

Meeting the Earth

The Challenge of Being Twelve

by Brian Jacques

Long-legged and lanky, groping for balance with each step, the twelve year-old trips and stumbles into the classroom. Next door, the ten and eleven year-olds race into their classroom nearly running down their teacher, but, with the grace of a bird in flight, they glide past, unaware of the narrowly missed collision. Why is there such a difference between these children who are so close in age and yet so far apart in the very nature of their being? What has happened to the twelve year-old?

We can begin by looking at the changes in the physical body. In the tenth and eleventh years, the life forces of the child are absorbed in forming the muscles and the child's movements are fluid, graceful and confident. As the twelfth year approaches, these formative forces are moving through the tendons towards the bone and the child begins to have a dim awareness of the rigidity and hardness of its own skeleton. Gone are the days of gracefulness, replaced now by awkwardness and lack of confidence as a new relationship to the body is explored. It is now, as the child comes into the hardest part of its own physical body, that the earthly realm of physical matter is finally met. Rudolf Steiner said during a lecture in Dornach that 'the incarnating human being must first penetrate the body before he can establish a relationship with the external world' (Soul Economy and Waldorf Education; lecture XI). For the first twelve years of life, the child is gradually incarnating into his physical body and thus into the realm of the physical earth. At the age of nine come the first feelings of separation from the whole of the cosmos and then, three years later, gravity takes over and the earth is met.

One of the Waldorf teacher's tasks is to meet the children where they are in their development. So how does this happen? Corresponding to the twelve year-old's contact with the earth and with her own skeleton is first the desire and then the ability to understand physical matter and physical laws. In a variety of ways the Class 6 curriculum can help. In the main lesson blocks, for example, the earth is experienced from a more objective perspective through geology and mineralogy in connection with geography. The earth is measured through geometry and conquered during Roman history. The phenomena of heat, light, sound and then later, electricity and magnetism are experienced through sense observation in the first physics lessons and, in mathematics, business maths is introduced. In art, the pupils begin to draw in black and white for now the world has become a shadow of what it was. Gardening lessons find a place in the timetable for the first time as now the pupils work with the physical substance of the earth, the soil, with more consciousness than when they were younger, and in language lessons, the nature and folklore of the country is introduced. In Tone Eurythmy, the octave movements can be learnt now that the bony system is more awake and in Bothmer Gym, geometrical exercises such as the triangles can be done. It is also in Class 6 that woodwork lessons begin - consciously shaping and modeling a harder material than the clay, plasticine or beeswax used hitherto.

As shown, the Class 6 curriculum seeks to meet the changes of the growing human beings in their relationship to their own bony system and to the earth. But what about that other drastic development that occurs around the twelfth year: the onset of puberty? (Currently the age of the physical changes of puberty is getting younger and younger as is the age when children begin formal schooling and are introduced to abstract, intellectual concepts but this important and very interesting correspondence will have to be explored on another occasion.)

The changes that accompany puberty, like the growth into the skeleton, are unsettling and lead further to a feeling of discomfort with one's own body. The maturity of the sexual organs, the development of breasts for girls and the changing of the voice for boys can begin to occur around this time. The curriculum provides an inner feeling of security within a rough sea of changes as the outer environment, the earth, becomes the stable, unchanging anchor. It is also important, as A.C. Harwood recommends in The Recovery of Man in Childhood, for the twelve year-olds to remain in the same school and with the same class teacher to provide some stability in their fluctuating world.



There is another physical change, less obvious but not less important, which occurs around the twelfth year. This has to do with the breathing and the blood. At seven years old, a child's pulse is slow but the breathing is light and quick, reflecting how at this time the child, as one big sense organ, is taking the world into itself, strongly impressed from the outside in. In contrast, the twelve year-old's pulse is quicker but the breath is deeper and slower. This corresponds to the young adolescent's deep inner emotional life which can be roused by strong feelings and borne upward by the blood and out into the external world.

Twelve years old is when the strong inner feeling life (the astral body) just begins to become free from its involvement in the development of the child, preparing for the beginning of the third seven-year period (14-21 years old) during which it will fully come into its own, so to speak. The independent feeling life of the adolescents awakens, begins to stretch and changes their relationship to their own bodies, to their environment and to ideas and ideologies. Their interest in the world increases and can bring with it a passionate, even stubborn, sense of responsibility and devotion to a cause. These heightened feelings are accompanied by a new ability to think.



One of the pictures which will strongly live within a Class 5 child (10/11 years old) is that of Odysseus' triumph in the Trojan War. After ten years of besieging Troy, Odysseus finally suggests using cunning instead of strength and brute force. The Trojan Horse is built, Odysseus and his men hide inside and the unknowing citizens of Troy, thinking it to be a gift from the gods,

pull it within their walls where the men hiding inside the hollow horse burst out and capture the city. This is a picture of the awakening of thinking. The Trojans believed all of their actions were determined by the gods, leaving them without the capacity for independent judgment. Odysseus uses the cunning of the intellect for the first time and so displays how human beings can use their own faculties to solve problems. So it is with the twelve year-old. The change from mythology to history in the Class 6 curriculum reflects this change in consciousness and whilst the children will be developing these new faculties at different rates, the study of Roman times can serve as a meeting place between the imagination of mythology and the intellect of history. Marjorie Spock writes about this transition: '... the time comes when the matrix of imagination within which the intellectual capacity has been ripening releases thought as a full-born power of the human spirit'(Teaching as a Lively Art; p. 86).

The adolescent, now in transition from the poetic consciousness and divine wisdom of the ancient cultures to the first searches for truth in the form of modern scientific concepts, can also now grasp the idea of cause and effect. This new ability is connected with the soul-spirit being of the growing child entering the skeleton and awakening the gradual understanding of the laws of leverage, mechanics and weight (taught in Class 7). One must be careful to avoid teaching the concept of cause and effect before the awakening into the skeleton and the unfolding of the astral body, the feeling life.

Concepts and causality require the faculty of critical judgment, the ability to say yes or no, and if taught before the astral body is released from the developmental process, they will work into the life forces, the etheric body. What effect does this have? When the life forces are working to form the physical body during the first seven years and fixed concepts are introduced, awakening the intellectual forces and the faculty of judgment, the life force, the etheric body, is called away from its task to concentrate now on the development of thinking, leaving some of the organs, perhaps, without the opportunity to develop properly and in the right way and thus susceptible to premature hardening and so influencing the future health of the individual.

Even when the child enters its twelfth year, forming concepts and making judgments should not be overly pressed upon the budding intellectual faculties. A.C. Harwood described this first spark of the intellect as 'a false dawn easily mistaken for the real sunrise,' (The Recovery of Man in Childhood; p. 96). For it is not until around the fourteenth year, when the feeling life, the astral body, truly comes into its own, that the adolescent should come more fully to judgments and abstract concepts. Prematurely calling forth these faculties can also have an effect on the young adolescent's relationship to society. 'The final outcome of such premature judging in a child under fourteen is an inner resentment against the judgments accepted by society'(Rudolf Steiner, The Child's Changing Consciousness; lecture V). If reverence, gratitude and love are instilled in the young child, these qualities will arise in the astral body when it unfolds. Then, when the faculty for critical judgments is developed, these qualities will flow into the judgments and have a benevolent effect. If, however, these qualities are not present, the thinking and judging can become cold, unfeeling and destructive.

So we can see that this is a delicate process of awakening and developing the thinking gradually. The Class 6 curriculum is such that it tickles the awakening powers of

thinking but does not abruptly switch from picture-consciousness, imagination, to intellectual thought. It is still important to include imagination. In fact, according to Rudolf Steiner, it is perhaps more important now during the early years of adolescence. 'We are much more justified in encouraging the child of seven to develop its own intellectuality by way of reading and writing than we are justified in neglecting to bring imagination continually into the growing power of judgment of the child of twelve,' (Study of Man; lecture XIV). Flexible free thinking will develop only as long as imagination is present as well.

This study began by noting the differences between children of Class 5 and children of Class 6. There is a remarkable change which occurs around the twelfth year and parents and teachers must be prepared for what will come. Many of the children will have difficulty adjusting to the drastic physical transformations and may retreat within themselves, turn to drugs or show by other signs (like eating disorders) that they are having trouble overcoming the challenges at this age. Parents and teachers with young adolescents in their care need to be aware of this. It can also, however, be an exciting time as these young people discover their new faculties of thinking and judgment. Here, too, the adult needs to be equally sensitive to this delicate process of awakening and, as we have seen, allow it to unfold gradually.