

A SENSE OF WONDER

*"My heart leaps up when I behold A rainbow in the sky. So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man; So shall it be when I am old Or let me die! The child is father
to the man And I should wish my days to be Bound each to each in natural piety".*

William Wordsworth

Picture a little child, just born into the world; his new, soft organs prepared in a gentle, watery place, ready to be formed and finished by whatever he encounters in the first few years of his life. Every little child is a picture of perfect openness, joy and trust. He's at one with the world, full of love for it and he trusts everyone and everything. He is permeated with 'natural piety'. Piety is a word which has different nuances now from those it had when Wordsworth wrote his poem two hundred years ago. Then as now, it meant 'devotion', which includes 'humility' and also 'wonder' A prerequisite for all of these is that we accept the existence of something greater than ourselves and that a feeling of awe arises in us when we stand before it. But the word 'piety', apart from not being used very much at all anymore, now has other qualities attached to it; hypocrisy, superciliousness, falsity and even foolishness. To say that someone is 'pious' now is a criticism. The meaning of the word itself has not changed, only our attitude to the quality it expresses. 'Piety' now is something to be sneered at.

Nevertheless, while we sneer at it in adults, most people would still accept that piety, or reverence, is quite natural in small children. 'After all', we might say, 'the child knows nothing about the world, of course he will be full of wonder'. Now we have before us two things: One, a child, quite naturally and understandably full of piety and , on the other hand, the belief that a pious adult is something to be despised.

Whether or not we see it in such clear terms, it seems really to be the case that we set about eliminating that piety in our children as soon as we possibly can. The child says 'look at the lovely rainbow !' and we reply 'yes ! and do you know that it's the rays of light from the sun being bent by the little drops of rain that makes those colours?' The child says 'The moon is shining!' and we say 'Actually, the moon doesn't shine, it only reflects the light from the sun' No magic there then.

What are we doing ? We would say that we are telling him the truth and helping him to understand the world, but it doesn't take much imagination to realise that a small child has no way of understanding such abstract concepts; he can receive them (and we think it's cute when children say grown up things) but that's all; when he repeats our words unchanged, he is really giving them back to us because he can't digest them.

Perhaps our intention in telling him these things is to give him something that will be useful to him later in his life. Do we think that by demystifying the world for him and presenting him with the essential facts we will save him the trouble of finding out for himself and so he will 'get on' faster? We want to take away the magic so that our children are not fooled.

If this is our intention, then lurking behind it is modern materialistic man's conviction that there is no spirit and, actually, there is nothing greater than man himself. The incredible advances in science and technology over the last few decades have culminated, for the moment, in the ' Human Genome Project' which has spawned

claims that we will soon be able to 'create human beings' to particular specifications. Even children, it seems, can be reduced to formulae - you just need to have all the bits and put them together. The divine spark doesn't even come into the equation - Man now believes that he is omnipotent, therefore there is no need to wonder at the miracle of creation. Yes, he says, life can be very exciting and it is quite acceptable to marvel as new discoveries are made, but what we are really being encouraged to marvel at is not the wonders themselves so much as Man's unbounded cleverness in finding them out. Possession of the information is the important thing and if that's the case, the sooner you start collecting it, the more you will have and the better off you will be, so better start early.

This is really how some people see the education of children, and even those of us who do not hold this view may find ourselves doing things with our children which, because they have a seemingly universal stamp of approval, we do not question, but which are really products of this principle and are based on the premise that the child is a blank page on which we must write everything we think he should know.

Of course it is natural that we, as parents, should want to share our enthusiasm with our children, but in our eagerness to give them everything we want them to have, we can easily forget that 'our' children have a right to their own destiny and that we must not presume to know what that is. We also forget that they are already having amazing experiences; they are finding joy, wonder and excitement in their own journey of discovery through the things we once marvelled at, but now take for granted. The everyday world is truly an extraordinary place! Anyone who has been for a walk with a four year old knows how much delight is found in leaves, caterpillars, cracks in the pavement, moss, stones, sticks, ants, beetles and birds. They don't need microscopes and telescopes to find amazing things, just the time to be allowed to use their eyes, ears, noses, arms, legs, hands and feet in peace.

But their fascination with commonplace things is not something we, as adults, can easily share. We've done all that and, while we can accept and even find it delightful in a two year old, we begin to get impatient with it and we want to move on and show the child things which we think are interesting. If our five year old wants to stand and watch the fairies dancing in the puddles when it rains, we might let him, but a year later we begin to think it's time to 'set him right'. We begin to feel that he must not be 'left behind' or that, even better, he should start to 'get ahead'. So we start to explain things to him: We teach him to read, take him to the Science Museum, show him how to use the computer, give him books about dinosaurs, 'endangered' species, the rain forests - and tell him about the bad people who cut down all the trees - tell him the stars are really huge suns very far away and that our sun is only a small one and very unimportant and that, anyway, one day it's going to explode; that 'we don't eat meat because it's cruel to kill animals.'

As adults we can argue about how much of this is true, but, more importantly, what do we expect a small child to do with this kind of information? None of it has anything to do with the way he experiences the world. All of it separates him from the world he lives in which is good and beautiful and of which he is part. His picture of the world becomes chaotic, arbitrary and strange. What is he to feel about his friend who eats sausages or the gardener who cuts down a tree in the park? How can he be open and trusting when there are 'bad people' doing 'cruel' things? How can he make any sense of the great big sun being smaller than the tiny stars? and the moon that isn't shining even though he can see with his own eyes that it is? What we really do when we say 'yes the rainbow is lovely, look, I can make one by bending the light

with this prism' is we snatch away his experience, which touches his feelings and fills him with wonder and, instead of keeping silent and allowing him to take it in for himself, we fill his mind with our words. This also touches his feelings; he feels he should listen to us because we are adults and he trusts us to know what's best. So we replace the rainbow with our explanation. We teach him not to trust his own experience of the world so that he has no choice but to rely on what we tell him about it.

If a child has really learned to do this at an early age - particularly before the age of nine - as he grows up he will find it difficult to approach things with an open mind. When he sees something for which he has been given an explanation - a rainbow or the moon - he will not be able to look at it without evoking those concepts which were planted in him when he was too young to digest them and so have remained fixed and firmly impressed in him.

This means that if, as an eleven-year-old, he hears his teacher begin to talk about the sun in the class six astronomy main lesson, he will think, 'Oh yes, it's ninety million miles away and one day it's going to explode - I know all about it.' Then he may stop listening because he 'already knows' or he won't be able to accept anything new which doesn't seem to fit with the pieces of information he has been carrying around for years. In either case he is likely to complain or reject what the teacher says without much consideration.

This has far reaching implications for the child's life; an inability to let go of the old and a reluctance to accept the new will make his growth and education much more of a struggle for him. If he is not open to being surprised, intrigued, moved or amused by what he learns, 'if his feelings cannot be touched in some way he cannot really become interested in what he is learning.'¹ He will always feel, somehow, that it has nothing to do with him because he has held himself back from it.

As Waldorf teachers, we try to bring subjects in ways that reach out and grab hold of the child so that he must become engaged in it. This is not always easy. Especially before the age of nine, but right through the school, children are taught through pictures and stories as much as possible so that what they learn lives in their imagination and can grow with them, revealing deeper and deeper layers of meaning as the child's capacity for understanding develops. In the older classes science is presented in an experiential way; we ask the children to observe and become aware of what they see, hear, smell, feel or taste. We give credence to their own experiences. If the children are carrying preconceived ideas about what they ought to see, hear etc, then it is very hard for them to do this : One child, when asked to describe what he saw when a violin string was played wrote that 'sound waves went across the room.'

As children grow older - between the ages of about nine and twelve - their natural reverence wanes and begins to be replaced by a healthy scepticism behind which lies a new challenge to adults: 'go on, show me then.' In a healthy child, this is accompanied by an eagerness to find things out, and we can respond to that more and more, presenting things from new angles and relating lessons to real life as the faculty of judgement awakens between twelve and fourteen.

If we bear in mind the age of the child and what he is ready to receive, and we present it in a way that can really move him, he will become more and more

interested in the world. But if he has not been allowed to pass naturally through early childhood, to experience awe in the face of the great world but instead has been given a picture of the world without magic, where danger lurks and you can't rely on your senses, then he will have become nervous, fearful, confused, even aggressive and resentful. The child's soul has been wounded and he feels something like disappointment with life. Then the healthy scepticism can turn to cynicism.

We're back to semantics again because 'sceptic' and 'cynic' have become almost synonymous. Whereas they were once both derisory terms, they are now used to denote a kind of admirable cleverness or wit. There is a difference though. Scepticism means 'questioning' but 'cynicism' means 'a refusal to believe'. The sceptic still wants an answer, and the cynic doesn't care any more; everything is 'boring' and 'pointless'. The classic response of a cynic to anything you tell him is 'so what'. He has learned that there is nothing wonderful about the world, it can all be explained and it's childish and humiliating to be amazed. As a teacher, or a parent, it's very difficult to work with that.

So if you now fear you may be the parent of a cynical twelve-year-old, is it too late? First be comforted by the assurance that all twelve-year-olds say 'so what' sometimes. Yes, it is more difficult to reach the feelings of children who have become cynical, but it is still possible. They may be full of facts and bored with life but they are still children. There are so many things they have not yet experienced. With imagination and ingenuity we can still find things which have not been spoiled for them- and it's important that we do. Recently, with my own class seven, (a mixture of thirteen different degrees of sceptic and cynic) I took the chladni plate² out in the middle of a history block. I introduced it by reminding them of how the monks in the twelfth century studied the Bible and how they might have contemplated the words 'And God said let there be ...' I suggested 'perhaps this might have helped them to picture it...' Then I sprinkled the 'world without form' (salt) onto the plate and drew a violin bow across it. It sang with an eerie, ancient tone - and the salt sprang into a beautiful geometric pattern.

Every one of them gasped, said 'wow!' or 'wicked!', they all smiled or even laughed. There was surprise, wonder and joy in all of their faces. They forgot to be cool - their 'hearts leapt up'! I did not explain it; that will come later. Now, this may seem like a party trick, and it's not an everyday occurrence, but a very deep truth lies at the heart of it which prompted some thoughtful questions. As I packed it away and they swept up the salt, I heard one of them say 'I thought it would have been much more complicated than that' and then another boy came to me and asked, in rather a conspiratorial whisper, 'How come no-one knows about this?' For one it was a profound discovery that a simple thing could be so wonderful, and for the other there were still things which he might find interesting which (at thirteen!) he did not already know about. Who can say where these realisations will lead them?

Amanda Bell Easter 1999

1. 'The Renewal of Education' Rudolf Steiner

2. The Chladni Plate is a thin metal plate fixed at the centre to a base. It is usually used in Physics lessons to demonstrate the forming forces of sound.