

## **Breathing life into Education.**

When Zeus was suffering from a headache after swallowing his consort Metis, there was great consternation on Mount Olympus. The gods ran hither and thither trying to find a remedy among their many medicaments, but to no avail; until Hephaestus proposed a radical solution, namely splitting Zeus's head open with his axe. This was agreed, and it was Prometheus who held the head for the duration of the operation. Then Athene sprang, fully armoured, from the brow of Zeus and, in gratitude, she taught Prometheus the knowledge of the gods, which was all the sciences and the arts. With these gifts Prometheus, for no other reason than the delight it gave him, moulded dolls out of mud in the likeness of the gods. Athene was so charmed by them that she breathed on them and gave them life. Humanity had been created and was in fact the first artistic creation, the first copy of reality. In keeping with our origin, it is still an art to be human and it is through education that we learn the necessary skills.

The art of being human is never completed, it is a life-long process and our biographies are a record of our individual striving to create ourselves. As adults and parents we are constantly learning from our children and the daily challenges with which they face us are a spur to our own further education. This applies to teachers also, as succinctly pointed out by a headteacher describing the life of her primary school and defining herself as the *headlearner*. Many a parent has been acutely aware how much they have learnt through and with their children, and for teachers it is an axiom of their professional activity. The great educational philosopher, John Dewey, perspicuously pointed out that *'Education is not a preparation for life, but a process of living.'*

Governments may continue to issue a multiplicity of legal frameworks regarding the education of their citizens, but that this reforming zeal is so pronounced may just be masking the fact that they are increasingly ineffective. Many voices are now asking for change from the grass roots up. Global capitalism and accelerating technology have their own self-generated momentum that is now proving to be increasingly destabilising, and the dispersion of decisions to parents and practitioners is undermining the traditional mass-market attitude to education. Whereas educational traditional practice was founded on the mentality of industrial mass production buttressed by academic standards we are witnessing these values conflict with an increasing individualism. The result is an intensified requirement for more teamwork, flexibility, innovative thinking, the conscious sharing of responsibility, and the ability to make decisions within a context that also allows for greater freedom.

The implications are that extrinsic motivation, for instance in the form of examinations and regimented testing, will become redundant and students in the future will increasingly have to be able to find their own intrinsic motivation. Learning to learn is becoming a vital skill in a changing world. Faced with this prognosis all schools and education systems will have to regenerate and revitalise themselves in a way that is both relevant and effective. Traditional subject areas are likely to break down in a move away from an endless process of subdividing human knowledge, to be replaced by a greater demand and regard for an approach that leads towards a creative synthesis. The novel *Howard's End* by E.M. Forster, that already in 1910 foretold the nomadic life-style of our age, has the striking words '*Only connect...*' as its dedication. It is this ability to "connect" that will become a premium skill in a disjointed and fragmented future. It lies at the

foundation of all healthy creative ability and is a necessity for inclusive social skills and personal emotional balance.

As educators, whether parents or teachers, we must acknowledge with all humility that we cannot really foretell the future. We can, however, see fundamental challenges on the horizon that will change what has been previously considered to be the role of a teacher, as inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its establishment of compulsory education for all children and the emphasis on the formation of national citizens. The teacher is no longer the repository of a culture and whose task it is to hand down traditional values to the next generation so that they can then be replicated. This was recognised in a seminal document produced for UNESCO in 1996 and which is still referred to with great respect by educational policy makers across the world.' *The importance of the role of the teacher as an agent of change, promoting understanding and tolerance, has never been more obvious than today. It is likely to become even more critical in the twenty-first century. The need for change, from narrow nationalism to universalism, from ethnic and cultural prejudice to tolerance, understanding and pluralism, from autocracy to democracy in its various manifestations, and from a technologically divided world where high technology is the privilege of the few to a technologically united world, places enormous responsibilities on the teachers, who participate in the moulding of the characters and minds of the new generation.*'<sup>i</sup>

Values are implicit in all educational processes. This is of course a truism but often forgotten in the flurry of educational reforms that swirl around us. Reforms need underpinning with a concept of humanity that also goes beyond those that can be measured in purely measurable terms and decided by market conditions. As adults, we

can readily forget the potential that resides in the early years for deep and fundamental experiences. Children have predispositions and gifts, and the school is there to serve and foster them so that the child is able to unfold its capacities in such a way that he or she becomes an independent, responsible and free individual. Perhaps this activity is akin to poetry in being partly inexplicable and its practice impervious to what is the accepted as conventional scientific research.' *To pray is to pay attention to something or someone other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention on a landscape, a poem, a geometrical problem, an idol or the true God, that he completely forgets his own ego and desires, he is praying. The choice of attention, to pay attention to this and ignore that, is to the inner life what choice of action is to the outer. In both cases a man is responsible for his choice and must accept the consequences whatever they may be. The primary task of the schoolteacher is to teach children in a secular context the technique of prayer.*'<sup>ii</sup>

How do we decide to what we should pay attention? When Rudolf Steiner first inaugurated the Waldorf school, his idea was not to replace what he called the generally practised '*mental conceptual education*' but rather to develop it. He spoke to the initial teachers in August 1919 about bringing life to educational practices by '*allowing the whole to rise out of all the one-sided parts*'. In his view what was needed was an art of education that ensured the will of the child was active in the lessons. '*If we approach the beings of nature and the world at large merely as onlookers, with our understanding that works in mental pictures, we stand within a dying process; if we approach these beings of nature and the world with our will, we stand in an enlivening process. As educators we shall thus have the task of constantly quickening what is dead and protecting what is approaching death from*

*dying entirely; indeed we shall have to fructify this dying with the quickening element we develop out of the will. Therefore we must not be apprehensive about starting right from the beginning with a certain artistic form in our lessons while the children are still young.'*<sup>iii</sup>

This is where Athene and Prometheus meet in the combining of clear intellectual thought and artistic endeavour using the enthusiasm and fire of the will. It brings with it a heightened experience of learning that then touches on something deeper. '*It is inconceivable that a piece of sculpture or a piece of music which gives us an emotion that we feel to be more exalted, more pure, more true, does not correspond to some definite spiritual reality, or life would be meaningless.*'<sup>iv</sup> It is the experiences of this quality that we remember from our school days and which frame our attitudes and choices later. This requires courage and an acceptance that whatever form of education we have devised in the past, including Waldorf, and regardless of its earlier achievements, it must be capable of transformation in order to meet the needs of pupils who will grow up and live in a very different world from ours. It is only with these high aims that we can hope to create an education that has a real value. This, as the Ancient Greeks so wisely acknowledged, is an art.

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<sup>i</sup> Delors, J. *Learning: The Treasure Within*. P. 141 Report to UNESCO. UNESCO. Paris.1966

<sup>ii</sup> Auden, W.H. *A Certain Way*. London. The Viking Press 1970

<sup>iii</sup> Steiner R. *Practical Advice to Teachers*. 23-8-1919 London Rudolph Steiner Press. pp 40-42

<sup>iv</sup> Proust M. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Vol. 3 pp380-1. Random House. N.Y.