

## THE PATH OF DESTINY LEARNING

“Man struggling to the sunlight  
Up from the mire and clay  
Fighting through wars and jungles  
And sometimes learning to pray  
And sometimes a king with a sceptre,  
And sometimes a slave with a hod.  
Some people call it karma  
And others call it God.

*George W. Carey*

Destiny Learning is the second of three paths of learning brought forth by Coen van Houten. These three paths have been elaborated through research conducted over twenty-five years at the (now defunct) Center for Social Development, Forest Row, England. They take their departure from Steiner’s so-called “seven life processes.”

Little has been said by Steiner about the life processes, and little has been taken up from his indications before the work of Van Houten. Karl König has devoted some study to these life processes which appear in *In Need of Special Understanding*.<sup>1</sup> Much about these processes appears in an indirect way in the study of child development.

The worldwide Waldorf School approach stems from knowledge of how the life forces of a child bring about body and soul development, and how education can best fit these processes. After about age 21, the seven life processes take on a different role. They serve the development of the growing self. The research of Coen van Houten underlines three metamorphoses of the life processes called, respectively: adult learning, destiny learning and spiritual research. These processes respond to the following questions: How do I learn as an adult and what is it that makes this different from child learning? What can I learn from the challenges I face in my life and how can I develop a true understanding for the forces active in my personal destiny? What questions is the world asking of me, and what resolves did I bring to Earth from the world of the spirit? We will

look at the first two paths; the third aspect of Van Houten's work will not concern us in the present overview.

## **Adult Learning<sup>2</sup>**

Steiner makes us aware that every new idea we take in can take root in our soul and become an ideal that gives us abundant life forces. Conversely, if we only passively receive ideas without turning them into ideals and applying them in our life, we impoverish our vitality. The focus of adult education rests on how to awaken our will in view of a certain goal, rather than accumulate information. Everything that follows applies both to adult education proper and self-education as well. Learning is different from the assimilation of knowledge. Even if we know this intuitively, little is usually applied in adult education that clearly differentiates it from earlier education.

If learning is a process rather than a result, then teaching must add, to the typical idea of lecturing, all the tools that support and reinforce understanding of the topics studied. Very important to the whole is a preview of what is to come as well as a review and evaluation of what has been done. If learning is truly a spiritual process that leads us to the boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds, then time must be given to assimilate all experiences and new understanding that awaken in us over time. Group work is a very important part in the first three steps of the learning process. Exercises and artistic activities designed to support and deepen the material studied engage our feelings as well as our will.

The seven life processes are: breathing, warming, nourishing, secreting, maintaining, growing and reproducing. In terms of adult learning these terms can be translated into observing, relating to the topic, "digesting" the material, individualizing, exercising, growing new faculties and becoming creative. Let us take a closer look at the seven life processes as they metamorphose in the adult and may be used in adult learning.

Observing is the first step. Much has been said in this regard about the importance of awakening our senses to precise observation. The scientific path is a beginning. But correct observation means more. It requires faculties of attentiveness that are threatened by our world of external over-stimulation (TV, computers, electronic stimuli, constant

busyness...). As Hellinger's work or NVC have highlighted, observing is an art, one that needs to be nurtured through specific practices and exercises. Becoming a phenomenological observer requires dedicated education of the senses. Goetheanism is one good example and a tool on this path. Goethe could penetrate to the deeper essence of a plant because of the depth of his power to perceive. He could literally exhaust every possible level of observation, and so arrive at higher levels of reality without having to add theories or speculation.

Relating is the second stage and includes establishing a relationship between the object of our interest and our self. Warmth, soul enthusiasm, is the key here. It is found in the faculty of deep interest and devotion. Every learning has to ignite this basic interest in order to become more than just head-knowledge. Artistic activity and practical exercises form an important bridge. In the absence of real warmth, surrogates will fill in the vacuum. The pursuit of wealth, fame or ease cannot form a lasting bridge to the object of our studies. They will transform our learning process into a purely mechanical pursuit. In fact, what occurs at this step is the critical initial transformation of ideas into ideals.

Digesting and individualizing, the third and fourth steps, come through faculties of discernment. Here the scientific tenets are perfectly at home: don't accept anything without questioning its reality, don't refuse anything before first testing it for yourself. Take everything apart, look at all details, make sense of every single part. The capacity to discriminate and form careful judgments needs to be strengthened at this stage. Group work forms a pivotal step since it promotes thorough review and critical understanding of what we could otherwise passively hear, accept and assimilate. Individualizing means being able to re-create, not merely repeat, what we study from within ourselves.

With the fourth process we arrive at a critical step. Up to this stage our "day consciousness" plays a more important role than our subconscious learning — what we can also call "night consciousness." But subconscious learning is just as important as day learning since present-day humanity lives both in the physical and, to a degree, in the spiritual world. We know for a fact that many important scientific discoveries of Nobel Prize winners have been brought about through dreams or sudden inspirations. How can the adult enhance the processes of learning, knowing that in learning we receive help

from the other side? Individualizing is, therefore, an important turning point. Learning individually is like bringing about a “re-creation,” not merely an assimilation. As the next steps will emphasize, the goal of true learning is the acquisition of new faculties.

Faculties, this is the key word. What “adult learning” emphasizes above ordinary learning is the fact that the process of learning will show us who we are, as well as our strengths and shortcomings.

Learning means being able and willing to change, to overcome inner blockages. This is the meaning of exercising, the fifth step. The process of learning should be a stimulus for working on our own weak spots. Are my observation skills precise enough? Is my judgement strong in the cognitive, aesthetic and/or moral realms? Is my rhythm of night and day in balance? Am I able to really analyze a given content and rebuild it from my inner self? Here, the learning step requires a further effort of the will. When I have discovered my blockages, I can work on them by doing exercises that develop new faculties. We may be able to ascertain what we need to exercise or we may ask an adult educator or colleague for help. Exercises have to be designed specifically to the need of the individual. Exercising works on both sides — on our daily consciousness and on our subconscious. It works from day into night and vice versa. In ways that defy purely mechanistic terms, we can develop new faculties of perception. These and these alone give life to the content studied, and make it truly individual. It is these new faculties that enable us to become creative, and add to what we have learned — a thoroughly personal element, something that wasn’t in our world before.

In light of the above, we can give new meaning to the following, puzzling words of Steiner: “The result of this study is that truth is not, as man usually assumes, the ideal reflection of something real, but a free creation of the human spirit that would not have existed if we had not brought it forth ourselves. The task of knowledge is not to recapitulate in conceptual form something that already exists somewhere, but to create a wholly new realm that, together with the given sense world, forms then the full reality.”<sup>3</sup>

Adult learning forms a foundation for destiny learning. Educating ourselves thus means developing the ability to live with questions that lead us forward rather than pat answers that can offer us false assurance. It is also the foundation upon which we can

build a sense of wonder and openness of mind that will lead us to a realm of inquiry, where the most subjective concerns in our lives become the basis for an objective self-knowledge. In destiny learning, even more than in adult learning, the learner is the tool of knowledge, but can only fully become such a tool as long as he is willing to grow inwardly and acquire new faculties of perception.

### **Destiny Learning<sup>4</sup>**

More and more people at present realize that healing at both individual and social levels will come from moving away from blame and moving toward taking responsibility for our lives. This has been the focus of the Twelve Steps recovery movements and of all the sprouting encounter group-work. At a spiritual level, taking responsibility means beginning to recognize karma not just as a plausible idea, but as a reality that we can see weaving through the fabric of our lives. Social healing will then result from the recognition that our present personal difficulties and conflicts have their sources beyond this life and have resurfaced in our present life to offer us opportunities for future development.

The path of destiny leads into a “new psychology” with two major differences from the psychology we know. The patterns we develop in this life very often have their deeper roots, not in the past or in early childhood, but in previous lives. This new psychology is not analytical. It is both scientific — inasmuch as it is based on enhanced sense observation — and artistic/imaginative since it elevates facts to gestures and images.

Karma presupposes that we are spiritual beings on a long path of development encompassing many past incarnations and looking forward to many future ones. It is a path of evolution and transformation. The goal of destiny learning is not to arrive at what is right or wrong, but to what is helpful, healing, and forward moving.

As we have seen, the seven life processes are: breathing, warming, nourishing, secreting, maintaining, growing and reproducing. These stages correspond to the following steps in destiny learning: observing a destiny event, reading an event in a biography, finding the causes, accepting our unresolved karma, practicing “freer deeds,”

perceiving the network of karma, and re-ordering our karma. Steps 1 to 4 form what is called Destiny Learning I; Steps 5 and 6 form Destiny Learning II and Step 7 Destiny Learning III.

Destiny Learning I serves one's own development. Destiny Learning II serves our social development, the transformation of our relationships. In Destiny Learning III, we embark on the desire to be of help to the community, humanity, and the Earth. Getting started on Destiny Learning does not require knowledge of the laws of karma and reincarnation. It is not a simple application of concepts about karma, nor a code of behavior derived from them. The whole process is practiced in small groups and most often in a workshop format with the help of a facilitator.

### **Destiny Learning I: Personal Development**

Let us observe the first three steps of Destiny Learning I (Steps 1-4). We first look at an event from sensory perception as fully as we can. This event offers us a gesture that is characteristic of our being, or rather of our double, the spiritual being who is the aggregate of all unredeemed karma that we carry in our present life. This event can be raised to the level of an image. It also often reconnects with similar events in our life history. In this sense a set of similar, related events occurring in a pattern constitutes a symptom. The events we turn our attention to are simple, primary, recurrent themes in our lives. They are simple and precise; events most charged with an emotional component are less indicated. Some individuals may have a propensity to fall and, as a result, cause pain to their ankles, knees or other parts of their bodies. Others have a recurrent pattern of conflict. For another person, a tendency towards being late causes stress in her life. Destiny learning looks at very definite, crucial parts of an event. In the conflict example, the reasons that led to it are not considered. The mechanics of the conflict are what make it purely individual. No matter how similar the reasons for a conflict, no two individuals will go through it in the same way. Observation of phenomena highlights the purely individual nature of destiny events in a person's life.

A set of recurring events forms a symptom. This is an image of the individual double. Those recurring patterns that work against our best interests and that we have

difficulty controlling are expressions of our karmic doubles. Since they have their origin in one or more lifetimes, they cannot be easily modified or redirected. This also explains why destiny learning places emphasis on as accurate an observation as possible. Since no two karmic pasts can be exactly identical, the expression of the double is bound to be extremely precise and individual.

The third step of finding the cause lies beyond present life and can point to our karmic past, to what we can call our “unredeemed karma.” All past-life debts require that we find the force that enables us to atone and compensate for our transgressions. Knowledge of the past will reach us in vivid dreams, or visions far more conscious than dreams. Atoning and forgiveness have as their major enemies guilt and inflation of the self. Guilt magnifies the dimension of the transgression we have committed. Inflation of the ego finds refuge in denial. Either we remain unaware of the result of our actions, or we believe we can rise above our pain further than our strength allows. The two poles of guilt or pride can be found in the stereotypes of the “villain” and the “saint.”

The practice of destiny learning brings us close to the knowledge of our double, that part of ourselves that we may live uncomfortably with but are unable to push aside. This is a being we can only progressively transform. Working on our double is working on both sides of the threshold. Discernment for “karmic truth” is a delicate faculty. It does not manifest with strong emotions or sensationalism. Talking and practicing in small groups helps to develop it, hence the nature of the format chosen. Destiny learning helps us actively transform our “head knowledge” into “heart knowledge.” It is this knowing-of-the-heart that can create a truly open space between individuals. Our meetings can become a place for true individuality to manifest instead of the far more common meeting of our doubles. The resolve to actively work with our doubles is the key to taking on destiny learning. The desire to know about previous lives can be helpful, but that alone could prove a source of disappointment.

The first part of destiny learning, in the format of a workshop, is practiced in stages. Each of the three steps is looked at from one day to the next. The idea behind these steps lies in giving participants the opportunity to receive insight from their subconscious selves during the night. If deep attention is given to the episode before

sleeping, then upon awakening the next day, a vivid dream or insight can be remembered and later shared with the group.

Destiny learning workshops include the important element of instruction about the ideas of karma and reincarnation, essential for those who are not familiar with them. Attention to detail is fostered through observation exercises. Knowledge of the heart is supported by artistic activity, for example, after sharing an event or when participants are asked to find a “gesture” — an imaginative picture of their recurring events. Finally, an important element is the teamwork; the facilitator is also a participant. Participants themselves ask questions to clarify the narration of an event. They also contribute their own perceptions to the process of identifying previous-life causes, which is the fourth step. Here, as in family constellation work, it is only the subject who can determine the rightness or accuracy of other participants’ insights.

A complete process can lead to the last step of Destiny Learning I, a clear perception of a previous-life cause. This is most often a single isolated event or a general recollection, e.g.: “I was a soldier in a Greek incarnation. I had such and such responsibility and was used to following orders without thinking much about the consequences.” The same can be the result of a dream with a very vivid sequence of events. Knowledge about a past incarnation reaches us in a very precise and often limited way, analogous to how we will discern a minute portion of the heavens when looking through a telescope. Nevertheless, such a perception from a previous-life is often the source of countless insights into problems that besiege us in our present life.

The second part of destiny learning begins with accepting karma, truly taking responsibility for our lives. If we have truly connected with a previous life event or with our pre-birth resolves, we will now have the strength to carry a “freer deed” into the world — a deed that will emancipate ourselves (even ever so slightly) from the compulsions that work through our double.

Something new and unforeseen can enter the world through a continuous exertion of our consciousness and will — something, for example, that can move conflict forward. In the last two stages – Destiny Learning II and III we are beginning to re-order our karma and bring a healing force into our social environment. The following is a brief

description of something which, as an experience to be undergone, cannot be fully grasped with a mental description.

## **Destiny Learning II: Transforming Our Relationships**

Destiny Learning II (Steps 5 and 6) can be divided into two parts. Each is accompanied by an exercise called “looping,” because its own seven steps are graphically represented as a loop.<sup>5</sup>

*Step 1: Transforming our Double.* Looping I concerns transforming our “double beings.” These have a life and intelligence of their own and overshadow understanding of our karmic tasks. Their resistance increases the moment we start exercising. However, these are the very same resistances we need to encounter in order to acquire new faculties of understanding. We can come to the conclusion that we could not develop them without the help of our double.

Key to Looping I is the practice of a “freer deed.” It is realistically defined as freer rather than free because under the pressure of our shadow, we have only limited freedom. Moving away from the compulsory element of our double truly requires exertion of the will. Whatever difficult situation an individual has to face, change can happen through small steps taken with discipline and constant repetition. The deed can be done via thought (acquiring a different perspective), feeling (controlling our strong antipathies), or action. Ultimately we accomplish something that our natural disposition does not move us to do spontaneously and then observe the reaction of the double. The first freer deeds can be accomplished on the mental level only. It may be a good step to think of the very same individual once a day, and hold back from bringing charged feelings into the picture. If there is an individual with whom we have difficulties dealing, bringing ourselves to say hello every day may already be an important step. This practice should enable us to perceive something that lives in us as an objective reality that we can, so to speak, put before us.

Through recognition and understanding of the particular aspect of our double we enter the situations of conflict or personal hardship in a more conscious way. Our double

knows what it wants to prevent. When we defy it, it takes a stand. At that moment feelings of satisfaction, accusation and guilt surface. Expressed in different terms we can say that the double manifests, determined to repeat the pattern of a previous incarnation, holding us back from realizing the specific purpose of the present incarnation.

It is useful to refrain from interpretations; what is helpful, on the contrary, is keeping a journal with accurate information. Finding karmic causes has to be supported with the help of revelations that can come from the night. Knowledge may come as an insight the next morning. The subsequent knowledge of the task is an act of looking back at our pre-birth resolves, an act of remembering. When the first freer deed has been mastered, then a second freer deed can be planned. We will be guided to this next step by the last stages of the previous process.

***Step 2: Transforming Our Relationships.*** At some point in our personal development, we start becoming conscious not only of our karma but also of our relationships with other people. We become aware of the network of relationships, especially of those that have a major bearing on our life story.

We begin the process by recognizing the persons who have had an influence on us, both positive and negative. We look at personal friendships, love and hate, lifelong relationships, deaths in the family, professional relationships and all those who have helped us on our spiritual path. To begin the Looping II exercise, we then choose and work on one relationship. As in Looping I, we will perform a freer deed but the difference is that, after performing the action, we can now observe the reaction of the other person. Here again the action may be done in thought, feeling or deed. The circumstances tell us a lot about concrete possibilities. We do not work with the other person but with ourselves — although, as a result, the other may soon sense something and begin to act differently. One of the main reasons for this limitation is that processes of inner change move at a different pace for each person and, therefore, we cannot work at them in a collective fashion.

To set the process in motion, the following questions help us determine the nature of a freer deed:

- How am I affecting the other person?
- What are the obstructions between us?
- What is blocking that person and what can I do to support her true being?

In time we move away from judging, blaming the other person, or defending our actions, acquire more interest in the other. The realization that the situation may become fixed in a set, immutable pattern provides motivation for the freer deed.

After a freer deed, people around us — our whole environment — starts to perceive us differently. Reactions can be observed in the other person but also in oneself. Often unexpected events are generated. Over time, and with the benefit of night-learning, aspects or indications of the original karmic situation in a previous life will appear. The nature of the karmic connection will appear more clearly the more we keep practicing freer deeds. We try now to move away from compulsions generated in a previous life, those tendencies that seem to become more common in our time. After repeating the exercise a sufficient number of times we can reawaken to the reality of the karmic task we face. This understanding will offer more clarity about the next freer deeds we could perform.

All through the process, the reaction of the double will also evolve. From being the one who offers resistance, he somehow becomes a sort of advisor telling us what can be achieved and what cannot be achieved. Over time freeing deeds are prepared over progressively wider areas of influence and we will notice that our taking responsibility releases the other person's attachment to certain stances and behaviors.

We can extend the exercise to more people. In fact, Looping II should be practiced until we clearly visualize a network of people. The end result of the process should be the realization that we are all connected and that none of us can rightfully claim to be the saint or the sinner in any situation. Healing comes from our ability to atone and forgive – the boundary between the two being rather blurred from this perspective.

Our relationships with the dead may come to the fore during this process and we may become conscious of their desire to help us. The dead, like the living, are working on their destiny, and our freeing deeds may have positive effects on them as well. By

perceiving this network of relationships, our karmic horizon expands, and offers us a growing vision into the future.

### **Destiny Learning III: Re-ordering Karma**

In the step of re-ordering karma our actions will have the character of initiative. Re-ordering karma is the stage at which we effectively decide to carry another person's old karma or at least some portion of that karma. Thus, the deeds that we accomplish at this stage need to support the growth of as many other people as possible. These are deeds of love intended for healing.

After we accomplish our pre-set freer deed with the goal of moving a situation forward, as soon as the next day we may have a sense of lightness or a certain uplifting feeling — or we may have some foreboding, or a feeling that something isn't quite right. Karma work at this level enables us to develop a sense of the consequences of our choices. We can call this "karma preview," a faculty which puts us in touch with our prenatal resolves, our life's mission, the idea that we all come to this life for the specific purpose of adding something new to the world.

Whereas in Looping II, what had to do with the past was at the center, in Looping III we focus on what relates to the future. The original freer deed's goal has to do with making what is needed visible, taking the initiative oneself or making the initiative possible for others. The motivation for action should come from a need that is expressed by our environment, by what we have defined as our karmic network.

The springboard of the process, after we have taken initiative, is an earnest analysis of one's motivations, in other words the effect of our double over all aspects of the initiative. The same analysis is turned toward outer factors, such as circumstances, possibilities, obstacles and challenges. At this stage it is appropriate to ask oneself: What strengths and what limitations do I bring to the initiative and what consequences can this have? Likewise we can ask ourselves if the initiative serves the environment or if it serves only the initiator. Is it the right time and what will happen if I should withdraw or hold back? At the central point of the Looping, Step 4, when old karma becomes visible,

we can ask ourselves: “In what way does this initiative belong to me?” Or “Am I entitled to carry this and to carry it further?” In Step 5 we become aware of the social tasks involved. In Step 6 we reflect and accept what is possible and what isn't. Acceptance of karma is what we need to develop at this stage. This can be strengthened by a daily review in which we ask ourselves what we could have done better or differently. After the process of review is finished, we move on to another freer deed that offers a forward-moving impetus.

Destiny learning makes the reality of repeated earthly lives not only something we can study and understand in general terms, but also a growing dimension of personal experience, a realization that offers us new dimensions of hope over and against a purely materialistic understanding of our lives.

## REFERENCES

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- 2) For a specific look at adult education see: *Awakening the Will: Principles and Processes in Adult Learning*, Coenraad van Houten, 1995, Temple Lodge, London.
- 3) *Truth and Science, Prelude to a 'Philosophy of Spiritual Activity'*, 1891, Steiner, Mercury Press, Spring Valley, N. Y., preface.
- 4) *Practising Destiny: Principles and Processes in Adult Learning*, Coenraad van Houten, 2000, Temple Lodge, London.
- 5) The description of Destiny Learning II and III can be found in detail in *The Threefold Nature of Destiny Learning*, Coenraad van Houten, 2004, Temple Lodge, Forest Row, U. K.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1) *In Need of Special Understanding: Camphill Conferences on Living with Handicapped Adults*, Karl König, 1962-1964, Camphill Press, Botton Village, U. K.
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