

At a time when more and more sections of humanity are sinking deeper and deeper into materialism, there rises the great question: how can one cultivate a new altruism based on insights into the true nature of human beings?

Kindergarten, schools and colleges are the seed beds where the new impulses can be sown which will then later bring in good harvests for the social life. These can then radiate within the dying and decaying elements of our overripe civilisation.

If we look around us we can see very few leaders of humanity who have the necessary spiritual insights to pour into education. In so many of them lives the picture of man as the naked ape or the black box with input and output. The hope of these thinkers for the future is in genetic engineering and not in radical new forms of education which improve the depleted stocks of human resources. This leads to a deep fatalism and sense of recognition in the millions who cannot find a new way forward. This can then take many forms: violence, anarchy, suicide, hooliganism, alcoholism. These are the hidden caricatures and perversions of those forces which should have been developed in the Kindergartens and classrooms: creative imagination, strength of character, rich feelings, unshakeable will power, living thinking. How can these develop when the force of competitiveness (= educational Darwinism), of premature intellectual learning ("Teach Your Baby to Read"), together with the early mechanisation of human learning (computers, videos, T.V., etc.) all bring the chilling winds of materialism into so many schools.

One of the few giants in the educational world of our own century is Rudolf Steiner. His own exact researches into the true nature of the human being led him to widen our views considerably. He showed how, far from being a blank slate at birth, the child's soul has matured in many earth lives before and brings with it a complex web of strengths and weaknesses. It is up to the teacher to lead out ('educare') these strengths so that gradually the human weaknesses are transformed. There will be a big difference between the teacher who subconsciously regards his class as young apes with a certain amount of intelligence and the one who can sense what the children have brought with them as human potential. These two quite different soul moods colour a lot of what is learnt in the classroom.

Steiner gives the educationalists some golden keys of insight when he describes the three great periods of seven years which lead from birth up to adulthood, each containing its own laws. In the first seven years, we should surround the child with a rich world of things worth imitating. It is not too difficult to see that the influence of the media and of forced intellectual learning act as discords in these years. From about 7 to 14, a child should feel the warm companionship and authority of one class teacher who gradually and lovingly opens the doors of learning so that wonder and joy at the beauties of the world can be experienced. This is not a sentimental attitude, even though at first it does not seem to take note of the harsh realities of the world today. The growing soul does need some protection from the dehumanised aspects of modern life.

In puberty and adolescence, the young person will be awakening to his or her real powers of thinking and these powers will be warm and supple as long as the teaching has not been mechanised and not merely intellectually oriented in the earlier years. Colour, music, finger and limb skills, rhythms, will have prepared this thinking so that its gradual appearance from puberty onwards is full of qualities and not merely a quantitative thinking, only able to register factual information.

Speaking as a person who works in one of the 400 Steiner schools around the world, I can vouch for the fruitfulness of these methods and attitudes. In time they will create more and more oases within the arid elements of our civilisation and rescue much of education from death in the desert.