

In late 2007, Hannes Weigert, initiator of The School of Nature and member of the Council of the Anthroposophical Society in Norway, visited New Zealand and talked with Sphere's Vee Noble about the work of this initiative and his work as a painter.

## THE SCHOOL OF NATURE

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**Vee:** *What was your impulse for establishing The School of Nature?*

**Hannes:** My main question was, and still is, how to connect with inner and outer realities and what is the connection between the inner and the outer life. I became aware of this very early, when I attended a lecture by J rgen Smit at the Goetheanum. He strongly pointed to these two opposite ways of relating to the spiritual and what he saw as the necessity to combine the two paths. He spoke about the need to pursue this path in not just one direction but to create a rhythmical relationship between these two qualities; what could be described as the going out and the coming in. That really struck something deep within me when I heard it for the first time. It is an essential motif in the whole of Rudolf Steiner's work as we explore the possibility of connecting one's inner world with the so-called outer and this is also, in a way, the key motif in The School of Nature initiative.

**Vee:** *In 1995, you moved from your native Germany to Norway, where you still live, and the first seeds of the School of Nature were sown there. What was it about the Scandinavian experience that inspired you?*

**Hannes:** After I had studied painting for ten years with Gerard Wagner at the Goetheanum, I wanted to experience and deepen my understanding of the stronger outer qualities of nature in Norway and the light and darkness throughout the cycle of the year.

During that time the myth of Persephone has been a strong motif in the background of all of my work. Rudolf Steiner talks about Persephone in various lectures, and in one he actually describes the Divine Being as the action behind the outer veil of sense perceptible as the Being, or the force, which actually brings about appearances.

In other lectures, he speaks about Persephone as a Being that is hidden in our own soul and, if you try to bring these two aspects together, we arrive at the same question: how do we make a bridge between the two? On the one hand, there is what we see in nature, but at the same time working within so we can observe how we see nature. This is also the question for the work of The School of Nature; how can one become consciously aware of these processes so they are not just unconscious processes but ones which oneself can direct?

**Vee:** *How did you choose the name The School of Nature for your initiative?*

**Hannes:** With the name, The School of Nature, people tend to think it is like a Goethean science project. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate if I had called it 'The School of the Soul', but that would be misleading too. There does not seem to be a word that contains both aspects. We are living in a divided world. For me, personally, this is really an artistic project that has grown out of my own biography as a painter,

but that does not mean that it has to be that way for the other people involved in The School of Nature. Painting has always to do with what you experience within your soul in relation to what you see, and sooner or later it leads you to the question: do they have anything to do with each other? What is the relationship between the within and the without?

With these questions, I joined with my friend and fellow painter, Patrick M llersch n, whom I have known since we went to a Steiner School together, in a project called 'painting spaces' over several years. We built a hut with no windows and just a skylight in the Norwegian landscape and then we started to paint the interior walls.

You have to imagine when you enter such a hut you can no longer see the landscape, so we struggled with the question: how can we paint something that reveals the outer landscape which we can't see any more, and at the same time, the inner aspect to it? Of course this is a very dangerous thing because you can paint all sorts of things and believe this has something to do with the outer landscape.

I don't know if we succeeded, probably we didn't, but the main point was really to live and work with this question as painters. And working on the building and then within the hut, we were able to get to know the place through the cycle of the year and through the changes of light as we tried to work through our painting. We never actually finished this project, but it inspired us to take the next step with The School of Nature to include everyone, because the questions are not just for us, as painters, but for gardeners, biologists, doctors, or any one who would work with this question, and thus bring people together. Each person brings a different viewpoint to add to the creation of a larger picture of nature and thus a different part of nature can be revealed to my limited perception.

**Vee:** *The School of Nature organised its first course in 2005 in Norway with the title, The Creative Forces in Man and Nature - Exploring inner and outer realms. It included the doctor, biologist, gardener, an eurythmist, as well as painters, that you mentioned, so was this a successful combination?*

**Hannes:** It was quite extraordinary at this first course. Normally when you prepare for delivering a workshop or a conference lecture, you concentrate on your research and work to deliver your piece and you are not so much aware of what else is taking place and cannot take part in other activities. We wanted to create something of a different event so that everyone could take part in everyone else's work and we could actually build on each other's contributions. So the first day was a bit like a puzzle where everyone came with their own prepared piece but, from the second day, it became more evident that we were changing what we had prepared to connect with our colleagues and you could see very strongly that together we were creating a larger picture and experiencing how various things connect.

**Vee:** *The original impulse has taken you to working with this inner and outer question and the setting up of The School of Nature. Why did you choose to work with young people in this context?*

**Hannes:** My impulse was to work with all interested people no matter what age group and I began looking around for a context in which I could place this initiative, and it was with Elizabeth Wirsching of the Youth Section that I initially received support, but for me it was never meant as something particularly for young people; I rather see it as a question which is generally human. If it belongs to a Section, I would say it would be in the General Section.

This is not a question for just young people or just those involved in the Natural Science Section. Nature itself has become a kind of threshold for us today so that meeting outer nature can lead us to the experience that there is a wall that we cannot go beyond to begin with, but we sense there is more to it.

The School of Nature is for those who have a longing to go beyond this threshold. Although this started within the context of the Youth Section, the course now attracts people from around the world of different age groups, from 18-80. The Youth Section was a starting point. Elizabeth has followed the process from the beginning with great interest, opening many doors for us and she continues to support as a member of The School of Nature Group that meets twice a year at the Goetheanum.

**Vee:** *The original concept of The School Of Nature was as an annual three-term course between Norway and Dornach but that has changed into short course and it has evolved into an initiative endorsed by the Anthroposophical Society in Norway hasn't it?*

**Hannes:** Yes, I approached the Norwegian Council to ask if this initiative is something they would like to include in the Society and, about three years ago, it was decided that The School of Nature would be a project of the Anthroposophical Society in Norway. Frode Barkved, the General Secretary in Norway also became involved in The School of Nature and, when he talked about our work in Norway at the General Secretaries' meeting in Dornach, he was approached by Hans van Florenstein Mulder, who was General Secretary for New Zealand at the time, and Philip Thatcher, the General Secretary in Canada, and both have become colleagues in The School of Nature. This led to Philip and a group of six in Canada setting up The School of Nature Circle. Their focus is more to work with the wilderness as an aspect of our concept of nature, but there are others too.

In Dornach there is group of people around Hans-Christian Zehnter who is organising School of Nature courses at the Goetheanum, while Hatsune Hatanaka in Japan and Michael Grimley in South Africa are exploring the possibilities of working with the concept of The School of Nature Circles, and I think Hans sees potential for such work here in New Zealand as well. I like the idea of independent but collaborating little circles around the world within different cultures and landscapes.



Hannes Weigert

**Vee:** *Returning to the original impulse of an annual course of three terms, two at the Goetheanum and the middle one in Norway, is this still a possibility for the future?*

**Hannes:** This was the original focus but I do not see this happening now. It may be a more realistic proposition in the future. There have now been several courses in Norway, Switzerland and Canada and I see these as continuing. We shall see where The School of Nature goes in the future.

**Vee:** *As a visitor to this country, what did you experience of the outer landscape of New Zealand?*

**Hannes:** The New Zealand bush is unique but it is the quality of the sunlight here that is a real experience. It is so different compared to the sunlight of Europe or Scandinavia. In fact, you would hardly say it is the same light. There is a kind of interrelationship between the physiognomy of the earth – its landscape – with the sunlight which gives the specific quality or character to a place. Just going from Norway to central Europe makes me aware of so many different landscapes and then, when I fly over Asia to New Zealand, it is incredible how many different qualities you pass through. Suddenly I became aware of this astonishing fact that our planet has so many different faces and that the sun is the one source of light, but that light has different qualities around the world, and this light affects the soul moods, and the way you think and the way you do things. I have experienced that the light affects strongly the way I paint in different parts of the world. Sometimes the forces that are present between this interplay between earth and light can affect a painter so that you find it very hard to come to form in a picture - there are places where everything becomes a bit lose - or you find that the light actually penetrates the colours whereas in other places the light separates more from the colours.

**Vee:** *Are the qualities of this country reflected in the work of New Zealand painters?*

**Hannes:** Well, an artist like Colin McCahon has produced a lot of landscape paintings. Although in his early work we can find more traditional religious motifs, they are always placed in a New Zealand setting, are part of this particular light filled space. Then if you follow the development of his work, words start to appear, often from the Gospels, like I AM written in big letters all over the canvas. Many of his later paintings look a little bit like blackboards but there is still a landscape quality, and I believe this quality has evolved out of a confrontation with landscape and outer space. I find it most fascinating that he connected this perception of landscape, space and light with something that obviously doesn't come from the landscape, but nevertheless seem naturally to belong there. The landscape is no longer the background for, let's say, a crucifixion but the word or logos itself seems to become a landscape; a new kind of landscape. I think that is something very special about this New Zealand painter's work, and I would like to come back and see more of his work.

*For more information on The School of Nature go to [www.schoolofnature.org](http://www.schoolofnature.org)*