

Meeting Fear and Finding Joy

By Stephen Spitalny

“Pleasure and delight are the forces that most properly enliven and call forth the organs’ physical forms. . . The joy of children in and with their environment must therefore be counted among the forces that build and shape the physical organs. They need teachers that look and act with happiness and, most of all, with honest, unaffected love. Such a love that streams, as it were, with warmth through the physical environment of the children may be said to literally ‘hatch’ the forms of the physical organs.” (Rudolf Steiner speaking about the child in the first seven years, from an article entitled “The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy.”)

Children of today are increasingly surrounded by the fears and anxiety of adults. These fears interfere with children’s play, their avenue for developing social skills and mastering their own fears and fear in the environment even affects the child’s proper physical development. The path to overcoming fear is joy. The essence of the task of a human being is to connect, to relate, and to find balance. This relating is with other human beings, with one’s own body, with the kingdoms of nature and the elemental world, with spiritual beings, and with one’s own higher self.

Fear, on the other hand, creates boundaries and impedes all connections but the connection with fear itself. Because fear breaks off our connection with our higher self, when we allow fear into our soul, we allow our double to take over, and we enter a reactive mode of behavior based on old habits.

Fear also results in physical and chemical responses. Our lowest brain system, the reptilian brain, is operant in fear situations and fight-or-flight reactions. Blood rushes to the heart from the limbs, which feel cold and heavy. We tend to hold our breath. To speed up our reactions, our bodies produce extra cortisol, the continuous presence of which in the bloodstream can lead to serious health problems.

As we know, young children experience not only the sense-perceptible world, but also the feelings and even the thinking of those in their surroundings. Fear and anxiety in adults is experienced in an immediate way by young children, who themselves become anxious.

Do we as teachers and caregivers carry fear into our work with children? There are so many fears that impinge on life in our time. They include fear of children’s injuries, fear of lawsuits, fear of not enough money, fears of illness and death, fear of our own inadequacies. We must find ways to meet these fears with love. Fear and anxiety are cold and prevent connection, while proper human development requires the nourishing warmth of empathy and love. Children need to experience this warmth from adults so they can feel welcomed, reveal their gifts, and unveil their true nature.

A tense or anxious environment evokes defensive and protective behavior in the child and a closed-off gesture. Adults’ fears also result in actions in which the child can be divorced from life, from reality, and from possibilities. This atmosphere of fear leads to premature hardening of the child’s physical body and allows antisocial qualities to enter the life of the young child.

If a child (or an adult for that matter) is in an environment where she feels safe and nurtured, then play is possible and the child is open to embracing the world and other human beings through play. True play can be a means of overcoming fears and grasping the world. It serves as a venue for learning to cope with life. But there is a vicious cycle at work here, for play itself requires an atmosphere of security. In play, we are safe and so we can be vulnerable.

In the child, fear interferes with the possibility of play. Anxious children have difficulty entering into free creative play with others. Over the years, I have experienced an increase in aggression being acted

out in play, and among young children an increase in behaviors that are physically harmful to others. Children who live in a sea of anxiety don't feel safe and have no clear boundary between what is play and what is harm. True play can live when the environment feels safe to the child, for protective and defensive behaviors are at a minimum and the child can embrace and explore the physical and social world through play.

The very nature of play involves risk. Children need a lack of outer control over their play. All social creatures need a rough and tumble element in their play to become truly social in their community. Can we allow this in our young children's play? Children, especially the boys, need to come up against each other in a physical way. Through this they learn about themselves and the social world. As responsible adults, we have to find the balance between physical safety and permissible rough play. We adults need to create a safe space where children feel cared about, loved, and welcomed without anxiety, so they can open up and embrace the universe through their play.

*May light stream into you that can take hold of you
I follow its rays with the warmth of my love.
I think with my thinking's best thoughts of joy
On the stirrings of your heart.
May they carry you, May they cleanse you.
I want to gather my thoughts of joy
Before the steps of your life,
That they unite with your will for life,
So that it finds itself with strength
In the world,
Ever more,
Through itself. (Rudolf Steiner)*

Inner exercises to lessen fear can become part of a daily practice in self-development. Fear and courage and love all live in the realm of the heart, and the key to working with fear is striving for consciousness and balance in the heart. (See Florin Lowndes, *Enlivening the Chakra of the Heart*.)

Among Rudolf Steiner's six basic exercises is the equanimity exercise which strengthens the heart chakra. It involves bringing thinking and will forces into the feeling life. As part of a practice of equanimity, we can say to ourselves: Yes I feel fear. I recognize it, but I do not have to be led by it.

We can also work with our fear by recognizing it as a sign of inner work we need to do. What is this fear trying to tell me? Our attention then becomes the warm light of the sun which melts the ice of fear.

In fear, we contract. Physically, our blood rushes to the heart and our heartbeat quickens. To counter fear, we can cultivate the ability to have our consciousness simultaneously centered in our heart and expanded into the infinite periphery. Rudolf Steiner and Ehrenfried Pfeifer both give exercises that help develop this capacity. (See Steiner's *Guidance in Esoteric Training* and Ehrenfried Pfeifer's *Heart Lectures*.)

Another path toward overcoming fear and finding joy is to work toward embracing one's karma. What is my attitude to what I meet in my destiny? What am I being asked to develop in myself? What old habits of reaction can I transform? If I can embrace what life brings, even the painful things, with gratitude, I will find joy. Perhaps this joy is what is truly human.

Dr. Michaela Glöckler speaks about the importance of a "Christmas mood" surrounding the young child. This mood resounds in what Fra Giovanni wrote in 1513:

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today.

Take heaven.

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present instant.

Take Peace.

The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet, within our reach, is joy.

Take joy.

And so, at this Christmas time, I greet you with the prayer that for you, now and forever, the day breaks and the shadows flee away.