Rudolf Steiner’s Autobiography

Where I began and where I would like to begin now is with the autobiography of Rudolf Steiner. His autobiography stands as one of the mighty presentations and challenges in biographical sharing. So much of the biography is written in idea form that it is necessary to find the being of Rudolf Steiner as a thinker in the world of ideas. This is not a usual biography for most of us, but one that seeks to lead us to find his being in the lofty world of ideas. To seek his being in the world of ideas in order to appreciate his inner essence is a challenge to any serious seeker. The thinking philosopher is used to seek ideas, but not so used to seek the being of the thinker who lives in the world of ideas. The ideas sought by Rudolf Steiner were, are, ideas which are gained out of freedom, ideas which are pregnant with intention, and are ideas which can lay a foundation for moral action. For anyone dealing with this autobiography, the task is set out clearly and the work is considerable. One has to be prepared to wrestle with ideas. But more, in the ideas shared in this autobiography, something of the person, the being of Rudolf Steiner, shines through. Here he can be sought.

It is in the earlier chapters of this book that Rudolf Steiner takes up the work with Goethe. He tells of his own striving to come to the world of the living idea which can be grasped in the process of sense perception. As the living idea of the plant appeared to the senses of Goethe in the form of the archetypal plant, so Rudolf Steiner strove to find his own way to this same cognition. In addition to the plant, he undertook studies of the mineral, animal and human kingdoms. He studied man’s make up in great detail. Rudolf Steiner actually began his search not so much in the domain of outer nature, but human inner nature. He started with man’s spiritual activity, that is thinking, as thinking can come to birth with much effort. To research thinking was a task which he undertook with much care and much effort. He was undaunted in his quest. By his 26th year, 1886, he was able to share how he had come to see man as a spiritual being able to think and think as a spiritual activity. Pure spiritual activity he came to speak of. This, of course, is no usual activity, and for he who tries to go this path, many a hurdle stands in the way. Rudolf Steiner thought and observed the thinking activity of numerous philosophers by activating his own thinking and continually changing his thinking as he lived into the idea world of each philosopher. Not only the ideas were important, but the thinking which was needed to arrive at these ideas. This was a faithful work carried out by Rudolf Steiner. He had observed the philosophical activity of those who were thinkers. He thought and observed the differentiated activity of the human soul-spirit on the path that can be called the path of the love of wisdom.

Rudolf Steiner shared how he could observe the thinking of another spirit, and how thinking could be used to find the being of the other spirit who lived in the garb of an idea. The one who thinks, who is doing the thinking, who is making activity of thinking into a cognitive organ, comes to the idea which can be seen as the garment of another human being. Our usual thinking is not sufficiently strong to undertake this type of activity. What Rudolf Steiner gives in his autobiography is a good challenge to take this rather difficult path along with him as one is led through his life having to again and again live into the world of ideas. The activity he has carried on as a thinker, seeking other thinkers, he demands in his autobiography in relation to his own being.

After Rudolf Steiner placed the domain of thinking before the souls of those who seek, he then went on in his early years, as revealed in the autobiography, to relate the activity of perceiving and thinking to the various spheres of existence. He detailed man’s perceiving and thinking activity as it relates to the inorganic, the organic, the social-cultural and spiritual reality in all created things. This research he placed into a little monograph known as Goethe’s Theory of Knowledge or more recently as The Science of Knowing. The struggle to find man’s relation to existence and the different kingdoms of existence, though cognitive activity, through the act of knowledge, he placed in this little tome in 1886.

With the faculties gained in the quest of researching the act of knowing, also called epistemology, Rudolf Steiner turned his concerns to the make up and the being of man. Here is what he had to say about this search, this research.

I now felt compelled afresh to press forward toward a knowledge of the natural sciences from the most diverse directions. I was led again to the study of anatomy and physiology. I observed the members of the human, animal and plant organism in their formations. In this study I came to my own way upon Goethe’s theory of metamorphosis. I became more and more aware that the picture of nature, which is attainable through the senses, penetrates through to that which was visible to me.
in a spiritual way.

If in this spiritual way, I directed my look to the soul activity of the human being, to thinking, feeling and willing, the 'spiritual in man took form for me even as a clearly visible image.' I could not linger in the abstractions of which it is customary to think when speaking of thinking, feeling, and willing. In these inner manifestations of the life of soul, I saw creative forces which placed the ‘human being as spirit’ spiritually before me. If I then directed my look to the sense-appearance of man, this was supplemented to my reflective contemplation through the spirit-form which holds sway in the sense-perceptible.

I came upon the sensible-supersensible form of which Goethe speaks, which is interposed, both for the true natural vision and also for spiritual vision, between what the senses grasp and what the spirit perceives.

Anatomy and physiology I struggled through, step by step, to this sensible-supersensible form. In this struggling through, my look fell, at first in a very imperfect way, upon the threefold organization of the human being about which—after having pursued my studies concerning it for thirty years in silence—I first began to speak publicly in my book Von Seelenraetseln (Riddles of the Soul). At the beginning, it became clear to me that in the portion of the human organization in which the formation is directed chiefly to the nerves and the senses, the sensible-supersensible form also stamps itself most strongly upon the sense-perceptible. The head organization appeared to me as that in which the sensible-supersensible also becomes most strongly manifest in the sensible form. On the other hand, I was forced to look upon the organization consisting of the limbs as that in which the sensible-supersensible most completely conceals itself, so that in this organization the forces active in nature external to man continue their work in the shaping of the human body. Between these two poles of the human organization everything seemed to me to exist which expresses itself in a rhythmic way, the processes of breathing circulation, and the like.

At that time I found no one to whom I could have spoken of these perceptions… (Autobiography—pp. 71 and 72)

This quote is placed here so we can see that cognition of the threefold human organization, and the first revelation was not perfect. Thirty years of research preceded the open sharing of this work though Rudolf Steiner was continually at work with this mystery. I would venture to say, that this is one of the greatest mysteries researched by Rudolf Steiner. This mystery, thirty years later was to become the basis for the social efforts which have grown out of his work, as well as the movement for the Threefold Commonwealth. The ordering of the social process is a central use of the perception of man as a threefold being. Man had, in the past, been known to be a body, soul and a spirit. Man was known as a trinitary being until the ecumenical counsel in 869 A.D. when man was claimed by the Church to be a dual being. This discovery by Rudolf Steiner was and is a new trinitary revelation of man, never before spoken to in the history of man’s cultural evolution. Here we are given a threefolding of the human organism.

It might be noted that the little book Von Seelenraetseln has not been translated into English in its entirety. (Editors note – subsequent to this Mercury Press is offering the full text translated to english – click here) So far it has been published as A Case for Anthroposophy with sections of the original not included. My view is that what has been eliminated is actually needed to give a basic orientation for the thesis, that is the threefolding of the human organism. What is left out is the record of a man, Dessoir, who was not honest in pursuing the nature of a human being. It is only on the path of truth, that this man’s true nature can be found. Rudolf Steiner contrasts the truth seeker, Brentano, with the non-truth seeker, Dessoir, in the process of unfolding the threefoldness of the human being. If the perspective of the lie, the untruth, is left out of this little treatise, then the truth seeker may not be appreciated, even overlooked. Also important may be that the incomplete translation can indicate our need to take this impulse of the threefolding of man and the social process more seriously.

Some have come to consider this activity of seeking the threefolding of man, and the social organism, as the most esoteric of all of Rudolf Steiner’s endeavors and the most difficult for we human beings. Ehrenfried Pfeiffer at times, spoke of this work of Rudolf Steiner as his crowning achievement, along with the founding of the Free School for Spiritual Science.

A parting glance at the above quote might stimulate our thoughtfulness about Rudolf Steiner’s reference to his total aloneness with this new mystery. He speaks about his aloneness in relation to his discovery. Those who take the time to work with the Riddles of the Soul (Von Seelenraetseln)
where the threefolding of the organism is presented, most likely will find the reading very difficult. It then is not surprising that Rudolf Steiner found himself standing alone so many years ago. Riddles of the Soul was written twenty-seven years after the first revelation in 1886. Now many more years later the great mystery of the human threefoldness remains quite a challenge for those souls who take up concern for the social organism, enlightened by insights from these pioneering efforts of Rudolf Steiner.