

The Middle Place: Moving into Three-year-old-ness

— Susan Weber

The following thoughts are drawn from keynote addresses by Susan Weber at the WECAN East Coast Conference in February, 2012, and at the WECAN Rocky Mountain Regional Conference in March of the same year.

Why are we focusing on the three-year old child?

Through a puppetry vignette at this conference we have received the picture of a child building a home, building an earthly mansion, a distinct physical body for this earthly incarnation. It is our fortune to be on the earth in our times at an extraordinary place in the evolution of consciousness. We have been coming through the consciousness soul, to awaken our individualities. There have always been gifts and challenges at any time of incarnation. Yet looking at the painting of the Sistine Madonna with faces of the children in the clouds can bring to mind what extraordinary courage these children have in coming to the earth in our times. If they have that much courage despite the challenges that lie ahead, the least we can do is be there to receive and support these children on their journey.

How do we help each human being find his individual path to this personal mansion of the human physical body? The gift we give is offering the context and opportunities for him to find his way to who he is and what he has come to earth to do. We have ourselves biographical moments when we feel we have aligned in recognizing our chosen task in coming to earth. Sometimes we take the right fork in the road, sometimes a detour. From Anthroposophy we know that each person does have a destiny and has pre-earthly intentions. Each human has a reason to come to the earth. What a gift it is to hold this picture and to be in relationship with the child to see his gift. Obstacles are part of the journey, making us resilient. But obstacles always want to be manageable and want to be carried in relationship with other humans. The reason we come to the earth is to meet one another. We have come to encounter one another. It is not always easy but it is the relationships that make us human. This is the grounding anchor in the world: re-

lationship.

At Sophia's Hearth, as they were caring for groups of young children, the teachers began to see the children moving into three-year-old-ness. They saw that something very important was happening in this three-year place. How can we understand this developmental moment?

If we look at the child from birth to seven (illustrated with a horseshoe curve drawn on the board), we can see that this time span can be divided into three parts. From birth to two and 2/3 years, the past and heritage from the spiritual world are still raying in. Pre-birth experiences stream in through this first period, and this never happens again. From four and 1/3 years to seven years, the future is raying in; children begin to anticipate. Seven to fourteen as a future phase begins to make itself visible. This segment looks to the future. Five-year-olds begin looking toward going into first grade.

Then proceeds coming into language. When language comes to birth, the child needs the possibility to connect herself to the world of archetypes that was experienced before birth. The sheaths, the nest, are echoes of archetypes of pure realities of life before birth. Wetness, lightness, flames are all archetypes from the spiritual world. These give the child reassurance in being on the earth. We need to become like a little child and enter into the archetypes. We want to have wholeness, caveness, wateriness, so children can play in the archetype and have the language to go with it. This is the realm of the toddler.

The young child is also living with uprightness in language. The young child needs language filled with morality, with the ethics of truth. Adults create a mood and listen to the child so the child can speak into the respectful space of self-initiative. When the

child falls and hurts himself, he needs someone to acknowledge and comfort. We should not push away when his authentic voice is striving to come forward.

As life's task is to come to "Know Thyself," leading up to this vulnerable moment of three-ness, we support the child's self-knowing in many ways. We can provide clarity of form in the child's environment. Everything in the physical environment is ready, with things in order the same way every time. This builds the forming of thought. The caregiving processes are still all one-to-one with the child of this age. We are not sculpting a group of children. We are not holding these little ones as a group yet.

We have the possibility to support the child in another way. At age two the question of social life opens. The child pushes out against the world to create more space for his emerging individuality. The self has to define itself and take many different initiatives. His question is how to find himself and he needs to have space to not be distracted from this task. Adults have to find an artistic way to respond as the child expands outward. If he wants something someone else has, we say, "You want this and the other child wants this, too." This statement acknowledges and does not try to tell the child he is feeling something different from what he really is.

With the infant everything happens one-to-one. The adult is in the center doing all the care giving activity with the child. If we go to the other end, as the children grow, the teacher moves more to the periphery. The children become more interested in their friends. Their focus of interest is in the other children.



Photo from SeaHeart School, Costa Rica, courtesy of Louise deForest

With the older children, the adult moves to the periphery and the child carries the center within himself.

Right in this middle point, the three-to-four-year-old is neither fish nor fowl. He still needs lots of one-on-one time. Children should be independent out of joy, not out of duty. But when a three-year-old is vulnerable, he can easily unravel. This age needs all the nurturing and building of sheaths that we can offer. The three-year-old still needs bodily care and one-on-one time to feel whole.

This place in the middle—years two and 2/3 to four and 1/3—stands alone. As the child moves toward three, there is a moment when Rudolf Steiner says the first thrust of the I comes in. This is not the first time that the I has been active. The eternal individuality of self has been active all along from the midnight hour. But we are talking about the moment when the child says "I" to herself, and then a certain door closes. Total accessibility to the spiritual world closes and the child now stands on her own. The future is not yet revealing itself. The child of this age is not held by the past nor called toward the future. In this place the child is extremely vulnerable. If the first years have gone well, consolidation of development will slip into daily life.

How can we observe if what has come before has gone well? Signs that the first years have gone well are:

- *The child will have fluid, healthy movement. She can walk and jump with sturdiness.*
- *Self-care is in place. The child can dress, toilet, and feed herself.*
- *The attachment process has come to a natural conclusion. Attachment begins at birth, peaks at one year, and keeps active through the second year. The Madonna's cloak begins to fall away and the child can step out on her own. The child begins to relate to other adults directly without the mother mediating. A signal of this accomplishment is when the child begins to call by name the caregiver who is not the primary attachment figure. The child is also moving away from one-on-one care to becoming part of the group.*
- *The child speaks and uses speech as interaction, which a two-year-old may not do.*
- *One has a sense that the child knows that the world is good. The child has experienced that "the world is good to me."*
- *The child has moved beyond instinctive willing and resistance into self-initiated will activity. The period of defiance has completed its intention so the child can*

move smoothly into the next phase of development leading toward the future.

We know, as described in *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity*, that the spiritual world guides the child's development for the first three years and then steps back. Then Lucifer and Ahriman can begin to influence the child and discord enters. We see that these influences are active in children at younger and younger ages. Today's children can have elements of both dreamy large-headedness and premature awakens at the same time, since these Luciferic and Ahrimanic influences have been given earlier and earlier access to the children through our current lifestyle. The consolidation we hope to see may not occur if some interrupting experience or consequence of destiny intrudes. Then aggression, chaotic disorganization, and anxiety can result. If we look to observe where development was interrupted, we can help the child reconsolidate, refigure what was not completed in the past.

This is a crisis between three and four. The child needs to be very close to us, still in a one-to-one relationship. In that time there is not yet the "held-ness" of the group. There is a turning-inside-out phenomenon occurring for the child. As things are turning inside out, the child begins to look to the adult ever more for social guidance. This self-initiative time of birth-to-three can turn itself inside out to move toward social interaction in the future. Self-protection and rhythm made or broken in the first three years begin to show itself during this crisis. Those children who did not have sensitivity of care and the possibility for freely-initiated activity become anxious. There is anxiety because the I is not rooted well enough into the body. Simple daily rhythms can help accomplish this. The I may not have penetrated as deeply as it has needed to.

How can we help the children at this time? We help them most by recognizing the special nature of this time period of transitioning from spiritual guidance to earthly guidance. A caring adult is needed as guide in this earthly world during this void. A story of two three-year-olds having a fractious time settling into play gives example. The two children wanted to build a train. They had language skills but could not negotiate socially how to proceed. They needed the adult to step in and offer guidance. The adult entered their play as a "signal person" who actively gave directions in their train yard. The play for these two three-year-olds settled and the adult could then step back.

The child needs the chance to develop freely-initiated

compliance. This needs lots of time so the little ones can stream along into what comes next. When we have pulled them along faster than their maturity can support, we have awakened something prematurely. We see this in toileting. Not having completed the toilet learning process shows that something remains incomplete from the first three years. This can also show as anxiety about feeding and eating. We want feeding and eating to come out of self-initiated activity. If we are directing whether the child is full or not, then the child cannot learn this for herself.

Free, self-initiated compliance grows out of imitation. It is very hard for adults to work primarily in this way. But if the children act through imitation, their will is being guided. It takes great confidence and courage on our part to strive to truly work out of imitation. Of course there are moments when we guide and instruct. There will occur a moment with the six-year old when she needs to be able to do what needs to be done, even if it is not her favorite moment, when the adult must be more directive. But it is through imitation that the child can come to act out of her own joy in the work.

The true immunization of our times is the act of supporting healthy integration of the self, to enable the soul-spirit to come into the physical and etheric bodies. We need to develop the capacity to meet fear and unpredictability. We must be flexible models of adaptability filled with joy for the children to see.

Our hope is to give to the child the possibility of carrying forward all that lives in him from the spiritual world—the archetypes—so he can know himself and can meet the world from that possibility. The child, through this activity, will have so much joy out of these processes that he will not retreat from consciousness but will step out into consciousness.

We allow the child the possibility to develop the capacities mentioned at the beginning of the lecture by honoring the children in these ways—with rhythmic care, not rushing, and recognizing and honoring the child's individuality. ♦

References

Steiner, Rudolf. *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1991).

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