



Where Children Grow

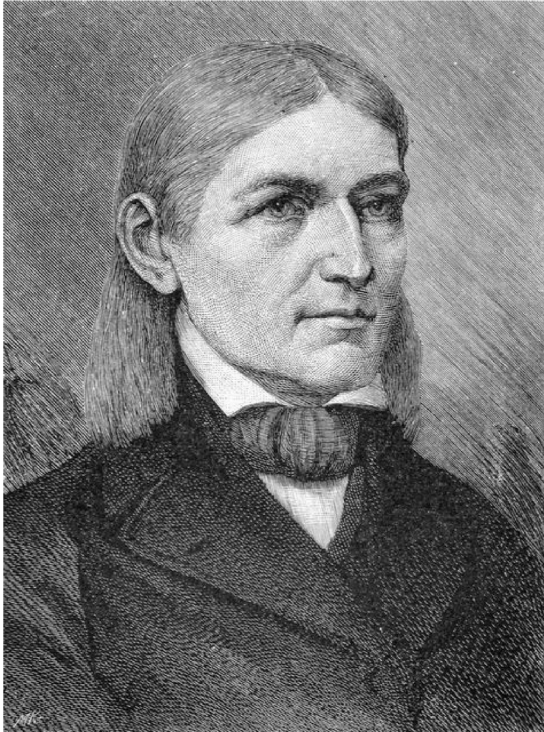
Wisdom for Raising Resilient Humans
from the Inventor of Kindergarten

Friedrich Froebel

EDITED BY MIRIAM MATHIS

Where Children Grow

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Wood Engraving of Friedrich Froebel, c. 1840
Artist Unknown

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*Wisdom for Raising Resilient Humans
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Foreword

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about Friedrich Froebel, the inventor of the kindergarten, since his death in 1852. His work was certainly known internationally during his lifetime, but his worldwide fame reached its peak in the early twentieth century, some fifty years after his death. At that time in the United States, his birthday was celebrated with gala affairs. Many major US cities had Froebel clubs or associations, fitting recognition for the man who gave the world the first successful form of early childhood education.

Why then have we forgotten Froebel? Was it due to anti-German sentiment stirred during World War I? Did the method become too diluted or rigidly applied? We certainly still have kindergartens in America, but they usually do not adhere to the child-centered, whole-child, play-based approach that Froebel pioneered.

My personal belief is that the shapers of our current educational system made a conscious decision to move away from Froebel. The Froebel kindergarten required

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well-trained professionals, and while early childhood education contributed greatly to the success of America's industrial revolution, the kindergarten was not easily mass-produced. As the demand for education increased exponentially, a lower percentage of instructors were properly trained and the application of Froebel's method became less effective. Educational leaders such as John Dewey, Patty Smith Hill, and William Heard Kilpatrick moved the country away from the kindergarten gold standard in the hopes of reforming Froebel's "romantic notions," bringing preschool education into the modern age. As a result, much of the real power of Froebel's approach has been lost.

There are echoes of Froebel's philosophy in the Reggio Emilia movement and the work of Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, who both acknowledged him as an influence. While these adaptations of Froebel's work are not the original concept, they share his child-centered, whole-child, play-based approach. Such approaches in general have been relegated to the fringe by mainstream education, the legacy of Kilpatrick's published "critical" examinations of Froebel and Montessori. Kilpatrick's writings give a clear indication of how and why we abandoned Froebel's way for the promise of a more "scientific" approach.

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The history of the Froebel kindergarten in America explains why the US education system finds itself in its current circumstance. The business of public education is finally collapsing under the weight of its own bureaucracy. The educational marketplace is finally driving a re-examination of educational methods as parents opt for homeschooling or the growing number of private alternatives. Will this produce better education, and most importantly, will the masses of American society be able to afford what really works?

Froebel education is still very much alive among the elite private schools of Europe and Asia. In the United States, a mystique has developed around Froebel's method, due primarily to its connection to Frank Lloyd Wright, Buckminster Fuller, and others. Increasingly, interest in Froebel education is based on a desire to help children develop as creative problem-solvers. The growing appeal of Froebel's ideas appears to be the result of a socio-economic shift that has been documented by Richard Florida, Daniel Pink, and Malcolm Gladwell. It seems that Froebel education may play the same role for the Technological Revolution that it did for the Industrial Revolution one hundred fifty years ago.

There are many today who claim to have the best interpretation of Froebel's ideas. He was not fully

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understood in his own time, even among those who spoke his native German. With so many passing years, it has become increasingly harder to find material about what he actually intended. Much of what is available in English was augmented by well-meaning followers. Perhaps the place to start is with his own words.

While there are several books attributed to Froebel, he himself authored only one book during his lifetime, *Die Menschenerziehung*, in 1826. Known today as *The Education of Man*, the title is perhaps more properly translated as “human education.” Many of his other writings, including letters and articles from his weekly newsletter, *Das Sonntagsblatt*, have been published in books under a variety of titles which are attributed to Froebel.

It is important to consider Froebel’s work as an educational philosophy more than a method. The power of his ideas is due solely to his emphasis on what we are as human beings. How can one properly develop a child without a clear understanding of human potential? The bulk of Froebel’s material describes what we are: creative beings, co-creating within a creation. If this definition resonates with you, further study of Froebel education will be a rich and rewarding experience.

SCOTT BULTMAN
FROEBEL USA

Preface

GROWING UP IN RURAL NEW YORK, I enjoyed going home with my two tree-climbing companions, because their parents seemed unruffled by things like pine-pitch hands or slightly torn clothes.

Lisa had discovered a method of climbing a white pine's ladder-like trunk and then sliding down the outside of the tree, branch to bouncing branch, which was a lot of fun (and somewhat scary). Edith had a pet raccoon she had raised. It searched her jacket pocket for apples and rode her shoulder during our excursions. Saturday mornings, I usually had to wait while Edith and Lisa finished their chores around the house. Then we were free. In our teens, the three of us built a log cabin.

I liked my friends' energetic mother, Annemarie, who expected them to pull their weight at home yet supported our enthusiasms. I knew she and her husband were German; they had fled the Nazis on their honeymoon, their daughters told me. But I learned only much later

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that Annemarie had grown up in a village called Keilhau. Annemarie had been the only girl in the Keilhau boys' school where her father was principal – a school founded by a relative, Friedrich Froebel. (Froebel's niece, Emilie Froebel Barop, was Annemarie's grandmother.)

Edith and I were attending a teachers' college when she gave me these facts about her mother. While this connection delighted me, it was credible because Froebel had advocated just the sort of free play Annemarie had allowed her girls (and me, with them). He was the one who'd famously said that for a child “to climb a new tree means discovery of a new world” and considered the educator's role not as “teaching” but as accompanying children in their learning.

Although Froebel is best known as founder of the kindergarten, he started working with five-year-olds only after decades of teaching, so most of his ideas apply to children of all ages. He observed them closely, considered deeply, and recorded thoughts. Some of his longer works are not readily accessible, yet the more I immerse myself in them, the more I want to share what I unearth with teachers and parents. I love his image of the child as a flower, for instance, vulnerable yet strong. Take dandelions: you'll see them bloom in lush meadows

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or thrust through city sidewalks, in spring sunshine or winter wind. You will never change them into roses, no matter how you drench them with fertilizer. Determined and thriving, they remain what they were created to be.

Because Froebel honored differing learning styles, he particularly respected what he called self-activity. Rather than defining this term, I'll share an example from my own experience.

During recess one day, some of my fourth-grade students began damming the stream behind our school. No adult had organized this activity; it was their idea. Most people would call it play – but it was equally work, as the children exerted themselves to the limit, physically and mentally. Their first attempt failed, and they excitedly discussed possible reasons, probing in mud and water until they located and solved the problem. It took a long time. Up on the bank, another child was engrossed in a different world. Oblivious to her classmates' shouts, she carefully set acorn-cap dishes on a carpet of moss beneath overhanging tree roots. By the time I turned my attention elsewhere, she was perfecting interior decoration.

When I finally called my class back indoors, one of the dam-builders eagerly explained their project. He didn't seem to notice that his hands were cold and his

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sleeves wet. Nor did he realize that he and his friends had been experimenting with physics – and gaining skills in communication, teamwork, and troubleshooting in the process. But triumph shone from his eyes. The gnome-home designer said nothing, but she brimmed with quiet happiness.

Encouraging youngsters to discover their own solutions – to their own questions – was so revolutionary in Froebel’s day that the state shut down his kindergartens toward the end of his life. Valuing initiative, independence, and imagination was countercultural in an era when children were meant to be seen and not heard. Industrialization had begun, and school was where the young learned to sit still and follow instructions.

What about now, two hundred years on? Have we lost Froebel’s vision of childhood? From what I see and read, it seems that standardized curricula and testing, technology, and homework loads are robbing children of free play, the joyous self-activity and hands-on learning that rightly belong to education. Perhaps world leaders believe that accelerating children to academic success will secure their nation a leading edge in the world economy. But just as Froebel protested molding children like clay or stamping them like coins, we too can take a stand to

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protect children's right to a wholesome childhood. Peter Gray, a leading expert on the psychology of play, writes that today's children are suffering from play deprivation: "If we want children to reach their full human potential, we must accord them lots of freedom and time to play."

That's why I believe Froebel's reflections are as important in our day as in his. In compiling the following collection, I have combed his 1826 book *The Education of Man*, his autobiography, and other works – their English translations as well as the original German – for excerpts that I feel capture the heart of his message. In many cases, these have been slightly edited for clarity. I hope this book will encourage educators to step up in defense of children.

MIRIAM MATHIS

Miriam Mathis is a retired early childhood educator, German-English translator, and member of the Bruderhof.

Who Was Friedrich Froebel?

THURINGIA IS A STRIKINGLY BEAUTIFUL part of Germany, and numerous poets, musicians, and philosophers began life among its forested hills. Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel, too, was born in Thuringia, in Oberweissbach, on April 21, 1782. The famous Grimm brothers – Froebel’s contemporaries – collected folklore in the neighboring region, and some of their bleaker tales could almost have described his first years.

Froebel retained no memory of his mother, who died before he was ten months old. His father, a Lutheran pastor and strict disciplinarian, remarried when Friedrich was four. After her own son’s birth, the new mother spared no love on her stepchildren, and Friedrich later recalled that she treated him like a stranger.

“If anything went wrong while my stepbrother and I were playing, I was blamed,” he wrote. “Since our parents assumed bad motives for everything I did, I became the bad boy they thought me. Afraid of punishment, I began to lie and deceive.”

Friedrich occupied himself in the yard between parsonage and church, with “only bugs and weeds for friends.” When he was old enough, his father sent him

to the local girls' school, its headmaster being a family acquaintance.

Circumstances changed for the better when Friedrich was ten, after a visit from his mother's brother. Sensing his nephew's loneliness, Pastor Hoffmann invited the child home with him, and for the next five years, Friedrich thrived on his uncle's trust. "My new life was vigorous and free. The world lay open, and I made the most of it."

Friedrich described the two parsons in his new village. "My uncle, the main pastor, conducted his life and calling with kindness. The second pastor was rigid, scolding, and commanding. The first led us with a glance; a word from him and few boys could disobey. The other's long exhortations went over our heads, immediately forgotten."

Similarly, he compared the two teachers at the school he attended with forty other boys. "One was pedantic and rigid. The other – our class teacher – was generous and free. The first had no influence over his class; the second we followed eagerly." Further describing this man's influence, Froebel wrote, "Our teacher's religious instruction confirmed my own thoughts, quickening and warming me. When he spoke of Jesus, my heart melted in longing for a similar life."

As these impressions affected Froebel's future course, so did his next chapter, when his father apprenticed him

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to a forester at age fifteen. As well as forestry, Friedrich delved into geometry, surveying, and agriculture, making full use of his master's library. Best, he spent hours alone among the mighty trees, where he marveled at nature's repeating patterns. He noticed, too, that trees damaged as saplings remained scarred for life. Applying this observation to children, years later, he wrote, "Education should initially consist in watchfully following, not dictating and interfering." Trees remained symbolic: "I would educate human beings with their feet rooted in God's earth . . . whose heads reach into heaven and there behold truth, in whose hearts earth and heaven are united."

After two years with the forester, Froebel pursued a range of subjects at the University of Jena, where botany studies reinforced his woodland observation that "everything strives toward unity." The romantic poets Goethe and Schiller also left their mark. But Friedrich ran out of money, and his two years at Jena were cut short by a stint in debtors' prison. He used the nine weeks for continued study.

Froebel spent his next three years doing clerical jobs on various estates. He hesitated over plans for the future, until, in 1805, he decided to train under a Frankfurt architect, supported by a legacy from Uncle Hoffmann. Yet doubt persisted. Would his architecture actually benefit humanity?

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In Frankfurt he met a school principal, Gottlieb Gruner, with whom he shared wide-ranging discussions. After some weeks, Gruner suggested that Froebel, now twenty-three, drop architecture to teach in his model school of two hundred students. When Froebel agreed to give it a try, his passion was ignited. While teaching his first lesson to thirty or forty boys, he felt “as happy as a fish in the water or a bird in the air.” He had found his vocation.

To his brother Christoph, Friedrich wrote, “From the first hour, the children were not strangers to me. I felt I’d been born for teaching. . . . This happiness comes both from my work’s high purpose – education – and from the children’s affection.”

The school was based on Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi’s principles, so Gruner lent his young employee a Pestalozzi publication. Reading it opened new realms of thought for Friedrich Froebel. “Pestalozzi’s heartfelt goal was to build, in some corner of the world, an institution to educate the poor. This was oil poured on my spirit’s fire. On the spur of the moment, I decided to visit this man.” With Gruner’s agreement, he set out for Yverdon, Switzerland, arriving in September 1805 after three weeks of walking. He was thrilled by Pestalozzi’s school, where head, hands, and heart shared equal honor.

Back in Frankfurt, besides his teaching job, Froebel started tutoring three sons of a baron, von Holzhausen.

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In July 1807, he left Gruner's school to focus on the von Holzhausen boys' education, setting two conditions: they would live with him in the country, and they would be entirely in his care. He now wrestled to create connection between academic subjects, believing that "joyful, unfettered work springs from perceiving everything as one whole." Baron von Holzhausen donated a field, where his sons helped their tutor tend plants they brought from surrounding hills.

Despite his zeal, Froebel felt inadequate to the task. So in 1808 he asked their father's permission to take the von Holzhausen lads to Yverdon for two years, certain both he and they would benefit from time with Pestalozzi. Froebel observed the boys' lessons, discussed their progress with Pestalozzi, and attended student teachers' lectures, which fueled his desire to continue working with children.

Even in Yverdon, however, Froebel sensed a disconnect between school subjects; when he and his students left, he was still seeking a more "natural, lively, and childlike way of teaching." In 1811 he enrolled in further university studies in Berlin, spending holidays with his brother Christian's family.

Froebel interrupted his educational pursuits in 1813. German-speaking states were joining forces against Napoleon's retreating army, and Froebel volunteered with

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the Lützow Free Corps. Enlisting connected him with two other students, Heinrich Langethal and Wilhelm Middendorf, with whom late night discussions kindled a lifelong comradeship. Their division participated in two battles, then disbanded when a peace treaty was signed in May 1814.

Following his military episode, Froebel returned to Berlin, where geology and crystallography classes had provided clues in his search for “the inner connection of the universe.” In his new role, assisting at the mineralogical museum, ongoing study convinced him that all of nature – from snowflake to quartz crystal, pinecone to galaxy – follows related laws of growth and form. “Whenever I grasped this interconnection and unity, I felt my spirit’s longing fulfilled,” he wrote.

He turned down a professorship in mineralogy, though, because he’d come to believe that educating children could renew humankind. And he was convinced that all aspects of their education can be linked, just as divergent life forms connect.

In 1816, Froebel had opportunity to further test his ideas. His brother Christoph had died; and when Christoph’s widow asked advice on her three sons’ education, Friedrich offered to teach them himself, at their Griesheim home. His brother Christian sent his two sons as well.

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Instead of conventional instruction and rote memorization, Froebel hoped for lively interaction between teacher and students – confident that when children’s interest is kindled, they take initiative and “make the knowledge their own.” His educational theories and method would keep evolving through time and experience, but his goal remained firm: that each child “understand himself, be at peace with nature, and be united with God.”

“I would like to unite what I see divided. School and life must be one,” Froebel wrote. He proposed that education should move outward from the familiar: from home, to school, to village. So he and his five nephews explored the area, drawing maps on their return. Froebel noted that the boys felt increasingly comfortable as they connected with their surroundings, with nature, and with other people. He respected them, and they in turn respected him and each other.

Froebel invited his two wartime friends to join the venture. Wilhelm Middendorf arrived at Griesheim in April 1817, bringing a sixth pupil.

Two months later, Froebel, Middendorf, and the boys piled their belongings onto a horse wagon, then walked beside it several miles to Keilhau, a picturesque hamlet of red-roofed, half-timbered homes clustered around the

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central church and fountain. In this typical Thuringian farm village, Froebel's school took root.

Honoring creativity as highly as academic achievement was almost unheard of. Yet Froebel believed that humans are essentially creative – and therefore children need opportunity to experiment and invent. He balanced morning lessons with afternoons of practical work, sports, handicrafts, art, and free play. Evenings were relaxed, with storytelling, singing, and hobbies.

Above all, Froebel hoped his students would be freethinkers. “Must we go on stamping our children like coins instead of seeing them walk among us as images of God?” was his challenge to other educators.

His own role was that of guide: attentive to – and building on – what inspired the boys. A wish from one of them to climb a nearby mountain for a birds-eye view of Keilhau developed into the first of many excursions. It was usually a child who called everyone's attention to a bird's nest or berry patch – confirming Froebel's claim that children heighten their teacher's awareness.

Heinrich Langethal arrived that September, as did more students. Within months, the number grew to fifty-six. Froebel drew floor plans and obtained permission to build a school. Construction began in November 1817, with teachers and boys helping the carpenters.

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In Keilhau's woods and orchards, the boys gleaned apples, built fires, roasted potatoes, and cleared sledding tracks. They used materials from a torn-down shed to erect dens and forts; they reenacted battles and legends. If they had to be indoors, there were wooden blocks (and furniture) to build with. It was obvious to Froebel how much the children were learning – and how imagination blossomed – while they pursued their ideas. Why should school and play be separate? he asked.

September 1818 brought a big change. In Froebel's words, "I brought to the household – now so rich in children and brothers – its housewife, a lady to whom I'd been drawn by a shared love of nature and childhood, with high ideals for children's education." Froebel had met Henrietta Hoffmeister at university in Berlin, and she was thirty-eight when she left her affluent home to marry him and help realize their dream. She cheerfully accepted Keilhau's frugal lifestyle and loved the children as her own.

Prussian authorities became suspicious about this unusual school. In 1825 they sent an inspector, but he returned a glowing report:

The institution presents a rare harmony – an intimate family of sixty, living peacefully, all doing heartily what they have to, with complete confidence in each

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other, every member contributing his share, so that the work goes on of itself. The headmaster is loved by all.

Eighteen twenty-six marked publication of Froebel's most comprehensive and best-known work, *The Education of Man*. Its title would raise eyebrows today. So would its text, in which the author discusses "boyhood," "manliness," and "the boy." Readers must try not to trip over nineteenth-century gendered language (and bear in mind that Keilhau was a boys' school). Most of Froebel's ponderings apply equally to all children.

This book was Froebel's manifesto. As well as his belief that "Every life's purpose is to reveal God, through realizing its own nature," he wrote that each person is also a member of something bigger – a family, a community, a nation, the human race – and that wellbeing develops only in relation to the larger entity. "Children are like a tree's blossoms, manifesting humankind's ceaseless rebirth. As a bud is connected with the whole tree – root, trunk, branch, and crown, and so with earth and sky – so the individual shares life that is common to all."

Unity is the book's recurring theme: "Underlying the universal order of things is a living, all-pervading unity. This unity is God, in whom everything lives and has its being."

Unsurprisingly, the reactionary government continued to look askance at Keilhau. Following a crackdown on

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dissent in 1827, parents started withdrawing their sons from the school. From sixty students, the number dropped to five or six. The financial situation became dire.

After several years of hard luck and disappointments, Froebel consulted an acquaintance from his Frankfurt days. Xavier Schnyder, who admired Keilhau's spirit, offered a Swiss castle he owned. Froebel immediately set out for Wartensee Castle, hoping Switzerland would prove more tolerant than Germany. He hoped too that Keilhau School might fare better without him, since authorities there had labeled him a dissident. Schnyder arranged permissions, and the Wartensee School opened in 1831.

This venture soon seemed a false start, when Schnyder forbade renovations to the castle. Froebel and his colleagues were discussing their problems in a Wartensee tavern one evening when three merchants joined the conversation. On the spot, they offered another castle in nearby Willisau. Within days they had formed a union of twenty wealthy families who guaranteed support.

The Willisau School opened in 1833, with thirty-six pupils and several Keilhau staff. However, Froebel's assertion that children need no church forms – and his determination to protect them from “stony, oppressive theology” – antagonized Catholic Church authorities. “Hunt the wolves from the land, to the glory of God and

the rage of the devil!” a Chapuchin monk incited the populace during a church festival.

On a local magistrate’s suggestion, the teachers organized an open day, and a curious crowd arrived for the twelve-hour event, including authorities from Zürich, Bern, and neighboring cantons. Throughout the day, children answered questions so eagerly that onlookers broke into spontaneous applause. Shortly thereafter, the regional government, which owned the castle, reduced the rent – and banished Chapuchin monks from the canton.

Impressed by what they had seen on their visit, Bern authorities invited Keilhau staff to direct an orphanage in Burgdorf, where Froebel, Langethal, and their wives set up a day school as well, so town children and orphans could learn together. It was here that four- and five-year-olds were first included. When the local government had Froebel run refresher courses for teachers (in groups of forty), he became further convinced, through conversation with these colleagues, about the importance of including such young children.

Free from opposition for the first time in years, Friedrich Froebel enjoyed working with the Burgdorf children. His observations reinforced his certainty that time and space for free play are the best ingredients for wholesome development. In self-motivated play, children

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interact with their surroundings and find their place in the world, Froebel noted, and he described play as “free expression and activity of every kind.”

During such play, children involved themselves with whatever materials were at hand, deciding what to do, how to do it, and meeting challenges that arose. Watching them, Froebel’s respect deepened for what he termed “self-activity,” implying involvement of the child’s whole self: body, mind, and spirit.

This rewarding interlude was cut short when Henrietta Froebel became unwell and doctors advised leaving Switzerland. In 1836 the couple returned to Thuringia, settling in Blankenburg, four miles from Keilhau. In their rented house, a former powder mill, Froebel focused on caring for his wife, on production of his “gifts and occupations” (playthings he’d designed, such as cloth balls and wooden blocks), and on writing.

In Blankenburg, Froebel opened his first center exclusively for four- and five-year-olds. At the same location, he launched a course, in 1838, training young women and men “to take oversight of children before they are ready for school; to guide them according to their own natures; to help them develop their senses and physical abilities; to engage their minds; to acquaint them with the world of nature; to rightly guide their souls; to lead them to the origin of life.”

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Early the following year he spent time in Dresden, where a similar center was opening based on his principles. While there, he was invited to lecture in the palace, with the Queen herself in attendance. His ideas were gaining recognition.

Henrietta's illness worsened, and on May 13, 1839, she died. Froebel temporarily moved to Keilhau, to grieve his loss. But he knew his way forward lay with children, and in June 1840 he returned to Blankenburg to continue his work with four- and five-year-olds.

For a long time, Froebel had searched for a word to encapsulate his goals and values. In June 1840, he hit upon "kindergarten," and immediately knew he'd found what he was looking for. Often translated as garden for children, "garden of children" better conveys the word's meaning.

Froebel toured Germany with Middendorf, to develop more centers and teacher-training courses. In 1847 there were seven kindergartens, and forty-four more opened the following year. After one conference, attendees (some of whom had arrived skeptical) passed a resolution stating: "The Froebel school should form part of every child's education. . . . Teachers and educators present cannot withhold their approval from so excellent a system of training the young."

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Despite his travel, lectures, and writing, Froebel still spent as much time as possible with children. He helped start vegetable and flower beds outside the Blankenburg kindergarten and wrote, “In their plots, children may plant what they like, how they like. In this way, they learn that plants must be treated with care.” Noticing their pleasure in pushing his wheelbarrow, he composed a wheelbarrow song and had the local carpenter make forty child-size wheelbarrows.

In 1849, the Duke of Meiningen offered Marienthal Castle as a teacher training center. Froebel hoped it could also include a kindergarten, school, and orphanage, plus a workshop for design and production of educational equipment. He envisioned the Marienthal community as a model of harmony: between God and man, between people of all ages, and between each individual and nature. Reality fell short of his dream, however, and only the kindergarten and teacher training center came into being.

Louise Levin was a woman of wealth who had visited Keilhau in her twenties and later helped Henrietta Froebel in Blankenburg. Inspired to become a kindergarten teacher, she had attended the training course. In 1849 Froebel invited her help at Marienthal, where she became principal of the training school. And on July 9, 1851,

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Friedrich Froebel and Louise Levin were married. He was sixty-nine; she was thirty-six.

Unknown to Froebel, renewed opposition had been mounting against his ideas. A month after the wedding, Karl Otto von Raumer, the Minister of Education, closed every kindergarten in Prussia. His stated reason: kindergarten was “part of the Froebelian socialistic system, calculated to raise our young people in atheism.”

Froebel was sure there had been some mistake. With his goal of uniting children with God, how could he be considered atheist? And how could schools modeled on gardens be dangerous? He wrote to von Raumer, and to the king of Prussia, but to no avail. For a totalitarian regime, there was nothing more abhorrent than teaching children about freedom.

Froebel’s disappointment was bitter. “As a machine of the state, I should have been engaged in cutting out and modelling other machines,” he wrote. “But I only wanted to train up free, thinking, independent men.”

Despite this blow – or perhaps because of it – he convened a three-day conference in September, attended by educators, church dignitaries, and government officials. As well as explaining his approach, Froebel led games with children, who were clearly enjoying themselves. At conference end, attendees praised the

Who Was Friedrich Froebel?

interaction between children and adults, as well as the gymnastics, artwork, stories, songs, and poetry. Froebel's courage was restored.

“I know it will be centuries before my views are generally accepted,” he said, “but that no longer troubles me. If a seed has been sown, germination will follow, and so will good fruit.”

Friedrich Froebel died at Marienthal on June 21, 1852. His approach to education was only beginning to receive wider attention. After his death, his views on childhood would gain momentum in England, the United States, and Canada (and more recently in Japan and South Korea), gradually reshaping education. “If three hundred years after my death my method of education shall be completely established according to its idea, I shall rejoice in heaven,” he had written.

Froebel had always been an optimist. “I foresee a time, spread before my eyes like a spring landscape, when reverence for childhood and fostering creative activity – through which children give form to thought and internalize all they perceive – will convince everyone of the truth.”

MIRIAM MATHIS

I

Foundations

LET US ABSORB from children's lives into ours that vital creative energy of childhood that we have lost. Let us learn from our children. Let us listen to the quiet demands of their hearts. Let us live for our children; then their lives will bring us joy and peace, and we will ourselves begin to grow in wisdom. ¹

Reverence for Childhood

THE SPIRIT OF GOD and of humanity – although as yet concealed and unrecognized – is revealed most purely and perfectly in each person as a child of God and of humanity as a whole if he unfolds and represents his own being as much as possible in accordance with his individuality and personality. ²

EACH PERSON is a member of the human race in his or her unique way; the destiny of humanity – to be children of God – manifests itself differently in each individual. ³

Where Children Grow

THE AIM OF ALL INSTRUCTION and training is the nurturing of each human being so that the inner and outer, the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal are brought into living harmony. This nurturing should begin before birth while the parents await the child. ⁴

THE CHILD must be accepted for what he is, what he has, and what he will become. ⁵

WE GIVE YOUNG PLANTS and animals space, and time, and rest, knowing that they will unfold to beauty by laws working in each. We avoid acting on them by force, for we know that such intrusion upon their natural growth could only injure their development. Yet we treat the young human being as if it were a piece of wax, a lump of clay, out of which we can mold what we will. ⁶

WE HANDLE CHILDREN so differently from other growing things. . . . Yet children proceed from the same source and follow the same laws of development as other growing things. Children are like varied flowers. They need care. Each is beautiful alone and glorious in community with its peers. ⁷

Foundations

FROM BIRTH children should be seen and responded to according to their unique nature, and given freedom for the many-faceted use of their powers. The use of particular powers should not be enhanced at the expense of others which are then hindered in their development. Children should neither be fettered nor given too much assistance. They should learn early how to find in themselves the center of their activity, and to move freely, to grasp with their own hands, to stand and walk on their own feet, to find and observe with their own eyes. ⁸

AS THE GREATEST friend and loftiest teacher of humankind has said, the kingdom of peace and purity, unity and truth, belongs to the children, and only by returning to the spirit of childhood can we regain this kingdom. It is the return to childhood that ensures us those blessings of heaven, peace and purity, unity and truth, and all that of necessity blossoms and fruits from these; and it is the sanctifying and loving care of childhood which alone can bring us earthly salvation and joy. ⁹

YOU MUST KEEP HOLY the being of the young child; protect it from every rough and rude impression, from every touch of the vulgar. A gesture, a look, a sound is often sufficient to inflict such wounds. The child's soul is

Where Children Grow

more tender and vulnerable than the finest or tenderest plant. ¹⁰

ABSORBING A HOST of impressions through the senses is almost the only activity of infants. It is important that they absorb nothing morbid, low, mean, or ambiguous. The adults about them should be genuine, their surroundings firm and sure, stimulating confidence; the atmosphere should be clear and light-filled. The room should be clean, however modest it may be in other respects. Often the entirety of adulthood is not sufficient to amend impressions absorbed in childhood, simply because children's whole being, like a large eye, is open to them, wholly given up to them. For this reason the care of infants is so important. ¹¹

THE CHILD'S FIRST EXPRESSION is activity. . . . Children kick against whatever resists their feet; they seize whatever their hands touch. Soon after, or along with this, social feeling develops: hence the smile, the evident pleasure at moving their limbs in comfortable warmth, bright light, and pure fresh air. This is the first awaking of the child's human consciousness. ¹²

Foundations

THE FIRST SMILE, which instantly distinguishes the young human being from any other creature, is an essentially human characteristic, and certainly not merely an expression of physical well-being. It is the way in which the child first enters into communication with other minds. ¹³

TO SEE AND RESPECT in the child the germ and promise of the coming youth and adult is very different from considering and treating him or her as an adult already. Parents who overlook this forget that they themselves became mature only insofar as they lived through the various stages of their lives in natural succession. ¹⁴

AT EVERY STAGE of development, the child, the youth, the adult should be wholly what this stage calls for. Then each successive stage will spring like a new shoot from a healthy bud; it will follow that the individual will accomplish what each stage requires. Only wholesome development at each stage can lead to wholesome development at each later stage. ¹⁵

OUR OWN HEARTS and our whole experience assure us that only a very small part of what was lost in early years can ever be ours. ¹⁶

