

# Supporting Growth and Vitality in Our Children and Teens

DR. CARMEN HERING ON HOW TO BUILD A HEALTHY SENSE OF LIFE

By Kate Hammond, Roots & Shoots and High School Movement Teacher

Dr. Hering spoke this month at Sophia Hall on the sense of life. An Anthroposophic and Osteopathic doctor working in Family Medicine in a private practice in Albany, CA, she also teaches at the Bay Area Center for Waldorf Teacher Training. Our own Roots and Shoots and High School Movement teacher Kate Hammond wrote up this account of Dr. Hering's talk.



What is life? This question is one that people have been asking for centuries. Ancient Indians spoke of 'prana', while the Chinese spoke of 'chi'. Both of these terms referred to life—and that our life as human beings is closely related to breath. Prana and chi also encompass the idea that life is also an activity—which is incorporated in the idea of breath; a vapour-like activity that vivifies substance. The Ancient Greeks used the word 'ether' which means luminosity and they believed that life had its own set of laws. For instance, life permeates the cosmos and lends plasticity to material objects, and has to do with buoyancy, it unifies and builds up substance. Interestingly, 'ether' or 'life' was regarded as something more closely related to the watery element than the air. The Greeks felt that in spring it was the watery ether that makes buds swell, leaves sprout and plants to grow. In summer the ether rounded out the juicy fruits, and as autumn came and withering began, the earth was gifted with the harvest until in winter the life was completely withdrawn into the earth. They also saw the same cycle of life in the human being—as babies we are round and plump, we grow and sprout and children, we come to ripeness in adolescence and eventually we wither and fade.

The Greek concept of life was more than physical water—it was a living stream of life which could pick up material (such as dormant seeds) carry and nourish it and then drop it out of the cycle.

Recent explorations into the watery element have begun to uncover some remarkable aspects. Graham Pollack speaks of the Fourth Phase of Water—between solid and fluid, which can be found in water in cells for instance. In the state it has been found that water has the potential for energy—it is highly structured, polarized, can purify itself and has spontaneous flow. Through this research we have come closer to answering the question of how plants grow—for instance, how sap travels against the forces of gravity, how water can be energized through light.

In spiritual research we have also observed how life processes are living in the stream of time—that there is metamorphosis in living structures. For instance, from seed to sprout and root, to leaf and stem, to flower, fruit and seed—all stages are a result of the previous one, but also bear something new and changed.

In the growing child we can see something like the plant. As infants we are most like the seed—rounded and full of growth potential. The head is the most rounded part of our physical body, encased in the bony skull and is most formed at birth. The toddler learning to walk begins to have uprightness similar to the first shoot of the plant. As she walks and moves, her limbs grow like the stem of a plant. The school-aged child lives in feeling—taking in the world, reacting with sympathy and antipathy, digesting sense impressions. This is somewhat like the leaf phase of a plant—reaching out, taking in, digesting (photosynthesis). Finally we have the bud of the flower—now an inner space has opened in the growing child (late childhood: 9–12 years) and metamorphosing into the fruit—a picture of the ripening of the reproductive organs and the blossoming fruits of thinking that occur during adolescents.

How do we develop a sense of life? What does it mean to feel alive, to feel a sense of being a living being?

It is one of the most unconscious senses, deeply seated within us. However, when this sense is disturbed we feel its absence. For instance, when we are hungry or in pain we have lost the sense of well-being and have a disturbed sense of life. The sense

of life is never finished or complete—it is dynamic and we are constantly seeking it. When we have a sense of life we feel a deep peace and comfort: an inner contentment which is body-based—as if everything is right in our selves. As infants our loving carers help us time and time again find and refine our sense of life—through taking care of our bodily needs as well as our soul needs. As we grow we learn to find our own way back to a sense of life or well-being. Overcoming

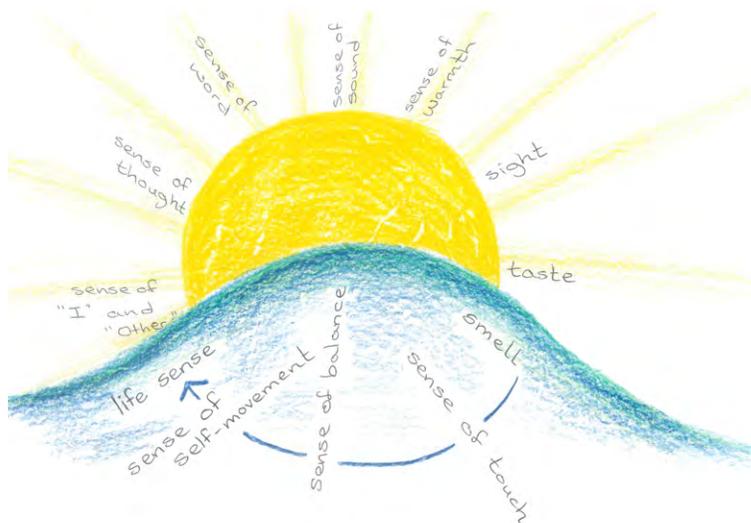


DIAGRAM BY KATE HAMMOND

manageable disturbances in our sense of life as we grow helps us—we need to have these challenges in order to find peace and build resiliency. A sense of life not only gives us inner contentment but enables us to develop empathy for others at the same time—feeling whole, alive and feeling connected. Paradoxically, it is like being a drop in an ocean—feeling contained in yourself but also connected to your surroundings.



but how we inwardly sense where we are in space. For movement to be invigorating it is best that it go beyond mechanical movement—if we bring consciousness to our experience of our movements this has a big impact on how enlivening the movements are to our life sense. Think about the difference between being on a treadmill and doing tai-chi or eurythmy.

We can't generate our own life—we are given life by our parents. When we experience a sense of life and well-being we can feel that our life is a blessing, that a sense of well-being is like a gift. Once we have had this experience enough times, it can be an anchor in our experience, where we feel that we trust in the life sense itself. We trust in our own organism, and also trust in life—that life is good. This feeling brings about a deep sense of rest.

The sense of life is one of twelve senses that Rudolf Steiner identified. It is deeply unconscious and can be described as a “night” sense. It can be supported through a sequence of addressing the other senses that are also less conscious: sense of smell, sense of touch, sense of balance and the sense of self movement. For instance, in a young infant who is fussing after being fed and having had a good nap, sometimes being near the mother and smelling her scent can bring the infant back to a sense of well-being and restore the sense of life. If that doesn't help, holding the infant and touching him is a second step. Thirdly, rocking motions can soothe because this addresses the vestibular sense of balance. Closely related is the sense of self-movement, which in the infant can be supported through swaddling, where the baby can sense his own movements because of the restricts around him. All these senses help lead to a place where the life sense can regain inner peace and contentment that can lead to a sense of well-being. In the older child and adult, we can also follow the same path to support the life sense.

Addressing the sense of smell, we can think of the quality of the smells around us. For instance, the smell of wholesome, home-cooked meals, or of bread baking can bring contentment and nourish us. Then we can look at what we are touching all day long—do we touch natural materials, or are we constantly interacting with artificial materials? There have been studies to show that walking barefoot in nature, touching the earth directly, can be hugely beneficial to health. Also, do we have enough loving touch in our lives? How do we touch each other?

The sense of balance can be regarded both physically and on a soul level. To address a sense of balance, nature again is one of the greatest gifts—her playground is endlessly challenging to the vestibular system! Climbing trees, walking over uneven rocks, balancing on logs... On a soul level we can ask if our lives are in balance. Do we have a balance between work and play? What is our daily rhythm like? Do we get regular sleep, exercise, meals?

The sense of self-movement incorporates not only our movements

The question arose how can we continue to guide our teenagers in daily life in a healthy rhythmic way? It was suggested that we regard the senses more on a soul level for the older child. For instance, as parents or teachers of teenagers we can look at the sense of touch in the following way. Have we touched our teen on a soul level today? Did we meet them? Did we find out what interests them and use this as a doorway into their experience?

The sense of balance can also be related to the balance of justice, truth and integrity. Have we as adults worked out of these virtues? Can we help our teens move towards these ideals? The teenage years are a time when young people yearn for justice, truth and integrity. They look out around them seeking to find evidence that older generations have worked out of these ideals. We can help them not only by striving for these too, but also finding other adults who carry these ideals into the practical life.

The sense of self-movement in the teenager can be related to a sense of freedom. How much freedom do we give our teenagers to move around the world, trusting in their healthy sense of self-movement (gone “too far”) and healthy sense of life to maintain their well-being.

Lastly, in the teenager the sense of life can be supported through our tolerance and healthy non-judgement. If we model self-tolerance, we can move towards self-love. We teach our teenagers to develop this for themselves through finding ways to behold who they really are. Then a healthy sense of trust is created—both of themselves and the world.