

On Going Off the Deep End

Michael Ronall
Spring Valley, NY

*In the Anthroposophical Society men draw nearer to one another than they would do in other spheres of life. * * * He who would be a true member should strive in the deepest places of his soul for inner tolerance towards his fellow-men. To understand one's fellow-man—even where he thinks and does things which one would not like to think and do oneself—this should be the ideal. * It need not mean an uncritical attitude to weaknesses and faults. To understand is not to make oneself blind. To a human being whom we love, we may speak of his faults and mistakes. In many cases he will feel it as the greatest service of friendship, whereas—if we lay down the law about him with cold indifference of judgment—he recoils from our lack of understanding and consoles himself with feelings of hatred which begin to stir in him against his critic. * In many respects it would become disastrous for the Anthroposophical Society if the intolerance of other men and failure to understand them—so widely dominant in the outer world today—were carried into it. Within the Society, such qualities grow in intensity through the very fact that men come nearer to one another.*

~ Rudolf Steiner, *The Life, Nature and Cultivation of Anthroposophy*, February 24, 1924 (GA 260a)

Crossing Paths

The prospect of receiving a periodical devoted to *Deepening Anthroposophy*, especially when it is offered in order to provide that deepening opportunity to Society members, attracted me because it addresses my reason for having joined the Anthroposophical Society.¹

The late René Querido, after he had been Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in America, spoke sympathetically of two impulses active in our movement, which he ascribed to the “deepeners” and the “broadeners” among us, both gestures being justified and needed. To illustrate their relationship here, we might adapt to adult sensibilities the polarity expressed in a verse that Waldorf School students, starting in the fifth grade, recite daily.

Deepeners seek anthroposophy in order to aid them as they “look into the soul,” and they turn to the Anthroposophical Society to provide them with resources through which to transform that soul. That soul is repeatedly addressed as such, and with specific reference to these transforming methods, in the Society’s Foundation Stone Meditation, meditation being the pre-eminent method for inner deepening.² Deepeners thus view the Society’s primary, though rarely as its exclusive, mission as nourishing its members’ search for meaning in life; to deepeners, that, rather than spreading the word, is what makes the Society worth joining.³

Broadeners “look into the world” and see vast fields of human endeavor thirsting for the remediation and cultivation that the human and cosmic contexts of anthroposophy would supply to

¹ “Anthroposophy is there for human beings who are seeking the paths of the soul to conscious spiritual life and knowledge. The Anthroposophical Society, to fulfill its purpose, must be in a position to serve those who are seeking.” Rudolf Steiner, *The Life, Nature and Cultivation of Anthroposophy*, January 27, 1924.

² “The ground in which the ‘Foundation Stone’ was laid could only be the hearts and souls of the personalities united in the Society, and the Foundation Stone itself must be the mental attitude that flows forth out of the anthroposophical shaping of life. This mental attitude in the form in which it is required by the signs of the present time is the will to find the path towards perception of the spirit and to live out of the spirit through human soul-deepening.” *The Constitution of the General Anthroposophical Society and the Free College for Spiritual Science. The Rebuilding of the Goetheanum* (GA 260a), January 13, 1924; quoted from S.O. Prokofieff, *May Human Beings Hear It!*, p. 825. [Thank you, Thomas O’Keefe, for the reference.]

³ “Each one entering this Society should have the feeling: I enter simply in order to learn about anthroposophy.” *The Life, Nature, and Cultivation of Anthroposophy*, July 6, 1924.

our broader cultural life. Broadeners' compassion⁴ stirs them to want to bring the treasures of anthroposophy to a civilization in spiritual decay, suffering for lack of an integrating and transcending vision. For broadeners, the signal feature about anthroposophy is that it is *about* everyone, and hence its benefits are *for* everyone, not just those who have already found it.⁵ Accordingly, the Society should disseminate its teachings where they are most needed, namely where they are unknown.

Both ideals are in fact encapsulated already in the First of the original Statutes of the Anthroposophical Society when it was renewed in 1923. There it is defined as "an association of people whose will it is to nurture the life of the soul, both in the individual and in human society, on the basis of a true knowledge of the spiritual world." And yet René depicted the paths leading to these two ends as intersecting axes of a cross, which, he observed, also becomes the cross that individual members bear in suffering others' differing priorities.⁶

I have not heard any broadeners discouraging other members from meditating or studying, nor any deepeners suggesting that anyone withhold the truths of anthroposophy from those who seek them. But to true broadeners, this formulation itself reveals the die-hard deepeners' elitist bias and indeed moral blindness—for how can one seek that with which one is yet unacquainted? And on whom does the responsibility devolve to acquaint the world with solutions to universal problems if not the trustees of the movement whose founder repeatedly emphasized its nature as a *public* society,⁷ with which the anthroposophical movement is to be coterminous?

And so, despite the possibility of each camp's sincere but naïve professions of appreciation for, or at least attempts to appreciate, the goals of the "other side," it can still seem to members in each group of enthusiasts that the other is *operationally* neglecting the Society's true mission, for example, through tendentious allocations of funds, scheduling priorities, editorial policies, or, less directly, in the mood or tone of communications, or even through failures explicitly to validate the intentions, let alone the efforts, of one's intersecting brethren.⁸

The Path of the Cross

The gesture of broadening addresses the world. As G.K. Chesterton observed, from outside anthroposophy but from within Christianity, "the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox at its center it can grow without changing. ... The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a

⁴ "Kindling the love of mankind, anthroposophy grows creative in moral impulses to action and in the practice of a truly social life." Idem., January 13, 1924.

⁵ "Anthroposophy ... leads to results which can be of assistance to every human being—without distinction of nation, social standing or religion—as an incentive in spiritual life. These results can in a real sense give rise to a social life based on brotherly love." [Statute #3]

⁶ "The Society should be an organization, [Rudolf Steiner] said [On October 21, 1906], with the task 'of helping people to find what they seek in themselves. Let us do positive work without polemics—even polemics against our attackers. ... fighting does not solve problems. It can, at most, correct things on the physical plane. On higher planes, only positive work is able to help.'" Günther Wachsmuth, *The Life and Work of Rudolf Steiner*, p. 83.

⁷ "The General Anthroposophical Society is in no sense a secret society, but an entirely public organization." ~ Statute # 4; "It has to be borne in mind that anthroposophy can only become what it should become when more and more human beings take part in its development and cultivation." *The Life, Nature and Cultivation of Anthroposophy*, April 6, 1924.

⁸ "It is not by uniformity but by variety that we shall reach the goal of the Anthroposophical Society. We should be heartily glad of the fact that we have in our Society so many members who out of their own personality have something to give. We should get accustomed to recognizing such members. There can only be a true life in the Society when the activities within it are properly valued. Narrow-hearted refusal or 'turning down' should be the rarest of faults in the Anthroposophical Society. Much more should one develop the enthusiasm to learn as much as possible of what the one or the other in the Society has to say." Ibid.

signpost for free travelers.” But if insufficiently grounded, a would-be rescuer will topple over and assimilate to the victim’s own predicament, whence the scriptural caution against the blind leading the blind unawares into a common ditch. This proscription hardly militates against the embracing gesture as such, but merely against its expression out of sequence: The cosmic embrace of humanity by the Risen One is rooted in, indeed by having first been literally nailed into, terrestrial substance. In the spiritual morphology of the human constitution, this rooting must penetrate, and anchor itself in, the soil of thinking.⁹

If we should assign equal merit and justification to both axes of this cross, why then am I drawn to a periodical aimed at *Deepening*, and not (hypothetically) to one dedicated to *Broadening* Anthroposophy? On reflection, I realize that I might well have been attracted to such a (literal) broadsheet concerned with extending the reach of anthroposophy into the surrounding world. But let us consider the *sequence* of terms if we were to incorporate both axes into the title: Why does “Broadening and Deepening Anthroposophy” seem to invert the organic order of “Deepening and Broadening”? I think it does so for the same reason that the First Statute cited above describes the cultivation of the life of the soul not “in society and in the individual,” but rather placing the primary, personal unit first.

This is because individual deepening existentially must precede¹⁰ societal broadening. Individuals are the only units capable of “conscious human action,”¹¹ and it is only individuals who will in any event be making decisions, whether on their own behalf or for others. If social purposes are promoted first, it will still be certain individuals determining the lives of others, which is not the ideal of ethical individualism that Rudolf Steiner offered to his students. Multiple cultural and political revolutions have historically demonstrated the effects of modernity’s distinctive managerial tyrannies: Administrative control executed in the name of a merely theoretical egalitarianism hardly constitutes a moral improvement over traditional aristocracies of professed native merit.

Deeply Personal

My own interest in this journal seeks the balance that its agenda brings to the broadening tendencies that are currently most prominently visible in contemporary anthroposophical expressions. In recent decades, the intention to make anthroposophy accessible has lowered or dissolved many of the discernible boundaries between members’ work and public work, such as through the recruitment efforts for both the Society and the First Class. For example, membership in the Youth Section is now open not only to Society members who are not members of the First Class, as was the case at its inception by Rudolf Steiner, but to the public. While this apparently confounds the Euclidian axiom that a section must logically belong to a whole of which it is a part,¹² I am open to the possibility that new social forms presuppose new dimensions in thinking. So it may be the case that the biological condition of integration for fruitfulness¹³ can now subsist independent of organizational structures. But I find it hard in this instance to practice the

⁹ “... thinking’s reality [is] a reality which is woven through with light, and which delves down warmly into the phenomena of the world. This delving down occurs through a power that flows within the thinking activity itself, which is the power of love in spiritual form.” *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, Author’s Addendum to Chapter 8 [tr.W. Lindeman].

¹⁰ “The basic form in which anthroposophy can appear among men is the idea; the first door at which it knocks is that of insight.” *The Life, Nature and Cultivation of Anthroposophy*, January 27, 1924.

¹¹ Title of Chapter 1 of *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*.

¹² “Anthroposophy begets a multitude of tasks; but these can only find their way into the wider circles of mankind if fostered and developed first in a society.” *The Life, Nature and Cultivation of Anthroposophy*, January 13, 1924.

¹³ “No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine ... a [separated] branch ... is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.” (John 15:4-6, NIV.)

phenomenological technique of bracketing, that is, suspending, my assumption that entities (such as the Anthroposophical Society) must be bounded in order simply to exist. I would be comforted to see evidence of other transcendent thinking accompanying such deconstructions.

Still and all, I have always assumed that the Society's primary purpose is to serve its members, which, I have tried to show above, means *initially* providing methods for deepening their capacity for experience; I have also believed that people will be drawn to anthroposophy by being drawn to what lives in anthroposophists.¹⁴ For example, the members of the Anthroposophical Society attracted me precisely because, unlike the members of every other spiritual group I had investigated, they were visibly *uninterested* in recruiting;¹⁵ proselytizing repels at least some candidates for admission.

A friend once addressed a meeting called to determine how best to advance the cause of anthroposophy. She spoke in recognition¹⁶ of the devotion and love for Anthroposophia that she perceived among her broadener-brethren, and said that she sympathized with their wish to dress their beloved in beautiful garments. "But I'm wondering," she added, "Will those who are looking for her recognize her?"

Deepeners and broadeners agree that the influence of anthroposophy could and should be broader; they differ only in whether this is more predictably achievable directly or indirectly. I look forward to following the indirect path toward the world that the present enterprise charts.

A table grace composed by Rudolf Steiner, also familiar to many Waldorf School students and alumni, depicts the analogous relationship between man and plant, in that, as the germination of botanical seeds requires the inwardness of "earth's deep night," "so the soul is quickened in the heart's deep shrine." Only at the end of the verse, as at the end of the cycle of vegetal life, does the plant bear fruit, and do corresponding human powers receive blessing to further those intentions that are rooted in the spiritual world.

It is my hope that the course of the reflections promised in this journal will strengthen the abilities of readers to broaden their influence into the world,¹⁷ and certainly not inspire them to hide the light of their anthroposophy under a bushel. Indeed, resorting to that gesture makes sense only when such light stands in jeopardy of being extinguished by prevailing winds, whatever their source and the intentions animating them.

¹⁴ "Anthroposophy ... cannot find its way through the world by ordinary agitation or propaganda, no matter how well meant. Agitation kills true anthroposophy. Anthroposophy must come forward because the Spirit impels it to come forward. It must show forth its life because life cannot but reveal itself in existence. But it must never force its existence upon people. Waiting always for those to come who want it, it must be far removed from all constraint—even the constraint of persuasion. Such is the frame of mind which I would fain bring home to members as a thing most needed." *The Life, Nature, and Cultivation of Anthroposophy*, January 27, 1924.

¹⁵ "A thing that truly lives out of its own spirit can *wait* until the world is ready to receive its influence." *Ibid.*, italics in original.

¹⁶ "In these days when everything seems to be shattered, let us strive to be one through which cherishes and practices peace and harmony in every heart, so that every one entertains the best thoughts about every other one, without envy, without discord." Rudolf Steiner, speaking to the builders of the First Goetheanum, August 13, 1914, quoted by Günther Wachsmuth, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

¹⁷ "When this frame of mind is alive in every Group of the Anthroposophical Society, then will the Spirit of Anthroposophy work out into the wide world, where it is our task to carry it and represent it." *The Life, Nature and Cultivation of Anthroposophy*, January 27, 1924.