

From Outer Authority to Inner Morality

Dorit Winter calls us to question our authority, to strive for objectivity, to remain firm and thus to practice good habits. If we achieve these goals, today's young people will be ready to face the world; a world in need of independent thinking, creativity and an inner compass. This article surveys the territory which Dorit Winter covers in her book, "Train a Dog, but Raise the Child; a practical primer" (1). In the book, her dog, Scamp, is the entertaining envoi for the pedagogical insights gleaned from her 43 years as a Waldorf teacher and teacher educator. For this article she, "left Scamp at home." The book, which can be recommended to parents, neighbors and friends, is written for the public as well as for the professional insider.

Illustration by Margrit Häberlin

I. Authority

Why are teachers often unable to assert their authority? Why are parents often afraid to?

For the newborn, the infant, the toddler, and the young child up to the age of about nine, the adult provides the outer authority which the child does not yet have within. The adult is capable of judgment, can make decisions, can think about what is best for the child. That does not mean that children don't have a mind of their own. A two-year-old can be very insistent. But up to the age which Rudolf Steiner characterizes as a time when, "the force of the ego nature first begins to stir" (2) (around the age of nine) the child craves authority. Yet, adults are reluctant to draw the line. Understandably. We grown-ups do not want to oppose the child's will, do not want to undermine the child's strength of purpose. And what a powerful strength of purpose it is, that childish will.

The crying infant, the screaming toddler, the grumpy fourth grader, the sour adolescent, they test us. They want to know whether there's a captain to help steer them. Their own captain, their own grown-up self, is still in the making... (3)

Even the most willful child is searching earnestly for a grown-up who is strong enough to lean on. We might even say, that the more willful the child, the more desperate is that child's yearning for support in the form of firm, loving, authority. This is the key: firm + loving. We grown-ups are inclined to think that we cannot be both firm AND loving. But for a child, having the one without the other causes insecurity. Firmness by itself can quickly become despotic authority. This is the firmness of, for example, military school. There is little flexibility in such authority. It is authoritarian. If, on the other hand, sympathy alone holds sway, then the objectivity and especially the consistency which the child so urgently needs will get lost

because the child, driven only by what is desirable rather than by what is right, will rule the roost.

This brings us to the second key element:

II. Objectivity

What do we mean by “objectivity” or “subjectivity”? An object is something that is outside of my self. I do not necessarily identify with it. But “I” am always my own subject. I see the world from inside this subject, from inside myself. If I am healthy, I identify fully with myself. That is what “I” means. As Rudolf Steiner reminds us repeatedly, I am the only one who can say “I.” I am the only one who has my own perspective. Therefore, when we have a subjective relationship to something outside of our self, we are melding our Self with that Other. This is the natural inclination which every parent has towards his or her own child. Parents naturally see children as extensions of themselves. Eventually the child becomes a teenager and rebels against the parents’ tether, a phase of liberation many parents find difficult. Yet, if the parent, whose rightful task it is to fully embrace the child, remains too interwoven with that child, parental authority is difficult to sustain. Any authority, including parental authority, requires objectivity.

Authority that is purely objective, is, as we saw, deleterious. It punishes without regard to circumstance. It is absolute. Such authority is meant to break, not support, the child. But without some element of objectivity, the challenge of asserting authority in opposition to the child’s childish will, is insurmountable. The child becomes the authority if we are too subjective, if we are overwhelmed by sympathy for the child. Yet the child does not yet have the judgment to make decisions, to be his or her own authority. What child would not take the extra cookie, or stay up too late, or snatch a favorite toy out of the hands of a curious younger sibling?

Whereas both teachers and parents can aspire equally to being firm and loving authorities for the children in their charge, when it comes to objectivity, there is a fundamental and inherent difference.

Parents, by nature, are not cool toward their offspring. Flesh of my flesh is fused. Blood is thicker than water. Parents are not, nor should they be, cool toward their children. (4)

The task of parents is to love their children no matter what. That is why disciplining other people's sons and daughters is so much easier than disciplining your own. On the other hand: A teacher in love with the children is headed for shipwreck. (5)

Or to put it another way:

Parents are not supposed to find even their wrinkled, middle-aged children less appealing than the smooth skinned infants their babies once were. Teachers, on the other hand, ought never to fall for the appeal of even their cutest students. For teachers, appeal should never enter the equation. For teachers, the long view is absolutely desirable. That long view requires a strong measure of objectivity, so that the child is never absorbed into the teacher's personal domain. The parent's relationship to the child is, by definition, personal and subjective, meaning, the child is permanently part of the parent's identity. The teacher ought never to lean on the children for personal satisfaction. That's professionalism. (6)

So whereas parents are naturally endowed with subjectivity and must strive for objectivity, teachers are free of this inherent subjectivity, and, generally speaking, have an easier time being objective. Thus authority is more easily attained by the teacher in the classroom than by the parent in the home, which accounts for the many stories of children whose behavior at home and at school are so different.

As authorities, adults related to their charges have to make a conscious effort toward the cool pole; whereas those who have a title - the doctor, the teacher, the policeman - and are not part of the family, are not familiar as friends, ought to strive toward balancing their institutional authority with individual warmth.

In either case, once a healthy balance of objectivity and subjectivity is achieved by the adult, the adult is less likely to fall under the sway of the child's erratic will, is more likely to make a healthy decision for the child, and is altogether more likely to become the consistent adult the child can trust. Consistency is crucial.

III. Consistency

For the child, adults who manage, on the whole, to be consistent in their behavior, their expectations, their responses, provide security for the child. Spontaneity has its place, as do exceptions to the rule, but not when they are the norm.

Children like routine. They are conservatives. It's only the grown-ups who feel compelled to spice up routine with spontaneity. Children thrive on regularity. Regular meal times, regular bed times, regular outings... all this is part of our next section on habits. Our concern here is the consistency which promotes objective authority. In other words, the consistency of the adult in responding to the child is our concern here.

Consequences for our actions are a grown-up concept. Rudolf Steiner tells us that the child can begin to grasp the idea of cause and effect only around the age of 12. (7) We should not expect younger children to be consequent on their own. It takes mature judgment to be consistent, to mete out consequences fairly and consistently. Despots, tyrants, dictators and autocrats don't care about fairness or consistency. But children are highly sensitive to the consistency of consequences. This is the heart of discipline. They know what is fair. "That's unfair!" is a cry that most teachers know well. Often though, it is an unfair cry.

My book, "Train a Dog, but Raise the Child; a practical primer", was inspired by the realization that the consistency required to train a dog is applicable to child-rearing and pedagogy. Quickly I must add that this is where the similarity between dog and child ends. The three "R's" of Regularity, Routine and Repetition are necessary for all kinds of training. So whether we're teaching the dog to fetch the ball, or the child to multiply 7×8 , once is not enough. We have to practice. We have to repeat.

The familiarity of a predictable rhythm, like the columns on a Greek temple, can bear weight. Children crave regularity, structure, repetition, and form. The younger they are, the more the adult is called on to provide the day's architecture, to compose mealtime, to choreograph bedtime. Predictable daily routines, recognizable weekly events, seasonal celebrations and festive anniversaries all contribute to profound security in a child. Maintaining a grip on time by marking its passage deliberately, instead of being yanked like a rudderless boat by conflicting currents and surges threatening to topple us, is getting harder and harder. [...] Flexibility is fine as long as the basic pulse is maintained. When that basic pulse is maintained, the unexpected blip is far less upsetting, both to the child and to the adult. (8)

Nor is once enough when it comes to consequences for undesirable behavior or the correction of habitual mistakes. Moreover, it is in the realm of discipline, that consistency is paramount. The only real question then becomes what to ignore.

The exhausting aspect of consistency is that it requires consistency about what to be consistent about. (9)

In other words, we have to choose our battles. It's my experience, with both dogs and children, art and life, that working on one or two patterns of behavior at any one time suffices. Once these are mastered, we can move to the next.

If we want the child to raise a hand before speaking out in class, we have to be consistent about our expectations. No exceptions. Any exception will shortcut the laborious process of learning the habit. So too with consequences for naughty behavior. In my 40+ years of teaching, I have found that the naughtiest children respect clear consistent consequences. That is where the objectivity we mentioned earlier comes in. Our rascals, whether at home or at school, understand appropriate consequences. Without them, they feel let down.

It can pain us, the adults, more than it actually pains the children, when we insist that there be an appropriate consequence for inappropriate behavior. This leads us into the consideration of rules, whether at school or at home.

The trick is how to keep the rules alive, how to keep the rules useful, practical, organic, and pliable. An organic rule is one that has grown out of the needs of the situation, unlike a gratuitous rule, which is illogical, pedantic, superimposed on the situation, and counter-productive. An organic rule ought to be pliable enough to adapt to the growing situation. It ought to change the way a tree in a forest adapts to its environment. Military rules are not organic. They are notoriously rigid. They formalize hierarchy. They achieve control. They are gratuitous. Gratuitous rules antagonize and hinder; organic rules expedite and galvanize. (10)

Wisdom and judgment are required for the establishment of "organic rules." Objective warmth helps.

The one thing that children, especially after the age of nine, really find distasteful, is inconsistency in the application of consequences for transgressions. They experience that sort of inconsistency as failure by the adult. That is one reason why children are so exhausting: they brook no deviation.

Rudolf Steiner famously gives examples of appropriate consequences. He speaks of “inventive talent.” (11) He speaks of the “self-knowledge” the teacher must have so as to avoid setting bad examples. This is the so-called, “Pedagogical Law” in action.

No matter the age of the child, and more so as the child becomes a youth, an adult’s sense of humor is essential when addressing the young person’s transgressions. But the humor here is the humor that stands above the fray, that recognizes the Comedy of Errors, that partakes of a somewhat aloof wisdom and maintains an objective perspective as it does in Rudolf Steiner’s great sculpture, *The Group*.

IV. Habit

Although we have already brought up the topic of habit in our consideration of consistency, it may be helpful to give habit its own arena. So much of our work as parents and teachers concerns habits. It is the habits about which we want to be consistent.

But beware the habit lest you become addicted.

Habits challenge us coming and going. They’re hard to acquire and then harder to lose. Although a life without habits would be as much of a jumble as life without memory, life ruled by habit results in obsessive extremes. Do we rule the habits, or do they rule us, is the question that allows us to harness our habits to our purpose, and not theirs. It’s a lifelong effort, because habits are sneaky. They harden and imprison us covertly. [...] Training of habits needs thoughtful direction. (12)

In the English language, the word “habit” implies drugs, alcohol, caffeine, opioids... all notoriously habit-forming substances. As we will see in the next section on attention, technology is now recognized to fall into this category of “hedonic substances.”

Clearly, good habits are habits we control, not habits that control us. Good habits can be hard to achieve. Most of the time, they have to be learned.

Habits have to be trained, the way a vine has to be trained. Neither the vine nor the child will succeed if they flop all over and their scraggly tendrils are left to their own devices. (13)

Habits, both the good and the bad, get us through the day. Children are born without habits, and one of the first tasks a parent undertakes is habituating the child to some sort of rhythm. Later on, the life of the school-aged child is regulated by habits. Without them life would be chaotic. But apart from bringing some measure of order into the life of the child and the adult caregivers, good habits serve a larger purpose.

Habits lay the foundation for tact, empathy, and, ultimately, for compassion and thence morality. (14)

We can be habitual about practicing good manners, about looking both ways before we cross the street, about so many aspects of social interaction. Such good habits can be convenient time-savers. But there is this other aspect: good social habits can help make us aware that we are not the center of the universe. This is a terribly difficult thing for a child of, say, two, to grasp. Until now, if there is a loving home, he or she has been the center of the universe. How then to realize that we cannot interrupt Mummy as soon as she is talking with a friend. How then to learn that Sister may also play with our toy?

That’s what education ought to be about. What’s the use of all the knowledge in the world if it leads to evil? The tree of knowledge, which Wikipedia cannot match for impact, brought us not just an irresistible apple, but also the capacity to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong. The latent capacity for self-determined judgment became our lot. (15)

Self-determined judgment is an adult prerogative and should not be expected of a child. But by calling on our authority as adults, by ameliorating that authority with the right balance of objectivity and subjectivity and applying it consistently, we help the child develop good habits for life, habits that ultimately lead to compassion and morality.

V. Attention

Various recent publications make the connection between habits and technology abundantly clear. In "Hooked, How to Build Habit-Forming Products", the author states:

Companies increasingly find that their economic value is a function of the strength of the habits they create. (16)

And in "The Hacking of the American Mind" (17), we read that,

"Our addiction to smart phones and social media is largely driven by corporate profit [...] Modern technology is designed to trigger the same reactions as a drug." (18)

In other words: the more habit forming our technology devices, the more successful their creator's bottom line. Or: to the extent that we become addicted to the habits inculcated by any of the apps we might have on our smart phones, the more desirable we are to the giant corporations promoting this industry.

While concerned adults strive to assert their parental and pedagogical authority to guide the young in learning good habits, a world-wide consortium of technological innovation is doing everything it can to habituate the impressionable youth market to its products. As both books demonstrate, a lot of effort by way of research and money is going into this goal.

Our addiction to the momentary high of a dopamine surge, which is what we experience in the mere anticipation of a desired email, text, snapchat image, etc. is not accidental:

Modern advertisers are blending old marketing tricks with fresh neuroscience to make their products irresistible. [...] They are marketing hedonic substances and products and behaviors as being completely benign, and using neuroscience to do something called neuromarketing. (19)

This is serious stuff. Children world-wide are being deliberately targeted. So egregious is this attack, that the back lash is growing, and not just in the Waldorf world. So obviously does the habit of gratuitous technology undermine an individual's capacity for attention, that there is now a bona fide "science of attention."

The Science of Attention has legitimized the technological counter-culture, which champions what is uniquely human: individuality. In spite of the behemoth powers of the Emperors of Silicon Valley, the inner core with which every human being is born is, as yet, out of reach of the pandemic manipulations perfected by data management. (20)

If you Google "science of attention" you will get 40,800,000 results. You will find additional suggestions on the topic:

- what part of the brain controls focus and attention
- brain areas involved in attention
- cognitive attention definition
- science behind concentration
- what part of the brain controls attention span
- what part of the brain controls attention and concentration
- how the brain pays attention
- attention studies psychology

The last chapter of my book, "Train a Dog, but Raise the Child; a practical primer", summarizes some of the research dealing with this question of Attention. The chapter is entitled: "The Habit of Distraction, the Loss of Mindfulness, and the Impact on our Children".

To offset the crushing popularity of the habituating activities technology spawns, Waldorf educators need to find their allies. The strongest voices warning of the effect of premature technology on the young are unaffiliated with Waldorf; their impressive credentials lie elsewhere. Their arguments do not include the 3-fold and 4-fold principles of Waldorf education. Nevertheless, they speak to the dangers of the developing individual, and the developing individuality is the sacred core of every child we teach. Our students leave our schools after high school at the latest, when their nascent ego has yet to incarnate. It is up to us, the adults, to protect the child's budding core.

If, as adults, our ego forces are sufficient to muster the authority, strive for the objectivity, achieve the consistency that bring about good habits and compassionate social awareness, then we have a good chance of avoiding the addicting habits that rob our youth of the attentiveness without which independent clear thinking, creativity, or the inner compass of individual morality cannot be attained.

Dorit Winter: Having grown up on four continents, Dorit brings a cosmopolitan background to all her undertakings. She was born in Jerusalem, attended kindergarten in Zürich, primary school in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and junior and senior high schools in New York City. She has a BA in Secondary Education with minors in English and German from Oberlin College and American University, and an MA in Comparative Literature from SUNY/Binghamton. Dorit began her teaching career in 1969. She has taught 5th through 12th graders as well as adults. She spent 25 years as founding Director and lead teacher of Waldorf teacher training programs in the San Francisco Bay Area. No longer attached to any particular institution, Dorit continues to be active as teacher, mentor and consultant, giving lectures and providing workshops.

Literature

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