

## What is a Human Being?

As a part of the newly enacted membership process of the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education, Schools must do a self-study based upon the 7 Core Principles of the Alliance. Principle One states that ***“Public Waldorf education is founded on a coherent image of the developing human being.”*** So what is that “coherent image?”

That there are three aspects to a human being is commonly understood. It is expressed in various ways—Body, Mind and Soul; Body, Soul and Spirit; Head, Heart and Hands; Thinking, Feeling, Willing. However, that the human being also has a four-fold nature is an equally important part of that image of the developing being that is the foundation of Public Waldorf education. The human being is more than the sum of its parts; more than what is visible from the outside. Yet there are four “parts to sum”—three of which are not apparent to the visible eye.

To start with the most visible, there is a “physical” part—a body, made up of chemicals and elements that can be segregated and analyzed in a laboratory. However, there is something more than the physical that brings those physical components to life. A life-force that is most easily acknowledged in its absence—in the wilted cut flower, or in the “empty shell” body of a pet that has died. This life-force also has many names—chi, vital force and, in Waldorf circles, etheric.

Where does that etheric life force come from? It resides in the earth, which is also something more than just physical “dirt.” One can perhaps best imagine it by looking at an individual plant as it grows. It rises up from the seed out of the earth. A stem with two leaves stands up, the plant grows upward over time. If you look away quickly from the grown plant, what remains is an “after-image” that is not solid. There is vagueness to it, related to the term “ethereal,” but this provides an experience akin to perceiving the etheric force. The etheric force is what has given the plant its form as it grows, and what sustains its life. Plants continue receiving all they need from the earth until they are cut off from it.

Animals also have that etheric force within them, but it is harder to perceive that their life-force comes from the earth because they are not directly connected to the earth as plants are. Animals move freely over the surface of the earth. However, animals must eat to survive. Something that plants, for the most part, do not do to sustain themselves.

What is the primary source of food for animals? Plants. Although there are additional factors, one can easily see that, if there is a life force within plants, animals (and humans) that eat the plant could gain the benefit of those forces and weave them into their bodies. Hence, human beings share this etheric element with both plants and animals. The etheric force is “attached” to a physical body to maintain its life, and when “detached” the result is death.

The third aspect of the human being, however, is shared only with animals. It is the ability to connect, to form relationships, with others. While it is clear that plants can respond to an external stimulus—be it light, music or the presence of the person who cares for it and waters it—there is no “connection” that endures. Although the sunflower turns with the sun, when night falls, it returns to its passive state. When the sun rises, it again turns to the sun, but it has not turned in advance of dawn in anticipation of its arrival! When the stimulus is gone the connection evaporates.

This is not the case of the connections forged between animals, whether it is a small “family” group or a large herd or flock, because those connections endure. And, because this aspect is common to humans as well, enduring relationships can be forged between humans and animals. In fact, but for the short life span of animals, it might be fair to say

that the individual relationships between a human and “their” animal (or the animal and “their” human) often tend to be more enduring than the relationships forged between human beings!

This realm is where feelings arise and live. This constituent part lives not only within a given individual body, but can extend beyond. In fact, since these forces exist on their own, they create a kind of communication network, but less “physical” than a series of cell towers transmitting electromagnetic waves in some form. This network creates the possibility of maintaining connections and enduring relationships, and an ability to sense or communicate feelings without direct contact.

Once a relationship is established, often one person can sense a reaction from the other person without having to touch them, without speaking and even without being in the same physical space. It is now well documented that twins on opposite portions of the earth can have shared sensations that only one has directly felt.

That such connections can be maintained (or sensed) over long distances is also well established through the many true stories of pets arriving back home months after being lost at some great distance away. The name of this third aspect of a human being in Waldorf terminology is “the astral.”

Lastly, the fourth constituent of the human being is the individual “spark” that makes each one unique. The seed that “brings specific gifts, creative potential, and intentions to this life.” It is what allows a human being to make decisions, be independent, to make his or her own choices—“able to determine a unique path through life.” This last element is called the “ego.” It is what raises the human being to a different level than the animal, to be a true individual, rather than merely be one of the “herd.”

The most simple, and therefore inevitably incomplete, statement about the relationship between these four constituents and the threefold nature of the human being is that the Body is primarily composed of the physical and etheric; the Soul interacts primarily within the etheric and astral; and the Mind/Spirit is most closely connected with the astral and ego.

The teachers’ understanding of all four levels—physical, etheric, astral & ego, and of their interaction during development, in both a fourfold and threefold manner, gains additional depth over the years through observing and interacting with students. This understanding, combined with the structure of the curriculum, allows Public Waldorf Education to address “the physical, emotional, intellectual, social, cultural, moral, and spiritual needs of the developing child, helping them “integrate into a maturing whole.”

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