

BRINGING THE WILL INTO THINKING IN ADOLESCENCE

by

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As we teachers work with adolescents, we experience the changes they go through in relation to their thinking, feeling, and willing. With the freeing of the astral body, new possibilities occur which change the relationship between the adolescent and the world. It is as if the young person is thrown into the world without a sense of direction. Yet the world of the early 21st century is very different from the one we teachers entered during our own adolescence.

Our generation experienced the dropping of the atom bomb. From that time on, no generation in humanity would live in security; but there would always be the possibility that the earth could be destroyed. All the images from science fiction about the destruction of the planet could really come true. The movie *The Last Day* confronted our generation with the terrible things that could happen if there is nuclear war.

Today's generation is living with just as much insecurity, but in a different way. There is not so much the fear that an enemy could use a bomb to destroy the earth, but that we ourselves, we human beings are destroying the earth through our life style, through our greed for energy, for material goods, and for comfort. We have not only affected the extinguishing of species, but we are responsible for changing climate and geography. This is the condition that our young people face today.

Such a condition has several different influences on an adolescent's will forces. Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is the movie of our students' generation. Because it is being shown all over the world, adolescents in many countries are united in their awareness of this dire situation. What kind of influence does this have on their will forces?

1. It could lame their will and create an attitude of despair: "There is no sense in doing anything because nothing will change the situation. So, why bother?" Here the impulse is to escape and hide in video games, drugs and alcohol, or give way to depression.
2. It can create an attitude of selfishness: "Since it doesn't matter anyway, we might as well just enjoy life to the fullest. Live it up."

3. A third attitude might be denial. During the summer, 2007, a young Chinese woman told me, “China is being blamed for global warming. But you Westerners have had the benefit of all the goods for a long time. You contributed a lot to global warming. But now you want us to stop manufacturing goods and driving cars. Our generation is the first generation to live the way you do. We want our chance in the world also. Our parents and grandparents were affected by the Cultural Revolution. They had nothing. We want to drive cars, use cell phones, listen to our iPods, and be able to email people around the world. We want to travel. We want to be part of the world. How can you tell us to stop? How do we really know there’s a problem anyway?”
4. On the other hand, the adolescent could have an attitude of interest and concern and think of ways to contribute positively. Through thinking about the situation in a broad way, youngsters can feel a call to action for the benefit of humanity and the earth. They can become aware of using environmentally-friendly materials in their homes and schools, they can walk or ride a bicycle instead of driving a car (if possible). Youth in many schools and organizations are founding clubs to make changes in their schools and communities to address the situation.

In the first examples of despair, selfishness or denial, we see a kind of instinctive response, connected with survival. Their picture of the world is narrow, focused only on “me.” Unable to grasp a wider perspective, the youth’s attitude becomes limited and is open to fear and gloom, or only to self-satisfaction. If youth have a broader scope of thoughts and feelings, they can direct their will with purpose, resulting in courage and sensible optimism.

Global warming is just one example of the physical and psychological environment in which our teenagers live. There are other issues that affect them that have to do with their longing for meaning and truth in the world.

During early adolescence from fourteen to sixteen years old (9th and 10th grades), as youth come in contact with the world, it is often overwhelming. Carrying an inner picture of a time when everything seemed to be wonderful, the younger finds the world disappointing, frustrating, unjust, and ugly. Nothing seems to work right. They have stepped out of the sunlight into a world of shadows, and they long for perfection, for unity. In this discord, they lash out at the adults. “You have messed up the world. It’s all your fault.” Or, “No one understands me.” They are trying to understand the world, but it is not easy. They often adopt a negativity towards the world in which they live.

As teachers of adolescents, we have to develop for them a broader view of the contemporary world. Although at times we may become upset and

even overwhelmed ourselves by the pace of life, by rampant materialism, and by vulgarity and violence in the media, it is our challenge to find what is positive and cultivate interest and positivity. It is our responsibility to be fresh and vital. We need to delight in what is new, while at the same time being cognizant of the cost and benefit of each change.

If we develop this attitude, then our words and interest will continue to stimulate the will and feelings of adolescents so that their thinking is activated. We then become supportive partners with adolescents, encouraging them to develop their own answers rather than simply adopting or rejecting ours.

As students reach the next stage, roughly sixteen to eighteen years of age (11th and 12th grades), significant changes occur. From the neurological perspective, the prefrontal lobes of the brain are increasingly developed, allowing for a more mature grasp of life. Students begin to understand issues at a deeper level, understanding the consequences of actions and organizing their thoughts more carefully. The inner life of the soul is opening up to receive the “I” on the wings of the astral. At this time adolescents make their way into the world in a more positive manner. Rather than being confronted by the outer world and feeling hostile to it, they start to connect with aspects of the environment, striving to find a moral direction. They are more able to see the complexity of the world, find ways to accept it, and to compromise. They approach life from within outwards, as if their will is connecting with their feelings and awakening in their thinking. Their search for truth becomes intense, and they begin to identify mentors whom they admire. Their relationship with their teachers changes also. Rather than seeing them as good or bad, black or white, they are able to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of a teacher with compassion and even amusement. They respect those who understand their own need to be individuals and to think through problems as they strive to find their own answers. Many parents comment that their sons and daughters become more balanced and easy to get along with after sixteen.

When we teach a course in the high school, we never know how the students will be influenced by it. Each student has identified teachers whom he or she admires. Surprises do come as students reflect on their particular experiences. One twelfth grader casually commented to her mother, “That course on Faust was boring, but through it I found God.”

We have to be so careful not to try to make the students believe what we do. In *Soul Economy*, lecture XVI, Rudolf Steiner comments that we must allow morality to develop freely. In referring to questions of religion, he said, “Any attempt to indoctrinate the young in our own particular ideology [Christian, Jewish, Roman Catholic, Protestant] must be eradicated from the true art of education.”

This is a challenge to Waldorf schools, especially in the festival life of the school. Questions arise: Is the Waldorf school a Christian school? Why do you mainly celebrate Christian festivals? In the new multicultural environment in many countries, this question needs to be tackled in an open-minded way. It causes us to ask questions about the place of the school in

the community, what is traditional, what is universal. At the high school level, these questions are significant. With issues around fundamentalism frequently in the daily news, high school students benefit from a course in the world's major religions so that they can better understand the values of each religion and be respectful and interested in different streams, awakening to their own thoughts.

One of the main ways adolescents awaken to their thinking is through the curriculum. During this time, the adolescent meets the world through his or her intellect. All the living pictures that had previously been given in the lower school were seeds for this new understanding.

In *A Social Basis for Education, Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, Steiner makes suggestions about curriculum:

All instruction must give everything necessary for life.

From age 15 to 20, everything connected with agriculture, trade, industry, commerce will have to be learned. No one should go through these years without acquiring some idea of what takes place in farming, commerce and industry. All those subjects will be introduced such as world affairs, historical and geographical subjects, everything concerned with nature-knowledge, but all this in relation to the human being. . . . Instead of our gaze being turned back to the most ancient epochs of culture, which took their shape from quite different communal conditions, from the age of 14 or 15 upwards, when the sentient soul with its delicate vibrations is coming to life, the human being must be led directly to all that touches us most vitally in the life of the current time.

I have pondered these words many times. How do we balance bringing historical periods from the past and yet lead the students directly into their time. In his lectures (*Education for Adolescents*) to the teachers when the first Waldorf school was about to begin a tenth grade, Steiner suggested that we should always connect our lessons with the human being and with something that is happening currently. It is difficult sometimes to leave behind many of the exciting and interesting events that happened in ancient or medieval times, or even events from a century ago.

Perhaps we are teaching one of our favorite subjects or time periods, but the students don't seem to connect with it. When I taught American history, every time I told the students about John F. Kennedy, I could feel a throbbing in my own soul. Kennedy's life and death were critical events in my life, but for the students they were just another part of history. They could learn it in their heads, but their will forces were not stimulated. However, when I described what Kennedy meant to my generation, where I was when he was shot, how the deaths of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy affected my contemporaries, the students became more interested because they could make a personal connection with me. When I went further and asked what events had occurred that would affect their

generation, they became excited and wanted to discuss this. Their will forces were involved, and their thinking was enlivened.

At different times over the last forty years, students' answers differed. When our high school in Sacramento started, it was the Vietnam War and Nixon's Watergate that affected them. Later other events were mentioned such as the death of John Lennon, the Gulf War, the use of the personal computer, Internet, robots and, of course, the Iraq War. Because of the war in Iraq, ancient history lessons on Mesopotamia and ancient Persia are more relevant to our students today.

Over the years students have complained about getting the same material that they had in lower school. They want something new. There is a benefit to revisiting material from the lower school, but it must be in a new way, a way that challenges students to ask deeper questions, to relate the familiar material to problems of our time. For example, when teaching a course on ancient history, the question of rivers and water supply is a central one that influenced the growth of a civilization. But what is the effect of rivers and water supply today? Why are dams being built to divert water and to produce hydroelectric power? How are these affecting changes in society today? How is the lack of water influencing the expansion of deserts, and what is the consequence of this? When the teacher relates the theme of the course to current issues, he or she is challenged to artistically shape the course so it has a clear focus and the central theme is not lost.

A teacher of 12th grade history of architecture did this successfully. After the students studied architecture at different times and places and had familiarity with architectural terms and concepts, they visited different locations in Sacramento to evaluate. They identified the ugliest areas and analyzed why that was so. Then they took one area not far from the school and had to design a town center for an area that had traditional suburban sprawl. This led to a project worked on in small groups. Students were motivated to design this project because it was real and it could lead to positive change in their community. Their projects were placed on exhibition in a public arena and were much appreciated.

Students are often taught about places far away and exotic, but their will is more activated when they connect with their local communities because it is the here and now. Each community is a microcosm of modern issues—land use, water resources, traffic, health issues, care for the elderly or homeless, schools, etc. Meeting with local specialists in each of these areas stimulates high school students to consider solutions to local problems. These are the streets they drive on, the public transportation they take, the stores they shop in, etc. If they become involved in the economic, political, and social issues that affect their lives directly, they are stimulated to think about them and be creative in making suggestions.

There are so many opportunities to involve students in projects where they have to work in teams to connect their learning with will activity. The challenge is to integrate a project with an intellectual component so that their will, feeling, and thinking are connected. For example, after the Katrina

hurricane did so much damage to New Orleans, students from various high schools wanted to help. Some collected truckloads of clothing and supplies, others helped families relocate, some went to New Orleans and worked in shelters. Others began websites to track places where help was needed. In addition to actually doing something important and meaningful, it is necessary to extend the activity into learning about hurricanes, what the relation is to global warming, how seacoast cities prepare for disasters, what happens to families who are affected, what changes need to be made for the future. The project itself is worthwhile, and students feel good about being involved. In addition, it opens possibilities to relate the project to whatever studies the students are currently involved in.

The challenge for high school teachers is to know the material so well that they can be flexible and shape the lessons so they relate directly to the students. Students today are very different from students in the past. Now they can get so much information from the Internet, so we need to offer them something different. No longer do high school students want to listen to their teachers lecture them, they don't want to be passive. They want more choices and more opportunity to be actively engaged in the learning process.

As high school students become more active in their learning, they begin to explore new aspects of themselves, new possibilities that relate to their own destiny. Is this an area that sparks an interest they want to follow? Where will this lead them? What skills have they learned by working together in small groups? What have they gained in terms of connecting with the problems of our time? Especially with the students in 11th and 12th grades, the opportunities to look into themselves awaken new perspectives and possibilities.

When the students' perspectives expand, they grasp different ways of handling situations. Instead of being locked into a one-question, one-answer approach, the breadth of possibilities enhances their optimism and courage to tackle situations that at first seem unsolvable. On the other hand, if they lack a broader perspective, it becomes easy for them to feel fear about the future and melancholic about whether they matter at all.

As we continue to explore the question of bringing will into thinking in adolescents, another area to consider is gender difference. When we understand the differences between males and females in relation to the four bodies (physical, etheric, astral, and I), we can become sensitive to their needs. This picture is augmented by brain research to help us understand differences. When the boy experiences strong feelings, he moves quickly into his will—from the limbic system to the reptilian brain (see Gurian's book in the bibliography). The girl, on the other hand, moves from feelings (the limbic system) into thinking (the cortex). This further adds to the image given by Steiner that the female lives more in imagination and the male in desire.

The challenge for us as high school teachers is to find a way to transform the boy's will (instinctive desire) into his thinking so that he can regulate his

behavior. This is particularly the case in early adolescence when boys are subject to react quickly without thinking. One way is to involve the boys in activities that serve the good of the community such as farming, practical surveying, building, welding, etc. Boys have a deep need to work physically to discipline their actions. Sports, if kept in balance, also helps meet this need. In all these areas of activity, there are particular rules (boundaries) that affect the use of tools or the actions of their body. Knowing how to keep from splitting wood, or how to use powerful equipment properly, or to stay within the rules of a game—all help them relate their will and thinking. Boys have a harder time than girls to sit in a chair and listen. They need purposeful activity. Although this need is already present in the early years of school, it becomes even stronger in the high school when they become restless and aggressive or withdrawn and want to leave school. Projects, practical crafts, and learning skills that connect them with real work are ways to involve the boys.

Girls have a closer connection between their feelings and their thoughts. They can get lost in their emotions and live in fantasy. Because the popular media puts tremendous pressure on girls to be sexy rather than use their intellect, they need a broader perspective on how some aspects of society work. When they understand how the thinking behind advertising is trying to influence them, they can feel more capable of resisting it. Becoming involved in projects that benefit others in the community helps take the focus off themselves. Many of the same activities that help the boys also help the girls. Today there are no differences in what schools offer boys and girls. Their individuality is much stronger than their gender identification. It is, however, helpful for the teachers to be sensitive to a situation in which a particular student needs guidance and direction.

An area of school activity that is particularly helpful with both boys and girls is drama. Drama is a great field for personal discovery and interaction. Students can experience soul qualities through taking on roles quite different from their usual ones. Trying to think and move like a particular character expands their understanding of human behavior. They can try out new ways of exploring anger, joy, jealousy, and nobility. They can sing solo or in a group, they can dance. They can participate in set design, lighting, costume making, printing programs, directing, and producing. Each activity contributes to the success of a production, and each person can find a niche in which to be active. They learn to work in ensemble, a microcosm for the world community. In addition to all of these activities which stretch their emotional life and physical capacities, there is the intellectual component in which to explore the meaning of the play, the turning point, the relationship of the play to values in society. Drama is also valuable because it contributes to the culture of the larger school community and brings appreciation and admiration from the community to the students

The key question to ask ourselves in working with this age is: What does it mean to be a soul artist with students after puberty? How can we be renewed in our own thinking, feeling, and willing so that we can be creative

and awake to the needs of our students? As society is going through changes and our students are changing, we, too, must be flexible and open to new possibilities. By cultivating our own inner development, by working to create a stronger center in our soul life, by working together with colleagues, and by being active members of our school communities we can heed the inner call of adolescents.

Resources:

Michael Gurian and Patricia Henley, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*.

Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Biology of Transcendence*.

Rudolf Steiner, *Essentials of Education* (April 8–11, 1924), lectures 4 and 5.

Rudolf Steiner, *Roots of Education* (April 13–17, 1924), lecture 4.

Rudolf Steiner, *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, December 1921, lectures 12, 13, 16.

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