

## **Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy and The Sheiling Ringwood**

This document will try to explain in simple terms what it is about Steiner and anthroposophy that shows up in the way that The Sheiling Ringwood provides its care and education to young people with special needs.

Steiner can seem an obscure figure, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Austrian 'Gandalf'. He wrote in a difficult form of German, often poorly translated, sometimes misinterpreted, regularly misrepresented. Yet his work lives on strongly worldwide in caring communities, in schools and in biodynamic agriculture. Two of these have examples that adjoin the Sheiling's estate and another is a few miles away. What is the essence at the heart of his achievement?

Anthroposophy means the study of what it is to be human. From the centre of Steiner's observations and theories come the approaches to human development, society, science, medicine and connection to nature which inform the past development and today's practice in the Sheiling.

It is impossible to Google these topics without immediately being faced with words such as spiritual, mystical and occultism and these can make them sound strange. Yet it is quite normal for people to have ideas of a spiritual aspect to existence, both human spirit and something beyond as is the case with religious belief. In our work, spirit shows up in the way that our young people develop, in the values that underly our working relationships and organisation, in our approach to care and therapy, in our festivals and in our living environment. All of these are inspired by what we refer to as our "ethos", and we believe that they are what many visitors respond to when they come to us. It is something that is felt. It is what caused recent Ofsted inspectors to say they had "observed something that warms and heartens them" and that "the ethos, the model and the practice that senior colleagues are leading is worthy of wider dissemination."

### Education.

For Steiner, education was firstly about the development of the child's being, their inner resources and capacities. Like any school or college, we are concerned with young people achieving knowledge of the world and obtaining skills to support them through their adult lives. What differs are the ways that these are brought forth and that they are underpinned by a sense of inner resource with the confidence to be all that they can be. This calls for a different curriculum, an emphasis on meaningful activities which provide the student with an active sense of contributing to life, supported by the special attitudes and ways of engagement from our teachers. It also leads toward a relationship with nature, the seasons, with practical skills such as green woodworking or gardening because we have always recognised what conventional wisdom is now saying about the well-being this brings.

### Care

It would be taken for granted that there is an intention to provide safety, security, support, warmth and kindness. Hopefully you might even add enjoyment, laughter, fun and love. But what else is particular to our approach? It is in the nature of life that all of us undergo self-development in our character and our ability to relate to others. There are differences between us in outward skills, but we are all equal at the level of human soul and in the certainty that we all face challenges, growing with them and through them. Whoever we are, this calls for courage, resilience and resource. The added feature from our tradition is the view, the experience, that those who provide support can learn and develop as much as those whose "special" needs are being met and that we are all nourished and inspired by each other.

### Health and wellbeing

Steiner's understanding of science and spirit brings an added dimension to the way that we work with the body. Colour-light therapy, eurythmy and other distinctive practices are part of the way that we help nurture aspects of embodiment and emotional balance using therapeutic methods which are at the boundary between conventional physiology and what is sometimes called "energy medicine". Food and quality of environment are other aspects of this wholeness.

### Social and community aspects

Steiner, in his social ethic, presented an aspiration for societal health and well-being to be an indivisible property of the whole collective as well as the individual. His formulation provides an image where each individual's presence is fully expressed in the community while, at the same time, the community lives in and through each member. In the Sheiling's past, this was brought about through high proportions of staff being resident and seeing their role as a vocation. While this is no longer possible, we carry that intentional sense of community forward in the way we approach organisation and relationships with staff. To support well-being in our young people requires well-being in ourselves. The harmony and calm that people feel in the Sheiling is a property of the whole which we continue to strive for.

Anthroposophy is not a religion, Rudolf Steiner is not an object of worship and we do not talk that much about him or the theory. One can easily visit or even work at the Sheiling without much of these associations being immediately visible in any explicit way. At the same time, the distinctiveness of what we do has its source and its roots there. However subtle their influence, the outcomes are tangible and we gratefully recognise and acknowledge the continued essential contribution that Steiner anthroposophy makes.

*Jon Freeman*

Chair of the SSET Board of Trustees