

Trust: the miracle of being human

Henning Kullak-Ublick

Trust is perhaps the most important condition to find our bearings in the world at all. That applies to children, but also to our everyday practical life – and to a far greater extent than its opposite, control. What does this sibling of love, which can only be given as a gift but not demanded, mean for the growing child?



Anyone who has ever looked into the eyes of a few-day-old child will never forget the infinite depth and purity of their gaze in which the moment appears to turn into eternity and in which the most ancient knowledge of the world encounters the promise of an equally far-reaching future. “Who are you?”, “Where do you come from?”, and “Where are you going?” are questions that pass through our souls more or less consciously.

What comes to meet us is complete and unmitigated trust. Already in the many months of pregnancy, the child feels itself secure, supported, enveloped by the voice of the mother, her thoughts, feelings and actions as she passes through all the changes associated with pregnancy, until they finally live through the birth, an experience which is as existential as death at the other end of our life on earth.

Living in the space of the other

Where does the infinite trust come from, with which a small child gives itself into the care of its parents? Is it merely the complete life-or-death helplessness, indeed, dependence on them, or is it as much a part of our humanity as the love of the mother for her child? We can give an answer to this question with the poet and philosopher of early German Romanticism, Novalis: “When the spirit dies, it becomes human. When the human being dies, they become spirit.” Our existence neither starts with birth nor does it end with death.

The first years of life of the human being are a period in which children are wholly given over to the impressions which they take in from their environment. That children adopt an upright posture and learn to walk only if they are surrounded by people they can imitate is generally known. Speaking, too, is something children learn only if they hear other people speaking around them (it doesn't work with loudspeakers). We know from brain research that learning through imitation even applies to thinking, as it is shaped by the differentiated language and choice of words of adults.

Rudolf Steiner describes this miracle of imitation in a lecture as follows: “It is of all the greater benefit for the child the more they can live not in their soul but in the soul of the surroundings, in the souls of the surroundings.” He is referring to the responsibility of adults to create an environment for children which is worth imitating – not just externally, for the surroundings of the child also include the actions we perform in their presence, indeed, even the feelings and thoughts we have in performing them. Do we enable children to “live in our souls” without reservation or do we let them down in their trust through our behaviour and force them to withdraw into themselves at much too early a stage?

According to Steiner, imitation in early childhood is a direct continuation of our spiritual existence before birth, in which we lived in complete unity with the angels, whose heavenly example instilled in us that archetypal trust which we show towards the people in our physical surroundings after birth.

The four types of security

When a child is born, they suddenly experience the world from the outside, whereas previously they could develop in the security of the mother’s womb for their entry into the world. Light, colours, words, bird song, the rustling of the wind, the sound of an engine, the gentle touch of a hand, warmth, cold, the consistency of the things they touch - all of these things suddenly flow into the child through the senses from outside without the latter being able to isolate themselves therefrom.

In the first years of life, everything depends on the child being able to make themselves properly at home in their body, which they gradually learn to shape into the instrument of their soul. As individual as this process is, affecting the whole of the future biography, specifically taking place in each child (embodiment) – it is grounded in our biography and rests on four aspects of security:

- security in our physical body in that the parents create an environment in which the child can feel protected, because it has an inner order within which they can move freely and, with all their senses, embark on a journey of discovery.
- security in the rhythm which pervades all our organism’s life processes and strengthens children, both emotionally and constitutionally, through good habits, a structured course to the day, small rituals, familiar songs, verses, and stories.



- security for the soul through attachment and a relationship in which we take the time really to see the children, listen to them, tell them stories, laugh with them, love them as part of our life in a very practical and reliable way.
- security in the relationship with the world, in that we give the children guidance because they experience that we know what we are doing and act out of knowledge.

Because children come from “heaven”, the epitome of goodness, they start out into life with the unconscious expectation: “The world is good.” In a world that has become ever more complicated, this requires an ever more deliberate response from the adult. Nice that this doesn’t leave us unchanged either ...

The archetypal gesture of learning

When a child learns to stand upright, it adopts a completely new position with regard to the world: the head is freed to move in all directions and perceive accordingly, arms and hands develop their fine motor intelligence because they no longer have to support the body, and the child learns to keep in equilibrium – which is no less important for our soul life than for our body. The Native American wisdom that we first need to have walked in the moccasins of another person to be able to make a judgment about them indicates how deeply learning to walk is associated with our individuality.

Through language, we can express what lies within us so that others can understand us. By this means, we can also consciously experience what another person feels or thinks. Language allows us to share thoughts and feelings that would otherwise remain hidden within us. On the wings of our breath, it continues to lay the foundation for our social coexistence. Our language is also the first teacher of our thinking. As children learn to name things, they develop their objective consciousness of the world around them. At some point, they recognise themselves as the ones who give the things their names and from that time on call themselves by the one name which no one else can give them: “I”.

Walking, speaking, and thinking are three forms in which the freedom with which we are born is revealed. That these three significant biographical steps can only take place in the encounter with other people is one of the great mysteries of human development: we awaken in other people and to ourselves. But to do so, we first have to engage with them completely, and that, precisely, is what small children do – if we don’t drive it out of them by too much of too little.

Obtaining these three basic abilities is an archetypal image of true learning, which always leads from volition through feeling to thinking or from experience through reflection to knowledge.

The world is beautiful

As I entered our classroom for the first time with a class 1, I had a momentary feeling of standing in a Gothic cathedral: 36 pairs of eyes were looking at me in the solemn expectation that something really significant was going to happen. The children simply assumed that it would! Their trust, not diminished by anything, gave me an almost physical sense of the responsibility I had taken on for the next eight years.

We can make children assimilate all kinds of things by way of information, just as we can train them to make an effort for reward or punishment. But that has nothing to do with real learning because a force is at work between knowledge and volition, which crucially determines our relationship with the world and other people: the feelings.

Children also want to explore the world with their feelings, and for that, they need images. That can be illustrated quite well using the Brothers Grimm fairy tale “The Star Money”: “Once upon a time, there was a little girl whose father and mother had died and she was so poor that she no longer had a room to live in or a bed so sleep in, until at last she had nothing left but the clothes she stood up in and a little bit of bread in her hand which a kind soul had given her. But she was

a good and devout person. And because she had been thus forsaken by the world, she went out into the open countryside, trusting in the good Lord.”

The rhythm of the language and the simple beauty of even these first few sentences communicate themselves to the children directly in their meaning. And while they listen, they work hard in their imaginations to recreate the images within themselves. While they are listening with their heart, their will becomes active in the thinking.

Trust in oneself

The trust which children display towards adults must increasingly be transformed into trust in their own powers. When Lisa, who is a bit slow in arithmetic, draws incredibly complex braided patterns in class 4 and helps Jonas, the arithmetical genius sitting next to her, to get his patterns at least halfway right, they experience and recognise in one another the skills they have. It is always about the interaction of volition, feeling, and thinking.

In the Waldorf school, the children, as far as possible, carry out this experiment themselves; then they describe and draw what they have found, done, and observed. At first, it is about precise observation and then about distinguishing the important from the unimportant in the pupil's own words. Only once all of this has passed through sleep, is it discussed how, through the combustion process, the water with the smoke in it is acidic, and the ash mixture is alkaline. If this is then thought together with photosynthesis, in which carbon is fixed, and our breathing, in which it is released, we can have very far-reaching discussions which take us right to the issues of our time. The crucial thing is, however, that the children learn to trust their observation, their ability to discriminate, and their ability to think.

It is part of our complicated lives that the conditions required for this have to be cultivated with ever greater awareness if they are not to atrophy. The archetypal trust in the encounter with the world can turn into the trust in our own capacities if the latter were allowed to unfold. That is more important than ever, as we have delegated more and more decisions to machines, because it is we who give the instructions to the machines. Whether a human or inhuman spirit fills them depends on us alone, because only the person who has trust in themselves can give trust to others.

Henning Kullak-Ublick has been a class teacher at the Flensburg Free Waldorf School from 1984 -2010. He is a Board member of the Friends of Waldorf Education, and the International Council for Steiner/Waldorf Education.

This text is published with the kind permission of its author.