

Rudolf Steiner: Fighter for spiritual freedom. A centenary-event approaches

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This article, originally written for a non-Steiner audience in May this year, has been recently published in The New View. Many people around the world are at this time seeking to commemorate the centenary of the Christmas Foundation Meeting in ways that will allow it to fulfil its untapped potential and bring spiritual and cultural renewal to this suffering world. To assist such preparations, I've produced this slightly-altered version of the article for members and friends of the Anthroposophical Society in a form that can be shared with others.

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A little under 100 years ago, an event took place that some consider to be the single most significant event to have happened on Earth in the last 2,000 years. Most people have never heard of it, yet its effects go on working, regardless of whether or not human beings are aware of what happened then. The event was called *The Christmas*

Foundation Meeting. It took place in the presence of about 800 people near the city of Basel in Switzerland, and the person who brought it about was Rudolf Steiner.

Many in the society he founded at that time are beginning to investigate how they will commemorate this event. There is a tendency for all societies that have been founded by great people but are dependent for their continuation on those who come later, to ossify over the years – to grow dogmatic and lose connection with the essence of their founder’s teachings. If people are honest, it is a genuine existential question whether *anyone* in this world will be able to mark the centenary of the Christmas Foundation Meeting in the spirit in which it was originally given. To assist the possibility of that happening, it will help if we step back from where we are now and look at the Christmas Foundation Conference with new eyes. The purpose of this article, originally written for a non-anthroposophical audience on Counterspin Media and now rewritten slightly for those who have more background, is to describe the event within the context of Steiner’s overall life-goals – his “mission” on behalf of humanity. I hope that in this way its universal significance can be glimpsed – both by those who know quite a bit about Steiner and by those who previously had known only little about him.

Like many events of significance, the Christmas Foundation Meeting was born out of tragedy and a sense of deep inadequacy. Before the First World War, Rudolf Steiner had begun to create a building that would be able to hold, amplify and radiate the new streams of light that were pouring into the world since the ending, in 1899, of the 5,000 years of darkness, known as *Kali Yuga*.

Kali Yuga had been spoken of for thousands of years, and for many centuries people had longed for it to end, that a new age of creativity and light could begin within this earth. The darkness of the old period had reached a kind of climax in the Western world during the Nineteenth Century – a deep point of materialism where the light of the spirit was almost completely shut out as people focused instead on physical reality. Steiner knew that he had a task to help humanity move into what was going to be a time of new opportunities but also new dangers. At the age of eighteen, in the year 1879, he had been shown how he must develop his awareness of the spiritual dimensions of what was happening on the earth and that his task would be to prepare human beings to take hold of entirely new inspirations of the spirit that were to become available then. Those who guided humanity’s spiritual evolution knew that the Twentieth Century was to be a major turning-point, and Steiner’s task was that this new influx of radiance from the spiritual world could be *understood* as well as felt, so that new creativity could begin to transform the world in ways that were never possible in earlier times.

As a visible sign of the fruitfulness of this new inflow of light, work began in 1913 on the building that Steiner had planned to be the focal point of his activities. Just 40 people were present on 20th September of that year in the Swiss village of Dornach, near Basel, when Steiner carried out a short outdoor ceremony to mark the significance of the hour and laid a copper container, crafted into the shape of a twelve-sided dodecahedron, into the pit that had been dug as part of the foundations of the building to come. During the ceremony, the elements responded with dramatically intense rain, wind, lightening and thunder as if the powers of darkness, determined not to have their 5,000-year reign disturbed, were enraged at this man’s audacity and were signalling their intent to destroy everything that he was setting out to achieve.

Steiner had publicly taken hold of his mission in 1900 at the age of 39, when he began to speak openly of what his spiritual initiation and subsequent journeyman years had shown him. From that year onwards, he spoke of the new insights he perceived regarding Earth's connection to the cosmos and how spiritual beings were longing to assist human beings in all aspects of their lives. He gave personal lessons to individuals from many European countries who wished to become bearers of the spiritual light that he served. However, the world as a whole resisted all attempts to change in any fundamental way, and the old tendencies of human egos contesting for power against other egos built up to a climax. The outer sign of this was the First World War.

While Steiner was staying in Berlin during the war, he was asked how Germany could respond to what seemed to be a hopeless situation. He replied by drafting a blueprint for how society could function, based on the sacred geometry of the human being. He and some colleagues did all they could to take these ideas out into the world, but once again he was thwarted by the sheer weight and inertia of what was living in the souls of the people of that time. When the war ended, Steiner knew that the Treaty of Versailles doomed humanity to a second great war and decades of conflict, for the real causes of the First World War were entirely unaddressed by the peace treaty that the politicians of the day had created. These politicians – so like those who hold forth in so many countries in our time – divided the nations up in the image of the old world whose destruction they had participated in, and Steiner saw the inevitable devastation that was ahead because of this.

Disappointed but in no way slowing down in his activities, Steiner continued to seek for ways to bring renewal and plant seeds that would bear harvest in future times. One of these seeds was the building that had been begun before the war broke out, for it encapsulated in solid materials the same sacred forms that he had tried unsuccessfully to bring in ideas as a blueprint of how society could function successfully without war and with respect for the freedom and dignity of all human beings.

Work on this building, which Steiner called the *Goetheanum* after the great German writer, Goethe, continued throughout the war years and on into the Twenties. Then tragedy struck again. In what was probably an act of arson, carried out by those who did not want humanity to progress out of the darkness of old beliefs and superstitions, Steiner's building was burnt to the ground on New Years Eve, 1922-23.

It has been reported that Steiner had once said that he would live to be 100, but the destruction of this building had consequences for his physical health. As a part of this, he went through a kind of spiritual crisis during the year of 1923. For 22 years he had worked tirelessly in all parts of Europe, but he saw in the destruction of the *Goetheanum* a sign that the world was not ready for what he was bringing. He told colleagues that it was also a sign of the inabilities of those who worked with him to be able to make the vital consciousness shift that the times were demanding of them. He travelled a great deal in this key year of 1923, always carrying within him the dilemma of how he should proceed in these difficult circumstances. One solution was to withdraw from human contact and work with a small number of those who were ready for what he had to give. The way ahead was not clear to him, and he described later that it was as if he needed to take a leap of faith in making his next step.

He made his decision concerning what he would do some time in the final months of 1923. He would not withdraw from the world but would create within it a new organization whose form would work out ever more strongly into the world. He imagined a society of human beings of all races and creeds, brought together in reverence for the new wisdom that, since the end of Kali Yuga, had streamed into the earth. He described what he intended to do as a service to God – a means by which humanity could be assisted to reconnect with the spiritual world through recollecting their spiritual origins, and individuals who connected with this impulse could become representatives of a transforming humanity. The society's primary task would be to act as a conduit for true inspirations to come from the spiritual world and to encourage and enable people everywhere to be able to achieve this for themselves. Steiner made an appeal to those around him to accompany him with all the forces of their hearts.

For a time, it seemed that this was successful. *The Christmas Foundation Meeting* took place over the course of nine days between 24th December 1923 and 1st January, 1924. For many of the 800 present, this was the greatest event of their lives, and everything that they went on to do from that point on would be done in connection with it. Steiner himself spoke during the conference and afterwards of how the spiritual world was positively responding to the initiative he had taken. But the mood that lived during the Society's founding could not be sustained. Steiner's death just over a year later was a picture of how humanity was not ready for what he had brought.

We can ask today if Steiner was naïve to hope that human beings would be able to transcend the limitations imposed on them through being, as Nietzsche had put it, "human-all-too-human". The tendency I spoke of in the second paragraph of this article – that institutions have an inbuilt tendency to ossify and turn against their own creators – has played itself out for centuries in many different situations. It was most visible when Jesus of Nazareth stood before the Temple in Jerusalem, built to house the prophesied Messiah, only to be rejected and put to death by the authorities of the time. Steiner had appealed for a certain kind of selflessness, and his inner power and charisma rallied people at first, so that he was able to speak of his leap of faith as having been the right decision. But the Christmas mood could not be sustained – human beings in the 1920's were simply too weak to bear what was being asked of them.

Steiner appealed a number of times for those around him to dedicate themselves anew to what had been founded, but it became clear that this was not possible. He had intended the Anthroposophical Society to become a bearer of the new Christ Consciousness pouring into the earth in ways that could have changed the world quite powerfully, perhaps even diminishing the effects of those destructive tendencies that were at that time preparing the Second World War. The strength of his inspiration would continue working spiritually – over that, the powers of darkness had no control – but it could no longer be carried by him physically. After an extraordinary period of super-human creativity, when Steiner planted many more seeds in many different areas, giving sometimes five lectures a day in all kinds of professional fields, his physical strength gave out. On Michaelmas Eve, September 28th 1924, Steiner took to his sickbed where he died six months later on 30th March, 1925.

For an initiate, death has not the same significance as it has for others. While he is alive, the initiate has been able to enter into the spiritual worlds in a way that others will be granted only after death. It is possible to imagine that, after his death, little changed for Steiner other than the loss of the instrument of his earthly body and that his work for the good of the world continued with the same intensity as he had shown in those nine intensely creative months between the Christmas Foundation Meeting and the beginning of his sickness. What changed was the ability for his work to be received on the earth.

Steiner had predicted that if the creative impulse of the Christmas Foundation Meeting was not able to be held with sufficient strength on the earth, it would move from there to a realm beyond physical existence. Some deny admitting the possibility of such a thing, but it is obvious to others, through considering the subsequent course of the Twentieth Century, that this is indeed what happened. A seed has been planted here of great significance, but it has remained a seed, unable, through the remainder of the Twentieth Century, to develop further in the ways that its founder had imagined. Through the rest of the century, those who had been inspired by Steiner's work were able to achieve many things that proved to be of great benefit for earthly life, but the essence of what Steiner had hoped would come out of the Christmas Foundation Meeting was absent.

The key question today to those who recognize the significance of that moment in 1923-4 is whether we can reconnect with what was planted into the earth at that time and bring it anew into physical reality. This is a very great question that weighs heavily on all who have some awareness of the spiritual evolution of the world.

Right now, it is 100 years since the difficult transition year of 1923. For most of that year, it was not at all clear to Steiner what he should do, and he was living with great intensity a quest to find the answer to his dilemma. Certainty came to him some time before the end of the year. After this year, we approach not just the centenary of the Christmas Foundation Meeting itself but the incredible year of 1924 that followed it when he was able to give so much that was of deep significance to humanity – guidance in all areas of practical life as well as the first part of a new path of schooling in inner development that he intended to become the growing-point of contemporary spirituality. From those early beginnings in the Twenties of the last century – from seeds planted at a time of great personal grief but with incredible spiritual strength – the new light has gone out to all parts of the world.

And yet, in that 100 years, the powers of darkness that wish to keep humanity ignorant and in slavery to old gods have been unrelentingly active. The remainder of the Twentieth Century – with its Holocaust and nuclear weapons, its rise of state power everywhere and its continuation of materialism and exploitation of the strong over the weak – was a reflection of what Steiner had predicted when the First World War ended with the lessons that should have come out of it unlearned: "This war has not really ended," Steiner said at that time. "It goes on, and what we have now is not peace – it is merely a cessation of hostilities." That war, waged by the enemies of the new Christ Consciousness against humanity, has continued throughout the Twentieth Century and on into the Twenty-first.

But human beings, in this time of destruction and darkness, have had opportunity to undergo transformation. Those who long for what is new and feel in their hearts the possibilities that are unfolding there, have been deeply tested through their sufferings. Could it be that now there is a critical mass that was not present 100 years ago? Could it be possible today that old and dead ways of thinking that divide human beings from each other and from the cosmos that surrounds them can be overcome and that new social forms can arise through enlivened and more truthful thinking that is in touch with the nature of reality?

Despite the fact that the trend over the last 100 years in mainstream western culture has been overwhelmingly in the opposite direction, this is no mere empty hope. It will always be but a small minority who will lead the world into new directions – what is important is how strongly this minority can take hold of their tasks and be able to ground new streams of inspiration from the spiritual world in ways that will make them available to all. Steiner once said that 48 individuals would be sufficient for that purpose. Till now, even that modest goal has not been attained, but we are now sailing upon quite different seas than those that carried us in the Twentieth Century.

Spiritually, Steiner never left the field of his activity. He is present with many others who carry with him various aspects of the total struggle for a new age in the sphere that he called the “etheric” – that realm referred to in the Bible as being “in the clouds”, into which Christ vanished physically at the event of His Ascension. The sphere of the etheric is the place from which life-forces arise, surrounding the earth and giving it at every moment the renewing energies and formative forces that it needs. Today, in 2023, the etheric sphere is very close to us, and what goes on there affects us far more than we know. From it, help can come for all who are engaged in this continuing struggle against stagnation, destruction and darkness.

What Steiner engraved into the earth in one location of Europe 100 years ago has expanded greatly during the intervening years. It may seem to be but a drop in the ocean compared to the evil that has worked its way into all areas of the world, but its potential is vast, and it is accessible to all, whether or not they know anything of the individuality who once bore the name “Rudolf Steiner” but who is not now limited to the identity he carried while he was alive on Earth.

One way to connect with what Steiner planted in his time as a foreshadowing of what is to come, is to pay some attention to what actually happened in that Christmas Foundation Meeting. When a friend of his who had not been able to be present was told about it afterwards, his instinctive reaction was expressed in the words, “Humanity has been baptised again!”

With the Christmas Foundation Meeting, 110 years short of 2,000 years since the greatest spiritual and earthly event ever, new powers of healing and light were enabled to stream into the earth. The year 2033 is now very close. At that time, it will have become clearer whether humanity is able to live out of the new Christ Consciousness or must continue on old cyclical roads, fettered to the earth and repeating endlessly the errors of the past. We are being tested, and evil is active as never before, developing diabolical strategies to make connection with the spiritual world increasingly difficult.

The Christmas Foundation Meeting gives us something that can support us in our Twenty-first Century endeavour to become realigned with the place of our divine origin. Powers of darkness work as never before to deflect us from this path and drive us in quite different directions. Against them, the Christmas Foundation Meeting, if it can be resurrected anew in a sufficient number of hearts, can become a source of strength for the entire world.

The key to understanding this event lies in taking hold of the words of the meditation which Steiner built up over a seven-day period during the Foundation Meeting, laying it into the hearts of the 800 individuals present. This meditation is known as the *Foundation Stone Meditation*, and it stands today as a sign that the power of darkness can be broken and that humanity can throw off old chains and step out into a new era of spiritual creativity and freedom. The Foundation Stone Meditation concludes with these disarmingly simple words:

*At the turning-point of time,
the Spirit Light of the World
entered the stream of earth-evolution.*

*Darkness of night
had held its sway.
Day-radiant light
poured into the souls of human beings.*

*Light that gives warmth
to simple shepherd's hearts.
Light that enlightens
the wise heads of kings.*

*Light Divine!
Christ-Sun!
Warm our hearts,
bring light into our heads,
that good may come
from what, in our hearts, we would found,
from what, in our heads, we would direct
with single purpose.*

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