

## Space is Human

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### **Be happy!**

In 1921 Fritz von Bothmer was asked by Rudolf Steiner to develop the gymnastic education at the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart. When Bothmer confessed to feeling somewhat inadequate for the task, Rudolf Steiner simply advised him to "be happy" in his work with the children. That is what he did; and gradually he evolved a series of gymnastic exercises. Bothmer did not start by imposing abstract theories onto movement. He started simply by moving. He started from the one question, "what is true human movement?" and grew from there, as we all can. It is the recognition of this starting point that has enabled me to take courage in my own work as a gym teacher. The tightrope walker knows

Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay on Nature says, "Man is the dwarf of himself. Once he was permeated and dissolved by Spirit. He filled nature with his overflowing currents." Now this may seem to be just pretty language, but Bothmer had similar intuitions and began to search for practical ways in which that knowledge could inform human movement. Human beings are not just a series of mechanical levers moving in abstract space, as the old gymnastics of 'physical jerks' would have it. We reach out beyond our fingertips; space reaches into us. The whole body of the air sustains us. Surely the tightrope walker knows this as he carries the pole across, to sense better the wing of the horizon holding him.

This experience of space is plainly visible if you watch the children moving. Imagine them, aged eight, entering the gymnasium for the first time, timid at first, but with a natural grace and flow to their movements. They hardly yet belong to gravity. Walking across a beam they are instinctively confident that the universe will catch them if they fall. Confronting an obstacle, they play with it. It is not yet something standing in the way. The gym teacher at this point has only to link on to what is moving within the children. No formal exercises yet, but encouragement through pictures and adventures drawn from everyday life: chopping wood, ringing bells, building a house, swinging over

canyons 1000 ft. deep with crocodiles at the bottom. I mean the 'everyday' life of a child's imagination. And many of these activities can be brought, through simple verses, into rhythmic exercises.

### **Hidden in what is human**

Of course, as the children become more aware of themselves as separate individuals, they fall away from that first spontaneity of movement and need further challenges. Bothmer recognised this, and developed a series of exercises, trying to remain true to what he saw unfolding in the children. Compared with modern practices of 'free expression' in movement they are, no doubt, 'formal' exercises. But they are not abstract. He did not invent them. He would claim to have discovered them hidden in what is human. Though I do not have space here to describe them in detail, I can perhaps indicate the quality of movement with which we try to work.

Bothmer's first formal exercises are still very much in the realm of play; a 'play between weight and lightness'; between what is below the 'horizontal' (made by the arms outstretched) and what is above it.

In the beginning God created heaven and earth' - two extremes, between which we can now begin to move dynamically. Normally we think only of gravity as a force. But Bothmer insists on speaking of another, sustaining, uplifting force - 'levity'. It is hard to find a language in which to speak of this (official science has not begun to do so), but if we are to transcend the present materialisation of sport we have to attempt it.

One possible language (greatly oversimplified here, but I have found it helpful) is derived from projective geometry.

### **Earth-bound**

The diagrams illustrate two different experiences of a centre: one radial, explosive, possibly even aggressive; the other softer, created from the periphery of space inward. These are two possibilities in geometry. They are two possibilities for gymnastics also. When we do physical jerks we are poking out into space from the radial centre. We confront each other and the environment as separate (even alien) beings. So much in our lives—the noise of the traffic, our enslavement to the clock—cramps us into such

a centre. And so much in modern sport—circuit training, the emphasis on competition—serves to enhance this. I do not wish to dismiss these activities as entirely useless. Certainly to be strong in the world we need to be able to take a stand and not be forever dreaming into things. But there comes a point at which it ceases to serve what is human. We become bound by our muscles instead of being master of them. A grotesque caricature of this is the use of Anabolic Steroids in athletics whereby the human being is sacrificed to what is external - the desire to win, or to break records. Around such a radial centre in ourselves tensions gather, and the possibility of violence and vandalism.

#### **Within the cosmos**

Bothmer was not happy with such a one-sided gymnastics. The exercises he developed call upon us to enter a different experience of space, to relate to a space for which that other kind of 'centre' is a reality, and whereby we feel ourselves embedded within the cosmos. That sounds strange, but really it is part of our everyday experience (except that we lack the language for it and so pass it by). Is it not clearly visible in a person's movements whether he moves as part of the environment, rhythmically related to it; or whether he is cut off from it, a knot of muscle and bone stumbling over everything? This applies to doing the washing-up as well as to gymnastics. It is a common experience that some of us seem 'earth-bound', whereas others carry 'an air about them', or come 'trailing clouds of glory', as Wordsworth put it.

#### **Observing a child's movements**

The gym teacher can work with this in a practical way. For instance, in one of Bothmer's exercises for the older children the qualities of the 'four elements', earth, water, air and fire (which in the human body correspond to bone, muscle, breath and blood), are taken as a basis for movement. In my working with gymnastics I have come to see here a key to all the exercises, indeed to every aspect of human movement. We can observe a child's movements and say which one of these four elements is lacking. The two most obvious examples are the child who seems all earth and bone, too rigid, lacking the flow between positions; and the child who is all watery without any backbone. It was the ancient ideal that these four elements should, in the true human being, be mixed equally. Observing such tendencies in the children, I can adapt exercises accordingly. I can ask them to exaggerate the wateriness, to free their muscles from their bones. Or I can ask them to fill the air so that their movements do not remain locked inside them.

I remarked earlier that the younger children bring with them a natural balance and harmony. As part of the process of growing up, however, they fall away from it. More and more they become related to gravity. The girls change shape, become heavier; the boys shoot into their long limbs (a little later than the girls) and are unable to fill them. You could say that at puberty they are for the first time properly on the earth, even earthbound. This is often a distressing time for them. Their movements become self-conscious; everyone seems to be looking at them. For only now do they took out at the world from the radial centre that I spoke of. Very often they lose their sense of balance. A girl who a year before could skip across a beam without thinking, suddenly seizes up with fear. Unable to trust the wing of the horizon, she shrinks inside herself and tries to hold the balance from there. These young people have to learn their relationship to space, time and gravity all over again.

In a sense all Bothmer's exercises are a preparation for this moment. The exercises, which began as a play between weight and lightness, now become more geometrical, demanding more consciousness within the three ethereal planes of space to which the human body relates.

And gradually the children are led towards a fall into gravity, cutting themselves off from that which sustains them in space, and then finding it again. Tension and release. This culminates in 'the fall into the point' - dropping from one extreme to the other. You could call it a fall into physical space out of the light-filled space that as young children they seemed to move in. It is most important that the young people experience this fall in gymnastics. There can be no shying away from it. But the hope is that what has been worked with in the earlier exercises will help the children through this difficult time, so that once more they can move freely in the world.

#### **Adolescents need challenges**

Around this time some of the children want to take up gymnastics in a more conscious way. They demand tests on their strength and skill and courage. This need can be met to some extent through working conscientiously with the apparatus. All the principles that Bothmer worked with in his standing exercises are applicable here. Take the four elements again:- to a child who confronts an obstacle as though he were a bulldozer I can say 'try to pour yourself over it.' Asking a child to do a handspring I can encourage her to feel it in the whole arc of the air so that it takes flight. It is true that some aspects of 'Olympic' gymnastics are hardening, but these can be redeemed and brought to serve what is human. Bothmer himself felt that his exercises led quite naturally into tumbling and work with the

apparatus. The adolescents need such challenges if they are not to remain flabby and lethargic.

Some do remain so. Some begin to ask, 'Why should I do gym? What use will it be to me in my career as a marine biologist?' A hard question to answer, and my heart sinks when I hear it because often it means that the children are no longer enjoying themselves in the gym. Certainly I have answers, but it is difficult to find a language acceptable to the children ('Well, you could do it underwater and dazzle the fishes').

### **Naked**

The word 'gymnast' comes from the Greek word meaning 'naked'; presumably because the Ancient Greeks were so at their exercises. But I take it to mean more - that in gymnastics we strive to be sheer human beings, to enact what is human. Maybe gymnastics will not help me to be a marine biologist, but it could perhaps help me to be human. And I do not mean just the physical human being. Bothmer's exercises work also in the realm of morality. It is not coincidence that many of our words for moral qualities are taken from human posture. We speak of the upright man and of the crook. Right means straight; wrong means wrung, or twisted. We speak of someone who stands by his word, a straightforward man. We speak of another who has no backbone to his character - as though truth were somehow related to how we stand or walk. Also we express our feelings spatially, feeling 'low' or 'high', or 'middling'. It is obvious that our emotions are connected with posture. Sometimes, to rid ourselves of a depressed state we have only to stand up straighter, as though standing up into our true human stature once more, filling it out. Perhaps that is why we express our identity, our 'I' with the vertical line - this uprightness that makes us human.

### **Three human planes**

These expressions in the language are not just symbolic. Space really is human. The three planes of space that sustain us can be experienced qualitatively. This surface which gives rise to 'above' and 'below' is where we meet each other, shake hands, embrace. This is the social realm, where all hearts are on the level. In movement we can feel it as a rippling surface of water which flows between us and our surroundings.

The plane which gives rise to 'back' and 'front' is quite different. This does not ripple. It shines out into the world. I feel strong in it. I can move forwards from it into the world, or can step back. This has to do with the human faculty of Will.

The third surface, which gives rise to 'left' and 'right', is much more difficult to move in. I can do so only with

thought and deliberation. It is the surface I move the knife through to dissect and analyse, to discriminate between this and that. All this is becoming rather schematic but I think we can glimpse from it that the three planes of space are not abstract. They relate to human faculties, and so quite naturally we find a language here to express moral qualities.

### **Receiving our stature**

In calling upon the children to be true to these planes in their movements we are not being pedantic. We are in fact asking them to stand within their human stature. Of course it can be pedantic if done only from the one-sided experience of the radial centre (in which case I am just physical man protruding into an abstract universe). But the gymnastic education developed by Bothmer strives to overcome this. Instead of raising my arms into the horizontal position and feeling it to be my horizontal I can feel that it belongs to the universe and that I am filling out what my body has been built (by the forces of that universe) to relate to. This is a very subtle distinction, but if worked with long enough (and the children have that opportunity) it can change the whole quality of a person's movements. This involves a transformation of the old (19th Century empire-building) image of the human being, confident inside his skin. It means coming to a new image of our humanity, continually receiving our stature out of, and being confirmed by, human space.

Above the horizontal is a light, awake, conscious realm ...

Below the horizontal is the heavy, dark, sleeping, unconscious realm ...