

What is Bothmer Gymnastics?

In 1921 Fritz von Bothmer was asked by Rudolf Steiner to develop the gymnastic education at the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart. When Bothmer confessed to feeling somewhat inadequate for the task, Steiner simply advised him to 'be happy' in his work. That is what he did; and gradually he evolved a series of gymnastic exercises for the children. He did not start by imposing abstract theories onto movement. He started simply by moving. He started from the one question, 'What is true human movement?' and progressed from there, paying attention to the children at different stages of their development. It is the recognition of this starting point that has enabled me to take courage in my own work of teaching gymnastics to both adults and children.

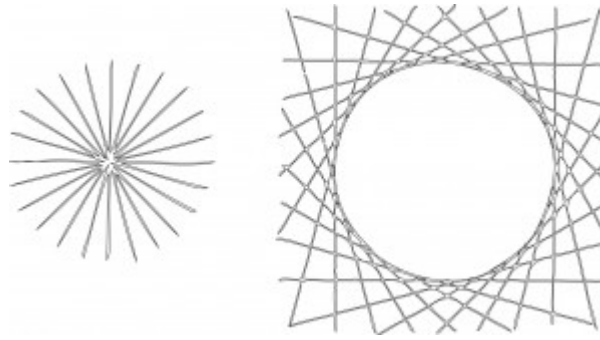
This experience of space is plainly visible if you watch the children moving. Imagine them, aged eight, entering the gymnasium for the first time, timid at first, but with a natural grace and flow to their movements. They hardly yet belong to gravity. Walking across a beam they are instinctively confident that the Universe will hold them. Confronting an obstacle, they play with it. It is not yet something standing in the way. The gymnastics teacher at this point has only to link on to what is moving within the children. No formal exercises yet, but encouragement through pictures drawn from everyday life – chopping wood, ringing bells, building a house, swinging over canyons 1000ft deep with crocodiles at the bottom. I mean the everyday life of a child's imagination. And many of these activities can be brought, through simple verses, into rhythmic exercises.

Of course, as the children become more aware of themselves as separate individuals, they fall away from that first spontaneity of movement and need further challenges. Bothmer recognized this, and in his exercises tried to remain true to what he saw unfolding in the children. Compared with more recent practices of 'free expression' they are, no doubt, somewhat formal. But he did not invent them. He would claim to have discovered them hidden in what is human.

Discovering Levity

Bothmer's first formal exercises are still within the realm of play – a 'play between weight and lightness;' between what is below the horizontal (made by the arms outstretched to the sides) and what is above. 'In the beginning God created heaven and earth' – two extremes which prepare a space for our creative activity. Normally we think only of gravity as a force, but Bothmer insists on speaking of another, sustaining, up-lifting force – 'levity.' It is hard to find a language in which to speak of this (official science has hardly begun to do so), yet if we are to transcend the present materialization of sport we have to attempt it.

One possible language (greatly over-simplified here, but I have found it helpful) is derived from projective geometry:



Two Experiences of a Centre

These diagrams illustrate two different experiences of a centre – one radial, explosive; the other softer and uplifting, created from the periphery of space inwards. This is surely what Blake refers to when he writes: ‘Thou perceivest the Flowers put forth their precious Odours / And none can tell how from so small a center come such sweets / Forgetting that within that center Eternity expands / it’s ever during doors.’

They are two possibilities for gymnastics also. When we do ‘physical jerks’ we are poking out into space from the radial centre; we confront each other and the environment as separate, even alien, beings. So much in our lives – the noise of traffic, our enslavement to the clock – cramps us into this centre. And so much in modern sport – circuit training, the emphasis on competition – serves to enhance this. I do not wish to dismiss these activities as entirely useless. Certainly to be strong in the world we need to be able to take a stand, test our forces against another, and not be forever dreaming into things. There comes a point, however, at which it ceases to serve what is human. We become bound by our muscles instead of using them as the instruments of our free Spirit.

A grotesque caricature of this is the use of steroids in athletics whereby the human being is so entirely sacrificed to what is external that we might well ask – was it the man who broke the world record, or was it the machine fuelled by the drug he was using? A few Olympic games ago I was watching television as the young gymnast, Nadia Comeneci, performed on the balance beam. I (along with millions of others the world over) was gasping at the beauty of her movements. The commentator gasped too, and exclaimed, ‘Wow! Just think how fast her neurons must be working for her to be able to do that!’ That made me gasp again – the notion that the beauty I was witnessing had nothing to do with Nadia’s inmost being but was the result, rather, of some highly programmed mechanism in her brain.

Bothmer recognized that an over emphasis on this radial centre in ourselves results in physical tension, trapped forces of will, and the possibility of sudden violence and vandalism. The exercises he developed carry living imaginations whereby we can begin to stand confidently within that other kind of centre, clothed by the space that surrounds us, embedded in its rhythms, rather than feeling small and insignificant in the face of a boundless Universe. That sounds strange, but really it is part of our everyday experience, except that we lack concepts for it and so pass it by. Is it not clearly visible in a person's movements whether they move as part of the environment, rhythmically related to it, or whether they are cut off from it? – a knot of muscle and bone stumbling over everything. This applies to doing the washing-up as much as to gymnastics. We do, in fact, begin to find a language for this when we say that someone seems 'earth-bound,' whereas another carries 'an air about them.'

The gymnastics teacher can work with this instinctive elemental language in a more conscious and practical way. In one of Bothmer's exercises for the older children, for instance, the qualities of the four Elements – earth, water, air and fire – are taken as the basis for a progression of movement. In my work I have come to see a key here to all the exercises, indeed to every aspect of human movement. We can observe a child's movements and say which one of these elements is lacking. The two most obvious examples are the child who seems all earth and bone, too rigid, lacking the flow between positions; and the child who is all watery without any backbone. It was the ancient ideal that these four elements should, in the true human being, be mixed equally. Observing such tendencies in the children, I can adapt exercises accordingly. I can ask them to exaggerate the wateriness, to free the muscles from their bones. Or I can encourage them to generously fill the air so that their movements do not remain locked inside them.

Meeting Gravity

I remarked earlier that the younger children bring with them a natural balance and harmony. As part of the process of growing up, however, they fall away from it. More and more they become related to gravity. The girls change shape, become heavier; the boys shoot into their long limbs (a little later than the girls) and are unable to fill them. You could say that at puberty they are for the first time properly on earth. This is often a distressing time for them. Their movements become self-conscious; everyone seems to be looking at them. For only now do they look out at the world from that radial centre that I spoke of. Very often they lose their sense of balance. A girl who a year before could skip across a beam without thinking, suddenly seizes up with fear. Unable to trust the wing of the horizon, she shrinks inside herself and tries to hold the balance from there. These young people have to learn their relationship to space, time and gravity all over again.

In a sense all of Bothmer's exercises are a preparation for this moment. What began as a play between weight and lightness now becomes more geometric, demanding consciousness within the three planes of space to which the human body relates. Gradually the children are led towards a fall into gravity, cutting themselves off from that which sustains them in space, and then finding it again. You could call it a fall into physical space out of the light-filled realm that young children seem to move in. It is most important that young people experience this fall in gymnastics. There can be no shying away from it. But the hope is that a residue of the work done earlier will help the children through this difficult phase, until once more they can move freely in the world.

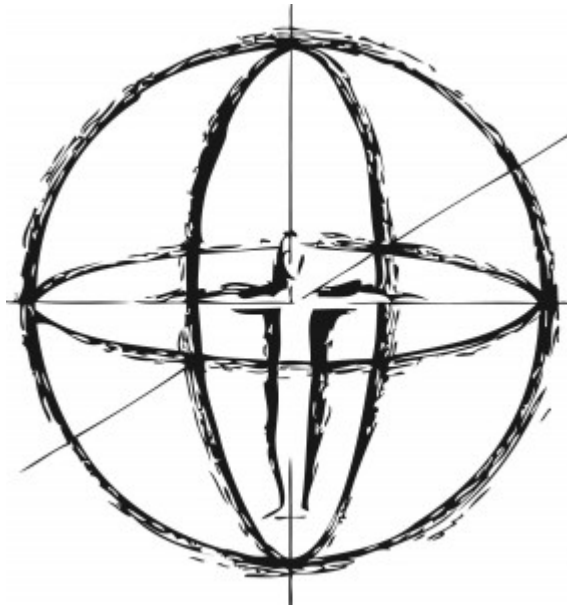
Around this time some of the young people want to take up gymnastics in a more conscious way. They demand tests of their strength and skill and courage. This need can be met through working with the gymnastic apparatus. Vaulting horse and balance beam and a rope to climb present excellent challenges for the adolescent, helping them with their tendency to be limp and lethargic. It is true that some aspects of the Olympic gymnastics are hardening but, by applying the imaginations that Bothmer worked with, these can be redeemed and brought to serve what is human.

Others, of course, begin to ask, 'Why should I do gymnastics?' What use will it be to me in my future career as a marine biologist? A hard question to answer, and my heart sinks when I hear it, because it so often means that the young people have come to the end of their first joy in movement. Certainly I have answers, but it is not easy to find an acceptable language for them ('Well, you could do it underwater and dazzle the fishes').

Becoming Naked

The word 'gymnast' comes from the Greek, meaning 'naked'; presumably because the Ancient Greeks were so in their exercises. I take it to imply that in the practice of gymnastics we seek to strip off idiosyncrasies and specializations of movement and to stand stark human. I do not wish to over romanticize the ancient Olympic Games (the specialist wrestlers, I know, often severely damaged each other), but at their best the games embodied those most Greek of human virtues – Truth, Beauty, Goodness – qualities not always thought important in our modern philosophy of physical education. They clearly inspired Bothmer, however, and in recent years those who have developed his work further have arranged Olympiads between schools in which such virtues have been nurtured.

The ancient Olympiad was a religious event dedicated to the Gods of Olympus – especially to Zeus, whose statue (created by the great Phideas) stood in the temple there with an olive wreath around his head. The crowning event of the games was the Pentathlon – not specialized, but a combination of Running, Jumping, Wrestling, Discus Throwing and Spear Throwing, the victor rightly being recognized as a fully balanced human being. I suspect that each of these five activities was dedicated to a particular God. Mercury for running, perhaps? Zeus, with his thunderbolt, for the spear? Or his daughter, Pallas Athene. And the discus? That, surely, was the sun God Apollo, hurling his golden heart into the sky each morning. I find no clear evidence for these connections, but at the very least Greek mythology provides the teacher of gymnastics with a rich source of inspiring imagery.



The three dimensions are human

Ensouling Space

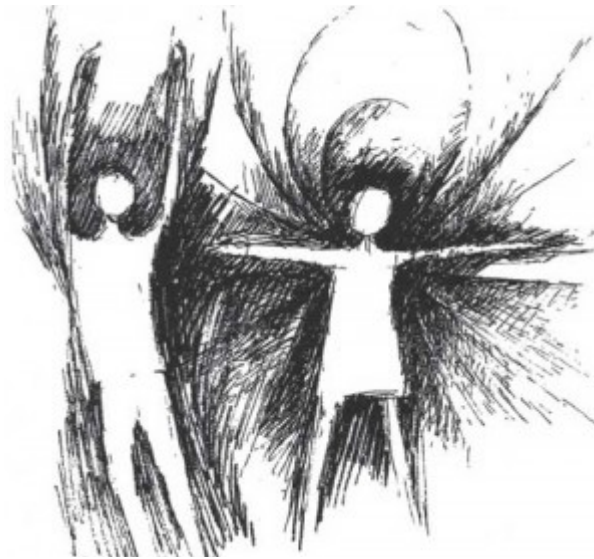
It is no coincidence that many of our words for moral integrity are related to human posture. We speak of the upright person, and of the crook. Right means straight; wrong means wrung, or twisted. We refer to someone who stands by her word, a straightforward person, and to another who has no backbone to his character – as though truth were somehow related to how we stand or walk. Also we express our feelings spatially, feeling high or low or middling at any particular moment. It is obvious that our feelings are connected to posture. Sometimes, to free ourselves of unhelpful thoughts and emotions, we have only to stand up straighter, as though filling out our true stature once more. Even ‘re-ligion’, at base, implies a realigning of our ligaments. Perhaps that is why we express our identity, or ‘I,’ with the vertical line – this uprightness that makes us human. Not that I am suggesting chronic physical disability to be the sign of any moral lack. Quite the contrary; it is clear to me in my work as a gymnast that a person’s inner posture and uprightness can blaze all the more truly on account of physical resistance that has to be faced – a bodily crucifixion through which the forces of the Resurrection are already shining.

These expressions in the language are not convention; say, rather, that in them the essential qualities of space become articulate. This surface, for instance, which gives rise to ‘above’ and ‘below’ is where we meet each other, shake hands, embrace. It is the social realm, where all hearts are on the level. In movement we can feel it as a rippling surface of water which flows between us and our surroundings.

The plane which gives rise to ‘front’ and ‘back’ is quite different. This does not ripple. It shines out into the world. I feel strong in it. I can move forwards with it into the world, or I can step back. This has to do with the human faculty of will.

The third surface, which gives rise to ‘left’ and ‘right’, is much more difficult to move in. I can only do so with thought and deliberation. It is the surface I move the knife through to dissect and analyse, to discriminate between this and that. All this is becoming rather

schematic, but I think we can glimpse from it that these three planes of space are not abstract. They relate to human faculties, and so quite naturally we find a language here to express moral qualities. Why else would an ancient Greek write spiral supplications on his discus (the 'truth-teller', as they called it) before hurling it along the horizon?



Above and Below the Horizontal

In calling upon the children to be true to these planes in their movements we are not being pedantic. We are in fact asking them to stand within their human stature. Of course it can be pedantic if done only from the one-sided experience of the radial centre (in which case I am just a physical thing protruding into an abstract universe). But the gymnastic education developed by Bothmer strives to overcome this. Instead of raising my arms into the horizontal position and feeling it to be my horizontal I can feel that it belongs to the universe and that I am filling out what my body has been built (by the forces of that universe) to relate to. This a subtle distinction, but if worked with long enough (and the children have that opportunity) it can change the whole quality of a person's movements and redeem the lost meaning of 're-creation.' This involves a transformation of the old 19th century empire-building image of the human being, confident within his skin. It means coming to a new image of our humanity, continually receiving our stature out of, and being confirmed by, human space.

Space Is Human was originally published in 1979 by Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship. This updated text is used with permission of Mr. Matthews and Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship. Thank you all.

Paul Matthews is a published poet, internationally acclaimed both for his poetry readings and for the joyful and interactive workshops in Creative Writing that he offers. His two books on the creative process, 'Sing Me the Creation' and 'Words in Place' (both from Hawthorn Press) have proved inspirational to teachers of children and adults alike, and to all who seek to develop their powers of imagination. He has travelled widely with his work and now, after stepping back from his full time work as lecturer, poet and gymnast at Emerson College he continues to expand his activities in the UK and elsewhere. He was the founder of 'Poetry Other Wise', a much loved gathering of poetry lovers that ran for many summers. www.paulmatthewspoetry.co.uk/