

The Healing Forces of the Night

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The wakefulness required by the modern human being in our daily life with our many roles and responsibilities can often make us feel fractured and fragmented at the end of the day. A good night's sleep can restore us, make us feel whole again, and heal the sense of fragmentation. This restoration of forces happens mostly without our conscious awareness. Sleep is a mysterious blessing that we mostly take for granted unless it is disturbed or disrupted. How could the healing power of our nightly journey be enhanced if we understood the remarkable reciprocal alchemy between our waking life experiences and what transpires during sleep?

As an early childhood teacher and teacher educator, I often revisit the opening lecture of the training course that Rudolf Steiner gave to the teachers of the first Waldorf School. In that lecture he spoke about the task of the Waldorf teacher in helping students to learn to “breathe” and “sleep.” In my recent reading, I was struck by Steiner’s focus on the opposite and complementary directionality of these two common, everyday human activities.

“We must be aware that when we teach children about this or that subject, we are actually working toward bringing the soul-spirit more into the temporal body and, at the same time in another direction, to bring temporality more into the spirit-soul.”¹ In supporting a child’s breathing, we are inviting the flow of substance from spirit realms into physical realms, and in supporting a child’s sleep, we are encouraging the lifting up of earthly substance into the spiritual world.

For Steiner, breathing encompasses much more than the physical process of inhalation and exhalation. Human beings, Steiner explains, have two ways of relating to their surroundings, through conscious perception (via the senses and thinking) and also through unconscious taking in of substances in highly dispersed states, as in breathing.² Children have not yet learned how to breathe in such a way as to fully connect their breathing with their nerves-sense system. When we help bring the child’s breathing into relation with their nerve-sense process, we support the drawing down of the child’s soul and spirit into their physical life.

Children are also not yet able to reflect on and carry into sleep what they see, hear, and do during the day in the same way that adults are able to process their daytime experiences. According to Steiner, what human beings acquire from the spiritual world comes to them during sleep. While we cannot give children spiritual content, we can help them gradually be able to carry their experiences from the physical plane into what their soul-spirit experiences in sleep.

When there is a rhythmic flow between physical/etheric and soul/spirit aspects of the human being, there is a greater harmonization of our earthly and spiritual natures. When these aspects are not in harmony, whether we are a child or an adult, our essential human capacities can be critically affected. That Rudolf Steiner asked the first Waldorf teachers to pay attention to the deeper significance of breathing and sleeping continues to be an unmistakable call for us to penetrate the deep mystery of these everyday activities in our own lives and those of our students.

The “breathless” pace of modern life and the current rise in sleep challenges for both adults and children underscores the need to deepen our understanding of these essential activities. These challenges bring up many related questions. In what way might sleeping challenges be linked to the lack of healthy breathing during the day? Both breathing and sleeping are an alternation of “taking hold” and “letting

go.” It is possible that in unless we can experience in a balanced and harmoniously alternating “taking hold” and “letting go,” in the rhythm of our day, we may have trouble “letting go” into sleep.

Other related questions include: What can we learn from current trauma research about the role of rhythm in education and healing? In what specific ways can Waldorf teachers mediate the current cultural factors that seem to be impacting children’s breathing and sleeping?

We can begin by recognizing that sleep is healing, not only for the body, but also for the soul and spirit. Understanding the deeper significance of breathing and sleeping can allow us to expand our understanding of healing to include the spiritual forces available for us to “draw down” during the day and those that help us process the daily experiences that we “offer up” at night in order to gain clarity and strength for our tasks in life.

Some Practical Suggestions

What we do during the day makes a difference in what can happen at night and vice versa. The more we understand and consciously work with our journey through the night, the more we realize how inextricably entwined these two polar aspects of our lives are. Here are some suggestions as to how Waldorf teachers can prepare for the transition from day to night consciousness and more consciously embrace the forces that come from the night and allow them to flow into the following day.

Filling our Basket during the Day:

Any kind of artistic activity helps prepare our imaginative faculties for the nighttime journey. Open-hearted listening to a child, a colleague or a parent clears a space in the soul, as does tempering our own strong sympathies and antipathies or holding back quick judgments. Being aware of and acknowledging those moments when we encounter goodness, beauty and truth during our day also belong in our basket.

Debriefing with our colleagues at the end of the school day and creating traditions for mealtime conversations with family members are additional means of distilling the precious essences of the day. Making note of the unresolved questions that can benefit from being worked on during the night is important, especially if a faculty group is carrying a question together.

Preparing for Sleep:

Going to sleep represents a threshold between two different states of consciousness. Releasing oneself from day consciousness is often not easy. It is supported by bodily rhythms and familiar rituals. Adults as well as children benefit from these rituals. The mood in which we do them, however, is critical. Reverence when we are tired may be more difficult to invoke, but it helps both adults and children release themselves from the rush of the rest of the day.

One of the things we learn from Steiner’s various lectures on sleep is that we leave the power of thinking on this side of the threshold and carry only feeling and will into the night world. ³ So, the mood we take with us as we make the transition, matters more than any thoughts we might be entertaining before going to sleep. Our review of the day should ideally proceed in pictures rather than words or admonitions. Gratitude for specific people and experiences also eases the release into sleep. Poetry, fairy tales, verses or prayers offer picture language that will serve, like deep waters, to float our night boat.

During sleep, according to Steiner, we are engaged in a backward self-review of our day in which everything is evaluated in terms of our fundamental humanity. 4 Our effort, however meagre, to do a backward review before sleep is a step toward greater effectiveness of this process.

Henning Kohler in his book *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children* uses the image of the Watcher on the Bridge to help us prepare our questions for our night-time helpers.

“Imagine yourself stepping onto a bridge as you fall asleep and having had an opportunity to relate to your child’s angel at the bridge’s far end. Then picture the Watchman at the Bridge posted there whom you have to justify your crossing to. What do you suppose he will ask you? His first question would be, ‘Are you bringing a clearly thought-out problem that concerns you deeply for the child’s sake rather than a problem of your own?’ His second question, one that may surprise you, would be, ‘Have you formed a really clear image of the child?’ What does a really clear image mean? Under what conditions does that clear image form itself as one falls asleep? It happens gently as the result of having taken the trouble to observe the child keenly and lovingly at least once a day and to do. So, as Rudolf Steiner put it, ‘with reverence for the child.’”⁵

The Moment of Waking:

During the day our experience of the spiritual world is muted. This allows us to consciously develop our individual capacities. At night our experience is cosmic and manifold. This change of perspective allows us to take difficult questions into sleep and wake up with fresh forces and new inspirations. Besides reviewing the past day during our sojourn in the spiritual realms, we also encounter what is coming towards us from the future. Although we may not remember what we experienced, pausing intentionally as we emerge from the spiritual world in the morning may allow something unexpected and surprising to be grasped. Moral impulses come from the spiritual world during sleep. In a certain sense, every night we put a question to the spiritual world concerning our moral development and receive guidance in response.

Letting the Night Forces Flow into the Day:

Trust is the mood that allows us to release ourselves into the arms of the night and also enhances what we receive in our souls upon waking as potential healing for ourselves, for our students and companions. What we glean from the night can over time re-enliven and reshape the way we think and live, sometimes subtly and sometimes with a strong sense of intuitive knowing.

Healing and Community

The longing that we hear in the world for greater wholeness could also be a call for greater integration of our day and nighttime journeys. Perhaps we can more consciously recognize the way in which our nighttime spiritual community helps us sift through and extract the gold from our day-time adventures. Perhaps we can work more consciously with those whispered nighttime messages and allow them to help us and our earthly companions transform the dross of our day (or turn our straw into gold as in the Grimm’s fairytale, *Rumpelstiltskin*). Healing may be more of a communal and community activity than we realize!

In this age, according to Rudolf Steiner, when humanity’s guiding spirits have stepped back to give us space for free action, our efforts to understand and work with the night forces can serve not only the needs and development of humanity, but also those spiritual beings closest to us.

The stars once spoke to us
It is world-destiny
That they are silent now.
To be aware of the silence
Can become pain for our earthly selves.

But in the deepening silence
There grows and ripens
What we speak to the Stars.
To be aware of the speaking
Can become strength for the Spirit-Human.

-Rudolf Steiner

- 1 Steiner, R, *Foundations of Human Experience*, p.42
- 2 Steiner, R, *The Mission of the Spirit, Lecture 4, The Other Side of Human Existence* (GA 214)
- 3 Steiner, R, *Old and New Methods of Initiation, Lecture 4* (GA 210)
- 4 Steiner, R, *Cosmography, Vol 2. Lecture 10* (GA 208)
- 5 Kohler, Henning, *Working with Anxious, Nervous and Depressed Children*, p.7
- 6 Steiner, R, *Verses and Meditations*, p.97