

Some excerpts from:

## DIFFICULT CHILDREN: THERE IS NO SUCH THING

### Chapter 13: The Pathology of Life Mastered and the Power of Astonishment

by Henning Kohler

Is it reasonable that a child's unmanageable or divergent behavior be assessed as a sign of individual failure in a time when interpersonal relations (conversational and love relationships, legal, work, and economic relations) on all levels are profoundly disturbed? When speaking of social circumstances, one often forgets that circumstances are primarily relationships, and only secondarily material existence, economic conditions, and so forth. Disturbed relations for their part stand in mutual relationship with disturbances in the awareness of relationships. The consciousness that is counter-inspired out of the force field of cold sets relationship standards and generates relational structures within which only this counter-inspired consciousness can provide any orientation: objectification (thinking), mechanization (feeling), and instrumentalization (willing) of the inter-human fabric. This sets a machinery in motion that lames socio-sculptural productivity and is unable to come to rest of its own accord. Truly, the only possibility to realize Beuys's "warmth/ time machine"<sup>67</sup> is through the influx from sources that are not layered over by the counter-inspired system. Thus, interpenetration from the sphere of the still and always, impacts the presence of the Human Being (from the "sphere of innocence"). Beuys's conceptional design to counter the cold machine, whose expressive force lies precisely in its logical impossibility—a machine in the current sense cannot be a structure that produces its own warmth and time—refers to the transformation of the principle of the machine. Thus, it is not a matter of mechanics, but rather a reason-filled and creative construction of relationships. This is the meaning of socio-sculptural productivity.

Children come toward us from out the sphere of innocence. We come toward ourselves from this same sphere, if and when we allow the event of artistic education to occur and thus become understanding allies of those children who cause chaos in the cold machine. Such chaos always has something to do with the fact that warmth/motion events disturb the under-cooled uniformity, thus causing incalculable, formable, situations (free spaces for action) to occur. To recognize these and to use them with presence of mind is the unuttered plea of special children to us, and it is no accident that this plea is becoming ever more urgent. To assume the defectivist standpoint is to ignore or refuse this plea. Condemnation of these children as "deficient," and so on, their "need for special care" (Steiner) with weakness in adapting to the laws of the cold machine always happens according to criteria and under the spell of the cold machine itself. Sometimes this is unavoidable, but we must not deceive ourselves.

In our hearts we neglect education as an institution (and by that I mean not only the political and administrative level, but also the configuration of thoughts, feelings and relationships in which we all have a part); hence we neglect its very core. Does this not compel childhood to put up resistance? And does this resistance not have to come out of the center of warmth and movement, that is, out of the heart and will! The same place where the neglect takes place?

By "childhood" I mean a supersensible field that shelters and connects all children up to a certain age. In this field "resolutions" are made by all means, and these resolutions come from a wisdom that stands head and shoulders above our highly esteemed rational understanding. We as adults are connected to

this field to the extent that we make ourselves acquainted with the entity of childhood in the way described. The driving force of the cold machine is a mixture of fear, envy, power hunger, vanity, and materialistic obsessions. This fuel has been analyzed frequently and impressively. The impelling force of the warmth/ time machine, though, is withdrawn from the conventional analytic grip. It is that substance of hope that streams into the process of incarnation: the essential nature of childhood that through thinking can be grasped as the idea of childhood. In this connection, it is worth a person's while to have a look at the fact that the so-called childhood behavioral disorders, which cause us so much puzzlement, are not only turbulences across the board in the warmth/relationship sector and the time/movement sector, but that they cause these turbulences, which means that they hit us right where our own fears and insecurities lie and where we ourselves have withdrawn into the deceptive securities of the cold machine.<sup>68</sup>

Whenever one wants to draw attention to these matters, one is dashed against the defense bulwark of a collective self-deception that is becoming ever denser. This self-deception presupposes the average neurotic relationship to the world as the reasonable measure of things. A self-critical and culturally-critical examination of the pathology of life mastered in times of spiritual superficiality and social frigidity—the one presupposes the other—occurs only at the very edge. This examination is also urgently necessary in connection with the question of education. The fact that so-called difficult children may be wanting to defend a patch of health of the soul against the psycho-pathological consensus, and thereby not only become conspicuous and cause disturbances but also fail (caused by us!) in alarmingly many cases, is a notion with which we seriously need to acquaint ourselves in order to find our way out of this pedagogical dead end. One chief reason for the failure of the healthy impulses that want to become active through such children, as well as for their deviation into resignation, fear, or destructiveness, is the tacit agreement on the part of the adult world (from the grass roots of a helpless, resigned parenthood up to the academic "elite" and pediatric specialists), to pathologize everything that exposes and wants to shatter the pathology of the times, pathologize in two senses of the word: to declare sick and to drive into sickness. It is not the special children who are the problem; rather it is the fact that we see them in a contorted way in the mirror of our damaged conception of the world. This contorted perception has an effect: the children do not recognize themselves in us and hence react disconcertedly and with agitation, while we further assess their disconcerted and agitated reactions as the confirmation of our contortions. It is up to us to break the vicious circle. The attitude that can enable us to break the circle can be expressed with the words Lao-tse uses about true knowledge: "I stand still, calmly and wishlessly like a newborn, like a person without a home." We have become acquainted with the dualities of protecting, accompanying, comforting, and healing, which comprehends and goes beyond the first three. These are fundamental attitudes of education and upbringing as an art that we need to practice. In the mystery sector of "protection" our listening attentiveness is located; the prerequisite for accompaniment of the child's destiny is patient waiting; comforting consolation lies in learning in a deeper sense—by reminding the child, as it were—to ask; and the proper force of healing (making whole) is the event of hope, through which, for the educational relationship as well, the precept bears itself out: When two of you come together in my name, I am there in your midst. These four qualities are reflected in the thought from Lao-tse quoted above: hearing transformed into something higher; empathy transformed into something higher because it has a say in the matter, but also because it waits patiently; comprehension transformed into something higher through being a pure question; and the power of hope, which condenses all this into the healing

atmosphere and which streams in out of the future.<sup>69</sup> These steps can now be reformulated into simple indications for contemplation and self-examination.

Still:

The many eager voices inside me that comment on everything before I have properly perceived it, be now silent. I have no personal opinions and do not know what this or that means. My consciousness is an empty room, in which the melody of your life may now resound. I listen.

Tranquil:

My fears and sensitivities are not what matters! I do not want to avoid anything; neither do I want to follow any intentions, save the one: to understand you. No matter what happens, I welcome it. My attention knows no preferences. I wait.

Wishless:

My wish for you and our present relationship to correspond to my needs is of no occasion; where there is no wish, there is no disappointment. I am entitled to nothing. My only demand is to recognize your demands and to do justice to them. I ask.

Homeless:

Conventional expectations, acquired measures, social prejudices must not influence me. The future know no customs, the status quo lies always behind me. I step out into the open and seek you. I hope.

Hope here means not the hope for a particular thing for oneself, but rather a fundamental attitude, in this case one toward the child that one could call a feeling of advent. In the mood of homelessness, the ability to wait (dis-interested) that distinguishes tranquility is heightened to one of joyful expectation of what is coming, of what is being announced. Hope in the proper sense is the preparedness or readiness to be surprised or found in a state of astonishment. For this reason, hope is clouded by everything that I presuppose or make into a condition, or that I consider to be opportune, and so forth. People who are poor in hope are tied to the stake of stability, imprisoned in conventions, weighed down by the ballast of the unalterable and the habitual.

Listening, waiting, asking, hoping are the four gestures of the soul that are united in astonishment, four aspects of what we, along with Morgenstern, call "creative comprehending." The ability to listen presupposes quiet. The ability to wait presupposes tranquility. The ability to ask presupposes wishlessness. Hope awakens in the mood of homelessness.

The path of exercise indicated here leads to a true art of education, in which it is not a matter of instruction and behavioral architecture, but rather of finding an attitude toward children that renders calculated "measures" superfluous, because it enables intuitive action and it teaches astonishment.