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**Rudolf Steiner**

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KARMIC  
RELATIONSHIPS  
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RUDOLF STEINER

*We not only live in our body, we live in our  
karma. Rudolf Steiner*



In the introductory lecture Steiner speaks about the Anthroposophical Movement in a way that applies to all the activities that occur on earth:

**[page 11] Our conception of the Anthroposophical Movement, however, must be that what takes place on earth is only the outer manifestation of something that is accomplished in the spiritual world for the furtherance of the evolution of humanity.**

On Thursday mornings I attend mass with my 80 year old parents — it is my way of ensuring that I visit them at least once a week. After mass we usually fold bulletins and attach mailing labels to each bulletin. For some time I have recognized that there is something special about seeing the names of the parishioners and touching the labels — it is like touching that family's life each time I do it. Steiner says about such seemingly mundane activities:

**[page 13-14] It is a matter of grasping the reality of the spiritual life as such and putting it into practice in every detail of existence. Let me speak of one small matter. We decided to issue a new membership card to each of our members, of whom there are now twelve thousand. It was therefore a matter of preparing this number of membership cards, and in spite of an objection made by several people, I was obliged to decide to sign each card myself. This was naturally a task that took several weeks. But what does it mean? It means that my eyes have rested upon the name of the one who receives the card of membership. This is not the outcome of anything like arrogance, nor is it a purely administrative matter. It is the expression of a human relationship, perhaps a seemingly unimportant one at first, but for all that a human relationship.**

It is understood in our materialistic time that, since people believe that a normal mind cannot experience the supersensible world, someone who does experience the supersensible world must be out of one's mind. By definition a materialistic scientist can only perceive the material world, so if someone experiences the spiritual world, that person must be irrational, mad, or hallucinating. Hallucination is the name these scientists give to an experience that is not consensual, and by their own definitions, non-consensual experiences are a sure sign of insanity. Thus such scientists can call Rudolf Steiner crazy or a quack, by definition, and feel proudly exultant of that proclamation, as though they have justified the superiority of modern materialistic science. Instead they have merely exposed the hollow tautology of materialistic science.

What if a materialistic scientist could test Steiner in a laboratory — wouldn't that prove that Steiner was not crazy? Such a proposal was made to Steiner and he gave this answer to the proposal:

**[page 29] It is of course as absurd as if someone were to produce mathematical results and, instead of testing their accuracy, you were to challenge him to submit to an examination in a laboratory to see whether or not he was a real mathematician. Absurdities of this kind go under the name of scholarship to-day and are taken seriously by learned people!**

What "testing their accuracy" would require is that materialistic scientists learn to access supersensible worlds. That is a proposal to which they most likely say, "I'd have to be crazy to do that!" In their earnest desire to keep from becoming crazy, these scientists operate in the world as if the spiritual half of the world does not exist, and this way of being, to a spiritual scientist, is crazy. I'm reminded that the majority of the materialistic scientists in 1492 thought Columbus was crazy because he was sailing to a part of the world that didn't exist for them. Such thinking creates the logical paralysis of a self-consistent tautology, and the only cure for that paralysis is to set sail into the unknown spiritual world. One must cut loose one's secured moorings in the materialistic world before one may experience the spiritual world.

In a previous review I'd mentioned Steiner's insight that nouns are the first parts of language to go after we pass through the gates of death. Nouns are the *content* parts of speech — they are the reified, nominalized *processes*. Verbs, on the other hand, point to the pure *processes*, and in Steiner's discussion of the lives of Titus Livius we can see how Livy's processes survive from one life to the next. In ancient Egyptian times Livy, during an earlier incarnation, was an embalmer of mummies. During his life in Roman times Livy became an historian who "had to write the history of the very same humans who in a previous life he had embalmed." (page 33) In addition, Livy's way of portraying the people of which he wrote histories was like creating a verbal mummy of them, embalming their lives in his words. Same process, but with verbal descriptions instead of corpses.

In further researching the karmic chain of Livy's lives, Steiner finds him in the poet Vogelweide in the Middle Ages, a lyrical poet who dealt only with the "fulness and joy of life." (page 35)

**[page 35] It is as though at last he had grown thoroughly sick of embalming dead mummies and he had turned to an entirely different aspect of life.**

Steiner tells us that Livy ends up as Ludwig Schleich who is led to meet August Strindberg by a man whose corpse the two men had worked on together to embalm as a mummy back in ancient Egypt. Steiner lays out for us to see this karmic chain of lives from ancient Egypt, to ancient Rome, to the Middle Ages, to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Steiner decries the cause and effect approach to history — that materialistic method that treats the events of history as so many billiard balls. He denounces this reductionistic approach to understanding history. That approach could be likened to describing how a cue ball hits a red ball that then hits a green ball. That cause and effect description necessarily leaves out the pool player who lined up the cue and caused the motive force to create the sequence of collisions. So too, does a cause and effect approach to history omit the essential motive forces of history as they exist in the spiritual world.

**[page 39] It is impossible to comprehend the inner motives of history and life unless we turn our gaze to that spiritual background which underlies the outer, physical happenings.**

So he proceeds to show us a series of examples that as a whole illustrate his point. His examples involve the powerful warlike campaigns from 500 A.D. to about 1400 A. D. History treats these as so many battles, recounting when the Arabs won, when the Crusaders won, all very much like one might describe

how the balls collided during a pool match. Anyone who's ever played an intense game of Eight Ball (a popular pool or pocket billiards game) will understand how ludicrous it would be to describe that game by a recounting of ball collisions. What really matters is the internal states of the pool players, before, during, and after the game, and a listing of collisions leaves that out completely.

In any intense game what really matters is the internal energies of each player as they learn from the other players. I learned this from playing Othello (a board game based on Reverso, an ancient Chinese game) with Del over the space of a couple of years. I'd win a string of games in a row and then suddenly I'd lose a game using the exact same strategy that I'd used so many times before to win. Then Del would win several games in a row using my own strategy that she'd incorporated into her own playing, and I'd be forced into developing a new strategy. This moving to new strategies happened multiple times over the course of those years: sometimes it was she learning from me, and sometimes it was I learning from her. In a dry recording of the number of games won and lost, the essential thing would be lost: that we were learning strategies from each other. We were fructifying each other, enclosing ourselves within each other.

As we read Steiner's account of Plato, Aristotle, Alexander, Haroun Al Raschid, Francis Bacon, and Amos Comenius, we are led to understand the spiritual fructification that occurred in waves across Asia, Africa, and Europe during the period between 500 A.D. and 1400 A.D.

**[page 64] The times and epochs of the earth require teachings to be given, now in Platonic, now in Aristotelian terms. But if our wisdom includes the supersensible life in the background, we perceive the one fructifying the other, the one enclosed within the other.**

Our materialistic scientific friends, with their catalogs of materialistic events tell us, like the famous astronomer, "I have searched the whole universe, through all the stars and all their movements, but I have found no God!" To them we can best quote Steiner who tells us how intimately our earthly life is united with the supersensible:

**[page 69] For everything that is of the senses is permeated at the same time supersensibly, and everything that is supersensible is revealed somewhere and somewhen in the world of sense.**

To ignore the spiritual half of the world is to be half-scientific. We might remind our half-scientific friends, as Hamlet did his, "There are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." One of these undreamt of things would be to do research by lying with a book under one's head, and that is exactly what Steiner recommends in this passage:

**[page 97] Just as one who researches on the periods of the first Christian centers, in order to facilitate matters may lay the writings of St. Augustine or of Clement of Alexandria under his head for a few minutes in succession. You must not laugh about these things. They are simply external methods to assist one, external technicalities that are not directly connected with the real thing itself.**

An important theme of Rudolf Steiner's work is the evolution of consciousness, one that he revisits in the next passage, reminding us how recently drastic changes in that consciousness took place. If you, dear Reader, have trouble recalling exactly how you thought as a child, consider that a similar problem occurs if you would attempt to think as a person of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.

**[page 122] It was not that men could simply think, but they felt their thoughts as inspiration. He who was sharp-witted felt himself gifted by the grace of God, and his thinking was a kind of clairvoyance. It was still so even in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., and those who listened as a thinker still had some feeling of the living evolution of his thought.**

Will the ability to draw aside the veil that covers karmic truths destroy the reverence with which we might otherwise hold such truths? Steiner thinks that to the contrary it will "fill us with a holy awe." He suggests that we must discover the immortal within us and with a deep faith draw close to deep secrets that we would otherwise with a lesser faith avoid.

**[page 126] A German romanticist once had the courage to think differently from all others about the famous saying of Isis: "I am that which was, that which is, and that which is to come, and my veil has no mortal yet lifted." — To which the German romanticist replied: Then we must become immortal, that we may lift the veil! — While others all took the saying as it stood.**

In my course in college curriculum recently I adopted a philosopher that supported liberal arts, but never did it occur to me to think of the seven liberal arts as living Beings. When Steiner talked of the goddess Natura, it was easy for me to translate that into the more familiar form, Mother Nature, of whom people still have an faint conception as a living Being rather than as a dried-out metaphor. But the Seven Liberal Arts was a stretch for me, up until now. "For the Seven Liberal Arts were indeed conceived as a living Being, even as Nature herself was described as a living Being." (Page 131) Steiner is referring below to Martianus Capella, who lived about the 5<sup>th</sup> Century.

**[page 130] It was he who first wrote the fundamental work on the Seven Liberal Arts, which were to play so great a part in all teaching and education throughout the Middle Ages. The Seven Liberal Arts were: Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and Music. In their combined activity and influence they provided what was then felt as knowledge both of Nature and of the Universe.**

The next subject involves a 10<sup>th</sup> Century nun, *Hroswitha*, who Steiner explains, was a reincarnation of Plato in a woman's body. She was to unmistakably carry the spirit of Plato into the Mid-European nature in her plays. The name Hroswitha rang a bell with me, a chiming sounding out of my depths, first only a quarter-hour gong, and soon a full hour's end flourish of callicaphony as I recovered the thread. Actually I recovered [The Thread](#) — a delightful book by Philip J. Davis that I'd read and reviewed back in 1997. While tracking down the name *Pafnuty*, Davis was led to *Hrotsvitha*, the play-writing nun in the Convent of Gandersheim. From there he discovered a Hrotsvitha Club in Rhode Island, and a Miss Wallace in Greene, Rhode Island. And although the numbers of the club "had been sadly depleted by members passing on and by other distractions of life," she still did a little club work and helped Davis locate a copy of the *Collected Plays of Hrotsvitha* in English. (Quote from page 66 of *The Thread*. See ARJ for review.) Well, that's enough of this *pafnutying* around, which is Davis's word for "pursuing tangential matters with a hobby-like zeal."

The task that Hroswitha (aka Plato) had to perform was one that could only be performed as a woman in that time, in that cultural atmosphere.

**[page 150] Had not Plato's being appeared with a feminine character and coloring it could not have received Christianity into itself in that age. But the Roman element too was strong in all the culture of that time which had to be received. Perforce, if I may put it so, it had to be received. And so we see the nun Hroswitha evolving into the remarkable personality she was, writing Latin dramas in the style of the Roman poet Terrence, dramas which are of extraordinary significance.**

From this incarnation Plato leaps forward into the personality of Karl Julius Shrörer who was to be an early teacher of Rudolf Steiner at the Technical University of Vienna.

**[page 156] . . . I once gave a pretty distorted interpretation of Mephisto merely to refute my instructor Schrörer with whom at that time I was not yet on such intimate and friendly terms.**

In Schröder he was to hear the beginnings of an answer to this question of enormous importance: *How shall we bring spirituality into the life of the present time?* And with that unanswered question, Steiner closed this cycle of lectures.

Alfred Heidenreich writes of the lectures in his Preface to "The Last Address", a final partial lecture by Rudolf Steiner that was never completed:

**[page 159] The living contact from spirit to spirit through the spoken word proved to be the best means of getting over those astonishing discoveries in the spirit-world which he had made in long years of earnest and innermost research.**

This is an insight that I came recently: that the real teaching takes place not so much in the content of what the teacher says, but in the "living contact from spirit to spirit" by means of which the understanding is transmitted to the student.

And in his closing remarks Heidenreich speaks of a process that I refer to as the "unanswered question" in which one purposely avoids giving a pat answer or accepting one to a question, so that the answer may grow into fruition within oneself over time.

**[page 163] Perhaps this is where we must leave this matter. In some other context Rudolf Steiner remarked with quiet seriousness that it is in certain respects better and more fruitful for the development of a human soul on its path to the spirit, if the soul has to ponder a spiritual problem rather than be furnished with a plain and neat answer.**

To that end, I'd like to leave you with my newest [Matherne's Rule, number 25](#):

*What is the power of an unanswered question?*

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