

## World Goodwill Seminar, November 2021

### Biography Work: A paradoxical transformative social practice Leah Walker

**Leah Walker** has a deep interest in human development and earth evolution, particularly as described by Rudolf Steiner. She is a biography worker and licensed professional counselor (LPC), as well as a certified homeopath. She is a faculty member of the Center for Biography and Social Art in North America.

The following talk and resource list was prepared by Leah for the World Goodwill Seminar on 6 November 2021 on the theme: Imagination and Social Regeneration. A video of her talk is available at: [worldgoodwill.org/video#lw](https://worldgoodwill.org/video#lw). Further information on the theme and the seminar is at: [worldgoodwill.org/regeneration](https://worldgoodwill.org/regeneration).

I will begin with a quote from Daniel Christian Wahl: “Humanity needs a new story.” I have a dear friend, Pete, who said to me one day, years ago, “We need a new way of being together.” Our deep need for the new, for social regeneration, stands as a central purpose in my wish to share biography work with others.

I feel compelled to say immediately what I mean by “social.” I mean, “where two or more are gathered,” here on the earth, in real time, though biography work has everything to do with our gathering in the spirit world as well.

I will say just a bit more about the social realm as I view it and work with it. One of those I admire most is Karl Konig, who, based on Rudolf Steiner’s teaching, founded of the Camphill Movement -- a remarkable “study of companionship,” by the way. Konig wrote: “... the human being does not merely consist of ... body, soul and spirit; above all we consist of everything that is constituted by our fellow human beings spread across the earth as the totality of humankind: the people among whom we live, the family we were born into, the karmic groups into which we are received between birth and death. It is only the totality of these relationships that makes a human being.” It is a task of our time to know this, to know “what it means to be a human being on earth among other human beings.” This is just beginning to dawn.

It is truly moving to begin to understand the nature and depth of Alice Bailey’s work, and also delightful to discover so many resonances with Rudolf Steiner’s ideas. It’s a pleasure to feel I can openly reference his contribution.

Rudolf Steiner, early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, spoke in a way similar to Alice Bailey about the needs of our time, naming social understanding, freedom of thought, and knowledge of the Spirit as “lamps,” and made suggestions about how to achieve and develop these, suggestions that led in the 1970s to the birth of biography work (among other earlier

initiatives). And so, biography work is young; there is a great deal yet to be researched and developed. I will speak briefly to biography work as art, science, and discipline.

Perhaps you have had the experience of coming across a word you've never seen before, and then you "just happen" to come across it several times more in the days following. Biography work is a little like that. I discover something new about myself and slowly or suddenly I begin to observe this same phenomenon or quality or behavior or wound ... in those around me. The more I see, the more I see. The more I know of myself inwardly, the more inclusive my perspective outwardly. I can use my story to understand yours. Thus, work we do that is self-centered in a way serves the shared social body and being.

Perhaps, too, as meditators, you likely know very well: the light of attention illuminates. I have a beloved colleague who says: What I pay attention to I become interested in; what I become interested in I begin to understand; what I understand I may love. This is rather lawful, is it not?

Biography work is born of spiritual science or anthroposophy, the name Rudolf Steiner gave his teaching, meaning "wisdom of the human being." Biography work is an experiential study of human life, employing objective observation, which may lead to direct experience of the wisdom of the human being,

A study of life is a study of growth and change, of metamorphosis or transformation. Biography work provides a kind of training, if you will, in perceiving transformation or, as we tend to say, the process of becoming. (This is a development of thinking that belongs to our current age; we are learning that thinking itself grows, transforms -- may be mobile.)

Just as the human body has an archetypal form that exists in space, the human life has an archetypal form that exists in time; and this may be observed. Can you imagine a day when someone walks in the room and what is "seen" is not only a human body in space but also -- or perhaps rather -- a human life in time? Can you imagine being able to observe an individuality *becoming* through time? This is one direction spiritual science is headed in with biography work.

Biography work is an effort to tell the story of human becoming. We strive to work with rich and true images. Think of the great storytellers and their ability to call upon all the senses to make an experience a living one. When we share images or cognitive imaginations with one another, we share them also with the angels. The spirit world is deeply interested in our earthly experience.

Capacity for perceiving becoming can also inform understanding of the cosmos. From Rudolf Steiner's perspective, human life and Earth evolution have a perfect correspondence as microcosm and macrocosm. We bear within us "the whole image of the starry world" (Bittleston). The human life, then, is holy, a keeper of ancient and prophetic cosmic wisdom. With biography work, we study our small part and slowly discover we are learning about the whole of human existence. To work deeply with biography is to enter a mystery school.

With sustained discipline, individually and in dialogue with others, biography work may become something of a meditation in itself, one that fosters increasingly nuanced capacity for spiritual insight into the nature of our relationships, our roles within community, even our particular task within the great context of “the divine world goals.” We look into the past -- through well-defined, devoted practices -- so that becoming, that is yet to occur, may be more clearly revealed, so that we may more consciously align ourselves with becoming that is yet to be, so that we may re-member the future, if you will. This is another leading edge of the science.

In my experience, insight is a grace. What I can do is take responsibility for my consciousness. What I can do, with practice, is create a space where grace or Spirit may enter. What I can do is be really devoted to the actuality of my life experience. As Mary Oliver says: “... just pay attention ... / This isn’t a contest but the doorway / into thanks, and a silence / in which another voice may speak.”

And then there is the social sensitivity biography work fosters -- the art. This brings me back to where I started. Attention leads to interest; from interest comes understanding. Most of us want to be seen, long to feel understood. When shared in a social setting, biography work becomes not only social art but healing art: evoking brother-/sisterhood and fostering inter-relatedness, to borrow Alice Bailey’s words. Biography work is a self-reflective practice that, paradoxically, develops “eyes and ears for the other.” It awakens interest in the other, teaches one to see the other, which, as it would happen, is the cry of much current social activism. Biography work is a bridge one to the other.

Biography work, at first, on the surface, appears quite simple *and* it meets real and profound needs of our time. I understand it is similar with the work of Triangles. Isn’t it so, the more essential the voice, the more universal the sounding?

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(reflective writing and breakout groups)

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A few words in closing: I want to share with you one of the most beautiful lines of poetry ever written, in my view. Robert Frost in “Birches” says, “Earth’s the right place for love.” From Rudolf Steiner’s perspective, love is Earth’s mission. And here we are ... battling feelings of isolation -- made worse by the pandemic, struggling to understand one another, estranged from family, painfully aware the Earth is ailing, broken by trauma, faced with illness, tested by forces that seek to keep us from the Higher, exhausted by materialism that obstructs Spirit ...

We need a remedy. We need new ways.

Biography is a particular way of looking back so the way forward may be clearer. The human life -- the story of becoming -- is a sacred text, ancient and prophetic. It is a task of our time to learn to read this text, through knowledge of the Spirit or spiritual science, through meditative practice -- on life experience itself, both singly in self-reflection and in shared dialogue. When shared, biography work becomes social art where one develops eyes and ears for the other.

Consciousness is key, of course. And, generally, the human being's capacity for living in conscious communion is yet very young. Biography work is a path of development *toward* community, a step towards "an understanding of what it means to be a human being on earth among other human beings" (Konig). Biography work is a remarkable, responsible, actionable practice of social regeneration.

*The stars once spoke to the human being.  
Their silence now is cosmic destiny.  
To perceive this silence  
Can be painful for earthly human beings.*

*But now, in the silence, ripens  
What human beings may speak to the stars.  
To pay attention to the speaking  
Gives strength to Spirit Human Being.*

—Rudolf Steiner

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## Resources --

### Biography workers:

Leah Walker

[biographyworker@gmail.com](mailto:biographyworker@gmail.com)

biographyworker.com

Jennifer Brooks Quinn (bilingual -- Spanish, English)

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### Texts:

Bittleston, A. -- *Spirit of the Circling Stars*, 1975 (Letchworth: Garden City Press).

Konig, K. -- *Becoming Human: A Social Task*, 2011 (Edinburgh; Floris Books).

Steiner, R. -- *Biography: Freedom and Destiny*, 2009 (Forest Row; Rudolf Steiner Press).

**Lecture:**

Steiner, R. -- "How Can the Destitution of Soul Be Overcome" (Zurich, Oct. 10, 1916)  
[https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/KnoSpi\\_index.html](https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/KnoSpi_index.html)

**Verses:**

Steiner, R. -- *Verses and Meditations*, 1993 (Forest Row; Rudolf Steiner Press).

## Full passages (referenced above) --

Karl Konig -- *Becoming Human: A Social Task*, 2011 (Edinburgh; Floris Books)

... the human being does not merely consist of a physical body, an etheric body, an astral body, and I, of body, soul and spirit; above all we consist of everything constituted by fellow human beings spread across the earth as the totality of humankind: the people among whom we live, the family we were born into, the karmic group into which we are received between birth and death. It is only the totality of these relationships that makes a human being. Without it we are not human beings. Developing an inner perception of this reality is the first step on the way to an understanding of what it means to be a human being on earth among other human beings.

Rudolf Steiner -- "How Can the Destitution of the Soul Be Overcome" (Zurich, Oct. 10, 1916)

Social understanding, freedom of thought, knowledge of the spirit, these are the three great aims... . We must develop in their light; they are the right lamps for our time. Many people feel intensively that something of this kind is necessary, and particularly that another kind of community life must be developed, and that there must be new conceptions... . We can think of honorable good will, which has the aim of creating impulses in humanity... . Think of the many reformers who appear in the varied fields, of the many socially minded clergymen, and of the teacher in the social field, who may stand quite outside theological and religious circles. All this is often inspired by the very best will. It often has the intention of leading human beings toward something, which life in our time is seeking. How much good will is present, and at this moment we will look at all that comes from good will, not from malice. But as long as this good will remains in general phrases, however warm the feeling by which they are sustained, it cannot help, unless that knowledge comes to life ... but human understanding in the present has not even reached the beginning of this insight, except in small groups which have gathered to study the science of the spirit.

... there can light up in earthly existence the thoughts of human souls, which shine up like bright stars ... The science of the spirit should not be described as something fantastic; the science of the spirit is something which has the purpose of influencing reality in such a way that the distress of the soul which is inevitable ... can be overcome.

"The spiritual significance of a thing lives in its details." -- Novalis

Adam Bittleston -- *Spirit of the Circling Stars*, 1975 (Letchworth; Garden City Press).

It is a starting point in the understanding of Destiny to know: I have taken in, like an indrawn breath, my being, my soul and spirit, at earthly birth out of the widths of heaven. I bear in myself the whole image of the starry world, parts of it indeed emphasized as my particular responsibility. In the struggle of earth, this heavenly commission would now be forgotten were it not for Spirit. The nearer I draw to Spirit the better I shall remember it: and in its presence not be overwhelmed by it, but in every situation be helped in finding the first small steps to carry out my commission afresh.

The Blue Iris  
by Mary Oliver

It doesn't have to be the blue iris,  
it could be weeds  
in a vacant lot,  
or a few small stones;  
just pay attention, then patch  
a few words together  
and don't try to make them elaborate.  
This isn't a contest but the doorway  
into thanks, and a silence  
in which another voice may speak.

Prayer to One's Angel or Genius by Ernst Karl Plachner, endorsed by Rudolf Steiner

*You, my heavenly friend, my angel, who has led me to the earth and who will lead me through the gate of death into the spirit-home of the human soul, you, who knows the paths since millennia, do not cease to enlighten me, to strengthen me, to advise me so that I may emerge from the weaving fire of destiny as a strong destiny vessel, and fill myself ever more with the meaning of the divine world goals.*