



In the past, external power conferred authority and dominance—today it is the inner strength of educators that enables children to claim their freedom.

The Olive Tree

Andalucía, Spain, February 2026. Nils, the sixth storm of this year, crosses the Sierra Nevada from the North, hitting the southern slopes with full force. All living creatures hide in their shelters. Exposed trees bow and groan under the lashing hurricane winds. In awe, I watch the solitary old olive tree at the edge of the terrace, standing quietly with its big trunk upright, seemingly unshaken, while its thick, spread-out branches move gently with the wind. The raging storm is mirrored only in the restless dynamic of thousands of leaves that cannot help but surrender to the power that moves them. Their response and means of survival is to dance fiercely to the rhythm and pace of this outer force. Watching, I realize that strength is not only found in the unwavering uprightness of the trunk, deeply anchored by its roots in the earth. It is also in the flexibility of the branches, bravely reaching out to and moving in resonance with the outer forces. Strength is present even in the surrendering gesture of the small leaves that, without defence, are in full contact with the dynamics that engulf them, yet don't let go.

The Source of Strength

We can first look for the origin of strength in how it manifests in outer bodily and inner soul-spiritual traits. Is one always an expression of the other, or can they be present separately in a human being? And is the presence of strength in a person a matter of nature or nurture? Is it a gift bestowed by the wise spirits as we descended to this world, or is it the result of exercise, labour, and the overcoming of life's hardships?

If we search for strength at the beginnings of life, we can look at how the self presents itself at threshold moments such as birth, waking up and starting the day, the arrival in our early childhood setting, or the ability to deal with transitions and unexpected changes. Every child comes into this world with a very individual gesture; some announce their arrival with trumpets and cymbals, while others linger at the threshold, scanning the environment with their highly sensitive antlers. We tend to immediately recognize natural strength in those who make their presence loudly known, but can we also recognize it in those who hold back and observe? In both these opposite gestures, a manifestation of ego-presence can be found, and if it is maintained within healthy borders, it will further inner strength. Rudolf Steiner's insights into constitution, temperament, and soul/planet typology offer a helpful framework for

understanding the individual traits a person brings to this world. Through this lens, strengths and challenges become potentials for inner growth.

Contemporary research on building “good character” points to “signature characteristics”—innate strengths that education should build upon to enhance other, less developed characteristics. ¹ This is where the adult caretaker’s role is decisive in creating the right educational environment. If the developing self of the young child is invited and supported to take root in the corporeality in which they are born, individual traits become a growth potential, regardless of how they manifest. Without breaking or judging the beauty of their pristine nature, extraverted children need to be supported to take control over their untamed forces. Introverted children need to be invited with creative patience to trust others and to show themselves, without shaming or mocking their tender souls. If not supported appropriately, a natural inclination can become a behavioural problem or weakness rather than a strength.

Between the opposing traits pictured above, a multitude of individual variations exist, and set in a diverse multicultural context, they form the complex working field for education today.

Developing Inner Strength

Embracing this wide span of challenges and needs is not a task for the faint of heart. Especially for those who find themselves in times and places of crises that seem to have no end, it takes inner strength and a deeply rooted resilience to get up every day and create a harbour of safety and human warmth for those in their care. Rudolf Steiner gave the following mantra, among others, to strengthen our vital forces.²

I carry peace within me,
I carry within myself
The forces that strengthen me.
I want to fulfil myself
With this power and warmth,
I want to permeate myself
With the power of my will.
And I want to feel
How peace pours
Through my whole being,
When I strengthen myself,
To find peace as strength
Within me
Through the power of my striving.

I think that above all, this “peace as a strength within me” helps us to keep upright in times of doubt or crisis. To stand like the olive tree, unwavering in the storms and at the same time in full contact with what is happening. Just as the educator has the responsibility to create a supportive and nourishing environment for young children to promote the development of their inner being, we, as adults, are responsible for striving within ourselves towards a soul environment in which our higher self can support our inner growth. The relentless striving of educators is a living example of goodwill for the children in their care and a beacon showing the way in times of trouble.

Physical and Spiritual Health

It is not surprising that striving for physical and mental health is the first requirement for those who choose to go on a path of inner schooling. ³ We are all blessed and challenged by different states of health in diverse contexts. These living realities are a given that we have to work with, but we can all strive to improve our present state, even if it is only possible in small steps. The metaphor of the physical body as the temple of our soul points to their intrinsic connection. Without physical vitality, our actions are lamed, our feelings are numbed, and our thinking is

clouded. Without mental or spiritual health, we lack the inner balance to meet life's demands with clarity and calmness of thought. In addition to today's existential crises, the global use of digital technology profoundly challenges our physical and mental health. If we want to develop the inner strength needed to take up our task as educators, we need to become conscious and wise users of these modern technologies and balance possible harmful effects with health-bringing activities. The time spent with young children in nature and during meaningful domestic and artistic activities is full of opportunities to strengthen our lived presence in real space and time and bring health to all.

Interconnectedness

As human beings, we carry ideals in our hearts: the perfect child, the always supportive parent, the equally engaged colleague, the understanding leader, the patient and ever-loving partner. Life, however, puts reality on our doorstep, and when we experience friction, conflict, or disillusionment, our first reaction is often to point to "the other" who needs to be changed or fixed. Learning to understand how we are intrinsically interwoven with "the other" changes the paradigm and turns our gaze inward. We no longer try to fix the other but rather ask ourselves, "What can I change in my thinking, feeling, or actions so that the challenge I experience with the child is dissolved?" or "How can I change my attitude so that the irritation I have towards the parent or colleague is released?" Such reflections broaden our soul's scape and help us free ourselves from judgmental mindsets that prevent us from moving forward. If we manage to change our inner reality, we can experience a feeling of equanimity and calmness descend in our soul. This inner strength will help us stay in dialogue and improve our communication skills. It also strengthens the social fabric of healthy communities that today's parents and children are so desperately looking for.

Thoughts and Feelings are Realities

The power of thought and feeling is often underestimated. A life of meditation and prayer, such as those in secluded communities, has become exceptional. I think we still don't quite understand their potent power. Deeply understanding how a hateful thought is as real and effective as a physical blow takes time and experience. We all have experienced seemingly friendly encounters where we felt a confusing undercurrent of "ill-feeling" or a sense of being judged without it being said out loud.

Such experiences can teach us that thoughts and feelings of others are living realities that have an immediate effect on the soul, and to guard how we ourselves think and feel about the other. Regardless of whether we direct our attention to our small communities or to world events, what we think and feel matters and will influence their progress.

A Being of Soul and Spirit

The demands of governments or the expectations of societies that are driven by success are often not in line with what we, in our hearts, known to be our duty towards the children in our care. The pioneers on whose shoulders we stand often found themselves called upon, like knights in a holy quest, to protect childhood and stand for what they recognised as "inner truth". At the same time, Steiner advises us "not to force upon our environment anything for which it can have no understanding." It seems that we can only weigh this in the silence of our hearts, act as truthfully as we can, and make sound compromises when needed. Understanding that the real being of humans is to be found in the inner life completely changes the pedagogical paradigm and remains, even today, very strange to mainstream education. But Steiner/Waldorf educators are also sometimes affected by this "drive for success" to be the best or the most popular teacher. Even when we are spared from having to pursue academic success, there's often a silent competition to have the class with the "nicest" drawings, the most beautiful lanterns, etc. It takes strength and courage to withstand these seductions and to prioritise activities that are needed but do not produce outer results that can be measured by others, such as more time for play or walks in nature.



Steadfastness

To swim upstream and go against the odds takes strength and steadfastness. Just like thoughts and feelings are realities, a resolution taken is also a living force. Rather than waiting for the successful outcome, strength is built through the “love for action” itself. It’s like developing muscles through endless repetition and exercise. After first having taken a resolution, we often forget about it during the course of the day. This is where moments of reflection and a preview of the day, as reminders, are very helpful.

Steadfastness as a strength of soul can be understood as a power of will, selflessly given to the world. Such sacrifice can be found in every adult who, with loving devotion, day after day, creates a healthy environment for the children in their care. It takes and builds strength to find goodness and meaning in the endless repetitive domestic work that’s needed and often goes unnoticed in the surroundings.

Gratitude and Harmony

Steiner describes gratitude for life as an “all-embracing love” and states that “we can only understand what we love.” But what kind of love is meant here? Is it the same as “to like” or is it bigger than that? To like is “to have sympathy for,” but that seems too fragile and fickle for the kind of love spoken of here, for it can easily swing towards antipathy. An “all-embracing love” born out of gratitude is an image of magnitude and grandeur like the wings of an angel, holding everything together until it is whole again. Something like a celestial sound composed of the transcending unison of human laughter, sighs, and grief. When we can develop such a feeling of gratitude for our lives —the blessings and the challenges—we develop in ourselves a healing strength that resembles the “moral goodness” out of which the young child is born and desperately seeks to find here on earth.

Strength as “inner tranquility” comes forth when we approach life in a manner that brings all the formerly described soul capacities into harmony and unison.

The storms have gone, and the olive tree still stands, looking out over the valley. Only one old, little branch has broken off. The leaves have come to rest, and the last olives have been spread over the land as seeds for the future. The land is at peace again, waiting for life to unfold its beauty once more.

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Footnotes:

¹ *Character Strengths: Research and Practice*. Peterson, Christopher. (2009). Journal of College and Character. 10.

² Steiner, R. (undated). *Soul Exercises II: Mantras To Strengthen the Vital Forces*. GA268.

³ Steiner, R. (1994b). *How to Know Higher Worlds: A Modern Path of Initiation*. GA10 Hudson, NY: Anthroposophical Press.

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