

Waldorf Teachers – Artists Or “Mooncalves”

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*“As a mere scientist you are just a mooncalf.¹
Only ... when your knowledge
takes on artistic form
do you become a human being.”*

RUDOLF STEINER²

This article has been written in the aftermath of the 2015 National Teachers Conference of South Africa, in the closing lecture of which the Waldorf school was described as a “total work of art” (Gesamtkunstwerk) with the teachers – each in their individual way – as its co-creators. Such grand words are entirely appropriate for the closing lecture of a national conference, and reminding ourselves about such high ideals is absolutely necessary, but, in being uttered, the words call up the question: how close are we to realising this (in real rather than merely cosmetic terms), and what does it mean anyway?

To answer the second part of the question first: what it means is a school composed of the collective actions of a group of teachers whose knowledge has, in Steiner’s sense, “take[n] on artistic form”. This is easy to say, but doing it is another matter. In this the answer to the first part of the question is already implied, for how many of our teachers could say of themselves that they have achieved this ideal state, or that they even understand what is meant by it?

So the big question here is how does knowledge become artistic³, or even is there such a thing as artistic knowledge, and if so, what is its nature and significance?

I would like to address these issues by a consideration of the Parzival story as a possible source of artistic knowledge. Initially, however, I need to back up a bit, for before our knowledge can “take on artistic form” we need a better idea of what is involved here.

The quotation at the start becomes particularly poignant when it is seen in relation to the crisis in modern biology. The crisis in modern biology? Well, does a constant stream of findings that call the central theoretical framework of biological science into question constitute a crisis? I would say it does, and I am not alone. Doubts are being voiced on all sides in all the leading journals, and the interesting thing is that these doubts are being fuelled by the new experimental techniques available to biologists. In other words, our ability to analyse genomes and their associated processes in detail is what has *created* the crisis. So multiplying the data is not going to solve it. Perhaps it is time to take the step from “mooncalf” to “human being”. This will require not a shift in experimental technique, but a shift in *epistemology*.

1 “Mooncalf” is what the drunken Stephano called the man-monster Caliban in Shakespeare’s “The Tempest”.

2. Translated from the last paragraph of Lecture 2 of “Meditativ erarbeitete Menschenkunde” in *Erziehung und Unterricht aus Menschenerkenntnis*, GA 302a, Rudolf Steiner Verlag, Dornach 1977.

3. It is worth noting at the outset that while the Waldorf world has done a lot of thinking, writing and talking about making teaching artistic, it has done comparatively little in this direction in the case of *knowledge*.

My awareness of this I owe almost entirely to the writings of Steve Talbott.⁴ In an extremely well-written series of articles that have appeared over the past ten years he has been documenting recent developments in molecular biology, and the story he tells is highly illuminating. In doing so he has provided us with a resource of inestimable value, and one which teachers world-wide should be aware of, especially if their knowledge is to “take on artistic form”. What he has been doing is working his way through thousands of scientific papers published in molecular biology journals, summarising and commenting at large upon what he finds there. Essentially, he has documented the continuing fall-out from the Human Genome Project. This, if you remember, was going to deliver us the “holy grail” of biology – full molecular working knowledge of the human genome. It has done nothing of the kind. Instead it has done something much more exciting and unexpected. It, and the research following on from it, has uncovered untold layers of complexity at the intra-cellular level, and through these revelations the “unquestionable certainties” of the gene-centred theory of evolution (i.e. neo-Darwinism), which has dominated biological thinking for the last 40-odd years, have begun to totter: DNA can no longer be regarded as, in any sense, the master molecule of life; epigenetic effects upon the genome – formerly ruled out in principle – are now commonplace; the concept of the gene as a causal reality and its code nature are being called into question; the notion of random mutation as the driving force of evolutionary change is now virtually untenable. In such a climate the standard neo-Darwinian “algorithm” of random mutation plus natural selection is hard to maintain. Perhaps the greatest discovery, however, has been that everything at the microbiological level – just as much as at the ecological level – is *context-dependent* (as a group of French researchers⁵ recently put it: “It appears that everything does everything to everything”). The chromosomes, it would seem, are not rigid, robotic controllers, but are enmeshed in a complex, constantly shape-shifting “dance”, orchestrated by cellular “music” from many different sources both inside and outside the nucleus. The more this dance is analysed, the more partners join it, and the less it is susceptible to analysis. As Steve Talbott eloquently puts it: “Having plunged headlong toward the micro and molecular in their drive to reduce the living to the inanimate, biologists now find unapologetic life staring back at them...”, and this life seems to be that of the and this life seems to be that of the *organism as a whole*. We may well be witnessing the demise of the gene and the rebirth of the organism.

With this discovery, or perhaps I should say, re-discovery of context-dependency, analytical reason in biology seems to have come to an impasse. There are just so many variables, so many regulated “regulators”, so many ways in which the same molecular configuration can mean different things, so many cellular and chromosomal topologies tailored in the moment to fit unique circumstances, that in the end the complex multiplicity of interpenetrating contexts simply defies analysis – and not merely in fact, but in principle⁶. This state of affairs creates a certain epistemological pressure. If one style of knowledge – analytical reason – is here experiencing the limits of its reach, extending that reach any further will require a different style of knowledge. The extension in question is that of apprehending an ever-widening context, widening to encompass the organism as a whole, and then further. In other words, a style of knowledge is required that can generate knowledge of the Whole.

It is perhaps worth mentioning in this connection another radical aspect of this state of affairs. This is the fact that, having sought the fundamental at the micro level and persistently failed to find it, we are now being forced, by the phenomena themselves, to recognise that *the Whole is what is fundamental*. And how are we to arrive at knowledge of the Whole? Knowledge that does not replace, but enhances and extends analytical reason?

The initial answer is that knowledge that has “take[n] on artistic form” would do just this. I realise that this sounds like a rather bland anti-climax, but that is partly the point. This style of knowledge is not necessarily spectacular, but it fits the bill, and how it does this will, I hope, become clear in what follows. Moreover, it would appear that the artistic sensibility that enables a school to be a total work of art and the style of knowledge required to extend the reach of modern biology are one and the same.

4. The series can be found under the heading “Toward a biology worthy of life” on the website of The Nature Institute: natureinstitute.org

5. Dumont, Jacques E., Frédéric Pécasse and Carine Maenhaut (2001) “Crosstalk and Specificity in Signalling: Are We Crosstalking Ourselves into General Confusion?” *Cellular Signalling* vol. 13, pp. 457-63.

6. When there are so many contextually responsive variables in play it becomes impossible in principle to predict outcomes.

Knowledge of this kind is closely akin to what comes upon us sometimes as a sudden state of heightened awareness.⁷ Such experiences, which have been known as *epiphanies* ever since James Joyce applied this term to them, are often provoked by a natural phenomenon of some kind – a landscape, the song of a bird, or any number of other phenomena. Whatever the catalyst, what we feel at such a moment is that we have been touched by the intrinsic meaning of some greater presence. We have been visited by the Whole, of which the phenomenon in focus is – while the moment lasts – a particularly striking representation. Experiences like this are entirely individual, but they nonetheless have some features in common: they come to us “at a tangent”, completely unbidden; they are participatory⁸, in other words, they dissolve our normal alienation from our surroundings, making us feel at one; they are unrepeatable and yet they call forth a longing to repeat the experience. Indispensable as they are, we cannot base a system of knowledge (not to speak of education⁹) upon the elusive vagaries of spontaneous epiphanies. The question therefore arises as to whether it is possible to induce what might be called the “achieved epiphany”. An answer to this question is given by Goethe:

“There is a delicate empiricism that identifies itself so profoundly with the phenomenon that it becomes its own theory. But such an expansion of consciousness belongs to a highly cultured age.”

The expansion of consciousness arrived at by the practice of delicate empiricism – which involves the disciplined application of what Goethe calls “exact sensorial imagination” – is what I mean by the “achieved epiphany”. The effect of the achieved epiphany is the same as that of the spontaneous one: direct participatory contact with the Whole, through one of its representations. This, of course, does not give us knowledge of the Whole in any analytical sense, rather what we arrive at is an awareness of super-ordinate presence¹⁰, which is akin to the enhancement of sensibility produced (or not) by a great work of Art, be it musical, poetic or visual. The Goethean practice of delicate empiricism is, in effect, “knowledge tak[ing] on artistic form”.

This knowledge is never complete, indeed it mostly defies articulation. No one could ever claim to have knowledge of the Whole, but the continual effort to – as the poet Louis MacNeice has it – “eavesdrop on the Great Presences”¹¹ gives us a sense, or inkling of the Whole, which can permeate, inform and fructify all our thinking. To have a sense of wholeness as it lives in the individual phenomenon upon which our attention is focused is the essence of artistically-formed knowledge. There may well be pathways to this other than the Goethean one, but it is clear that if teachers who have to teach their students about the “parts” of nature, in other words the science teachers, are to be human beings rather than mere mooncalves – with all that that implies for the overall life of the school – they need to have this living sense of what is fundamental.

While Art can no more give us working knowledge of the Whole than can science, art is by far the more realistic in its approach to this problem. Art is human culture’s perpetually forlorn attempt to express some greater reality, and it at least knows that some kind of groping *expression* is the best we can do; whereas science, driven by analytical reason, is for ever trying to eliminate the great mystery by reducing the greater to the lesser. It is the attempt to arrive at the literal, fundamental parts (aka “basic building blocks”). If modern physics, and now modern biology, have shown us anything, it surely must be that there are no such things.¹² The deeper we have probed into the “mechanisms” of the cell, the more the mysteries have multiplied. We look for fundamental parts and instead find fundamental wholeness staring back at us.

One of the great works of art that seems (I’m not suggesting that it was) to have been written with all

7. The English poet, Wordsworth, spoke in this connection, of “... a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused”; and Freud referred to this as “the oceanic feeling”. There are probably as many names for this experience as there are writers who have spoken of it.

8. This term is taken from the writings of Owen Barfield (e.g. “Saving the Appearances”). He has very convincingly shown that all our normal experience is participatory, although modern consciousness has developed in such a way that we are not aware of this. The epiphany, among other things, is a moment when we become directly aware of the participatory nature of our experience.

9. In a certain way, of course, we do do this. An intrinsic feature of the art of Waldorf pedagogy is the designing of lessons so that moments of epiphany are rendered possible (that they will actually happen is never a foregone conclusion).

10. Andreas Suchantke calls this “das übergeordnete Ganze” in ch. 5 of “Metamorphose – Kunstgriff der Evolution”, Verlag Freies Geistesleben 2002 (translated as “Metamorphosis – Evolution in action”, Adonis Press 2009).

11. This phrase comes in the first stanza of his poem “Entirely”

12. If this seems something of a bald assertion, it receives very convincing support from an article by Henri Bortoft: “Counterfeit and Authentic Wholes” in “Goethe’s Way of Science” ed. David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, SUNY Press 1998.

this in mind is Wolfram von Eschenbach’s “Parzival”. I have had the privilege of working with this story over the past 12-13 years in a variety of schools and other contexts, and over this time it has become increasingly clear to me that “Parzival” is something of a paradigm of artistic knowledge, as I have been speaking of it here. Many features of the hero’s journey are like stations on a path towards this goal, and I would briefly like to outline this now.

Parzival does not have a courtly upbringing, but grows up in the Forest of Soldane, to which his mother had moved with all her household in order to prevent her son from ever learning about knighthood. Instead of courtly life, nature is his teacher. In portraying Parzival’s childhood like this, Wolfram is saying something rather radical for his time, and also seems to be saying something about himself. In another poem he says:

*“...Every plant, scent, every kind of stone
Is fully familiar, Lord, to you ...
I feel your presence through my senses,
For what is written in books
To me has always seemed strange –
My senses¹³ have been my only teacher.”*

When we consider that in the medieval worldview nature was the fallen, sub-lunar world of death, temptation and evil, it is extraordinary to find Wolfram speaking in such terms and making nature the teacher of his greatest hero. Through this natural education Parzival may have learned much about the seasonal life of forests and their animals, but when, having – as was inevitable – heard about knighthood, he sets off to become a knight, he is still in a state of radical ignorance as to his personal identity (he knows nothing of his family, nor even his own name) and the ways of the world. His training in the arts of knighthood remedies the latter to some extent, but does nothing to allay the former, although he had at least learnt his name.

It is in this state of radical ignorance, which is also a state of openness, that Wolfram grants him the ultimate epiphany: he stumbles upon the Grail Castle (Munsalvaesche, although he only later learns its name). He comes into this visionary landscape in the true style of the spontaneous epiphany – he had been riding all day (in a love-trance) without holding the reins and in this way had “found” the castle which cannot be found by diligent seeking, but must be come upon unawares. Here the drama, grandeur and solemnity of what he witnesses overwhelm him to the point of speechlessness, and although he has a sense of having experienced something of a very profound meaning, he has no idea what that meaning is.

Finding himself being cursed on all sides for his failure to come to terms with this situation, there awakens in him a very strong desire to find his way back to Munsalvaesche and the Grail, but the experience he was granted, like all spontaneous epiphanies, is unrepeatable. So now the path he follows is necessarily one towards an achieved epiphany, and the rest of the book is the complex story of how this comes about.

The path towards this ultimate consummation is arduous and tortuous, and never are we given the impression that it is a foregone conclusion (which is entirely in keeping with the way things are in real life, where no outcomes are guaranteed). This path requires dogged determination in the midst of doubt and despair; on the way he meets the allegorical figures of Lady Love and Lady Reason; and it encompasses initiation processes gone through by the book’s two main characters, i.e. Gawain¹⁴ and Parzival himself.

From a Goethean perspective the episode involving Lady Love and Lady Reason is highly instructive. First of all, very graphic expression is given to the participatory relationship to the world remarked on earlier. The fact that our perceptual intentionality is active in the *construction* of reality is signified in this episode by the mirroring of Parzival’s mental state in the external image of snow – where he is it has snowed, whereas

¹³ The expression in German here is “mein Sinn”, which could be construed as something like “my own native intelligence”, but I have chosen its other meaning.

¹⁴ The actual spelling is “Gawan”, but I have always felt that “Gawain” sits better on the English ear.

at Arthur's encampment nearby it is flowery May-time. The coldness of Parzival's self-punishing thinking is intensified by the fact that as he sits there alone waiting out the night there is a falcon (lost the previous day by King Arthur's falconers) perched on a branch above his head. Thus we have the striking image of the hero, stuck in his cold, lonely inner-outer wasteland with a falcon, the intensified extension of his mental state, above his head. It is through the falcon that a change occurs. In the first grey of the dawn a flock of geese fly by. The falcon tries its luck on one of them, but only succeeds in wounding it, and three drops of blood fall down on the snow before Parzival. He contemplates this phenomenon, identifying with it so completely that he "loses his senses", although he is actually using them with falcon-like intensity. He is now described as "in thrall to Lady Love". The "theory" that emerges from this intense practice of delicate empiricism is the image of Condwiramurs, Parzival's wife.

But then comes a challenge from beyond his sphere of attention, contact with the three drops of blood is broken, Lady Reason re-asserts herself, his "senses" are restored and he is able to engage in a joust. Having done this, Parzival trots back to the three drops of blood and is once again in thrall to Lady Love. Three times Parzival goes through this transition from total perceptual identification (Lady Love) to rational detachment (Lady Reason), and the third time his "senses" are restored he finds himself face to face with Gawain, with whom his path towards the goal will henceforth be inextricably linked.

The parallel in the paths of these two heroes is very striking. It would go too far to list all the details, but it can nevertheless be said that while on his parallel path to Parzival, Gawain tends to follow the dictates of his heart, i.e. he is ruled by Lady Love; whereas Parzival, in spite of his susceptibility to love trances, tends to be a follower of Lady Reason. All this has been set from the beginning in a symbolic context involving the polarity of black and white as contrasting, but nonetheless complementary aspects of the soul. The goal appears to be not to eliminate the one or the other, but to balance them, and the same goes for our two allegorical ladies. The processes of initiation the two heroes go through are geared, each in their specific ways, towards this goal.

Thus, in following his heart, Gawain finds himself facing a series of trials which end in his being granted "vision" (by looking into a crystal pillar which gives him a panoramic view of everything that is happening for six miles around). Meanwhile Parzival has, in addition to grimly seeking and accepting any contest of arms that offers itself, been going through what nowadays would be regarded as an extensive therapy session. In a long, difficult and painful conversation with the hermit, Trevrizent, he is brought face to face with himself, both in terms of his deeds and of his ancestral identity. He is also told much about the nature of the Grail. Surprisingly, in this story the Grail is a *stone* with properties that give it a very wide frame of historical and mythic reference. Parzival, armed with this new knowledge, leaves Trevrizent much more at peace with himself, but still on his lonely quest.

Whereas Gawain, the "heart-knight" has, through his trials, acquired "vision", Parzival, the "head-knight" has, through this first phase of his own initiation, acquired "heart". Both are now more balanced than they had been, and it is at this point that these two, as a result of a very elaborate train of circumstances, meet in battle. When they finally discover who it is they each have been fighting – this moment comes when Gawain is on the point of defeat – they abruptly break off the contest. Now they both express the same sentiment: "I have been fighting against myself". From here Parzival again goes on alone, but has now fulfilled the second stage of his own initiation: he has come to terms with, and fully integrated, the "Gawain" within himself. Thought has become permeated with feeling, and vice-versa.

Now he is ready for the next stage. This is yet another battle, this time against a figure who bears all the marks of a much more profound layer of the human soul than Gawain. He is an image of polarity, but one in which the poles abut each other in stark contrast, for his skin is both black and white. His dark armour is studded with jewels of many colours, as is his sword and the apparel of his horse. He is the commander of a vast army composed of men from 25 different peoples (of Africa!). If ever there was a consciously constructed image of the naked, dynamically-polarised power of the human will, this surely must be it. This is Feirefiz, Parzival's half-brother, and it is the Feirefiz within himself that Parzival is now called upon to master (in this case also the same symbolic formula is uttered by both knights: "It is against myself I have been fighting"). He does not defeat Feirefiz, but certainly proves himself his equal.

The battle with Feirefiz was brought to an end by Parzival's sword breaking. This actually signals the end of his career as a knight, and he has in fact come to a kind of still point. He remains entirely in the dark as regards any outcome of his quest, but in mind, heart and in the depths of his will he seems at peace with himself. And now that this “integration of the personality” has taken place, only now is he called to the Grail castle, and the great consummation of the narrative takes its course.

In spite of this consummation, however, the central focus of the narrative, namely the Grail, remains as much a mystery as it ever was. We have gleaned more *information* about it along the way, but this does not make its existence and its nature any less of a mystery. All the way through it has been the central symbol of the story, and at the end of the story that is what it remains: a symbol. And Wolfram leaves this symbol to dissolve into the natural and cosmic background out of which it first emerged. In this quality of fundamental inscrutability it merges here with what I have been saying about the quality of the Whole. The Grail as it appears in the Parzival story can stand, like no other I know, as a master symbol of the Whole.

In presenting this very short account of some of the salient features of this story, I have been trying to show how Parzival moves from the primary experience of the spontaneous epiphany to the mature perspective of the achieved epiphany. Each stage of this path both deepens his self-knowledge and brings him closer to knowledge of the Whole.

Thus to experience and study the Parzival story is to have direct experience of the nature of artistic knowledge. Artistic sensibility approaches the Whole, expands the mind into the realm of Wholeness, but without any claim towards delivering analytical knowledge of it, or indeed any hope of doing so. With analytical knowledge you know “how”, whereas with artistic knowledge you simply know “that”. We are in the realm where Lady Love – participatory imagination – holds sway, and although she cannot articulate anything without the help of Lady Reason, the latter's sphere of influence with its tendency towards abstraction and its desire for clear definition must be held in check. In Lady Love's realm we can have clarity *without* definition, for here the normal epistemological tables are turned, and instead of imagination eking out a meagre existence along the margins of reason, we have the rational as the servant of the artistic imagination. And the artistic imagination does not deal in facts, but in meaningful expression experienced in the moment. To hear, read and study a work like “Parzival” is to experience such an epistemological inversion in action.

A similar inversion is required if normal scientific sensibility is to be transformed into artistic sensibility. The practice of what Goethe calls “delicate empiricism” is a way of doing this. On this path we may not often encounter three drops of blood on snow, but if we persist we will soon come to the realisation that all apparent “things”, all phenomena, are in one way or another *expressions* of the greater context in which they are embedded (ultimately the Whole). Expressed artistically, this means that all phenomena are *natural symbols*. The English poet and philosopher, S.T. Coleridge, puts it like this:

“...a Symbol is characterised by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General ... It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part of that Unity, of which it is the representative.”

Things as representations is a major implication of contextual thinking. There is, as Owen Barfield says, “no other thinghood”.

This “translucence” of the greater context within the lesser seems to apply at all levels of reality. With their discovery of all-pervasive context-dependency this is precisely what molecular biologists are being confronted with – by the phenomena they are studying. The problem is, with their seemingly unshakable allegiance to analytical reason and their use of mechanistic terminology they do not have an epistemology or, indeed, a language that can make sense of this. But if knowledge has “take[n] on artistic form”, for instance, by embracing such a process as is exemplified by the Parzival story, then the necessary epistemology would be in place. They would know that their desperate search for ultimate causal bits is futile, and that the path of knowledge rather lies in penetrating with the questing imagination into the ever-widening contexts that are opening up.

Such a change is sorely needed now, for it would give researchers the ears to hear what the phenomena they study are actually saying to them. If they listened we might be able to step back from the brink of a world governed by transgenic “organisms”, nanobots and robotic hybrids¹⁵, and move instead towards something more like Goethe’s “highly cultured age”.

Waldorf teachers, in becoming human beings rather than “mooncalves”, have a chance to make an essential contribution to this change, while at the same time creating schools that are “total works of art”.

15. If you would like to check out the delights that Artificial Intelligence has in store for us, take a look at “The Singularity is Near” by Ray Kurzweil, Penguin 2006.