CURSIVE HANDWRITING AND ADOLESCENCE

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When I taught grade school, I was very attentive to helping the children develop a cursive handwriting that was simultaneously legible and self-describing on the feeling level. The older the child, the more expressive and confident the handwriting could appear. Naturally, I tried to bring the many insights of Rudolf Steiner to the classes. In addition, I found that Magda Lissau offered many wise and practical guidelines. In *The Temperaments and the Arts* she points out that the nine/ten-year change is expressed in the child's handwriting which, somewhat beautiful up to that transition, becomes inharmonious. Why is this so? Magda Lissau tells us that "the cause of the chaos is the re-orientation of the working of the formative forces. An incisive moment in the process of incarnation is reached." In the later grades, "children now search for their individual style of writing while breaking down and discarding the imitated and previously acquired and learned style."

Speaking as a high school teacher, I can report that the grade-school experience is actually a dress rehearsal for the deeper, more existential chaos that erupts, quite naturally, in adolescence. Adolescence marks the birth of the astral body. Its birth signals more than a "re-orientation of the working of the formative forces" – it assaults the primacy of the ether body. The new and often exciting astral-entity in a student does not cater well to the formed body of behaviour that is a remarkable achievement, and goal, of the grades school.

We work with cursive handwriting in the high school so that the students can be led to a more-or-less conscious engagement with the formative forces that need to be shaped as they, the students, take up their own bodies, their own destinies. Sounds good and constructive, right? In my experience, the students, especially in grades 9 and 10, rarely agree with these intentions. They argue.

Many would prefer to print their letters, pointing out quite rightly that printing is more legible than cursive handwriting. True enough. But I can say, "printing is rather boring to look at, whereas beautiful, well-formed handwriting, is by nature interesting, if not exciting." Many would say that printing actually is a self-description of themselves, since they are aspiring to be orderly and well balanced. True enough. But I can say, "actually, printing is *not* you, it is a depiction that is heavily standardized. And you are not." And I add, "When you write, you have a literal and emotional chance to express yourself. Why not make the most of it? At the very least, connect a few of these printed, static forms to create a flowing figure, one that asks for comprehension?" In high school, self expression is more important than self depiction, just as thinking is different and more timely than picture making with one's thoughts.

When the inevitable question arises - 'Why really do I need to write in cursive when, in actuality,

handwriting commonly is understood as printing and cursive?' - there are two responses that are responsible and sufficient. First, I point out that there is something uniform about printing letters that mitigates the notion that handwriting is a *personal expression.* And second, I inform them that research on the cognitive and neurological impact of handwriting indicates that the brain is shaped and reshaped; it is modified through the activity in such a way that impulses connect different centers in the brain. Such neuroplasticity affects our use of language, our capacity to remember, our attention spans, and much more. True, all handwriting makes these connections. But cursive writing is a fine and perfect image of the mental activity that joins specific areas of the human brain. It is the very picture of connectedness.

In our anthroposophical language we can say that brain research shows how cursive handwriting allows the brain to act as does the ether body, which through its very nature makes connections. It brings what is static to life.

The question remains, then, what activities we can provide in the high school that encourage cursive writing. Let me make some suggestions that I have used successfully in the classroom.

Cornell note taking: A quick look at Cornell note taking will show that this form of note taking advances writing on a daily basis. Students take notes in every class. I used Cornell note taking in grades 9 and 10. A sheet of paper is divided into three sections; in the larger sections, a student takes notes; in the space to the left, homework assignments are noted and then completed; in the bottom section, the next day's review has a place. Not only does this organized note-taking help the students organize their own thoughts, but daily relies on handwriting. When I review the students' work on Fridays, I comment on the handwriting that is used to convey the facts, and of course, I stress cursive.

Board work: There is something magical about being in front of the class and writing down one's own thoughts. The student writes for others, and tends to concentrate more of their inherent forces on the task. Actually, they look at their work from an entirely different direction, literally. Board and student are on the vertical plane together. They 'write out' their words in exactly the same way as they 'reach out' to others. Talk about 'inharmonious'! But the student always prevails and takes hold of the writing self. They soon see how writing in cursive is more relaxing than striking out letters to form words – just as a curved line is more peaceful than a straight one – just as rhythm is more engaging than beat.

Poetic forms: It is not easy to write the word 'circle' in a circle, or 'triangle' in a triangle, but you certainly learn about the shape of a letter when you have to beautifully contort it. The continuity of the lines of circles, squares, rectangles promote the cursive connection of letters. Along the same lines, writing 'angry' in an angry way, and 'love' or 'peace' in a loving or peaceful way, is quite liberating. In these exercises, cursive becomes quite expressive. (This exercise was inspired by Magda Lissau who did exactly this when she wrote the four temperaments cursively in four distinct figurations.)

Ancient History: This block gives a teacher the opportunity to trace the path of human consciousness from the writing of pictures (hieroglyphics, for example) to the writing of sounds, to the creation of alphabets, to the carving and printing of the letters, higher and lower case, to the creation of cursive scripts. The students can sense that the uniformity of early writing has evolved into the individuality of modern cursive self-expressive writing. And when one begins to play with the cursive, as imaginative individuals do, one can truly enter a world of artistic activity.

Dynamic Drawing: One gets beyond the utility of handwriting and leads the students into an exploration-impression of the making of forms. For this end, I created a four-year curriculum entitled *Dynamic Drawing for the Adolescent and Adult* which carefully leads the students to work consciously with forms. We see them written in the air; we write what we see on a piece of paper; we move the forms; eventually we can trace the evolution of consciousness in the different forms that picture our history for us. Finally, we can create our own expressive forms to express our deepest feelings, lying below the threshold of observant consciousness. (Adult depictions, if you like.) We don't probe our selves in isolation, though, for we can expect our forms to be understood by others. I personally don't know of a more important aspiration in our times.

Let me end this short commentary on the nature and advantages of writing cursive in high school with one more observation. If I print my handwriting in high school, I mimic a form that does not change over the time I use it – my lifetime. It can't. When I write in cursive, my handwriting naturally and expressively changes as I mature; it conveys a self that is not ever finished. I ask you, "which do you want for yourself and your students?" Every time I write a sentence in cursive I exercise my free individuality.