

Humanity on the Threshold – A Well of Inspiration

A homage to Bernard Lievegoed's book

I intend to look at the significance of this book using three different lenses –

- **A Personal Lens:**
How the book met me and what it means for me,
- **A Professional Lens:**
What the book means for consultancy and therapeutic professions,
- **A Spiritual Lens:**
Highlighting some aspects of the book's spiritual outlook.

A Personal Lens

My first significant encounter with Anthroposophy was via reading the Biography on Rudolf Steiner written by Johannes Hemleben in 1979. At the time I was studying Social Sciences and Psychology in Berlin, and was disillusioned by the way the human being was seen and conceptualised as a black box (by the behaviourists) and as derived from the apes and shaped by labour (by the materialists). Steiner offered an alternative picture – a human being in development and also an integral part of the development of Earth and Cosmos. In addition, a path of inner or spiritual development, was possible for each individual. When I read Steiner's biography, I realised that he was the founder of the Anthroposophical Society. I found it hard to reconcile that the rather cultish Anthroposophists I had met, were inspired by the same person whose biography I was reading, Rudolf Steiner.

Then starting to search for a progressive introduction into Anthroposophy I heard about Bernard Lievegoed and the NPI. They were mentioned with caution, characterised as not true anthroposophists. I am not surprised that Bernard Lievegoed states in his speech of acceptance of the Golden Goose Quill (a Dutch cultural award ¹): *Well, I have strived all my life to be a heretic of the inner voice! And as an alternative, an amateur and a heretic I have received this cultural prize at the end of a long life!* When I looked for a book by Bernard Lievegoed in the anthroposophical bookshop in Berlin, I could not find any on the bookshelves. I asked about this, and the shop-owner handed me a book from somewhere under the counter. It was *Man on the Threshold*. For me it

was *THE BOOK – The right book at the right time*.

The first notes I made in the book are dated July 1986. My experience of reading this book was like my experience of reading Steiner's biography – new worlds opened up! Firstly, it is significant for me that Lievegoed at the beginning of the book acknowledges two different thresholds: *The path inward: the Egyptian mysteries* and *The path outward: the Northern mysteries*. My own spiritual path has more elements of the latter, the outer or ecstatic path, though I was also drawn to practices of the inner or mystic path. I realised that for most people spiritual practice is synonymous with prayer, contemplation and meditation, as indicated by the *inner path*. Lievegoed's writing about *The path of anthroposophy* made sense to me, and so did the part *About the human 'doubles'*.

Secondly, Part 2 of the book opened more new vistas for me, in relation to the human being and therapy. Two sections were of special importance: *Therapeutic thinking in anthroposophical psychotherapy* and *The Schooling path of the Therapist*. (Please note: the latter is translated as *The training of the therapist* in the English edition.) Reading this book coincided with my decision to end my university studies. Looking back, this book had a huge influence on my later professional work as a practitioner and trainer in Biography Work.

Meeting Coenraad van Houten, one of Lievegoed's colleagues at the NPI, allowed me to ask questions and build a better picture of Lievegoed himself. Van Houten introduced me to two concepts from Lievegoed which became *Guiding Images* for my own work: *to make anthroposophy operational* and *to contribute to a spiritual infrastructure*.

In 1993 I decided to travel to the Netherlands to meet Lievegoed in person, but sadly learnt that he had died some months earlier.

As a phenomenon of my own life's-journey, I resonated more with what was known as the Dutch *anthroposophical heretics*, than with the German *true anthroposophists*. I met colleagues of the NPI, and my way led to working with colleagues of the Centre for Social Development. In 2019 I married a Dutch-Australian anthroposophist.

A Professional Lens

Published in Dutch when Lievegoed was 78 years old, *Humanity on the Threshold* is a legacy book which has influenced therapeutic professions beyond anthroposophical circles. The language is accessible for professional readers, who are open to or even seeking for, an alternative perspective. It is affirming to know that Lievegoed's life work has received public acknowledgment with the award of the *Golden Goose Quill* in the Netherlands. When I get asked by colleagues in therapeutic, educational, social or consultancy professions about introductory reading material on Anthroposophy, Lievegoed's books always come to mind. He helped overcome the schism created when Psychology attempted to become a science by rejecting religion, and spirituality. It has become acceptable again to speak about spirituality in psychological circles. Envisage for a moment what would have happened, if there had been a Lievegoed in at least one university in every western country!

Still there is more, as three of Lievegoed's books have become cornerstones for the new profession of *Biographical Consultancy*. They are –

1. *Phases of Childhood: Growing in Body, Soul and Spirit* (1946 – his 41st life year),
2. *Phases: Crisis and Development in the Individual* (1976 – in Lievegoed's 71st life year), and
3. *Humanity on the Threshold: The challenge of inner development* (1983 – 78th life year).

Lievegoed actively contributed to Biography Conferences within the Medical Section of the School of Spiritual Science and out of these, bi-annual conferences emerged: The *Worldwide Biography Conferences* for professionals working with biographical development based on spiritual science. The 12th of these Conferences is scheduled for November 2024 in Kyoto, Japan.

This professional movement regards Bernard Lievegoed as the 'father' and Gudrun Burkhard, a Brazilian medical doctor, as the 'mother' of Biography Work. There is a growing network of trainers and consultants worldwide. Attempts are being made to establish Biography Work as a new profession with possible acknowledgment by public and private health insurance.

A Spiritual Lens

It was an important deed by Lievegoed to bring in this legacy book, the concept of the *Threshold*, and to support it with the sub-title *The challenge of inner development*. And it is even more important that Lievegoed widened the perspective of the 'threshold' right at the beginning of the first Part of the book to consisting of *two thresholds*. Usually inner development is seen as a result of contemplative and meditative practices – that is, in Lievegoed's words, *The path inward: the Egyptian mysteries*. The second threshold: *The path outward, relating to the Northern mysteries*, is often not even mentioned. This may be because initiation through nature, the elements and the seasons, for example as depicted in *The Dream Song of Olav Åsteson*², is too close to the wild sagas of the Norse Mythology³ with their various Gods and Heroes.

However, Rudolf Steiner also introduces two thresholds. See the following quote where Steiner mentions them in relation to the 12 Senses:

It goes without saying that when our soul and spirit leave the bodily sheath, they go through the senses. We go through the external <outer> senses therefore in an outward direction, through the sense of taste, sight, warmth, hearing, speech, thinking and ego. Later we shall see whither we go when we penetrate the other boundary where the senses open themselves to what is within <inner>, press inwards. Thus we penetrate through the senses to the outside, with our soul and spirit, by leaving to some extent the boundary of our body. Here, towards the outside, we pass by our sense of sight for example; in other words we press outwards with our soul and spirit by leaving behind our instrument of sight. When leaving behind our physical eyes and start seeing with our eye of the soul, we move into the world, we come into that region where Imagination holds sway... (GA199)⁴

Spiritual Science, spiritual traditions and scripture describe two different ways of crossing the Threshold to super-sensible perception. And initiates in the past were prepared in rigorous trainings to cross via one of the two.

1. Across the **Inner Threshold**, leading to an encounter with the spiritual energies or entities which created and constantly recreate our **Body**, or in a wider sense our **Instrument**. This direction of crossing is prepared by inner contemplative and meditative activities connected with the so-called **Mystic Path**. That is, meditations which work towards an inner focus, stillness

and detachment, are predominantly concerned with the preparation to cross via the **Inner Threshold**.

2. Across the **Outer Threshold**, leading to an encounter with the spiritual energies or entities which created and constantly recreate the **Natural World** around us. This direction of crossing is prepared by meditative or focussing practices, which include dynamic activities such as chanting, breathing and dance. This is connected to the so-called **Ecstatic Path** or the **Shamanistic Path**. That is, all meditations or activities working with the strengthening of the 'I' and expanding consciousness, are predominantly concerned with the **Outer Threshold**.

More on this topic can be found in Lievegoed's book in *Mystery Streams in Europe and the New Mysteries*.⁵

The difference between our time and past times, is that where in the past initiates were prepared for crossing the threshold, now many of our contemporaries are unprepared. They then have no way of making sense of their experiences, and as a result there is a huge unexpected increase in anxiety in modern societies. In Steiner's words:

*The fact that the whole of humanity is passing through the Threshold does not at all need to come directly to the consciousness of individual people. If, for example, people were to persevere in that disposition which the majority now has, in refusing all spiritual knowledge, the whole of humanity would pass over the Threshold just the same in the course of the fifth post-Atlantean epoch, but people, for the greater part, would not be aware of the fact. (GA190)*⁶

The achievement of this process will lead to higher spirituality –

*In passing over from the fifth to the sixth post-Atlantean epoch the human being passes over a sort of Rubicon ..., when the whole of humanity enters into a phase of development which **leads up to higher spirituality**.*⁷

So on the plus side, this leads to higher spirituality, helps humanity to develop new sensitivities and new organs of perception. On other side, this is causing problems, because many or most of us are not prepared and may be unaware of threshold related experiences. Therefore, we are unable to integrate such experiences.

We are developing new sensitivities as a result of crossing the threshold and having supersensible experiences, but these are also making us more vulnerable. Steiner indicates that with the process of humanity crossing the threshold,

a loosening of the soul-forces of thinking, feeling and willing occurs (GA190)⁸. This loosening allows other triggers like stress, accidents, exposure to speed, gravity, sense deprivation, trauma to have a much stronger influence on our inner life and can lead to developmental or mental health crisis. Or in other words: new sensitivities are making us more vulnerable.

If threshold experiences are not recognised and addressed appropriately, Steiner predicted a rise in mental health issues, and present statistics would support his prediction (see WHO statistics⁹ & ¹⁰). A spiritual or developmental crisis related to the crossing of the threshold can become a mental health crisis, if people cannot find adequate help and a framework that supports them to integrate and make sense of their threshold experiences.

Based on Lievegoed's book, those using Biography Work can offer both support and a framework to make sense of the experiences we may have during a developmental or spiritual crisis.

With thanks and gratitude

Karl-Heinz Finke

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Endnotes

- ¹ Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gouden_Ganzenveer
- ² Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draumkvedet>
- ³ Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norse_mythology
- ⁴ (1920) [GA 199](#), *Spiritual Science as a Foundation for Social Forms*, [Lecture3](#), 8 August 1920, Dornach
- ⁵ (1982) *Mystery Streams in Europe and the New Mysteries*, Anthroposophic Press, Spring Valley, New York, USA
- ⁶ (1919) [GA190](#), *The Spiritual Background of the Social Question*, [Lecture3](#), 11 April 1919, Dornach
- ⁷ (1919) [GA190](#), *The Spiritual Background of the Social Question*, [Lecture3](#), 11 April 1919, Dornach
- ⁸ (1919) [GA190](#), *The Spiritual Background of the Social Question*, [Lecture3](#), 11 April 1919, Dornach
- ⁹ [WHO Fact Sheet – Anxiety](#)
- ¹⁰ [WHO Fact Sheet – Depression](#)

Illustration: The Cover of my German Copy

