

A Christmas Message for Our Friends

We are now living through a pandemic, a time in which many people experience fear – a feeling that creeps in when we are confronted by the unknown, unseen. And we are dealing with something that is below the sensual boundaries – unseen and seemingly incomprehensible. It is a time when most people withdraw from the sensual world to varying extents, certainly from real encounters with other human beings. More and more we are thrust towards the increased use of “virtual reality”, even children have to lengthen their time online, although studies had only recently confirmed what most people’s common sense had told them – that this is not the way of the child into the world....and is not a replacement for person to person teaching. Dilemma over dilemma as we revert to “social media” (although that name is perhaps in itself an Orwellian statement), we connect via Skype that has nothing to do with sky or the heavens at all, or via Zoom as we appear to zoom around the globe, or perhaps we use Facebook, although we see almost everything about some of our friends there – just not a real face that reveals something of the inner disposition, gives expression to soul and spirit and invites us to enter this soul space, particularly by looking into the eyes. Yes, the danger has increased that we get entangled in the spider’s world wide web. And at the same time we are given the best opportunity to consider the significance of human existence – can humanity exist without true encounter from one to the other? What is the meaning of human life and our connection to the realities of the sensual world around us? What is the true origin of the human being? Is there also a supersensual portion to our being? I think these – and many others that arise in the present situation – are questions that could well open a new approach to Christmas, questions that can direct us towards a new era before us....could it be a “turning point of time”?

It seems to me that it was not merely by chance that we spent the last months – indeed the past year or two – studying the human senses! In August a conference had been planned in Chestnut Ridge, New York, to commemorate the lectures about the “12 senses” Karl König gave there just 60 years ago. They were truly landmark lectures that are still widely studied and appreciated. Besides which that visit to North America was the deciding factor in the development of a new region of Camphill work which now encompasses 15 communities in the US and Canada and has led to many other initiatives out of this impulse. This course of lectures was in a way also a “birth moment”. Of course our conference could not take place as planned, but the friends at the Threefold Community quickly transformed it into a webinar, and lo and behold, over 900 people signed up from 24 countries across the world! The warm interest in the subject but also in each other managed to indeed create a true festival and laid the foundation for ongoing cooperation. There will certainly be a larger event taking place in 2021, whether it is possible in-person or again as webinar – we will see. Here at the Institute we have spent the past 3 years working regularly with various experts, particularly Professor Matthiessen, Neurologist at the Free University Herdecke, who unfortunately recently died. We will be publishing two volumes of König’s work on the senses this coming year in German. The book “Living Physiology” is still available in English. In studying the wonderful way König could describe the unity of the senses in its threefold expression and its importance for human development, one can once again realize how important this theme is towards understanding the human being at all. And once again one realizes how the human being is essentially a social being, but also a being that bridges in a special way between the physical and the spiritual world. And it is the senses themselves that bridge the threshold to the supersensible.

Alertness of the senses and "sensory darkness" - A different view of Christmas -

We usually think of awaking consciousness when we speak of our senses - something tasted good; I saw a beautiful picture; heard a concert all these experiences of our senses have to do with the fact that I am "waking up" for something, that I concentrate on something, and that's why I remember it afterwards.

Indeed, memory depends on how awake I perceive with my senses. If the child is interested in the lesson, they will know a lot afterwards; if it is all just boring or if the child cannot concentrate for other reasons, then the memory stays largely blank!

There have also been experiments in adult education: a new machine was presented via Power Point to trainees in a company in much detail for a long time. Afterwards the machine was actually set up, but none of the young men could operate it properly. A second group got to see the machine straight away and they were all allowed to "try" it after simple and short instructions. All trainees were able to operate the machine properly within a short period of time. What is "real" cannot be replaced by what is "virtual". This has to do with the waking side of our senses, with consciousness and with memory; but also with our own movement and participation. That means - with the activity of our own will!

We all know that there is another, unconscious side of the senses that has to do with memory in a very different way. Nowadays in particular, sensory impressions are constantly flowing into people without them being able to consciously absorb all of them - on the contrary, they somehow have to block out a lot in order to find their own way through the city, through the supermarket, through life. Many people cannot fully or even partially achieve this - they are at the mercy of the sensory onslaught. This is usually the case for the child, over time this can lead in two directions: Either to an overly strong sensory sensitivity, which can also have an obsessive character, or through a protective fading out of the impressions up to a dullness or to withdrawal into their "own reality".

What do we perceive when we walk through the technological world? By the evening we most likely do not remember everything in detail, but we are exhausted by this onslaught and feel the impact! It has been "perceived" - has actually influenced and is still present in me - even when I do not know the details anymore! Today, of course, a whole advertising psychology is built on this - we know how something is planted into the subconscious, where it influences our actions; especially our shopping behaviour! So - the other way around: Not learning by being awake and by acting as free people, but conditioning, influencing our doing through subconscious impressions. This is not freedom, it is a compulsion!

It is a very important contribution to a new understanding of the human being that Rudolf Steiner specifically named 12 senses and described them in many details - also pointing out the consequences of this insight. Exactly 60 years ago Karl König wrote: Every single one of our senses is deeply rooted in the physical and soul-life of people, and we as a person are largely determined by the influence of sensory experiences. But we are only aware of some of these sensory experiences! Above all, our knowledge of the senses relates mainly to the senses we can call "environmental senses" (sight, smell, taste and the sense of warmth; only partially hearing!). Another group of four senses are not directed towards the environment, but towards our inner world; König calls these "lower senses" - because their actual effect lies "below" the threshold of consciousness. These "inner world senses" are however very essential for experiencing one's own self! The effect of the sense in the human soul is of particular importance. In normal everyday life (if everything goes well), for example, we are not even aware that we have a sense of balance. But when something does go wrong, we know it all the more - our whole life is affected.

But we also know what the experience of balance means, which the child practices so beautifully in a playful way, not only for free movement, but especially for the soul. The equilibrium of the soul is just as important for life as a whole - and can be just as unstable! The sense of touch seems to give us information about the outside world, but the effect on our inside is much more important, that we experience ourselves as a being closed within the skin's boundaries, which puts us into a free relationship to a world outside of us through touch. A child practices this often very early on. Later in life, an increased urge to feel the objects, perhaps even knock on them, will indicate that the child, and later even the adult, have too little experience of themselves as a self-contained and peaceful being. We know this very well in everyday curative education.

In addition to these inwardly important senses, there are two more that are of utmost importance for human development: Firstly there is a "sense of life" that "listens" in particular to the processes of the organs, to the wellbeing of the person - here too, we only notice our liver when its function is disturbed. Then there is a sense of self-movement When climbing stairs I don't have to think about how the knees relate to each other - on the contrary, if that comes to my mind too much, I stumble! My movement is downright dependent on this sense working well, but *not* being conscious. I can only really ride my bike when I'm no longer aware of how to do it!

Although these senses are below the threshold of consciousness, what they contribute to our state of being in the world, is a deeper security of reality.

In addition to these four more inward facing and four more environment facing senses, there are also four "upper senses" - which do not grasp the exterior and also not what is living in me, but give direct information about the soul-spiritual life outside of me. It begins with hearing, which not only has to do with external sound waves, but also conveys something of the essence, of the inner quality of what is heard - a foreign inwardness. This is why listening to good language and music is very important - in education, but also for ones whole life. The question of the difference between "real" voice or "real" music and electronically reproduced sounds should not be discussed here, but of course the question arises immediately.

These four senses in the „upper" group, we can call "social" senses, which external science has long been looking for and cannot easily define; four senses that actually lift us above what has to do with the ordinary definition of sensuality. You can already guess how essential this is for being human - especially for humans as the social beings they essentially are! Ultimately, it is about capturing the other person in their inner reality. These senses are essential as a bridge from person to person, as a gateway to a real understanding of the other, of that which is foreign, even when the external and intellectual perception do not allow for that! These senses are not conscious, but they are not directed inwards either. Rudolf Steiner described them as hearing, the sense of language, the sense of thought and the sense of the ego.

In summary, one can say: Through a healthy harmony of all senses, in their twelve-ness, there is a living certainty of the spiritual nature of the human being - the human being who does not only belong to external nature and is not exclusively dependent on it.

What does all of this have to do with Christmas? I think it's a very modern, future Christmas motif, which, however, also fits exactly to the old-fashioned and traditional understanding of the Christmas event too! The child is born in the dark half of the year and in the middle of the night; not at the winter solstice, but exactly 3 days (or nights!) afterwards, on December 24th, when the first step towards the birth of the new light has been taken. It is a festival of "new birth" - of initiation.

And it is not by chance that the Christmas season involves the 12 nights - it is a reminder that what can be born in us as an inner human being - figuratively speaking as a child - has to do with a non-natural influence; as a new impulse from the vastness of the universe into nature! Therefore it is emphasised that the birth was announced by the stars. That is the image of Christmas time - everything points to an outwardly "inhospitable" situation, which by itself could not have allowed for this birth; an old Joseph, a virgin Mary, poor, even adverse circumstances; they are undesirable "refugees" in the middle of winter. From the hill of Bethlehem one could see the red-brown desert, the desolate mountains of Judea and the region of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which had been buried by a volcanic catastrophe. In simple pictures we are wonderfully shown this poverty, the darkness and cold in the Oberufer Christmas play.

But this inner picture of a birth from a completely different origin, not from nature, not from the old, can be a picture of hope for humans in general - especially in our virus-plagued times! Our actual nature is "out of this world" and can be cared for and awakened independently of all phenomena of decline - come to birth. With Christ we may also learn to say: My kingdom is not of this world!

I would like to argue that through a new understanding of the senses - in their twelve-ness, which means especially to include those senses that take us above and beyond the usual borders of the sensual world - and through conscious use and care of these senses, a new content can arise for Christmas. Indeed, Christmas can be renewed, replenished with new, concrete meaning, and therefore a New Christmas can be celebrated. The biblical words "My kingdom is not of this world" and "If you do not repent and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" thereby reveal their true meaning. In a more recent translation, Emil Bock helps us to understand this in a more modern way: The more we humbly animate our inner being as a newborn child, the more we realize our belonging to the kingdom of heaven.

Today we can perhaps say: The more we cultivate the senses in such a way that the actual, not earthly but spiritual nature of human beings can be reborn in the soul, the stronger this kingdom, this richness of the

spirit can work in human beings; strengthening itself, but above all building the bridge to the true self of others.

In the Christmas verse of the anthroposophical Soul Calendar, it is pointed out that “God's word in the darkness of the senses transfigures all being” - a listening experience! And strengthened by “hearing” the spiritual, we can approach the growing world of senses anew from the Christmas season and lead and direct our own soul with a new power of our own being, not let ourselves be guided by the sensory impressions - this is the verse for the middle of January, out of the birth process of Christmas:

It is in this winter darkness
The revelation of one's own strength
The strong instinct of the soul;
To direct this into sense's darkness
And to anticipate through warmth of heart
The revelation of the senses.

And if we follow old traditions, we find that Christmastime actually only comes to a close with Candlemas – the day the child was presented in the temple. The next verse, for the last week of January leads up to this fulfilment of the Christmas birth:

In winter's depths is kindled
True spirit life with glowing warmth;
It gives to world appearance,
Through forces of the heart, the power to be.
Grown strong, the human soul defies
With inner fire the coldness of the world.

The discovery of the supersensible human being through the senses themselves can establish a new understanding of the human being, build new self-confidence. This is, however, a form of self perception that does not divide and does not isolate, but rather generates warm forces of the heart!

Could this not be a worthy task out of the crisis of our times? It would mean warming the social space between human beings and at the same time founding a new sense of responsibility towards creation around us, which is in dire need of new forces of life – or as it is in the verse of the Calendar of the Soul: the “power to be”.

For Christmas 2020, Richard Steel

And two further suggestions for Christmas reading:

We hope you have already noticed that Karl König's “*Christmas Story*” has now been newly printed in the new volume: “[*Stories, Poems and Meditations*](#)” and in the same book there is something which we are sure is new for everybody – Karl König's last of his more than 400 poems (of which we have only published a selection!) is a very special Christmas poem, giving insight into his destiny at the end of his life.

We also hope that you will be living with the verses of the Calendar of the Soul as this meditative substance is certainly of special importance during these difficult times. In the volume “[*The Calendar of the Soul – A Commentary*](#)” there are some very helpful contributions towards experiencing the Christmas verses.