

»Bitter Experience«

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Vortrag im Rahmen des Seminars

Alfred Wolfsohn and Charlotte Salomon – the unfolding story

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This book is testimony to a truth that lies behind the following words.

“Ich wünsche allen Menschen, die ich gerne habe, schwere Erlebnisse, auf dass Sie gezwungen werden, den Weg in ihre eigene Tiefe zu gehen.“

That is Charlotte speaking in her own tongue. It is her memory of Awes thinking. She must have kept it in her heart for a long time before she wrote it down.

The English translation says:

“I wish all those whom I love to undergo bitter experiences so that they can be forced to follow the path into their own.”

When one translates, one becomes acutely aware of words and shades of meaning. It's tempting to see if we can get closer to Wolfsohn's philosophy by comparing the German and English versions:

This English translation speaks of those one loves.

The German uses the expression “gerne haben” which means “to like somebody”; but what becomes clear here is that we are speaking about those we wish well to.

How interesting to wish somebody **well** by wishing them the opposite. By wishing them **bitter** experience.

But do we mean **bitter**?

The German refers to “schwere Erlebnisse”. “Schwer” means heavy, difficult or painful, we speak of “schwere Verletzungen” - bad injuries. The word “difficult” implies a struggle –something difficult to reach, the word suggests having to push hard – trying to get somewhere.

But where? The German version speaks of “eigene Tiefen” – literally: one's own depths. The English is simply: the path “into their own”. The word depth is missing. Perhaps it is not necessary to say depth, because the word “into” somehow expresses the idea of going (**deep**) inside. Nevertheless, the German seems more poignant. But perhaps the missing word depth suggests that one's inner self will always be deep and difficult to reach. We don't necessarily need psychological terms or analysis to reach it.

We need only to think of Orpheus and his trip to the underworld in search of his lost beloved.

Hades! There can be no doubt that Alfred Wolfsohn's Philosophy of teaching was closely linked to his own Hades; his own personal suffering. He suffered but was determined not to close down but to search for a way -or ways- through his bad experience by finding the creative process within it.

So, the underworld is connected to creativity? — Do we have to go to hell to be creative? Maybe not, or not always. When we first sing we make a sound — it may well not be the sound we want and this is where Hades begins. Because in this moment you are getting in touch, however subtly with:

Who you are.

Where you are.

How you are.

And

What **you** have to work with.

This is the material **you** can give form to.

Giving form to personal material, that is one way to make art; the other way is to take art form and to do something with it: to develop technique. Opposite directions which do not contradict each other.

I know from Marita that Alfred Wolfsohn loved beautiful voices, but the beauty didn't thrill him, it wasn't enough. When he didn't hear the **particular human** behind or within the voice something was missing for him. The human struggle. The individual human depth.

Another quote recorded by Charlotte is: "As a teacher of singing I believe that aside from great technical ability, the deepest most feelings of the singer must be shaken to achieve outstanding performance.

What, then, is a singing lesson going to be like?

I think we all will have or have had our own personal experience of this (wink), both as singers and teachers. The question arises, do we as teachers just push the pupils into their Hades and leave them there - or do we accompany them in and out of their hell?

Do we then enter the grey area of therapy?

Perhaps we must understand that we are searching for a vocal expression of emotions which are part of us and which are inscribed onto our being. The **expression** of the feeling leads directly to it; it **is** getting in touch with it. It is an active process of transforming emotions into voice. Of climbing into the feeling and having the courage to know that form will become rich through those very emotions.

Marita often said you had to go through rivers of tears to get in touch with yourself. Don't avoid the broken or weak sounds, but go right inside them because **there** is the treasure.

I remember very well that she always supported me when I was trying to express complicated inner feelings - even when others laughed at the drama in it. She saw it as a way through to something and warned the others: "don't laugh, she is working on something!". With great Trust and Respect she gave me the space I needed and accompanied my process the whole time.

She entered the grey area of therapy with me and with all her students. In doing so, she gave us both , the strength to live and the strength to sing. It was Wolfsohn's philosophy that lay directly behind this and it is interesting that so many contemporary forms of psychotherapy try now to find the key to their patient by following and using their expression. But nevertheless, the most important ability for us as teachers is to feel empathy with our students. In Alfred Wolfsohns thoughts: "to be com-passionate towards other one must first have borne one's own cross."

It is psychic strength that transforms and integrates "schwere Erlebnisse" - bitter experience - into life and into the creative act. And it is the same psychic strength that the artist needs to enter the unexplored areas of his or her art.

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