

ELEMENTAL BEINGS AND HUMAN DESTINIES

RUDOLF STEINER

Golden Blade 1984

A lecture at Dornach, December 6, 1919, printed in German in “Die Sendung Michaels” published by Der Verlag der Rudolf Steiner Nachlassverwaltung, Dornach, Switzerland (GA 194) as lecture 7. Translation revised by Charles Davy.

FOR a true understanding of the nature of the human being we have to recognise his division into three members, each of which is, relatively speaking, self-dependent. We have within the human being the head, the organs of the breast system, and the organs of the limbs. These are of course crude expressions that are only roughly true. Under the name of limbs, for example, we have to include a good part of what is contained in the trunk. Moreover, as you will have gathered from my lectures, as well as from my book, *Riddles of the Soul*, there is a connection between the head of Man and his life of thought and ideation; the whole rhythmic activity in Man — roughly speaking, the breast system — is connected with the sphere of feeling; and finally the sphere of the will, which represents the essentially spiritual part of Man, goes together with the system and organisation of the limbs. Relatively speaking, these three systems of the human organism are independent one of another. Similarly, the life of ideas, the life of feeling and the life of will are each self-dependent, although at the same time they work together.

Now, as you know, we can best comprehend the difference from a spiritual point of view between these three systems when we observe them in the following way. In ordinary waking life Man is fully awake only in his head system — in all that has to do with the life of thinking and ideas. Everything connected with the life of feeling — that is, from a bodily aspect, with the rhythmic system — is a dream-life. Even in daytime the life of feeling pervades our waking life with a life of dreams. What goes on in the sphere of feeling we know indirectly through ideas, but we can never know it directly through the feelings themselves. The life of will is in still greater darkness; we have no clearer grasp of its real content than we have of the life of sleep.

A recognition of these distinctions allows us to indicate more exactly than is usually done the character and extent of the subconscious states lying below ordinary human consciousness. Subconscious ideas lie beneath the life of feeling; and still more deeply unconscious ideas lie beneath the life of will.

Now it is very important to realise that each one of the three systems contains within it thinking, feeling and willing. In the head system or the system of thought, a life of feeling and a life of will are also present; only they are much less developed than the life of ideas. Similarly, thoughts are present in the sphere of feeling, more feebly than in the sphere of the head and only coming to consciousness in a dreamlike manner.

One thing is usually quite disregarded, my dear friends, in our time of abstract science, and it is this. These subconscious members of the human being are more objective in proportion as they are less subjectively present in consciousness. What do I mean by that? I mean this. In our life of ideas, in our head life, we have processes which take place within us. On the other hand, what we experience through our rhythmic system, the processes that go on in the sphere of our feeling, are by no means our own individual property. They take place within us and yet at the same time they represent objective world-processes. This means that when you feel, you have of course an experience in yourself, but this experience is at the same time something that happens in the world and has

significance there. And it is of extraordinary interest to follow up the world-processes that lie behind our life of feeling.

Suppose you experience something that affects you very deeply, Some event that moves you to joy or sorrow. Now you know that the whole of life runs its course in such a way that we can separate it into periods of about seven years in length. Roughly speaking, the first is from birth to the change of teeth, the second to the age of puberty, the third to the beginning of the twenty-first year, and so on. All these boundary lines are of course only approximate. Here then we have *one* division that shows itself in the course of human life.

The turning-points in the development of the human being which we arrive at by this method are clearly marked in the earlier part of life — change of teeth, and puberty — but later are more or less concealed, although they can be distinctly noted by one who knows what to look for. That which takes place in the soul and spirit of the human being about the twenty-first year of life is, for one who can observe it, just as clearly perceptible as the change at puberty is for external physiology. The division into seven-year periods holds true, in fact, for the whole course of human life.

Now let us go back to the event that makes a strong impression on our life of feeling. Suppose the event happens between the change of teeth and puberty. A very remarkable thing then takes place, which in these days of crude observation is not generally noticed. The impression made upon your feeling is there, and then gradually the vibrations of it die away in your consciousness. But something takes place in the objective world quite apart from what is in your consciousness, quite apart from any share your life of soul has in it. And this process that goes on in the objective world may be compared with the setting up of a vibratory motion. It vibrates out into the world. And the remarkable thing is that it does not go out and out endlessly into the infinite, but when it has spread itself out for a sufficient distance — when its elasticity is, so to speak, used up — it swings back and makes its appearance in the next seven-year period as an impulse that works upon your life of soul from outside. I will not say that such an event always comes back seven years later, for the lapse of time depends on the whole form and character of the individual life, but it falls into the course of the next seven-year period, although very often entirely without your notice.

Yes, my dear friends, we continually undergo experiences which strike in upon our feeling life and are the reaction of the world to an experience we had in the sphere of feeling during the previous seven-year period. An event that stirs and moves our feelings resounds again into our life of soul during the next stage of life. People do not usually remark such things, but anyone who takes a little trouble can learn to observe them, even externally.

Who of you has not at one time had the experience that someone you know well suddenly becomes dejected and out of humour? You have no idea why, but a change has come over him “out of the blue”, as we say. If you follow up the matter and have the eyes of your soul open to observe the particular way in which such a man conducts himself in life, if you can feel what is in between the words he says — or rather, what is *within* the words — then you will be able to go back to some earlier event that affected him deeply. And during the whole of the interval something has been going on in the world which would not have been going on if the man had not had that moving experience. The whole thing is a process which, besides being experienced by the man himself, takes place also as an absolutely objective experience outside him.

You will readily see how many opportunities there are for such things to go on outside us! They come about through our instrumentality, but they are none the less objective world-processes. These processes become involved in all that is going on among the elemental beings outside us, including such elemental beings as I described to you recently. You will remember how in another connection I brought them together with the breathing and the whole rhythmic system. Now you can see them working together with the rhythmic system indirectly through stimulation of the feelings. When we understand these things rightly, we are led to the inevitable conclusion that Man is continually creating around him as it were a great aura. And into the waves that are thus thrown up, elemental

beings plunge; they mix themselves up, as it were, in the whole process and are able to influence the reaction that comes back on to Man — their power to do so, however, depending on the individual human being.

Let us picture the whole process. Something moves you deeply. You ray it out all around you. When it comes back to you, it is not unchanged; in the meantime elemental beings have concerned themselves with it, and when it works back on to you, then, together with the process outside you of which the elemental beings took hold, you receive also the influences and workings of these elemental beings. Man spreads out around him a spiritual atmosphere whereby he comes into contact with elemental beings — he and they mutually affect one another. All destiny that works itself out *within* the course of life is connected with these beings. For even within this life we have a kind of fulfillment of our destiny. If we have some experience today, then that experience has a significance for our later life. And this in fact is how our destiny is moulded. Elemental beings who feel attracted to us by reason of our nature, work at the shaping of our destiny. There they attain to a feeling of themselves: there they work with us and upon us.

* * *

We have here obtained an insight into the interplay between Man and his environment, and can see how spiritual forces are at work in the environment. By following this interplay, we can throw a light on many things that happen to Man in the way of destiny. An insight into these connections is nowhere within the scope of the 'enlightened' knowledge of our times; we can find traces of it only in traditions that have survived from earlier times, when Man lived in more elemental stages of consciousness and had more direct connection with reality. These traditions you will find sometimes very beautifully brought to expression in poems of earlier ages, where a destiny that befalls a human being is referred to the intervention of elemental beings. One of the most beautiful that has been preserved is a poem often presented to you in a Eurythmy performance. Here you can see how elemental beings from the Elf King's realm intervene in the destiny of Man. The poem runs thus:

THE ELF KING'S DAUGHTER

Sir Olaf rides from house and hall
Till late, his wedding guests to call.

There elves are dancing on the green,
Elf King's daughter amidst them is seen.

“Welcome Sir Olaf, your hand I'll take,
Come dance and join us for my sake.”

“I shall not dance nor dance I may,
Tomorrow will be my wedding day!”

“Mark well, Sir Olaf, and dance with me —
Two golden spurs I'll give to thee!

A silken sark snow white and fine —
My mother bleached it by moonshine.”

“I shall not dance nor dance I may
Tomorrow will be my wedding day!”

“Mark well, Sir Olaf, and dance with me —
A mountain of gold I'll give to thee!”

“To a mountain of gold I'll not say nay,
But I shall not dance nor dance I may.”

“If you refuse to dance with me
Illness and pest shall follow thee.”

Over his heart she struck amain,
Never he felt such bitter pain.

Pale-faced he sat on his horse so tame —
“Go back”, she cried, “to your worthy dame.”

And when at last he reached his gate
Trembling his mother stood to wait.

“My son, my son, oh tell me true
Why is your face of deathlike hue?”

“Of deathlike hue it needs must be
For Elf King's daughter did I see.”

“My son so dear, and loved so well,
What to your bride I needs must tell?”

“Tell her that to the woods I'm bound —
To exercise my horse and hound.”

At early dawn, at break of day,
Came bride and guests in their wedding array.

They feasted and drank of wine and beer —
“Where is Sir Olaf, my bridegroom dear?”

“Sir Olaf to the woods is bound
To exercise his horse and hound!”

The bride she lifted the cloth so red
There lay Sir Olaf — and he was dead.

There you have the elemental world interweaving in the destiny of Man, at the very moment when his destiny strikes in upon him with the shock of illness and of death. Please note the words exactly. In old poems these things are not presented as they would be in poems of recent times. (Herder took these verses from an old folk-poem). Of the poems produced within present day culture we may well say that about 99 per cent are superfluous. The poems that are derived from an ancient knowledge are always to be distinguished by the fact that they are true to reality. It could not

possibly have been said in this poem that she struck him on the head, or on the mouth, or on the nose, but:

Over the heart she struck him amain,
He felt therefrom a grievous pain.

In this connection it has to be an organ of the rhythmic system, hence the *heart*.

What I want you to note is that here you have an entirely faithful reproduction in poetry of what actually goes on around Man in such an hour of destiny. It is in fact always going on around Man, but it makes itself felt particularly strongly in connection with the phenomenon of this periodic return of experiences in the sphere of feeling. For these always come back to us in a changed form. They enter into our destiny only after they have passed through whatever the elemental beings have found to do with them. Just as we live within the external physical air or among the products of the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms — in the very same way do we live with the subconscious parts of our nature in spiritual spheres. In particular, with our rhythmic system we live in the spiritual sphere of the elemental beings. And in that sphere is shaped as much of our destiny as can be shaped in the course of life between birth and death.

Only because in our head we are fully awake, do we rise up at all out of this interplay with the elemental beings. In respect of our head life alone we are not involved in the realm of the elemental beings. There in our head we emerge, so to speak, above the surface of the ocean of elemental existence, in which as human beings we perpetually swim. Here then you may see how experiences can come back in the form of destiny even within the ordinary course of life, when they are related to our rhythmic system.

For the limb system, too, there is an interplay with the environment, but it is very much more complicated. Here again the events swing back; but they make a wider circuit and come back only in the next life or in one of the following earth-lives. Thus we can say that what we call our destiny or Karma need not after all be so enigmatic for us, if we look on it as only a further expansion of what can be studied in the return of experiences within a single life. For the experiences do not come back unchanged; they have undergone a very great change in the meantime.

Let me now draw your attention to a particular fact. Wherever I have lectured on education, I have always given emphasis to an important landmark in the course of life that occurs at about the ninth year. It is a turning-point that should be very carefully marked in teaching. Up to that time one's teaching about nature should be entirely of the kind where the description of nature and her processes is connected — by way of fables, legends, and so forth — with the moral life. Only at the ninth year may one begin to describe nature in a simple, elementary manner. Then the child is ripe for it. In Waldorf education the whole arrangement and treatment of subjects is derived directly and entirely from actual observation of the human being, down to the smallest details. I pointed this out in the article I wrote on the educational foundations of the Waldorf School, and I alluded there to this turning-point around the ninth year.

We may characterise this turning-point by saying that the ego-consciousness receives then a new form. The child becomes capable of taking note of external nature in a more objective way. Earlier, he unites whatever he sees in nature with his own being. Now the ego-consciousness unfolds, as you know, in the first seven-year stage of life, from about 2 – 2 ½ years of age. What happens is that it comes back in the second seven-year period, at about the ninth year. This is one of the most striking 'returns' — this return of the ego-consciousness at about the ninth year of age. It comes back in a more spiritual form, whereas in the second or third year of life it has more of a soul character. This is only one of the events which comes back in a striking manner. The same observation can be made for less significant events.

Indeed, my dear friends, it will become urgently necessary for the future of human evolution to pay attention to these intimate things in the life of Man. An insight into such things must gradually become part of general culture. The culture and education of mankind change from epoch to epoch. We today, for example, are quite unhappy if at ten years old our children cannot read or do sums. The Romans were not so at all; they were unhappy if a child of ten did not yet know the twelve tables of the law. We for our part do not put ourselves to great trouble to make our children acquainted with the terms of the law. Our children's minds would be in a sorry plight if we did! What is thought necessary for people generally to be aware of, changes from age to age; and today we stand at the starting point of a time when the very evolution of the earth and mankind requires that these more intimate connections of Man's life of soul shall be generally recognised. Man will have to come to the point of knowing himself more exactly than has been held to be necessary hitherto. Otherwise these things will work back upon the whole disposition of human life in a most unfavourable way.

Because we do not know that something which stirs us deeply has such an origin, it does not by any means follow that nothing of the kind takes place in our life of soul. The events come back; they exercise their influence upon our life of soul. We cannot account for them. We do not attempt to bring them into our consciousness. The result is that many people today suffer a great deal from conditions of soul which they simply accept, while of course having no idea that they are to be referred to earlier experiences. Whatever concerns our feelings always comes back in some form or other. You will probably remember the typical instance I have often given. If we teach a child to pray — if, that is, we teach him to develop a prayerful mood and feeling, the effect of it will swing back into his life after many years. It swings back in the interval, but then swings out again further, and only later, after a very long time, does the feeling of prayer come back and manifest in a mood of blessing. As I have often said: No-one will be able in old age to bestow blessing upon others, merely from his presence, from the imponderable elements in his nature, if in childhood he has not learned to pray. Prayer turns into the power to bless. That is how things come back in life. And it is becoming imperative that men should understand these things.

* * *

The truth is that men's failure to comprehend these things is the cause of their inability to perceive the great significance of the Mystery of Golgotha. What meaning can it have for people who are caught in the toils of present day education when they hear it said: 'After Christ had passed through the Mystery of Golgotha, He united Himself with the life of earthly humanity?' People are not ready to form any idea of their reciprocal relation to the very realm of life wherein the Christ is to be found. The influence of the Christ Impulse is not very noticeable in the concept-forming activity of our heads. As soon, however, as we look down into the unconscious, as soon as we turn our gaze downwards into the sphere of feeling and into the sphere of willing, then we live, first of all, in the sphere of elemental beings; but this sphere is interwoven for us with the Christ Impulse. By way of our rhythmic system — that is, by way of our feelings — we dive down into the realm with which the Christ has united Himself. There we come to the place where the Christ is truly to be found, quite objectively, not merely through tradition or through subjective mysticism.

Moreover, we are living now in an epoch when the events that come from this place, in the way I have just explained, are coming to have great objective significance for the life of Man. For they are beginning to exercise an unconscious influence on men's decisions, upon all that men do; and this is true, even if they struggle against it. If only we are willing to enter into this matter and understand it, we shall be able to experience the influence consciously and to reckon with it; and then we shall be able to call on the spiritual worlds around us to aid us and to work with us.

* * *

An external observation will suffice to show that in this matter we are standing at a turning-point in human evolution. I need only refer you to one fact of which I have often spoken from one or

another point of view. If we look at the accustomed treatment of history, we shall see that it has not yet reached an understanding of the Mystery of Golgotha. Just recall the history of the world as it is usually set before us. A description is given of the ancient Assyrian and Babylonian kingdoms, of the ancient Persian and Egyptian kingdoms and of Greece and Rome, and then perhaps mention is made that the Mystery of Golgotha took place, and after that follows an account of the migrations of peoples, and so on. Some historians then carry the story up to the French Revolution or to Poincaré; others to the downfall of the Hohenzollerns, and so forth. But in all this *fable convenue* you will find no mention of the continued working of the Christ Impulse. From the point of view of history as conceived today, it is just as though the Christ Impulse had been simply struck out. It is not there.

It is remarkable how, for example, an historian such as Ranke, who was a Christian and had a true appreciation of the Christ Impulse from a subjective aspect, simply cannot bring the Christ Event into his history. He does not know what to make of it. It plays no part in his conception of history. We may truly say that for Man's knowledge of the spirit, as manifested in history, Christianity is not yet there. It is our anthroposophical spiritual science which for the first time treats history in such a way as to reckon quite positively with the necessity that in the fourth Post-Atlantean epoch the event of Golgotha should break in upon the course of historical evolution. This event is placed at the very centre of our picture of the history of Man. Yes, and we go further. Not only do we receive the event of Golgotha into our picture of the history of Man, we portray cosmic evolution also, so that the Mystery of Golgotha has place within it.

If you will study my *Outline of Occult Science*, you will find that we do not speak there merely of eclipses of the sun or eclipses of the moon or of explosions or eruptions in the cosmos, but we speak of the Christ Event as a cosmic event. Strange to say, while the so-called historians can find no possible way of including the Christ Event in the progress of Man, the official representatives of religion are infuriated when they hear that some kind of anthroposophical spiritual science has entered the field and speaks of the Christ Event as a cosmic event. When they hear this, they treat it as a terrible outrage. Thus you can see how little readiness there is on the part of the Churches to meet the requirements of our time, for it is essential that the Christ Event should be brought into connection with the great events of the universe.

It must be said that even theologians today often speak of the Christ just as they may speak of any other divine Being. They speak of Him very much as the Hebrews of old or the Jews today speak of their Jahve. I told you a few days ago how one could take Harnack's book, *The Essence of Christianity*, and substitute for the name of Christ, wherever he uses it, the general name of God, and this without altering the sense, for Harnack has no glimmering of the specific nature of Christianity. His book is page for page a description of the very opposite of the essence of Christianity. It does not treat of Christianity at all; it treats of a general Jahve teaching.

It is important to point out these things, for they are deeply connected with the necessary demands of our time. It is no vague awareness of the presence of an abstract spiritual world that is needed: the evolution of human culture requires that Man should bring into it a consciousness of the actual spiritual world in which we live with all that we feel and will and do, and out of which we raise ourselves only in so far as we think. We emerge from it only with our heads, so to speak. Indeed, an entirely new kind of world-picture is justified when the endeavour is made to permeate all our feeling and willing and doing with the Christ Impulse. Our modern astronomy and our theory of evolution have been able to develop so entirely along the lines of abstract formulae solely because the Christ Impulse has not taken hold of men inwardly, but has remained a tradition. Even where it has taken hold of men subjectively, their inner experiences have not been at the same time objective world experiences — that is, experiences where we feel an interplay between ourselves and all that is happening spiritually around us.

Here and there one sees people beginning to be very keenly aware of the need for a new impulse in the evolution of humanity. But it is with the greatest difficulty that they come to the point of

resolving to take hold of the life of the spirit in its actuality. When people speak of the spirit, they always have more or less a desire to keep within the abstract.

Even the consciousness of how we stand in relation to our thoughts must change in a certain way. For, as I have repeatedly pointed out, anthroposophical spiritual science is brought forward at this present time in fulfillment of a definite purpose. It is not the result of a wish to promote enthusiasm for some sort of ideal. It springs from an insight into Man's needs at the present time. And we must again at this point relate the needs of the present day to certain powers of the soul that were present in earlier ages, when Man had a closer connection with his spiritual environment. For in earlier times the conditions of Man's life of soul were quite different.

As I have often explained to you, we cannot look for any further development of Man from sources outside himself. The impulses for the progress of human evolution must in future be called forth from within; they must proceed from our connection with the spiritual world, and we must not blind ourselves to the fact that unless something is added by our own exertion to the experiences of life, these will tend increasingly to become experiences of decline. We find ourselves already in the descending evolution of the earth, and as human beings we must lift ourselves up by our own efforts if we are to transcend the earth-evolution, for we can emerge beyond it only through our connection with the spiritual world. It is our strivings in the direction of knowledge that we shall have to feel as a power within us, enabling humanity to pass over into future stages of evolution, when the Earth dies away, even as we pass on to further stages of evolution when our body dies away and we go through the gate of death.

We pass as individual human beings through the gate of death into the spiritual world; the body dies away beneath us. So will it be one day for mankind as a whole. Mankind will evolve over into the Jupiter existence. The Earth will become a corpse. We are even now in the dying stage of its evolution. The individual human being gets wrinkles and grey hairs. For the geologist who knows how to observe correctly, the Earth bears upon her today the unmistakable signs of old age; she is dying away beneath our feet. The spiritual quest we are engaged upon today is working counter to the ageing of the Earth. Awareness of this fact must permeate our consciousness.

* * *

Earlier ages spoke from a different point of view of the close relation between their Mystery knowledge and physical health and healing. This is a truth that must now begin once more to find its way into human consciousness. All striving for knowledge must give rise to the thought: I am doing something to promote the further evolution of the whole of mankind. We shall obviously never come to this consciousness as long as we do not pay attention to the actual process that goes on around us in the way I have described. For until we recognise this, we are bound to regard everything we feel and will and do as our personal affair. We shall have no idea that it is something which takes its course outside us, as well as within.

It will be necessary also for the more exact branches of human knowledge to come to meet this extension of our thought and understanding of the world. And here allow me to refer to something that may perhaps not be fully intelligible to everyone.

The more exact domains of knowledge are by no means yet at their zenith — far from it! For example, you can find today in the exact sciences the most impossible ideas. I will select just one, which may perhaps be generally intelligible. People have usually the following trivial picture: out there somewhere is the sun, and from the sun light goes out in all directions, just as from any other source of light. And you will find that wherever people follow this diffusion of light with mathematical ideas, they will say: You see, the light spreads out and out into the infinite, and then — why then it somehow or other disappears; it gradually weakens and is lost. But this is not so. Everything that spreads out or is diffused in this way reaches a boundary, and from this boundary it swings back again; it returns to its source in a changed form. The sunlight does not go out into the

infinite, but swings back on itself — not indeed as light, but as something else. None the less, it does return.

So it is in reality with every form of light. And so it is with every kind of activity. All activities and influences are subject to the law of elasticity. The elasticity in them always has its boundary or limit. And yet ideas such as I have described above are current in our so-called exact sciences; you will find them presented there today. If you were physicists, I would draw your attention to how people reckon with *distance* traversed and *time*. They call the velocity, usually denoted by 'v', a function of distance and time, and they arrive at the following equation: $v = d/t$

But, my dear friends, that is absolutely false. The velocity is not a resultant; the velocity is an elementary principle or quality that something, be it material or spiritual, bears within it. And this velocity we analyse; we split it up into distance and time. We abstract the two things out of it — space and time. Space and time, however, are not real things in themselves. Velocities, varying velocities, are real.

This observation I make for the benefit of physicists. They will understand me when I say that their theoretical knowledge of time rests in very shaky foundations. These theories would indeed not hold water if we were in a position to grasp the spiritual in its actuality.

That is the very thing required of us in the present Michael Age. It means that we must take full cognisance of the environment of Man; we must come to know the various elemental and higher beings in our environment as surely as we know of the air and water around us. These are the important things for us; and they must once again become a part of general education and culture, as they were in ancient times. People are not prepared to admit this. They will not admit that in human evolution changes occur as momentous as that which occurred, for example, at the turning-point in the middle of the 15th century. And yet it is quite possible to prove it from detailed facts.

Some Swede or Norwegian has recently written a book in which he gives many quotations from the alchemists. In particular he cites a passage where all manner of things are mentioned — mercury, antimony, and so on. And now our author, whom his book shows to be an excellent modern chemist, says he can make nothing of a certain recipe which is indicated by some alchemist. He cannot do so for the simple reason that, when a present-day chemist speaks of mercury or quicksilver, he means the external metal. But in the book from which he is quoting the words mean something quite different. They do not refer to the external metal at all, but to certain processes within the human organism, and they indicate a knowledge of the inner being of Man. They carry the sense they had for the alchemist. Certainly it is quite possible to read them as if one were reading the description of a laboratory experiment, carried out with retorts and the like — but then one gets no meaning out of it! One is bound to regard it all as nonsense. It *has* meaning, however, as soon as we know what was meant by the words antimony, mercury, and so forth in those times. They have, it is true, a certain application to the external minerals, but they refer paramountly to inner processes of human nature, for which one had other means of approach than those we have today. The relevant writings from before the 15th century have accordingly to be read with an understanding quite different from the way in which we approach scientific writings of later date.

Such things as these give opportunity to study even externally the far-reaching change that has occurred in Man's life of soul. For a long time now, indeed for hundreds of years, mankind has set no value on these things, but today we are living in an epoch when we must begin to place very great value on them.