions.

Students and faculty (the College of Teachers) should meet regularly (at least once per semester.)

One of the most important teachings in Waldorf education is encouraging students to think on their own and not fit us into the norms of society. We are taught to question the world around us. So why do teachers take it personally when we question them?

It is vitally important that the whole school continues questioning its methods and not become dogmatic in its ways.

Without letting go of the essence of Waldorf education, we believe that the school must keep evolving and growing as the world we live in changes so that the education remains real and full of life instead of getting stuck in traditions.

If you read all the way through the first ninety-four, thank you for your interest. We tried to truthfully and constructively present what we have observed over the past four years at this school. We are grateful for everything the school as given us. Perhaps these suggestions will benefit the students and teachers who come after us."

In this document the students show that they wish to create with us in working together to improve Waldorf education. They are longing for this possibility. I hope this conference will offer many ideas for this.

We high school teachers are working on our Spirit-Self as we cultivate the incoming ego of our adolescent students. We have much work to do to meet the talents and dreams of this generation of students.

In this spirit I will close with the Rose Cross meditation for the morning given by Rudolf Steiner.

"Wisdom in the Spirit Love in the Soul.
Strength in the Will.
These shall guide me.
These shall hold me.
In them I trust.
To them I devote my life."

* Members of the Waldorf High School Project core group have edited this article and the speaker has reviewed it, however, it is considered to be in draft format lacking a complete edit. It is provided so that AWSNA schools can make use of the content.

