

LEARNING FROM THE PAST, EMBRACING THE PRESENT AND UNFOLDING THE FUTURE

Notes taken by Ana Luz Anderson from the lecture given by Jill Tina Taplin

We know that in the first seven years of life the environment forms the child. Nonetheless, in our present society the environment is fast changing. We live in a time where there are new burdens for children and new choices for parents. Not everything is negative and yet there are many aspects of our modern society that we need to be aware of as they have a negative impact in the development of the young child. Some of the things impacting children today are:

- The fact that we live in a very urban environments with lots of traffic and this means in many cases that children and adults spend a lot of time in cars and therefore are restricted in their physical activities. Physical activities and movement are also restricted by lack of space and of safe public places where children can play freely.
- We live in a very mechanised world and children see adults using machines most of the time. Of course, they don't understand the machines and yet they get to know how they work very quickly. They see the physical body undervalued and they don't have many examples of how the physical body & our limbs work to transform the world and therefore they have limited real-life hands-on experiences around them to imitate and learn from. When they see machines at work, they see 'mysterious' processes happening without experiencing the work involved in them.
- Children are nowadays greatly exposed to the virtual world. Through this situation children experience lack of authentic real time relationships and of authentic sense experiences. They are also deprived of real encounters with nature. This lack of connection-interaction with nature makes much more likely that they might end up exploiting nature when adults.
- Life has become very rushed and full of the schedules. Parents have always been time poor but nowadays this is exacerbated by the expectation to have children participate in many extra activities.

All these pressures and many others one can think of give a new significance to what we need to offer the young children of today in our early childhood settings to be able bring balance and protection to the developing child.

We are living in a situation where we are resisting attacks to the children in all four bodies.

THE PHYSICAL BODY - is being weakened by physical restrictions.

THE ETHERIC BODY - is being undermined by hurry and lack of rhythm.

THE ASTRAL BODY - is being overstimulated by sensory impressions.

THE EGO BODY or 'I' – is being attacked by anti-social forces.

In Early Childhood we only work most directly in the physical body. However, all the bodies are present and are developing in different ways in the first seven years of life and therefore they can all be impacted by what comes from the world towards the child.

At this point, Jill Tina Taplin shared some extracts from different lectures given by Rudolf Steiner that explain or refer to the anti-social forces and that we need to learn how to work with.

Significant Phrases by Rudolf Steiner with Comments by Jill Tina Taplin

"... And however good the right maybe that you want to bring to realization - it will turn into a wrong in the course of time. The reality is that there are no absolutes in this world. You work towards something that is good, and the way of the world will turn it into something bad. We therefore must seek ever new ways, look for new forms repeatedly. This is what really matters."

IN: Fall of the Spirits of Darkness (GA117) Lecture 4 -6, October 1917

We are in a period when humanity is following its evolutionary path and our consciousness is different from that of the past. These changes are needed but they come with challenges. It is in this context that Rudolf Steiner said that we will be faced by destructive powers that wish to deviate the process of human evolution. Therefore, it is inevitable that we will encounter challenges and circumstances around us will force us to change and to keep looking for new ways to do what we do. We won't find a perfect permanent solution for our challenges. We will constantly have to adapt and to change and come with new possible ways forward. This requires flexibility.

"... In our age, which has developed in an intellectually way on the one hand and in a materialistic way on the other, much human misunderstanding and human hatred has become embedded in men's souls...[these] work... into the relationships which people form with one another on the earth."

IN: The Human Being as Symphony of the Creative Word (GA 230) Lecture 12 – 11, November 1923

Rudolf Steiner says that our physical body needs hardness in order to be a structure that allows us to be upright. A result of this fact is that hardness and coldness penetrate the soul and as our society becomes more intellectual and materialistic this hardness and coldness increases having an impact in our human relationships. Nowadays it is common to experience difficulties in our relationships with each other and this is also true in relationships at a larger scale in the world scenario. It is our task that we consciously work upon the realm of relationships and to do so, we need courage. Courage to face the ongoing undermining of our endeavours to be social and to love and care for each other.

"Human intelligence will more and more developed the inclination to plan evil, to bring error into knowledge, and to insert evil in man's moral life... If we want to think of a wholesome future for mankind, we must not count on the one-sided development of intelligence."

IN: Education as a Social Problem (GA 296) - Lecture 5 16, August 1919

To balance the present one-sided development of intelligence we need moral consciousness.

"... The social organism is something that is constantly developing, growing... To fix on some form as the best, and expect it to remain in that form is to undermine the very conditions of its life."

IN: The Three Fold Social Order (GA 23) - Chapters 1 and 3.

In Steiner's view the social organism is in a perpetual state of becoming. It is always developing and growing. We shouldn't get fix on some form or idea as the only answer. A form might work for a while but then in time it will have to change and for this seemingly constant change we need resilience.

"[The human being] cannot rest upon anything he already is, but must continue in the process of becoming..."

In our epoch is of special importance to make the efforts to form pictures, not really abstract, isolated judgements. It must be pictures, too, that will open a path of socialization."

IN: The Challenge of the Times (GA 186) Lecture 4 – 6, December 1918

We are in a constant process of becoming and the way to work with it is through imagination, through pictures and not through intellectual logical rational approaches. The latter approaches are important and needed but we need to balance them out with picture building through imaginative approaches.

We need imaginative pictures rather than abstract thinking in order, to support a more objective view of the world.

IN SUMMARY we need:

- Courage
- Moral Consciousness
- Flexibility
- Resilience and
- Imagination

Jill Tina Taplin then said that what Steiner called LIVING HEART THINKING is connected to the qualities mentioned above. Living heart thinking is responsive and empathetic, it is connected to the environment, to others and to the spiritual beings that supports us in our work.

Living heart thinking requires from us to be very present, awake, attentive, interested and imaginative so that we can connect with the spiritual beings and through this connection find inspiration and if we carry this into ourselves, in time, we will be able to have intuitions (pedagogical wisdom).

Living heart thinking allows us to move beyond traditions or routines that might have lost their value and it also allows us to compromise where needed.

Within this context Jill asked three questions connected to:

The Waldorf/Steiner Kindergarten in the 21st century

What impact does this anti-social, intellectual and materialistic environment has in our children? What does this mean for them? And what does this mean for us?

In our present day and age we are seeing a premature awakening of the "I" or Ego in the children. We see young children with an overwhelming awareness of their own needs and of their individuality. This premature awareness undermines their feeling life as they have to grapple with it rather than enjoying

life as it is. This situation also undermines the children's long-life health and strength of their etheric forces as these forces get distracted of their primary task which is that of building a healthy physical body in the first seven years of life.

We see children who have lost the ability: to play, to imitate, to use their imagination and who have lost the ability to be "unselfconscious". We see many children that are lacking etheric forces, are very thin-skinned and are anxious. We see many issues related to sensory development and sensory sensibilities manifesting as well as issues connected to relationship to others and to the world. Children are presenting more and more with additional special needs and even with some pathologies.

In the past, in Steiner settings it was said that the young child lived in a state of dream consciousness but, for Jill Tina Taplin, this could be a dangerous phrase to use nowadays as in her view a kindergarten where everything is kept very quiet, very soft and very slow might not be appropriate for the children of today. She feels that in this kind of kindergarten there is not enough distraction of the children's premature experience of individuality. She believes that many children of today are looking for the educators to be more aware and more engaged so that they are able to support the children's enthusiastic engagement in play and in adult led activities.

For Jill Tina Taplin, we need to lift the children into healthy life experiences by making real-life bigger than the individuality which threatens to draw them into self-consciousness. We need to find ways to invite the children to join us through imitation in what she calls: *unself-conscious-participation*.

We are required to find a new balance in the way we work with the children.

Jill shared a list of elements that stand up for her as needing to be revised and looked afresh in our present context in Waldorf/Steiner Kindergartens so that we can better meet the needs of our time.

"... *The task of a kindergarten teacher is to adjust work taken from daily life so that it becomes suitable for the children's play activities.*" R. Steiner- The Child's Changing Consciousness - Lecture 4, 1923

This quote remains to be essential and is (should be) the basis for any new approaches to working with children. Below is the list given by Jill Tina Taplin of Elements in our kindergarten practice that she believes need to be addressed in our early childhood settings.

- Simple Home – as the kindergarten is the bridge between home and school.
 1. there should be time and space for **domestic work** to be done every day while the children are around the adults and where we look after our space/environment with focus, care and engagement.
 2. there should also be plenty of opportunity and time **for play** that suits all the children with equipment & toys that are not limited to the home corner but also for the very many engineers and builders at heart.
- Artistic and Craft Work that are offered in a pedagogical thought through way.

What is standing behind the activity we are offering? What are its pedagogical goals?

Artistic and craft activities should be done with a real emphasis on the wonder of what our hands can do. And the focus should be in the process rather than on the product. Tools and materials should be met and used with respect.

- Aesthetic Experiences

It is very important that children have experiences of beauty, harmony and order. Aesthetic experiences are very difficult to find in our man-made world of today. Many books, toys, cartoons portray ugliness and chaos. So, we are interested in providing children with experiences of beauty and order in our kindergartens.

- Time and Space for Free Movement:

During play time and also in adult led activities such as Ring Time, Games and also in nature.

Children need lots of movement opportunities, as movement is essential in child development.

- Outdoor Nature Opportunities

We know more and more that nature is therapeutic and harmonising. It builds resilience and strengthen our connections with the seasons, with the plant, animal, and mineral kingdoms an also with the elemental beings. It is therefore very important that children have many opportunities to be and to play in nature.

We are not a forest kindergarten, but we can consciously do more to enhance our children's outdoors experiences. We want to show the children how nature can be positively transformed by human beings in a healthy and appropriate way.

We show them by example the work we can do with nature and how we take care of it and are their custodians.

- Experience of Healthy Relationships in the way we relate with our children's families, with our colleagues and with others.

We must deepen our love and our understanding towards others to give the children something worthy of imitation.

We need to work with the auxiliary exercises given by Rudolf Steiner all the time and we must work hard to overcome our natural antipathies and tendencies to make judgements.

- Social Justice

We need to model neighbourliness, inclusiveness, and acceptance of diversity.

All of these are very important deeds for the present and for the future evolution of humanity. We have to step in imaginatively in this area to support future capacities. We cannot build it as something that is intellectually appropriate but as something that is truly heart felt.

- Sustainability is part of the balance of life.

We must reduce, repair and reuse and we need to think how to work with sustainability in our settings.

In amongst all these things that we must revisit afresh and work through *we mustn't forget the power of humour, lightness, and joy* they are very important so that we don't get too serious or overwhelmed with the challenges ahead.

**What have we got to support us in our endeavours?
What can help us in our work and journey?**

From Rudolf Steiner there are many suggestions and guidance to help us with our inner work. It is our inner work and our connection to the Spiritual realm that supports us in our task and that allows us to remain working with young children and to commit to our vocation of supporting them in this fast-changing and challenging environment that we live in. It is through the efforts we put in our inner work that we can connect with the Divine to ask for guidance and support.

There are many exercises for self-development that have been given to us by Rudolf Steiner or by other traditions that can help us to become better human beings. Rudolf Steiner gave a Golden Rule in connection to the importance of self-development and inner work in his book: The Knowledge of the Higher Worlds

"For every one step you take in the pursuit of higher knowledge, take three steps in the perfection of your own character." Rudolf Steiner

We need to be making moral efforts all the time and through these efforts we make/create a space for Higher Spiritual Beings to be able to connect to us and to help us and guide us in our daily work.

To conclude Jill Tina Taplin, said that in today's world there is nothing usual (predictable) about children or about the job that we do and yet, there are all kinds of regulations that are pushed upon us. We are in constant tension between meeting ever more unusual situations and being ever more restricted by norms and regulations.

We live in a world where we cannot longer work with set expectations. *We must be much more imaginative, much more flexible and we are going to have to make compromises in how we work with children and that means deciding what matters most **and it is the inner relationships between people that matter most.*** They matter more than the open-ended play objects we have, more than the wooden chairs, more than the daily rhythm. It is the relationships between the people that makes something into a Waldorf/Steiner setting so it is essential that we are striving continuously to develop healthy relationships with the children and with each other around them.

Waldorf Early Childhood Education is not the equipment but the people working there and out of their understanding of the pedagogy and the wish develop an intuitive way of working with children that the environment and the methods that we are familiar with can manifest to better support the young children of today.

To close on a positive note Jill Tina Taplin, shared some words from Rudolf Steiner from Education as a Social Problem.

In these lectures Steiner said that *we need to have courage and to rejoice when people show a little interest in our ideas. Even if all that we do turns out not to be fruitful if we can be fruitful in one objective this will radiate out to the world.*

We know we have a lot of challenges, a lot to meet in the world and we need to work together, we need to work collaboratively, and we need to work with the Spiritual Beings. We also, need to be very awake and not work out of old habits, routines and traditions if we are to meet all the wonderful challenges which are before us.

CLOSING VERSE

*Grasp future things through past ones,
Hope for evolving things through what has evolved.
So grasp existence in evolving growth:
So grasp what will be in what exists.*

Given by Rudolf Steiner to Ita Wegman