

# Janusz Korczak Today

Adapted from "Janusz Korczak and His Meaning for Education for a Civic and Humane Society"

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## 1. Order Out of Chaos- Creating Meaning Out of Meaninglessness

The experience of Janusz Korczak and his orphans in the Warsaw Ghetto of Nazi-occupied Poland was located in the context of an apocalyptic vision of a world which appeared to have gone mad. The old order had been subverted and a chilling ideology was systematically and clinically defining millions of people as undesirable, as being less than human, for whom the only fate was certain death.

In his 'Ghetto Diary' Korczak declared:

"Thank you, Merciful Lord, for the meadow and the bright sunsets, for the refreshing evening breeze after a hot day of toil and struggle.

Thank you, Merciful Lord, for having arranged so wisely to provide flowers with fragrance, glow worms with the glow, and make the stars in the sky sparkle."

He is offering a prayer of thanksgiving for the beauties of the earth. His cosmic gratitude is rooted in an appreciation of the natural world which, despite the sufferings of life, can present to humankind a vision of beauty and joy. Korczak's contemplation, reflection and meditation were undertaken in the midst of the hectic life of the orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto at a time when the lives of he and his children hung in the balance. The future was most uncertain. Despite this Korczak took the time to mindfully and attentively focus not solely on the challenges, stresses and strains of running the orphanage but, instead, he took the time to be grateful for each positive aspect of the children's existence. He said a glorious Yes! to life when it would have been understandable for him to have been ground down by the daily challenges he and his children faced.

Central to Korczak's vision, and at the heart of his legacy, therefore, is the recognition that in a world of unpredictability, uncertainty, and even chaos, it is imperative to attempt to create oases of calm, order and structure which provide the possibility of meaning and hope for the future. Even in the darkest situation there is the possibility of discerning meaning and hope, however small this might be. In the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with its significant challenges and opportunities, Korczak's recognition of the requirement to create order out of chaos, meaning out of meaninglessness, is to be taken seriously.

## 2. The Primacy of Meaning

Korczak commented that:

"There are one hundred more days left till spring. There is, as yet, not a blade of grass, not one single bud is showing. But inside the soil, among the roots, the dictate of spring is already there,

secretly persisting, throbbing, lurking, waiting and gathering strength - under the snow, inside the bare branches, in the icy gale - to suddenly burst into blossom.”

He is affirming that even when things look bleak, when life's challenges appear to overwhelm us and when we find it difficult to discern any possibility of hope or optimism there is, at the heart of things, the potential for positive change, transformation and development. This can also be regarded as a metaphor for understanding and relating to children. Instead of adults focusing on the negative in the child's behaviour, actions and attitudes they should, instead, aim to affirm the positive and from these small acorns mighty oaks might grow. The entire pastoral system in schools, for example, should be geared towards transforming negativity in all its forms through the transformational power of positive life-affirmation. Educational and therapeutic organisations should, therefore, have at the heart of their aims, objectives, philosophy and mission-statements the central question of 'In what ways do we promote the positive in, and for, our children?' Addressing this question honestly and realistically, but with a sense of an achievable positive vision, can encourage and empower schools and related educational and therapeutic enterprises to create an ethos which celebrates positive transformation in all its many and varied forms. Such an ethos, however, has to radically address profound questions of meaning, significance and purpose.

### 3. Dialogic Encounter

Korczak declared:

“When I approach a child, I have two feelings; affection for what he is today and respect for what he can become.”

He recognises the creative dialectic between the present and the future, between potential and actuality and the interplay of the positive emotions of affection and respect. For Korczak the starting point for both education and therapy is the experience of the child in the present moment. This present, however, is rooted in an existential context. Each child has a personal history and this impacts upon their development and the unfolding of their future. For the pedagogue, therefore, to facilitate meaningful teaching and learning requires that in addition to being self-aware the teaching and therapeutic enterprise requires knowledge of the child. There are, however, no short cuts to this knowledge. The role of the teacher requires that she pays attention to, for example, what each child says, how each child acts, what each child writes and how each child expresses themselves in, for example, art and music. This task requires time, effort and energy and is an ongoing process in which new and, at times, unexpected insights into the child and their way of seeing the world are articulated. The teacher and therapist, therefore, share the experience of entering into a dialogue with each child.

The dialogue between teacher and child can significantly complement the positive nurturing provided by the child's family. However, there will inevitably be cases where the teacher and therapist are the primary source of an affirmative dialogical encounter. It can be suggested, therefore, that the foundation for the development of a civic and humane society is the establishment of relationships characterised by openness, spontaneity, warmth, genuineness and compassion. Indeed, what can be termed Dialogic Encounter or Moral Personalism, the 'I-Thou' philosophy articulated by Martin Buber, can be viewed as being an ethic of human relationships which should underpin the entire ethos of all organizations and institutions entrusted with the care and nurture of children.

## 4. The Ethical Dimension

If one explores the eight attitude-virtues of humility, self-acceptance, responsibility, self-commitment, friendliness, concern, contemplation and trust outlined by the philosopher Donald Evans as a vision of the moral life there is the potential to explore Korczak's life and work, meaning and significance from the perspective of his moral authority which can be regarded as being the outcome of his deep spirituality and his way of seeing and being in the world. Exploration of Korczak's life and legacy has the potential to facilitate the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of children because it explores ways of seeing the world which reflect the possibility of moral change. Persons do not, in Korczak's vision, have to remain in a state of moral regression or immaturity; they can move forward and develop the qualities of rationality, responsibility, autonomy and altruism which William Kay has identified as being the characteristics of the Morally Educated Person.

## 5. A Philosophy of Pedagogy

Korczak wrote:

“What a powerful effect on the sad life of a child, would be the memory of that person - perhaps the only one - who showed kindness, understanding and respect in a world where cruelty had become the norm. The child's future life and sense of himself could take a different course, knowing there was one person who would not fail him.”

He is recognising that parents, relatives, friends, teachers, carers and therapists, for example, all have the capacity to engage with children in a way which affirms their value, worth and uniqueness. In terms of schools, therefore, the teacher is not primarily a teacher of mathematics, technology, science, history or art, for example, but is first and foremost a teacher of children. However, the teacher is also a learner from children. At the heart of the process of teaching and learning is the nature of the positive relationship between the teacher and her children. For many children, particularly for those who are from emotionally disadvantaged backgrounds, their only positive interaction with adults is those they experience with their teachers at school. Central to the role of the teacher, therefore, is the pastoral work in which she is engaged on a daily basis. Everything a teacher does or says is a learning opportunity for the child and presents them with an example, either positive or negative, of what it means to grow and mature. Indeed, Korczak declared:

“Be yourself and seek your own path. Know yourself before you attempt to get to know children. Become aware of what you yourself are capable of before you attempt to outline the rights and responsibilities of children. First and foremost you must realise that you too are a child, whom you must first get to know, to bring up and to educate.”

Central to this perspective, therefore, is the Socratic injunction to ‘Know thyself’. The teacher or therapist must aim to become aware of her identity, her personality, her strengths and weaknesses and the ways in which she can promote or inhibit the child's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The philosophy of pedagogy articulated by Korczak, therefore, is rooted in the experience of authentic dialogue between the child and those responsible for their care.