

# EDUCATION AND THE MORAL LIFE

by

Rudolf Steiner

The tasks of the teacher and educator culminate in what he is able to achieve for the moral strength and bearing of the young folk entrusted to him. In elementary school education, he will find himself confronted with great difficulties in this matter. One difficulty is that the moral teaching must permeate all he does for his pupils. The orientation of all the teaching and educational work in a moral sense can attain far more than special or separate instruction in morals. This however is paramountly a matter of educational tact. For indeed, crude “moralizings” in every conceivable connection—impressive though they may be, made in the moment when they are brought forward—do not in the long run bring about the result that is intended. Another difficulty is this: The child, when entering the “elementary” school, has the basic moral tendencies of life already developed.

Until the period at about the seventh year when he undergoes the change of teeth, the child lives fully given up to his surroundings. The child is, as one might say, altogether “sense.” As the eye lives in colors, so does the whole child live in the expressions of the life of his environment. Every gesture, every movement of the father or the mother is accompanied by an answering experience throughout the inner organism of the child. Until this time the brain, the whole of human nature, is being formed and molded. And from the brain there goes out, in this first epoch of life, all which gives the organism its inner stamp and character. All that takes place in the environment—all manifestation of life—is imitated in the finest manner in the brain. The young child’s learning to speak depends entirely on this.

But it is not only the external features in the behavior of the environment which are echoed in the nature of the child and which set their stamp upon its inner character. It is the content of soul, the moral content, too. A father who reveals himself before the child in expressions of life that arise from a quick, hot-tempered nature will cause the child to take on—even to the most delicate organic structures of the tissues—the tendency to the gesture-like expression of quick temper. A mother behaving in a timid, frightened way implants in the child organic structures and tendencies of movement, such that the body becomes an instrument which the soul will then want to use in the sense of fear and of timidity.

In the period of the change of teeth, the child possesses a bodily organism which will react in a very definite way, spiritually and morally, to all that is of the soul. In this condition—with an organism of definite tendency and inclination as regards the moral things—the elementary school teacher and educator receives the child. If the teacher does not clearly see this fact, he

will be in danger of approaching the child with moral impulses which the child will unconsciously reject because he has, in the constitution of his own body, the hindrances to their acceptance.

The essential thing, however, is this. It is true that the child, when entering the elementary school, already has the fundamental inclinations acquired by imitation of his environment. But by a right treatment these can be transformed. A child who has grown up in a hot-tempered environment has received from it his organic stamp and form. This must not be left unnoticed; it requires to be reckoned with and it can be changed. In the second period of life—from the change of teeth to puberty—we can, if we really reckon with it, so change and form it that it gives the soul the foundation for a quick and ready presence of mind, bold and courageous action in cases in life when this is necessary. In like manner a child-organization resulting from an anxious, timid environment can provide the basis for the development of a fine sense of modesty and chastity. Thus, a true knowledge of the nature of man is the basic need in moral education.

But the teacher and educator must have a clear perception of what it is that child nature in general requires for its development between the change of teeth and puberty. (These requirements have been described by me in the *Education Course*, reproduced by Albert Steffen in the *Goetheanum Weekly*, and now available in book form.) In effect we can bring about the transformation of the basic moral tendencies, and also the further development of those which we must regard as right and good, only by directing our efforts to the life of feeling, the moral sympathies and antipathies. Nor is it abstract maxims and ideas, but pictures which work upon the life of feeling. In our teaching work we have everywhere the opportunity to place before the soul of the child pictures of human (and, in parable, of supra-human) life and conduct, pictures by which the moral sympathies and antipathies may be awakened. It is the feeling judgment upon moral matters which should be developed in the time between the change of teeth and puberty.

As the child before the change of teeth gives himself up, imitatively, to the immediate expressions of the life of his environment, so in the time from the change of teeth until puberty he is devoted to the authority of what the teacher and educator says. The human being cannot awaken in later life to the right use of his moral freedom if in this second period of life he was unable to unfold himself with full devotion to the natural and accepted authority of those who educated him. True as this is for all education and all teaching, it is true most especially for what is moral. By and through the educator whom he respects and honors, the child sees feelingly what is good and what is evil. The educator represents the Order of the Universe. It is through the grown-up human being that the evolving human being first must learn to know the World.

We can observe what an important educational impulse this involves when, with a true knowledge of the human being, we have to find our right relation to the child after the first third of the second period of life, say between the ninth and tenth birthday. Here a most important point in life is reached. We

note how half-unconsciously, with a more or less dim feeling, the child is going through something that means very much to him. On our meeting the child in the right way at this juncture, untold things will depend for the whole of his later life. To express consciously what the child now experiences in dream-like feeling, we should have to say: There comes before the child's soul the question, "Whence has the teacher the power which I, believing in him with such reverence, accept?" To the unconscious depths of the child's soul, the educator must prove that he has this authority rightly, in that he is firmly grounded in the Order of the World. By a true knowledge of the human being we shall find, at this point of time, how one child will require but a few words rightly spoken and another many. But something decisive must happen at this point, and only the nature of the child himself can teach us what it has to be. Things of untold importance may be achieved by the educator just at this point in life for the moral power, the moral certainty, and moral bearing of the child.

If the moral feeling-judgment is well developed when puberty arrives, it can then in the next period of life be taken into the free will. The adolescent leaving elementary school will take with him into life, from the aftereffects of the school years, in his soul the feeling that the moral impulses are unfolding in him in social life and in intercourse with his fellow men out of the inner power of his human nature. And the result after puberty will be a moral strength of the will, which until then was germinating in the rightly cultivated moral feeling-judgment.