

EMERGENCY PEDAGOGY AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE IN CHINA

In May 2008 the earthquake in China cost 90,000 lives and left millions homeless – many of them suffering from extreme trauma. On the invitation of the Waldorf School in Chengdu, a team of volunteers under the leadership of Bernd Ruf travelled to the area and worked with a endless numbers of children, young people, parents and teachers. At the end of a 2-week period of engagement, they were highly acclaimed by representatives of the Chinese government.

On 12 May 2008 at 15.28 in the afternoon, an earthquake reaching force 8 on the Richter scale, reverberated through the Chinese province of Szechuan. This Earthquake cost 90,000 people their lives, (of which 20,000 people are still missing) 450,000 people were severely injured, and five million were left homeless. Amongst the victims were a disproportionate number of children, as many of the adults were at work in the fields while the children were at school.

What happens after such an earthquake?

Every such catastrophe leaves a trail of trauma in people. There is an initial acute phase lasting about 2 days, which must be distinguished from the stress reaction that follows. This second phase lasts about 8 weeks, during which time countless symptoms of varying degrees of severity can arise; lack of concentration, compulsive memory pictures (with physical symptoms, fear of death and so on), or also amnesia, paralysis or hyperactivity, insomnia, regression into early childhood behaviour patterns (for example, sucking the thumb), aggression, depression, often feelings of guilt and shame, anxiety attacks, inner emptiness (feeling frozen inside, one has no more feelings, cannot sense one's own body), but also all manner of physical symptoms such as constipation, diarrhoea, Asthma and many more.

Ideally, these reactions should, over time, become less severe or frequent, and stop altogether after about 8 weeks. Yet in many cases the said symptoms do not disappear, but rather become more severe. This is where it becomes pathological – **Post-traumatic Stress**. In such cases, psychological counselling is needed. If the victims do not receive help, the condition can become chronic. Personality changes begin to show themselves, the whole biography is affected, with addictive behaviour setting in which can lead to criminality, family break-ups and so on...

In the first 8-week period following the stress reactions, the trauma cannot as yet be medically treated. What is more important, however, is the pedagogical-therapeutic work in order to stabilise to the person and allow the innate self-remediation to take place, so that chronic symptoms can be avoided.

We worked above all on the cultivation of the rhythmic aspects of life: starting with such things as regular meals and periods of sleep. In order to facilitate a healthy sleep, such aids as a hot bath, aromatic massages through to bedtime stories within an appropriate atmosphere. In fact, every kind of ritual can help to give particularly children the essential stability and orientation they require. For instance, harmonising the breathing process can help greatly to overcome panic attacks. One can achieve a lot just by singing songs that have a particular rhythm.

Trauma is always related to shock and cramps – it literally is felt in the bones. Movement, therefore, is also the main healing element: Eurhythmy, Eurhythmic therapy, games of movement and such things can be very effective.

The basis of art and rhythm underlying it, give to Waldorf Education countless tools that make it just about predestined to be a pedagogical method for crisis and emergency situations.

It is also very important that affected victims learn to speak about their experiences. This allows them to become detached from their problems, for if they can really discuss the things that happened, they begin view the experiences from outside. Children are often also able to express themselves through drawing pictures as well.

The Engagement - terrible experiences

The Waldorf School in Chengdu invited us to undertake the journey to China. Li Zhang had written that all their teachers had, immediately after the earthquake, helped wherever they could – above all in hospitals – and the physical stress on the population was intolerable. We met at the Waldorf School on arrival in order to prepare for the ensuing engagement, following which we drove to the disaster zone...

Shifang was the last city in the district to remain somewhat unaffected. This was also where the crisis committee of the local government had its headquarters. We received the accreditation for our engagement from the Department of Alien Affairs stationed here. Initially, for one day, we were observed by inspectors, who, however, were satisfied that what we were doing was good enough and left us to it. For the next 2 weeks we worked in 7 different school camps under tents with many children who had lost their parents and classmates. Many of them had watched their friends and relatives die – and these children were terribly traumatised.

The further one got from Shifang towards the mountains, the greater was the devastation. One could no longer speak of settlements. Instead there were great heaps of rubble surrounded by tents where people had found shelter. In spite of the catastrophic destruction, the region was well furnished with medical supplies and field hospitals, and disinfectants everywhere to prevent the spread of epidemics.

The first of the field schools we worked with the children in, lay in Xiaomukuo. One of numerous experiences we had here was with a young boy who struck us at once because of his attitude of complete rejection. When, for example, we started some circle games, he sat demonstratively to one side, throwing us dark glances. It took a very long time before he could open up and begin to participate. And this was when something wonderful happened: he changed completely, and particularly handwork exited him – knotting techniques and similar activities. These things were his way of overcoming his trauma. He even invited us to his home. This young boy, like many of the children, had been buried in the nearby district town of Hongbai. He could, however, be saved.

Many others could not be saved. In a single Hongbai school with 700 students, 160 were killed after the collapse of their building. Many children were caught in the debris for days, and people tried to dig them out with their bare hands. To crown it all, a chemicals factory had also been destroyed and was emitting poisonous vapours. Numbers of badly injured children were dragged onto the surrounding hills to get them above the clouds of gas. There were teachers who dug out their own children. Many of them could not speak, did not yet feel their bodies and ran around in panic.

In Luoshinzen, also near Hongbai, 200 children lost their lives when a whole section of their school building collapsed. There were children who had jumped out of the windows during the earthquake. One child survived for two days, head downwards, caught on the end of a staircase, only to die an

hour after having been released. The stories are terrible and there are countless destinies of this kind.

It was in Luoshinzen that we experienced for the first time protests by parents accusing the authorities of corruption. They maintained that the houses had not been built sufficiently strongly, as one had tried to save on concrete and steel. One poster put it blatantly in calligraphic strokes: "Acts of God cannot be avoided. But when the catastrophes are caused by people, we must hate them for it." Because of the volatile mood, the authorities did not dare to take it down...

Comfort, release, work through, heal

Anything that could release the psychological cramps, the trauma, in any way was helpful during this phase both for children and for adults.

In the case of the children, we placed the emphasis on games, rhythmic exercises, handcrafts and Eurhythmy. This included exercises in self-confidence, such as letting yourself fall and be caught up by others. Such specific exercises in movement help to re-establish the ability to function in life and strengthen the constitution once again. For a child that had lost its parents and little sister, we celebrated her birthday in all simplicity, with a cake, singing and cheers.

In the case of the youths we tried to carefully introduce conversation about what had happened. They told shattering stories, in floods of tears. We found a kind of biographical process helpful here: you take a rope, which acts as a symbol for our lifeline; then gather stones and flowers, the stones representing bad memories, the flowers the good ones. In this way we tried to connect them with the line of their biography once again, which is very difficult after severe trauma. The earthquake was often depicted by the young people as a large heap of stones. But what was there before this? The young people were able to find a relationship to their previous lives along this route, seeing beyond the terrible event of a few weeks before.

At the request of the government officials, we also worked in the chemical plant that had blown up. For an entire morning we held workshops, Eurhythmy, singing, rhythmic exercises, conversations with some 150 workers of the factory. We experienced people who broke down in telling their stories, but in this manner they could find release.

Besides this, we were asked to do some work with parents in the camp settlements. Many had committed suicide in this time, being unable to deal with the experiences. There were parents who had themselves dug their children out of the rubble, and had then to bury them in the mass graves dug for this purpose, no transport being available to the family graveyards. One man left a cell phone with his child in the grave... Fortunately our team included some psychotherapists. We were also able to bring relief through massage techniques – seeing again and again how everything depended on the release of stress and cramps, of working through it.

The teachers too, were naturally heavily traumatised. They had been responsible for the children when the unspeakable happened... Many were haunted by the accusations of the parents, who simply needed to offload the blame on somebody. One could hold them responsible for anything: that they had left the classrooms too early, or that they had waited too long; that they had walked at the head of the children or that they had followed behind them... It did not matter how they had behaved, they received the blame, sometimes to the point of meeting lynch mobs. And these same teachers are now asking themselves how they are supposed to take up teaching the same children once again.

We spoke to a director of a school in Hongbai, who was in real panic. When we tried to get him to talk about his experiences, he laid his head on the table - and went to sleep! It is unbelievable what mechanisms body and soul can find to avoid trauma in such experiences. Other teachers we tried to work with took out their cell phones and began to play computer games... none of this is some sort of deliberate slight, but just a desperate attempt to detach oneself from the awful experiences.

We helped these people with different exercises, with the sole aim of making them willing and able to lead conversations and meet people once again. We prepared the first lessons that were to follow the catastrophe together with the teachers. We showed them what they could do with the children that would harmoniously address thinking, feeling and will. We continuously stressed that the children needed rhythm and needed to be able to move, and especially to be led into activities in order to overcome their feelings of helplessness. And of course we also gave a lot of advice on what the teachers could do for their own situations.

The last days and a view towards the future

Through the work with the teachers, we were able to point to the methods of Waldorf Pedagogy that lead beyond overcoming trauma to the basic anthropology that underlies it. Throughout these days, our work was met by so much interest and resonance that we were accompanied by television crews the entire last week of our stay; from Hong Kong, Japan and other Chinese broadcasting stations.

The Government finally decided on their own initiative to organise workshops for teachers during the last days of our stay. The pedagogical commission, the teacher training college in Shifang and the Department of Alien Affairs organised 3-day seminars for groups of 60 teachers, which we held with them. We spoke of psychological trauma and of Emergency Pedagogy, interspersed this with songs, rhythmic clapping and other things. Conversations about their own trauma, underpinned by movement, massage, individual therapies of various kinds and working groups in therapeutic craftwork, Form Drawing, Painting and Eurhythmy.

This success of this whole effort is demonstrated best, perhaps, by the fact that the teacher training college and the pedagogical commission asked requested an ongoing co-operation into the future – and also co-operation with the Waldorf School in Chengdu!

Through this kind of practical help, the effects of which we could experience at first hand, the value of Waldorf Education attained a high degree of recognition.

During the entire time of our engagement, we wore dark blue Tee shirts with “Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners” written on them in red lettering. Representatives of the Provincial Government asked us if they could keep one of these as the Government intends to erect a monument in which it, too, should find a place as an exhibit expressing mutual human aid and solidarity...

In farewell, the Chinese handed us a letter of thanks in which their acknowledgement was once more volubly expressed. Amongst other things, the following:

“In this dismal time you extended to the population of Shifang a helping hand and encouragement. We herewith wish to thank you for your benevolence and express our admiration. We have been deeply moved and encouraged by it.”

At this point I should like to thank each of the volunteers in our team heartily for their work. Stefanie Allon (Waldorf educator), Christoph Doll (Waldorf teacher), Dr. Olaf Koob (Doctor), Warja Saake (Psychotherapist), Sebastian von Tschammer (Curative-/Eurythmy) – as also our translators Prof. Tian Dasheng, Astrid Schröter (at the moment in Chengdu) and Shoumao Wang.

Bernd Ruf