

A Beginner's Reflection on Anthroposophy

By Beth Patchel

By now most of us know that Waldorf education, conceived by Rudolf Steiner, is but a small arm of a spiritual philosophy known as anthroposophy. Though anthroposophy is not part of the Waldorf curriculum, the teachers have studied it, and its ideas permeate the education. Last August, curious to know more, I attended the first block of the Foundation Studies course, led by Elan Leibner. The central point of study was Steiner's *Theosophy*. The text is dense, so the intellectual study was balanced with artistic practice in order to help us reach a fuller understanding of it. "Head, heart, hands" is something we all know about in educating the children, but this philosophy can engage everyone, from the child to adult.

Theosophy explores the idea that each of us has the ability to spiritually transform ourselves – not only to increase self-knowledge, but to achieve a deeper knowledge and connection with the world. Spirituality can be hard to define. It evolves out of one's family and religious traditions and is thus intrinsically personal. I came to the idea of it early in life, growing up in a house that discussed spiritual matters more often than social or current events. Like many religious traditions, we were taught to do our utmost to eschew material values for a higher reward. The problem that continually arose for me was that following the rules and being 'outwardly' spiritual (certainly a contradiction in terms) often took precedence over the development of a true inner life.

I didn't, however, take the Foundations course with any spiritual intentions. My aim was actually quite simple: to know more of the philosophy underlying Waldorf education. What resulted was altogether more startling and rewarding - not merely an added appreciation of my daughters' education, though that was an immediate benefit, but an explosion of emotions, thoughts and revelations. It answered questions that I'd long forgotten I'd ever had, and simultaneously opened the door for many other questions that are yet to be answered.

Because the meaning of the course was unique to each person, it was and is difficult to articulate. It took time to intellectually process what was happening, and so most of us could only describe it in visceral terms. Almost every day I had the sensation of welling up, of a lump in my throat, with no logical explanation. Certainly not all the ideas were foreign - what was new was studying them afresh in the Waldorf way, with my head, heart, and hands. Even vague concerns that it'd be necessary to relinquish beliefs that were important to me, that somehow they would contradict each other, proved groundless; in fact, I began to see how the new and the old could overlap in their truths.

The eurythmy part of the course (led by Tertia Gale) answered a question I've now had for four years – how to define eurythmy? As with most things in life, the answer comes by actually doing it. Moving to music and language – a verse by Goethe, for example - was a way of literally feeling what we'd just studied. Just

as our children experience their lessons more intensely because they march, jump rope, and clap their hands, so too did eurythmy help us to digest Steiner's words more deeply. After all, it's hard to forget movement! Our bodies have a way of remembering things that our brain easily forgets. Eurythmy takes three art forms - music, language, and movement – and combines them into patterns both playful and reverent. In our very actions we physically absorbed the ideas that we'd read and discussed.

The remaining section of the day was devoted to watercolor painting and clay sculpting (led by Pam Shafer). This was the most challenging aspect for me, not being strong in the visual arts, and so not surprisingly, it was also the most intense. How to describe a process so difficult that you're actually fulfilled by the frustration itself? For example, one day we painted the mouth of a cave, lit up from within and surrounded by color. Though I didn't consciously process this at the time (and indeed, neither eurythmy nor painting was explained in concrete "here's the meaning behind this" terms), I held within me an image of being warmed from the inside out. And despite never actually painting anything truly worthy, I vividly remember the experience. In short, a door opened, a deeply personal one that embraced our intellectual, artistic, and emotional selves, each segment holding out its hand to another to encompass the full individual. It is, after all, the reason our children attend the Waldorf school – because we wish them to develop their entire person. I can't say whether anyone reaches their fullest spiritual capacity in one lifetime. But by holding tightly to the idea that to

continually enlarge our capacity for love, for connection with one other, a fuller understanding of our profoundly layered humanity will prevail.

My goal in writing this piece was to not only let people in on what sometimes feels like a closely guarded secret – what is anthroposophy, and what does it have to do with our school? – but also to hopefully coax some of those who might be on the fence about studying it. If the summer was any indication of the future, I can promise a richly rewarding experience.

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