
Center and Periphery: The Path of the Present Teacher

— Aimee de Ney

Can't you become dancers . . .? Why, you should be leading lives of joy—deep inner joy in the truth! There is nothing in the world more delightful, nothing more fascinating, than the experience of truth. There you have an esotericism that is far more genuine, far more significant than the esotericism that goes about with a long face. Before everything else—and long before you begin to talk about having a “mission”—there must be this living inner experience of truth.

~ Rudolf Steiner, from *The Curative Course Lecture 10, 1919*

As teachers of young children, it is imperative that we fully inhabit not only our bodies but also the space around us. We are set with the task of helping children to incarnate into their physical bodies and to learn to be a part of the world. Young children learn primarily through imitation. Thus we can set an example for them by truly incarnating into our own centers. We form clear and safe boundaries for them by inhabiting the periphery of the space in which the children can be free to learn, grow, and explore.

In *The Curative Course*, Rudolf Steiner gave the founders of the first curative school a meditation on point and periphery, instructing them to meditate each evening and morning on the point and the circle. In the evening, one can meditate with the words “God is in me” along with the image of a blue circle with a yellow point in its center. Then in the morning “I am in God” is carried along with an image of a yellow circle with a blue point. This can bring one to a place of understanding in which the point and the circle are one and the same, uniting and forming the polarity of center and periphery within us. This polarity “is everything,” according to Adola McWilliam, Camphill pioneer and adult educator. We come before birth from the far expanses of the cosmos and are born into the physicality of the world, drawn down even by the forces of gravity. Through incarnating into our bodies in the first seven years through the reflexes and foundational senses of touch, life, self-movement and balance, we are able to overcome gravity and find a place of balance between the earth and cosmos, our deepest human

experience of center and periphery. As educators, we must understand our own relationship to this polarity and to the forces that form us in the world.

Center and Periphery and the Four Foundational Senses

In *The First Seven Years: Physiology of Childhood*, Edmond Schoorel says of the twelve senses, as indicated by Rudolf Steiner, the “. . . T” experiences both a center and a boundary” (Schoorel, p. 128). In early childhood, children are learning how to enter their physical bodies through the four “will senses,” also known as the foundational or lower senses: touch, life, self-movement, and balance. These four senses are directed toward the development of the physical body. When this development is completed in the first seven years, these senses can later be directed to the outer world, transformed to the four highest “social” or “spiritualized” senses (p. 148).

One of the primary duties of early childhood teachers is to provide education to integrate these senses before the child enters grade school. For these senses to work together in an integrated, mutually supportive way is essential toward grade school readiness that facilitates future uninhibited learning and growth. Our modern culture and times often act as deterrents to healthy sensory development. So it is increasingly common for children to enter the grade school with one or more of these senses left un-integrated, forming obstacles within their physicality that can impede the ease of their development. If this is true for our students, it is likely true that many adults may have sensory challenges as well. How, then, can we fully inhabit our bodies if we are not fully integrated into our physicality? We support the children’s sensory development through the curriculum and conscious support toward sensory health. As adults, we have the opportunity for self-observation and self-work in these areas. When this work is complete, one can truly become “a citizen of the world” (Schoorel p. 125).

When we are standing firmly in our center, each of our lower senses is engaged. The skin is the organ for the touch sense and, as the periphery of our

physical body, creates a boundary between ourselves and the outer world (Schoorel p. 133; see also Albert Soesman, *Our Twelve Senses: Wellsprings of the Soul*, p. 14). In order to be fully present in our bodies, we must know where we are in space, which is the duty of the senses of movement and balance. If these senses are left un-integrated, it is very difficult for the body to know where it is in space. It becomes a challenge to be present in our center or aware of where in space our consciousness is living. The life sense allows us to experience peace and vitality. This sense is instrumental in being centered and present in our physical bodies and aware of what is happening around us. When a challenge arises with any of the former senses, the life sense, too, is thrown off balance.

Experiencing the periphery as a tangible boundary is primarily a movement and touch experience. We must be able to move our consciousness to surround, encompass and enliven the space we are building around the children. As we do this, we must touch each inch of the surrounding space with our living forces. This is accomplished through our awakened will.

When we are living actively in our center and our periphery, awake in our relationship with our lower senses, the space that we form is filled with vital, healthy life and clean-feeling soul energies. This in turn soothes the children's life sense, allowing them to feel contentment, clarifying their touch sense, and offering a sense of security. Our healthy soul energies clear the way for the development of the children's movement sense, permitting them to feel freedom, creating a balanced environment for their balance sense to emulate, and freeing them to feel their uniqueness, the joy of being themselves.

In childhood and in everyday life, we are asleep in the realm of these will-based senses. As educators, it is imperative that we raise these senses into our waking consciousness, into our conscious will activity. In this way, we can be sure to offer the children the opportunity to emulate us in our mature sensory functioning while also forming the space around the children in order to best serve their education and needs.

Practices to Enter One's Center and Periphery

There are many activities teachers can do to better inhabit their center and periphery by working consciously with their own four foundational senses. Ultimately, it has to be the decision of the teacher to hold the intention and vision of taking up this work. It is the duty of the striving teacher to be self-aware and to work on oneself when taking on the task of being a Waldorf teacher. Working through one's center out to the periphery is foundational in forming a safe and nurturing environment for the children in our care. This work intimately affects the mood of the class, the presentation of the curriculum, and the development of the children.

As Jane Swain describes in "Pikler, Point, and Periphery," the most important thing one can do in preparation for entering into this work is to have a meditative practice to help settle the mind and body toward peace and clarity. From there, the activities that bring the most joy to the teacher will often be the activity that brings one into one's center and frees us to be able to move out into our periphery in an awake manner.

The activities that support moving into one's center will likely work strongly with each of the foundational senses. A few examples from my experience are hiking, gardening, yoga, kayaking, and meditation. Activities in which we must sense others and move in fluidity with them, such as dancing or playing music, bring us to the periphery where we meet the world around us. Puppetry is an art form that requires the puppeteer to move her center into the puppet by willfully enlivening the puppet with her own etheric life forces. This is a practice of both moving one's center and of forming a periphery through the puppet's relationship with its audience. Many disciplines work with the forces living in center and periphery. There are endless activities that we can pursue actively to engage our will and find joy in our bodies and the world. The essential element is to find the activity that one loves and practice it regularly. It is all the better if one becomes conscious of how this activity is affecting one's lower senses and their relationship to their center and the periphery!

Uniting the Streams

As teachers, it is essential that we have clear boundaries. These boundaries offer the children safety, educate their senses of touch and life, and make it possible to bring more substance to the curriculum by setting up a culture of a joyful, managed classroom. The teacher who can offer the children both the advantages of center and periphery simultaneously offer the children the safest and clearest space to develop joyfully. Conscious breathing between point and periphery creates a space that is educating the children's senses of balance, touch, movement, and life. The very state of the balanced teacher, spreading herself to the periphery while also maintaining a clear center, offers a healthy model of the sense of balance which the children can imitate, subtle as it may be. When a teacher is clear within herself as to where she is in space (connected to the earth and spread out to the periphery, with angelic support above), the children are better able to locate themselves in the space that is created for them. When she buffers the periphery with light and intention, the children are wrapped in a touch experience. All of these enlivened senses and spaces allow the children to sense that they are well and safe in the world and that this is a good place to be.

Learning to form a palpable periphery can be experienced as a will activity. When the teacher can learn to create before and behind herself an invisible yet stable support that she can step into, feeling grounded down into her feet, she consciously enlivens and strengthens her will. The teacher is then empowered and strengthened to form boundaries that inhabit the periphery. Willfully living in the periphery makes possible a warm, loving boundary around the children.

I recall being told in teacher training that early childhood teachers come from one of two streams:

the kingly stream or the shepherd stream, as per the wise men and shepherds coming to see the baby Jesus. Could it be that it is time to unite those streams? We can stand simultaneously in the upright stream of the kings and in the protective, nurturing stream of the shepherds, and indeed, the children in our care will reap the benefits of the effort we put towards uniting these streams in joy, love and presence. ♦

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