

How Then Shall We Live

By: Michael Ronall

December 12, 2013

Category: Anthroposophy-General, Self-Development

An essay from the Mercury Press catalog, by Michael Ronall

The following essay was written for the Mercury Press catalog from the Rudolf Steiner Fellowship Community in Chestnut Ridge, NY. The author has shared it to help promote the catalog and the work of this invaluable small press. View the catalog [here](#), and the Fellowship home page [here](#).

How Then Shall We Live?*

*Do you seek the highest, the greatest?
The plant can teach it to you.
What the plant does without willing, do that willingly.*
— Friedrich Schiller

At first glance, the questions *What is the meaning of life?* or *Why have you come to earth?* seem over-reaching, in fact, pretentious, grandiose, even bombastic. Present them to a thinking person in the course of a day, and they are likely to be dismissed as silly; trivial because the right answers would have to be ineffably profound; what is vital always eludes formulas. Anyone attentive to the complex web of relationships continually forming among, and thereby transforming, human beings, even through a single year, will dismiss out of hand the expectation for some comprehensive explanation. Surely any given solution to life's great riddle would be too simplistic: There cannot be just a single reason to be born.

On a factual level, it is indeed true that each individual pursues a vast multitude of constantly shifting purposes, some barely identifiable, and together defying any conclusive reckoning from our narrow perspective. But as to an ethical *style* of living, might there be a unifying principle that determines the prospects for lasting satisfactions arising from our intentions? Diverse and subtle though life's *whats* and *whys* may be, could there be an over-arching, sustainable *how* to living?

The subject-matter is visible to everyone, content is only discovered by him who has something to contribute, and form is a mystery to most.
— J.W. von Goethe

We commonly miss patterns among the particulars of our existence: We are too close to them, too heavily invested in the outcomes of our projects, preoccupied with our failures or successes within what C.S. Lewis called "the gnat-like cloud of petty anxieties and decisions about the conduct of the next hour." And since our entanglement with our surroundings obscures our vision, moments of reflective pause can lend us the perspective that is lost in the course of active living.

This course of active living proceeds through rhythms, which are indeed its signature: Autonomous patterns of expanding and contracting, grasping and releasing, are the very sign of life. An organism that fails to show such regular alternations as respiration and circulation will soon revert to following the laws of chemistry and physics, replacing with entropy and disintegration the unity of form that a living being characteristically maintains. Its separated components will become absorbed into the elements of the soil, awaiting assimilation by new specimens, which will persist through lives marked by continual exchange with their environments.

Among the living kingdoms of nature, the purest manifestation of life is to be found in the plant. The ascending plant, liberated from gravity toward air and light, has not yet been cast into tension with its environment, suffused with passions and subject to pain. What distinctive pattern of activity is revealed when the plant is lifted out of mineral existence, still unpolluted by the animal urges that, entering the human soul, darken counsel and impel us into regret?

ARTICLES

Articles

main listing

e-news sign-up

Stay in touch. Sign-up for anthroposophy in america e-news!

Name:

Email:

Zipcode:

The manner of change that distinguishes organic processes from mechanical causality is *metamorphosis*, whose four constituent factors are *rhythm*, as described above; *intensification*, the tendency toward increasing complexity and diversification; *polarity*, the formation of dynamic relationships between interdependent opposites, both within and between organisms; and *inversion*, the substitution of growth-for-itself by preparation for progeny.

When the growing plant arrives at its crowning blossom-stage, maximally revealing its individual identity, it begins to shed its petals: Having fulfilled the process of adorning itself, it does not collapse, but reverses its orientation, dissolving in order to live for something outside itself, namely the invisible future that will survive its own demise. Without that turning-point, there would be no plant, whose essence consists in living through its successors for the species itself, giving itself over until nothing of its original manifestation remains. Following the model of the plant in every sacrificial gesture, the human being also spiritually enters into the organic process of fructifying rather than merely consuming. In that renunciation, we too break through morbidity, into the kingdom of life as such.

But how can we identify what to renounce in our own lives? For surely wisdom lies in knowing *when* to give our various impulses “a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot.” When are we best off persisting in the face of adversity, and when submitting? When should we suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and when take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing—if we can, that is—end them? When to hold ‘em and when to fold ‘em?

In human action, the right occasion to submit is not determined simply by alternating cycles governed by biological law, or else our days would be far less complicated, but also uncreative. How do we train our thinking, our inclinations, and our intentions to issue productive rather than destructive decisions?

If they ask you: "What is the sign of our Father in you?" say to them: "It is a movement and a rest."

— The Gospel of Thomas

The rhythm most familiar to human beings is the daily round of sleeping and waking. This cycle, which can accommodate variation but not complete elimination, always reasserts its irresistible claim after even briefly prolonged disturbance. To this self-regulating oscillation between two poles of consciousness, human beings can add a third mode out of their own volition, namely meditation—whose content need not be profoundly complex in order to be useful.

From this third, synthesized process, we may mount to a perspective created from our own initiative, to link sleeping and waking through willed attention, in Steiner's words, "...as though we had spent the whole day in a place where we beheld the smallest objects at the same close range as the largest, and in the evening climbed a neighboring hill and surveyed the whole scene at a glance. Then the various parts appear related to each other in different proportions from those they bore when seen from within."

One meditative exercise, which prepares directly for sleep and indirectly for reawakening, is the *Rückschau*, or "review of the day." In it, we imaginatively reconstruct the past day as if from outside ourselves, detached from the subjective appetites, drives, demands, and their corresponding gratifications, deprivations, and disappointments. Through this exercise, we might become aware of having exercised compulsion or manipulation on our environment, particularly our human environment, all too often addressing our neighbors' astral and physical imprisonment rather than their autonomous individualities. By repeated practice, we can come to identify our own true individuality as distinct from the personality that we reflexively guard, even to our own ultimate detriment. In learning thus to distinguish between the essential and the inessential, we also prepare for death, by anticipating the subsequent unveiling of the meanings of events, concealed from us on earth.

The symmetric, parabolic pattern of vegetal life is discernable also in human biography: In the second half of life one distributes (or—tragically—withholds) what one has acquired in the first half. But despite our every failure to hand ourselves over to the "soil" that gave us birth—that is, the world around us—each day offers new invitations for little renunciations, to which meditation can make us more attentive.

Our drives and sentiments, our capacity for mobility, and our self-consciousness, which raise us above the kingdoms of nature supporting us, make us capable of higher—and lower—deeds. What chiefly distinguishes human beings from other creatures is the capacity for introspective observation, which enables us uniquely to transform *ourselves*. When we grow quiet enough to hear what the plant teaches, what might we learn from it about our own highest potential?

Vegetation shows spiritual progress at its purest, free of the conflicting and life-compromising passions that bring decay and death in their wake. The plant shows that sacrifice, rather than competition for survival, is the principle of true development, as the words of Christ reveal: *Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.*

Our daily pattern of sleeping and waking reflects a larger cycle: We have contracted into the physical body through which we have come on earth— with a task, even a mission. In order to fulfill it, we are wise, as Emerson urged, to “accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.” Among these events, a human life affords multiple— dare we say infinite?—opportunities to participate in the great diastolic release of falsely-believed-in entitlements, falsely-identified selves. Our attentive responsiveness to the gesture of the plant can school us to enter consciously into the sublimely forgiving nature of the realm of life, whose essence is its perpetual, fructifying service.

Michael Ronall

*Ezekiel 33:10.

Related Item

Links:

www.fellowshipcommunity.org/mercury-press-books.html

[<- Back to: Articles](#)