

*Susan Weber*

We, human, each our universe  
Are given, as Adam was, not part but whole  
The inner regions of the soul  
With sun, moon, stars, distances  
Of earth no other knows nor can set foot upon,  
Each there to build our many mansions.<sup>1</sup>  
—Kathleen Raine, *Spheres*

Emmi Pikler (1902–1984) was a Hungarian physician who observed, studied, and practiced the art of being with infants and very young children. She was an astute phenomenological observer and meticulous researcher who brought her observations into a continuously evolving practice. Pikler spent the years from 1930 into the 1940s as a family pediatrician in Budapest. Her devotion to the very young child led her to support parents intimately. She made daily home visits for the first ten days after a baby's birth, continuing with weekly visits over the early months. Her guidance in child rearing with these first 100 children gave her confidence that her insights were accurate.

In 1946 she was invited by the Hungarian government to create a residential nursery home for children in the first three years of life to care for the World War II orphans as well as children whose mothers had died in childbirth or from tuberculosis. The 70 children at the National Methodological Institute, or more familiarly "Loczy," named after the street on which it was located, were cared for by caregivers trained by Dr. Pikler to carry forth the ideas she had developed out of her family pediatrics work. Over the next twenty years more than 700 children lived at Loczy, where their growth and development were documented meticulously by a team of not only their caregivers but also the doctors and other professionals on the staff.

Pikler was convinced, first, that the child's very experience of *competence* arises from self-initiated active motility (responses that involve muscular sensations) and the *changes produced as a result of motility*. Secondly, Pikler noted that in developing motor capacities, the child's transitional postures were

critical. Thirdly, she recognized that it is one's daily experience that weakens or reinforces belief in one's own capacities. In other words, each act of bodily care or of play or other environmental exploration day-by-day builds up the child's sense of self as a competent being. For Pikler, the basic elements of competent behavior were self-initiation of action, independence of performing the action, and the effectiveness of the action, in which the formation of contact with others is deemed to be the primary capacity.

From an anthroposophical picture of the human being, we would describe this as the activity of the will, encouraged and strengthened through its freedom initiated out of the individuality residing within that physical body. What Pikler observed was the expression of the soul and spirit as they continue on from the spiritual world into the earthly.

### Caregiving as invitation

The child enters earthly life by bonding with her mother and father and caregivers. Nowhere is this invitation more delicately extended than through daily caregiving, as Emmi Pikler skillfully observed at the Pikler Institute in Budapest. Here the newborn naturally spends long periods of time in intimate activity with the adults who care for her needs—feeding time, bathing, diapering, dressing—and each of these moments can provide a gentle invitation to the child's soul to reach a little further into earthly life. When we are with the child, she yearns for full, undivided attention. Divided attention brings confusion and a feeling of isolation, no matter how subtle. She gets to know her 'nest' and looks forward to time together with the adults in her life. When the child is met with our mindfulness, quiet presence, and centeredness, she extends herself into the environment. Her self enters more and more deeply into her body as we communicate to the child over and over through our hands, our eyes, our voices that the world is good and that her existence is secure.

We can observe the progressive anchoring of the child's self within the body in the simple caregiving moments. As early as five or six weeks of age, the child reaches out her hand and arm to 'help' the parent put on a sleeve, or lifts her legs to enable the diaper to be put on. *This is more than mere sensory response: It is a deed of the child's individuality.* If we notice, respond with interest, wait with patience, the child will initiate more moments like this, and the child will respond in even more active collaboration. Our intimate interest is reciprocated, and the child becomes increasingly engaged in the daily substance of life. Her ego becomes increasingly active, expressing its presence in an individual, personal gesture. Pikler's work makes these elements of the infant's experience tangible and perceptible as active phenomena in the integration of the ego.

### **From relationship into the world: the further integration of the child's ego**

#### *Motor explorations*

Pikler recognized through intimate observation over many years that the child's motor development can be supported through the careful role of the adult as step by step the motor explorations begin. The child's hands discover each other, touch one another, and explore the detail of fingers and palms. She turns her body from prone to supine and vice versa, perhaps in imitation of the turning of the upright human beings in her environment. Researcher Ernst-Michael Kranich shares that when we observe these explorations, "the ego of the child is at work in the unconscious depths of the body, where bones are formed and muscles develop. Through this work the ego impresses its signature on the child's body."

*Here is Alice at six months. She is comfortable with her parents, but also finds joy and fulfillment exploring the world of space independently. We see her lying on the carpet, relaxed and gazing about. She holds a play object in her hands, examining it visually and then with her mouth. She bends and stretches her knees; she makes small circles of movement in the air with her feet and ankles. She twists*

*her trunk—for no externally visible reason. Now on her stomach, she taps her toes on the floor as if in response to the activity of another child in the playroom, who is tapping a toy against a hard surface. Returning to the relaxed comfort of her back, Alice now suddenly discovers a hand moving before her field of vision. She opens and shuts it, much like the old traditional children's game of "Open, shut them, open, shut them..." Her gaze shifts to find her other hand, as if recognizing, "This is me!" The second hand moves to greet the first one. Hands touch, each exploring the fingers of the other. The moment passes and she once again resumes a position of relaxed rest, gazing dreamily about her. Momentarily she crosses her left leg and extends it far over to the right, twisting her spine. In one cat-like twist, Alice rights herself onto her stomach, raising and stretching her torso far above the floor in defiance of gravity. This leads her forward into a new position and, for the first time in this sequence, she moves intentionally towards an object a few feet away.*

What is striking throughout Alice's exploration of space is her freely-initiated movement, safe in the awareness that her parents are close by. At the same time, she is not dependent upon the adults. The comfort of each transitional position in which she discovers a new sense of balance—on her side, back or front, and everywhere in between—and the physical pleasure of the movements themselves appear to satisfy her completely. She coos softly in some moments, or smiles into the space around her, content with her own activity. And yet, throughout, her parents are only a few feet away.

Next, lying on her belly, the child raises herself up above the ground, first using her arms for support, then her knees, then legs, and we recognize the change in gaze that signifies the ever-growing consciousness that accompanies these developments. Alongside this progression of movements comes the moment in which the child sits stably upright out of her own self-initiative, without any support. This frees her hands and torso, providing new possibilities for responding to the many objects upon which her attention focuses.

Working against gravity, she will push down to raise herself upward, perhaps grasping hold of furniture or other objects in the environment for support. Sooner or later, the child independently finds

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her own individual position for standing alone, guided by her own consciousness and her bodily capacities of balance and strength.

*Evan, eight months old, arrives at his playgroup and somehow identifies a large baby doll from far across the room. This doll has attracted his interest before, but now he can crawl skillfully. Leaving behind the circle of other babies and parents, his own included, he crawls off to meet the doll. Reaching his goal, almost, he pulls himself up on the large basket and carefully rolls it over in order to gain access to the doll he likes. He pulls the doll out of the basket, sits down, and explores the doll now sitting in his lap.*

Where is his ego active in this moment? Evan began with an interest, a preference, and his confidence and motor ability enabled him to pursue that interest.

The possibility for self-initiated movement is essential for the ego's work. Through movement the child enters the world and makes contact with it. Step by step, chaotic movements are refined and the baby masters the space around him by mastering his own body. Each step of the way, it is the ego's penetration, its taking hold, that defines what is possible—holding up the head, grasping an object, turning the body from back to front or front to back.

**Play is the expression of the ego's engagement in the world.**

### **The world of objects and play**

Play is the expression of the ego's engagement in the world. At first, it is pure perception that engages the child. Each step in the development of play illustrates the child's soul-spiritual involvement in the physical world around him in an ever more full and complete way. As we carefully observe the child at play, we also see the progressive unfolding of his thinking. Many professional observers have recognized the child's deep need to play. Within the first two to three months after birth, the child's fascination with his surroundings is inexhaustible—if the level of stimulation is appropriately matched with his ability to digest his experiences. Naturally, those objects closest at hand are of greatest interest and the simpler the better, for the child can take in what is simple and that which is repeatedly present for exploration. The familiar object is comfortingly

the same and yet full of potential for new discoveries.

He takes pleasure in touching, feeling, squeezing, picking up, and dropping objects within the first three months of life, and the list of all he does with them could go on and on. As the child, out of his individuality, chooses those things to which he is drawn, we see how deeply original each child's explorations are, for reasons we will never know. The individual initiative he takes is evidence of the self entering into bodily activity. The child who does not show this interest and liveliness warrants our attention and concern.

### **How do we recognize the manifestation of ego presence and strengthening?**

The child's approach to a new object is to apply the skills he has gained up to that point. If he finds that the new object behaves differently from familiar ones, this prompts him to try a different approach in investigating this toy, thus getting to know the new possibilities it may offer. Éva Kálló, a colleague at the Pikler Institute and brilliant observer of child development, gives us a powerful tool for seeing the phenomena of ego integration in her description of the infant's play. Through her eyes, we see such sophisticated interaction with the world, such intricate manipulation of objects and their possibilities that we can have no doubt that a self is actively streaming out through the child's organism of body, soul, and spirit.

The child's explorations continue in the second half of the first year: the fingers gain dexterity and the thumb and index finger can now pick up the most minute crumb or thread from the floor. Objects are picked up and dropped repeatedly. And what's next? The child's research continues! The child begins to explore what effect he can have upon objects *without* picking them up at all! Pushing a ball, it rolls away from him. What power he must feel in causing such a change in his surroundings. Toward the conclusion of this first year, the child discovers that two objects have particular relationships with one another, and that this is distinctive for each pair of objects. What are these relationships? What fits inside something? At first it is trial and error, but gradu-

ally—by around eighteen months—memory of relationships as well as visual examination of objects replace the physical trials.

The healthy child is not satisfied with a narrow, repeated exploration of the same object in the same manner. The inner activity of the self is woven through with the independent will, drawing him outward to take hold of the environment. The child feels deeply competent and capable as the progression of capacities is born, and this competence breeds joy and contentment.

Play now leads to the era of ‘collecting’ in its many aspects. First, almost randomly, the child discovers the similarities of some objects close by. Soon, out of some internal criteria, he begins to collect with intention and selectivity those objects that belong with one another. As he aggregates more and more collections, it may be that his collecting brings him into a little collision with the world. Objects of interest to him may also be of interest to others. As this occurs, his soul separates itself from the world around him and experiences the qualities of ‘mine,’ ‘not mine,’ and ‘yours.’ We see the unfolding of the nascent feeling life, as well as the world of language and thought. This is surely evidence for the all-encompassing nature of play and the sophisticated layers of meaning and the ego development inherent within each moment of play.

### Language and a new step into the world outside the self

As soon as the human being speaks, an ‘I’ expresses itself. The child’s first syllables are the mark of an individuality joining the world of those who communicate with language. Every parent looks forward to hearing the first syllabic utterance that connotes actual meaning, for the parent inherently knows that the child’s self is anchored yet more deeply, that an individuality is truly present. Although it is not within our scope here to bring a detailed description of the senses as Rudolf Steiner has described them, nonetheless it is important to recognize that these twelve senses

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underlie the integration of the incarnating child’s ego. When active in the adult around the child, the so-called ‘higher’ senses of thought, of the Word, and of the ego stimulate the emergence of these same senses in the child. Without such stimulation, the child suffers greatly. The child’s general sensory

organism works through its deep imitative capacity to strengthen his senses of thought, Word, and ego in a preliminary way. These higher senses unfold in quite a different way from the ‘foundational’ senses of balance, movement, touch, and warmth that arise more directly in relationship to the physical body and activity within it.

At the Pikler Institute, the caregiver develops her intimate relationship with each child not only through her touch and the sharing and playfulness that occurs during caregiving times together, but also through her voice. In a musical, natural way, the caregiver engages the child with rich, rhythmic language; she speaks to the preverbal child from earliest infancy, and he responds with his eyes, his gestures of collaboration, his interaction. Communication arises from speech as well as from listening.

There is a unique inner awakening, accompanied by the weaving of the outer social tapestry, when speech emerges for the young child. He either joins the human community ever more intimately or begins to become progressively isolated from it. Speech brings separation from the global consciousness of the first year, for the child must stand outside that which he describes. Speech provides both a powerful and vulnerable situation for the child as he exposes his innermost sentiments to those who listen.

A general picture of the incarnating child brings an expectation that the steps of movement to the upright, exploration of the world through play, warm and verbal relationships with those close to the child will all converge to invite the child to bring forth expressive language toward the end of the first year. For many months the child gradually understands more and more of the speech he hears around him until his own first words burst forth first singly, then in pairs, and finally in full sen-

tences. Naming itself sets the child in distinction to the world around him and breaks the ties between the core of the self and the outside world. The self has found its voice.

### Saying no—and yes—to the world

Later in the second year, the self gradually unites with the body and the child grows toward a unity of soul-spirit and life-filled physical body. The evidence is dramatic. To create a space for this self, the child pushes away the world. This ‘push’ literally creates distance between the little one and the world around him. To get a feeling for this experience of the child’s, push your own arms away from your body and experience the space you have thus created. It is tangible, this separation that the outstretched arms create. There is safety and also power in this gesture, which can be felt to be a painful moment of death as the oneness, grace, innocence, and simplicity of daily experience give way to separation and isolation. It can be an overwhelming moment for the child to recognize that he is no longer one with the world around, but is himself a separate and distinct individual.

It is simultaneously a powerful moment of recognizing his ability to act upon the world. The forceful ‘No’ is the practice of this very strength. But how crucial is this passage! For without separation, the ego’s unfolding halts. If the consciousness of the child remains in the periphery rather than internally anchored, the adults around the child may begin to sense that an important transition has not occurred.

Over time, this period of strong ‘No’ is transformed into an ever more mobile relationship with the world, in which the well-anchored self is gradually more comfortable, feels adequate space between the self and the world around him, and can now begin to tolerate disappointment, boundaries, and limitations.

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### Evidence of healthy ego integration: the three-year-old

Towards the end the child’s third year, we recognize the culmination of this initial process of healthy ego integration as we observe the shining forth of the well-anchored human spirit in the following qualities, characteristics, and capacities:

*Initiative:* The child is a being of initiative, with joyful interest and engagement in the world. New possibilities, explorations create a lively spirit who lives in a mood of the goodness of the world.

*Security and trust in the environment and in people:* The healthy child is interested in other children, addresses them directly, seeks their companionship in play. Eye contact, touch, following and leading activity express the child’s growing satisfaction in human relationships, both within the family group and beyond it.

*Fluid movement:* The child has developed the ability not only to stand upright, but also to run, climb, and jump with confidence and agility. He is confident in trying new physical activities and in exploring new environments, is able to take appropriate risks and recover independently from the small bumps in his encounters with daily life.

*Self-care:* The child has now taken on elements of bodily care independently, such as dressing, eating and toileting, with a joy of mastery and competence. (Interestingly, research from the Pikler Institute finds that the single correlation with completion of the development of toileting skills is the full emergence of the child’s speaking of herself as ‘I.’)

*Play:* The child’s ability to play, both alone and with others, is now well developed. She has the capacity to express creativity in the use of physical objects (no longer object exploration alone)

and most especially, to engage in imaginative play. The liveliness of fantasy, in particular, illustrates the ego's penetration of the etheric body as the sculptural forces are freed up from their work upon the brain and now express themselves in free activity in the outer world.

*Reference to oneself as I:* Rudolf Steiner over and over describes the pivotal moment in the human biography when the individual refers to himself as 'I,' the name that no one else can use. The peripheral consciousness has now contracted, and the child understands himself as more separate and distinct from the world around him.

The fourth member of a person's being, the power that enables one to say 'I,' makes the human being the crown of creation. This name can be applied only to oneself; it expresses the fact that the soul's primordial divine spark is what speaks. We share the designations of everything else with others; a person's ear can be reached from outside, but not the name that refers to what is god-like in every individual human soul.

*Speech and memory:* The child speaks with grammatical correctness in relatively complex sentences that express his needs, wishes, interests, observations, and feelings; his memory enables him to describe relationships between situations, people, and events in his life. He is now a being with a continuous biography.

*The life of the will and the life of the emotions:* A progression has taken place from a state of pure, instinctive willing, unmediated by anything other than sensation, to a capacity for self-determined and chosen activity and with an ability to inhibit his will when necessary. The child awakens gradually to emotions that lie beneath the surface, not fully conscious. They rise up into a defiant 'No' that enables him to feel his nascent self. Gradually, as the ego penetrates more and more deeply, the child becomes able to feel this strong inner self without the accompanying resistance to the outer world. If the child's emerging strength of self is met with empathy and yet clear boundaries from those around him, his ini-

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tially negative pushing back in response to the world diminishes and is gradually replaced by a harmony between his inner and outer worlds. The transition may bring a period of highly charged conflict with those around him as the child gains the capacity to navigate with his newly-born strength of soul.

This is truly a miniature death experience as the child moves from a state of complete sympathy and oneness with the entire world to a recognition and experience of separation from the world around him. As the dreaminess of the little child is exchanged for consciousness, alongside comes the pain of separation. The child works and sometimes struggles to find a personal balance between sympathy (attraction) and antipathy (separation) toward the outer world.

*The child experiences the world as good:* A healthy, nurturing environment, successful attachment to parents and caregivers, and first friendships have allowed the child to develop a sense of security and trust in the world. She is open, receptive, and enthusiastic about the world—within the boundaries of her constitution and inherent personality.

## Conclusion

Many of us have witnessed the steps described above and have felt the joy of this 'second' earthly arrival of the three-year-old as an individual. We also observe many children in whom this process does not unfold smoothly, as the world in which we live brings impediments and fears to both incarnating child and to the adults who surround the child. Along the path to this important moment of the first full step of the soul's grounding, this 'thrust of the ego,' stand many crucial thresholds.

Recognizing and understanding these spiritual and physical steps give us the possibility to respond in the most supportive way as we accompany the child along her path. While each step is highly individual in its timing and mode of expression, we can become ever more sensitive to the many tiny archetypal steps that illustrate to us that the ego is, in fact, finding its way into bodily incorporation. The tenderness of these transitions, of the progressive steps toward selfhood,

cannot be underestimated. For as long as the child is protected by heavenly forces, we have the opportunity to complement these forces with our own earthly gentleness and protection, with our joyful invitation for the child to enter life.

At a time when we are told of increasing alienation of parent from child, of parents uncomfortable touching their own children, it becomes most important for each of us to stand knowledgeably behind the process of the incarnation of the child through the integration of the ego. We can, in fact, school ourselves to recognize the discrete steps and to enhance an environment that best stimulates their emergence. In this way we stand behind their importance in enabling the incarnating soul to prepare for the drama of her adult life.

Rudolf Steiner describes how an aura hovers around the young child like a wonderful human-superhuman power. This aura, which is actually our higher nature, extends everywhere into the spiritual world. But at the earliest moment we can remember, this aura penetrates more deeply into our inner being. We can experience ourselves as a coherent 'I' from this point on because what had previously been connected to the higher worlds has now entered the 'I.' Thereafter, our consciousness establishes its own relationship to the outer world.

Spiritual forces are present during the first three years of human life that are never again available in the same way for the rest of a human lifetime. The child is unaware of these forces—insofar as memory does not allow them to enter into the child's consciousness. In this way the child is left to develop in freedom. These life-sustaining forces—acting from without, from above and beyond—are the most powerful and profound forces in the cosmos. They have the possibility to serve as tremendous inspirations and support to those who accompany the child at this time of his life. We can step both back in wonder and reverence and also forward with attentiveness and engagement to witness all that unfolds before us.

It is extraordinarily interesting to watch a child learning to walk. You must learn to observe this. ... This is the first thing to look for in a child; for how a child moves reveals the most inward urge of life, the primal life impulse.

— Rudolf Steiner,  
*Human Values in Education*



Emmi Pikler

### Endnotes

1. Kathleen Raine, taken from Emmi Pikler's medical journal.
2. Ernst-Michael Kranich, *Research Bulletin*, 2007.
3. Ibid.

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"People have enough to live, but nothing to live for; they have the means, but no meaning."

– Robert Fogul, Nobel Laureate economist

These words echo those of Viktor Frankl written a half-century earlier. I know that I have been on a search for meaning and perhaps you have been as well. This search caused me to quit a successful litigation career so that I could become, in Maslow's terms, "one with the work that I do." Where is the "meaning" in the work that your company does every day? Whether it is manufacturing widgets, selling insurance coverage, or a retail operation, any real hope at finding meaning comes from service.... The greatest meaning of all comes from our relationships: the relationships that we have with our work individually, the relationships that we have with our co-workers and the relationships that we have with our customers and clients.

– Daniel Pink