

Biodynamics and Social Justice: An Awakening Call

© Robert Karp (Karbelnikoff) 2020

Installment # 1: May 18, 2020

introduction

In the last several years the Biodynamic Association, under the leadership of Thea Carlson and the current board of directors, has been integrating concepts, principles, and practices drawn from the modern social justice movement into the work of the Association and thus into the life of the biodynamic movement. From board development and staff training, to conference and program design, to the “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” statement on the Association’s website, the influence of the social justice movement has become increasingly present.¹ Many have celebrated this direction while some have raised strong questions and concerns.

I have been pondering this for several years now and have entered into lively conversations with many people in the movement who hold quite different perspectives on these developments. I am very grateful for these conversations because they have helped deepen my thinking and heighten my awareness of the importance of these burning topics. In recent months, feeling this tension in the movement grow stronger, I came to the feeling that a more in-depth study of these themes was needed to support the healthy development of the biodynamic movement. This essay is the result. My goal is to contribute to an ongoing inquiry and dialogue in a spirit of appreciation for the rich diversity of people and perspectives that live within our movement and the love for the work, and for the earth, that I know lives in everyone.

the archetypal social awakening

To explore the question of social justice in the context of the biodynamic movement, we need to begin with the recognition that biodynamic agriculture is itself an expression of a “social impulse” within humanity, meaning, in the first place, a longing to awaken from a narrow, limiting experience of oneself, of others, and of the world.

When we look to the people who worked with Rudolf Steiner at the beginning of the 20th century on his different activities and initiatives, we find that they all shared, before ever encountering

¹ See www.biodynamics.com/content/biodynamic-association-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-statement

his work, this longing for something new: a new way of being, a new way of seeing, a new form of community and consciousness able to transcend divisions of race, nationality, and class. This longing is what I mean by *social impulse*.

For the people living at that time, this was not an abstract aspiration or vague hope but a deep existential need, especially coming out of the mindless bloodshed of World War I. We could also call it an awakening of *social conscience*. Thousands of people came to the feeling that western civilization had reached a dead end: it had imploded in on itself and a radical new beginning was needed if the civilized world was not to be thrown into endless further cycles of nationalism, ethnic hatred, war, and social chaos.

Many of the individuals who were present at the *Agriculture Course*² had also been some of the first witnesses of the destructive impact of the new industrial agricultural methods. They were deeply disturbed by what they experienced—depleted soils, declining harvests, sick animals, loss of rural culture—and knew that something different was needed. You could say they had an awakening of *ecological social conscience* and came to feel there had to be another way to work with nature and with the whole realm of agriculture. This, in turn, led them to reach out to Rudolf Steiner.

We do not understand biodynamic agriculture, as well as Waldorf education, anthroposophical medicine and all the other diverse offshoots of anthroposophy, correctly if we think of them simply as “applications” of spiritual science to different vocations. This is an abstraction. In reality, these movements are the result of powerful forces of social conscience living in different individuals and groups of people in the early 20th century, *which then received from Rudolf Steiner and spiritual science a certain direction, a certain form through which their social impulses were channeled and further cultivated*.

Rudolf Steiner made it abundantly clear that the social impulses come into being first, and only later unite themselves with the inner substance of spiritual science. For example, in his lectures published under the title *Awakening to Community*, he describes “three acts in the soul drama” of an anthroposophist, i.e. of a modern human being striving to work in the world out of the impulses of spiritual science.³ These “acts” will be a key theme in this essay as I believe they can provide a pathway through the labyrinth of challenges we face in social life today, whether or not we are students of anthroposophy.

² The lectures and events which served as the founding of the biodynamic movement in 1924.

³ See lecture 4, *Awakening to Community*, The Anthroposophic Press, Spring Valley, New York 1974.

The first act of this drama Rudolf Steiner describes as the emergence in our biography of a kind of inner refusal to participate in the destructiveness and superficiality of modern civilization. He calls this a *withdrawal or turning inward of the will* away from conventionality—conventional thought forms, social forms, and ways of being—in search of something deeper.

This turning inward of the will is the very ground of the social conscience, wherever it emerges. The tragic conditions of the modern world touch us in some way: through war, poverty, ecological destruction, racial discrimination, childhood abuse, illness, and so on. Whatever these events or trends are, and however they have impacted us, we can find ourselves disgusted, wounded, angered, depressed, sick, offended. Our will is hindered in its natural outward embrace of the world and we go inward in search for something new and different—we are thrust onto a quest for meaning and healing, both personal and collective. For millions of people in our time, this is the beginning of their hero's journey of liberation from the oppression, violence, and emptiness of modern life.

On this basis, we can begin to understand the archetypal social awakening as it lives in humanity, as well as the diversity of movements that arise when these social impulses are then channeled into different forms through being wed to the insights of influential thought leaders and the movements to which they gave birth.

If we take some of the modern expressions of the eco-agricultural conscience, for example, as one small branch of this general social impulse, we find the most varied movements: from biodynamics to organics to permaculture to the local food and urban agriculture movements, to name a few. Beneath the surface of these movements, we find networks of people with very similar values and social impulses. Above ground, however, we find movements that have remarkably distinct perspectives, priorities and practices informed by the very different worldviews, historical individuals and circumstances that brought them into being.

growing a healthy biodynamic movement

What I hope to have made clear so far is that biodynamics is not an agricultural impulse derived from the teachings of spiritual science; it is rather, a powerful social impulse working in the domain of agriculture that has united itself with the spiritual substance of anthroposophy. *Biodynamics is thus not something that needs to be wedded to, or have grafted onto it, any type of social impulse, movement, or worldview from outside—it is a social impulse in and of itself—with an inexhaustible wellspring of inspiration for social deeds.* The same can be said of all the different so-called “daughter movements” of anthroposophy. This uniting of our social impulses

with the insights of spiritual science is what Rudolf Steiner refers to as the second act in the soul drama of an anthroposophist.⁴

At the individual level, it is a fact, however, that the social impulses that fuel movements at their founding are not identical to the social impulses that continue to fuel them over time. This is because the social awakenings of each generation, as well as those of people based in different regions and cultures from the founders, are informed by different karmic, social and historical circumstances and thus have a unique character. It is one thing, for example, to wake up to ethnic violence or ecological devastation as a Central European in the 1920s and another to wake up to these same realities as an African American in the 1990s. This means that biodynamics and all social movements are and must be in a continual evolution. A movement is thus not a static thing but an ever growing and changing reality.

To grow the biodynamic movement in a healthy way, it is therefore necessary for two different things to take place: first, that it is refreshed, again and again, by new people flowing into it with their unique social impulses and perspectives; and second, that these social impulses are continually wedded to and illuminated by the social and spiritual substance of anthroposophy; just as took place for the founders of the movement.⁵

The biodynamic movement can thus be distorted in two different ways:

- a. It can close itself off to the fresh social impulses of succeeding generations or from people in very different regions and cultures, and thereby become less and less relevant to the present time, enclosing itself, as it were, in a kind of sectarian skin formed by devotion to the experiences of the founders and to an ever smaller circle of people in the present. We could call this the *sectarian* tendency.

or

- a. It can welcome new people and fresh social impulses but neglect the process of uniting these social impulses with, and illuminating them through, the substance of anthroposophy; instead adopting and grafting onto itself all kinds of perspectives,

⁴ It is important to note that these “insights of spiritual science” I refer to above are not purely mental in nature, they contain within them also inherent social impulses, which is why in this essay I often refer to the “substance” of anthroposophy, rather than simply to the “insights of spiritual science.” A key question we will therefore need to address later in this essay is, what exactly are these inherent social impulses that derive from anthroposophy and how do they live in the biodynamic movement as well as the other daughter movements?

⁵ I am not proposing here that everyone who comes into the biodynamic movement needs to become an anthroposophist. What is essential is that the social impulses living in those who are active in the movement find illumination and guidance from the wellspring of anthroposophy.

narratives, and agenda from movements outside itself. We could call this the *grafting* tendency.

It is important to recognize that each of these tendencies has its light as well as its shadow side. In the case of the sectarian tendency, for example, there lives a deep devotion and commitment to anthroposophy and this is important to recognize and honor because this is an essential quality for the health of our movement. The problem arises when this very devotion leads to an inability to welcome in new people and perspectives and/or bring the vital inner substance of anthroposophy fully to bear on the needs and questions of the present time.

Likewise, in the grafting tendency we find a courageous will to engage with the people, needs and questions of the present time, and we need to recognize and honor the importance of this gesture for the health of our movement. The problem arises when these needs and questions lead to an impatient grabbing hold of thought forms and strategies from all manner of outside movements, whether or not these movements are actually aligned with the inner substance of anthroposophy.

The tragedy of the former is that certain existential questions of the time simply don't get asked or answered, or the people who could ask and answer these questions are not invited to the table. The tragedy of the latter tendency is that the right questions are asked, but they are not brought into relationship with the being of anthroposophy for illumination and guidance.

What has been missing, I would suggest, in the biodynamic movement, through the working of these two tendencies, *is an individualized approach or response to the questions of social justice drawn from the profound social and spiritual heart of biodynamics and anthroposophy*. I am writing this essay to contribute to precisely such an effort.

the renewal of the anthroposophical movement

If we look honestly at the anthroposophical movement and its diverse offshoots (biodynamics, Waldorf, etc.) we must admit that, though a more or less tenuous middle ground continues to hold sway, both these tendencies are living ever more strongly. Many of the groups and organizations in these movements tend to swing from one extreme to the other and often we find different "camps" in the same movement or organization, each expressing some aspect of the light and the shadow side of these two tendencies. We can also experience how these two tendencies play off one another and create a kind of vicious cycle, because in a subtle but real way they tend to reinforce one another.

This challenging landscape in the anthroposophical movement is a symptom, I would suggest, of the fact that we are approaching (and in some cases have passed) the 100-year anniversaries of the founding deeds of anthroposophy and her offshoot movements. They are a result of the fact that after 100 years, the spiritual forces and social forms that proceeded from the founders begin to decline and can no longer engender the kind of balance between these two tendencies that a movement needs to grow and develop in a healthy way.⁶ The power of the founding impulse is thus waning and the only solution is for a profound renewal to take place; *a renewal that taps vertically into the very source and substance of the inspiration for these movements as it lives in the spiritual world in the present, bestowing on us the power to fully meet the challenges of our time.*

Though both of these tendencies or gestures have their place—the gesture of devotion to the work of the founders and the gesture of openness to the world and the work of other movements—they must be brought into a dynamic relationship of harmony through a higher source of inspiration. Rudolf Steiner was fully aware of this reality and thus spoke on several occasions of the need for a great renewal of the anthroposophical movement at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries.⁷ He also planted a powerful seed for this renewal through the supersensible *foundation stone* of the new Goetheanum that was placed into the heart of the community at the Christmas Conference of 1923/24.⁸ It is remarkable to note that at this world-historic event, Rudolf Steiner spoke again and again of how this foundation stone can help us, as a community and as individuals, find the power to harmonize what he called “true and genuine esotericism” with “the greatest conceivable openness”—precisely the two qualities that are needed to bring healing and balance to the two tendencies I am pointing to here.⁹

When we understand this deeper background, we can begin to see that the tendencies referred to above are not only playing off one another in a negative manner, they are also setting the stage—or you could say, creating the longing, the needed tension—for a higher resolution, not only for the movement as a whole, but in each of us. For if we are honest, we have to admit that we each have played our part in this challenging dynamic, we each have our tendencies toward one or both extremes, and thus the needed transformation must begin within each of us.

⁶ For a more detailed exploration of the challenges associated with this 100-year cycle see Jessiah Ben-Aharon “The Global Situation at the End of the Century: The Emergence of a Threefold Global Society and the Future Tasks of the Michael Movement” in The Future is Now: Anthroposophy at the New Millennium. Temple Lodge, 1999.

⁷ See, for example, Rudolf Steiner’s lecture of August 27, 1924 in Karmic Relationships volume VIII. Steiner Press, 1975.

⁸ The Goetheanum is the name of the building in Switzerland designed by Rudolf Steiner which serves as the worldwide home of the anthroposophical movement.

⁹ See, for example, Rudolf Steiner’s words on page 99 of The Christmas Conference: for the Foundation of the General Anthroposophical Society 1923/1924. Anthroposophic Press, 1990.

Rudolf Steiner spoke of the individual dimension of this challenge in his characterization of Act III of the soul drama of the anthroposophist. Essentially, he suggests we reach a crisis point in our biography as we seek to embody the universal impulses of anthroposophy within the unique circumstances of our destiny—a process that requires us to confront, ever more deeply, the limitations, wounds and weaknesses of our personality, which includes, of course, the limitations of our familial and cultural heritage. This is a drama marked by great inner struggle with our lower selves: our illusions, our biases, our fears. Yet through this process of self-confrontation and self-emptying, new capacities arise, new born powers of soul that ultimately can allow us to unite our personal destiny with the destiny of the time and place in which we live. We could say of this act of the drama: *anthroposophy herself dies in us and is reborn*—she dies in us as an abstract teaching, as a personal spiritual path, as a historical movement to which we are tirelessly devoted—and she reappears as a living spiritual being who guides us to our work and to our colleagues, wherever they may be—and gives us the power to incarnate our highest aspirations in the present historical context. We are reborn, you could say, as world citizens from the confines of our intimate anthroposophical and biodynamic communities. Rudolf Steiner calls this the awakening of a *Sophia* power in our souls, thus connecting this initiation, in a certain way, with the mysteries of the divine feminine in our time.¹⁰

I am bringing these big picture perspectives at the start of this essay because I feel they can engender the mood of compassion, honesty and patience that is necessary to meet these challenges in the right spirit. To make progress as a biodynamic movement, we need to be willing to see clearly our present state and to name clearly what we see, both the sectarian tendencies and the grafting tendencies, not in a spirit of judgement, antagonism and condemnation, but in a spirit of shared inquiry, shared responsibility and shared love for one another and for the work itself. And to do this work well, we need to recognize that the entire anthroposophic movement, together with its many offshoots and daughter movements, is presently passing through a collective initiation process, a collective turning inside out, an Act III crisis if you will, which is the ultimate source of the challenges and polarizations that we find in our movement, such as those that have emerged through the Biodynamic Association's strong engagement with the social justice movement.

Finally, I want to emphasize that by suggesting we do not need to “wed biodynamics to any outside movement, or graft any outside movement on to it,” I do not mean we cannot learn deeply from other movements or collaborate with them and their leaders. As pointed out above, many of today's social movements share a common social awakening or conscience at their root

¹⁰ Please note that these three acts of the soul drama of the anthroposophist are not something that are accomplished once and for all at different times in one's biography, but are rather an organism of ongoing spiritual practice. For a deeper exploration of the three acts and how they relate to the renewal of the Anthroposophical Society, see my essay “Embodying Anthroposophia in the 21st Century” available at <http://robertkarp.net/writings/>

and have, therefore, much to gain from cross-fertilization with one another. Indeed, from my perspective, learning and collaboration between *michaelic movements* and their leaders is of the greatest importance at this time.¹¹ For these relationships between movements to be healthy, however—just as in our personal human relationships—each movement needs to be deeply grounded in their own unique identity, purpose and trajectory, as well as in a growing understanding of the other. True collaboration, in other words, has nothing to do with grafting or merging with one another.

the essential questions

To explore further the question of biodynamics and social justice we therefore need to ask a whole host of questions, for example:

What is the unique character of the inherent social impulse as it lives in biodynamics and the wider anthroposophical movement?

How do we more consciously cultivate and nourish this inherent social impulse so that it becomes ever stronger in our movement?

What is the unique identity, worldview and trajectory of the social justice movement in America and how or where does it converge with or diverge from that of the biodynamic and the wider anthroposophic movement?

Does biodynamics have something to offer the unique questions and challenges facing the social justice movement and does the social justice movement have something to offer the unique challenges and questions facing the biodynamic movement?

Is there a basis for collaboration between these two movements and if so, when and how might this collaboration take place most fruitfully?

What might the being of anthroposophia herself have to say at the present moment to the questions, suffering and challenges that have brought the social justice movement into being? What do these world historical events and existential questions call forth in her, what wisdom can she shed on them and what enthusiasm for deeds might she wish to awaken in us? What, in other words, would a social justice movement look like that was deeply informed by anthroposophic insights?

¹¹ By “michaelic movements” I am referring to movements that consciously or unconsciously are working from the inspiration of the rightful “spirit of the times,” which is understood in anthroposophy to be the Archangel Michael.

Finally, to navigate this whole landscape of inquiry, I will also need to address to some degree, the perennial question: is there some kind of inherent racial bias or ethnocentrism in the worldview of anthroposophy or was such bias or ethnocentrism present, at least, in the soul of Rudolf Steiner?

In the further installments of this essay, I will attempt to shed light on these far-reaching questions that are so necessary, as I see it, for the growth and development of a healthy biodynamic movement in the Americas.

**To correspond with me about this essay, please email me at
robert.karp@newspiritventures.com**