

Tilling the Soul

An exploration of Triskeles 'Food for Thought'

program for youth age 13-18

Mimi Coleman

Camphill Academy

## ABSTRACT

## Tilling the Soul

An exploration of Triskeles 'Food for Thought' program for youth age 13-18

Triskeles' 'Food For Thought'—How a Philadelphia-area non-profit has helped a generation of youth to discover nature, agriculture, job skills, and philanthropy. This team strives to nurture the whole human being using a Waldorf-school approach to educate the “head, heart and hands,” as well as to develop ecological consciousness, environmental sustainability, nutritional awareness, and the power to “learn and earn”. Through summer programs and internships, participants engage with dedicated mentors and employers, gain tools for success in providing needed services in the 'farm to table' movement and in environmental issues facing urban communities. This paper includes interviews with participants and features Sankanac CSA and Kimberton CSA, two of the garden worksites.

This paper uncovers what motivates the teachers in the program, what draws the youth to take up the challenging work on the land, what rewards they gain beyond the modest stipend from the “learn and earn” model. And the farmers and gardeners—their motivations to go forward with the difficult work on the land that is subject to weather, pests, drought and crop failure. This paper seeks to get to the spiritual source and well-spring from which these players act. Does the Bio-Dynamic agricultural inner current run through and nourish the physical practice? Is there some intangible that gets passed on to the students and youth in the program?

Both the Waldorf Education movement and the Bio-Dynamic Agriculture movement spring from Anthroposophy, a radical and spiritually based philosophy developed by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). They have grown over the ensuing years to encompass work being done all around the world in both small home gardens and home-school cooperatives to large farms, vineyards, schools and colleges.

**Mimi Coleman**, an art therapist and poet, has lived 16 years in Camphill Village Kimberton Hills, a community that includes adults with disabilities, where Bio-Dynamic agriculture is practiced. She offers tours to visitors and integrates volunteers into this holistic and integrated model of supporting soil, plants, animals, and people.

How can we sustain agriculture in a way which is truly life-giving to humanity? How can a healthy culture of farming nourish us so that our ideals can live and grow and feed back into the farm, as well as into all of our other human endeavors? Two Southeastern Pennsylvania organic/bio-dynamic CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) gardens and Triskeles, a local non-profit which runs a youth program, exemplify how this work is being done, and the positive effects it has on many. Triskeles, which serves youth in Chester, Montgomery and Philadelphia Counties, has developed programs for minority and under-served youth, ages 3-24. The youth in the Food For Thought program receive a stipend and thus have an opportunity to 'learn and earn' as they go through the five week internship with the CSAs, work in the kitchen and learn job skills in agriculture, farm to table culinary arts and community engagement. How can health-giving work and a meal program contribute to the Spirit of Sustainable Agriculture? When Clemens Pietzner, founder of Triskeles, and Mark Birdsall, Director of Youth Programs, described some of the aims of the youth program(s), it became clear that some of the motivating elements for them were: the connection with food and earth; that the work would prepare youth to be employable almost anywhere; that a shift in food culture may come about; that they would follow the cycles of the seasons as much as possible in the planting, cultivating and harvesting of the food; and that there would be a celebratory culture around finishing the program and sharing the food and lessons learned

One of the gardens is the 12-acre Sankanac CSA, located along French Creek at Camphill Village Kimberton Hills (CVKH), a life-sharing community that includes adults with and without disabilities. This CSA is only one small part of a 432 acre

farm which includes homes, orchards, herb garden, dairy, craft workshops, a café and community center. The other garden is Kimberton CSA, located across French Creek on 10 acres of land along Seven Stars Road. Both gardens utilize organic and bio-dynamic practices. These are holistic methods of caring for the soil, first indicated by Rudolf Steiner and developed since the early 1900's. I happen to be a member of Sankanac CSA and a neighbor to the Kimberton CSA. Although I knew that there was a summer youth program at our CSA, I had never read about it or taken the time to learn more until I read an article in the CVKH newsletter: 'Sustainable Agriculture Education: Sankanac CSA and Green Interns,' where it was written: "Feedback we receive always confirms that the impact of working on our farm –and with people with developmental disabilities – is immense and immeasurable." That final statement had a strong impact on me and caused me to seek to find out more about this 'immense and immeasurable' part of the work. I have lived and worked at CVKH for 17 years and have experienced this 'immense and immeasurable' aspect in my own way; it is one of the things that keeps me here and gives meaning to the work that we do. We pull together on behalf of the needs of all, we work for the love of the work, and we find meaning in the ideal that each can work according to his or her abilities. This paper reflects many of the things I learned while exploring this theme further. Throughout the paper I will use the words 'farm' and 'garden' interchangeably.

I had a chance to meet Chris Headley and Terrence Sims, two of the teens in the Food For Thought program for multiple summers, and they described to me some of their experiences: --How they had to wake up very early in order to be part of the program, unlike some of their friends who slept late and relaxed all summer; --The contrast between very hard work in the summer sun harvesting or weeding and then relaxing in the shade to wash carrots; --The love and kindness they felt from

experienced gardeners who understood that they did not garden on a daily basis;  
--How they found a snake, three baby moles, and -- How they learned to re-evaluate  
their ideas of some vegetables!

In keeping with the background of Anthroposophy, the philosophy developed by Rudolf Steiner that underlies Bio-Dynamic agriculture, I will describe some of the elements of the Triskeles program and the stories I heard about it, based on an understanding of the four elements, the four kingdoms of nature, and the four-fold nature of the human being. By looking at aspects of the program in light of this philosophy, it is then possible to see how the idea of the Spirit of Sustainable Agriculture lives and weaves through the endeavor, although in itself it is not a 'spiritual' program.

Rudolf Steiner, Austrian philosopher, (1861-1925) introduced esoteric principles which have very practical value. Many of his ideas have fructified education, agriculture, medicine and other areas of work and study. One maxim he gave in a lecture to teachers, in Stuttgart, September 23, 1919, is as follows:

One principle humanity has to grasp, otherwise no development will be possible in our crucial time. Seek the truly practical life, but seek it in a way that does not numb you towards the Spirit that is working in it. Seek the Spirit, but do not seek it out of greed for the super-sensible...; but seek it, because you want to apply it unselfishly in practical life, in the material world.

Make use of the ancient principle: "***Spirit is never without matter, matter never without spirit.***" So that you say: We intend to handle all material

matters in the light of the Spirit, and we shall seek the light of the Spirit in such a way that it will kindle in us warmth for our practical deeds. Spirit that is led into matter by us; matter that is shaped by us until it reveals the Spirit it contains; matter that receives through us the Spirit revealed; the Spirit that is brought by us to, and into, matter.

All this will build that active and vivid substance, which can take humanity into real development; into that kind of progress that the people of today, in the deepest and most worthy longings of their souls, can only but yearn for.

This quote will serve to illuminate the idea that the working together of spiritual ideals and practical daily life can bring health and vitality to the farm and garden as well as to those who work there and who benefit from its produce. I may use the words farm and garden throughout the paper, interchangeably.

I will illustrate this in a few stages. First we consider the four elements as known to our western civilization since ancient times, **the earth, water, air and fire.** I will put the most physical element at the base of the list, coming upward to the most ephemeral. These elements will form a framework to which we will relate the four kingdoms of nature as follows:

<b>Fire or warmth</b>	<b>Human</b>
<b>Air</b>	<b>Animal</b>
<b>Water</b>	<b>Plant</b>
<b>Earth</b>	<b>Mineral</b>

How they relate to one another will be revealed as we take further steps.

Now we can take look into the four-fold nature of the human being as introduced by Rudolf Steiner in his book *Theosophy*, and as we do so we can enlarge upon it by looking at the four-fold nature of the garden or farm. Because the farm is made by human endeavor and the work there depends much on human activity, they can be seen as very inter-related, and have direct effects upon one another. This is only a brief entrée into the subject, to help us explore the ideas further.

When considering the farm and garden, we can identify the **physical** part as the land and buildings, the earth, fences, implements, paths, and other structural aspects, as part of the earlier mentioned **earth** element and related to the **mineral** kingdom of nature. When considering the human beings we see the physical part as the physical body, and the most mineral part represented by the bones. We can therefore add to our previous list, as follows: **Earth**            **Mineral**            **Physical**  
**Body.**

The next layer of our farm and garden is the **etheric** part, also known as the life body (the Asians call this chi.) This is related to the **water** element, and to the living **plant**, in nature. In contrast to the lifeless mineral part, this is the living circulation, the bodies of water, the flow of life on the farm, the atmosphere. This is also the plants themselves, whether as sprouts, seedlings or full plants, or the weeds and other plants living on the farm. In the human body it is the fluids, the circulation, and the life within us. This is also related to the rhythmic aspect of our individual human lives or the way the life of the farm unfolds rhythmically day to day. Thus again we can add to our previous list: **Water**            **Plant**            **Etheric, or Life Body.**

The animals on the farm can be related to the next layer, the **astral** or **soul** layer. This is all the insects, the animals. This astral part relates to the **air** element, therefore also wind and weather, the quality of light of sun, moon and other heavenly bodies. For the human beings, it is also the hopes and wishes we have for the farm, the social relations, the frustrations, the stresses and pressure as well as fears.

This can also be the feelings engendered in the people that work there, and the will to work that is present among the gardeners. Now we add to the third layer of our list:

**Air                      Animal                      Astral, or Soul Body.**

This relation of animal to soul can be seen in the way that animals do not have such individual personalities the way humans do, (though this may differ a bit for animals that are living closely to humans), but rather live within the 'group soul', with the instincts of their way of living predominating. They have consciousness but not self consciousness the way humans do.

Then we come to the human **ego, I,** the higher **Individuality** that exists within each of us, and is the bearer of **warmth** and interest in the other individualities. It is the ego that directs (hopefully!) our astral, soul forces in line with our higher ideals.

The ego of the farm would be the farmers, the gardeners, this most **human** element, that gives direction and guidance, and that can welcome collaborators and build relationships with other egos. The farmers carry the Ideal of the farm, the spiritual component, and help to bring that ideal into all the practical considerations. The farm itself has its own Individuality that makes it different even from neighboring farms.

Again we add to the top of our list: **Fire/Warmth                      Human                      Ego, I**  
**or Individuality.**

In his book *The Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe's World Conception*, Rudolf Steiner gives indication of the ideals that we carry being the most spiritual part of us. The ideal comes not only from outside of us but also from within ourselves, and gives us the impulse we need to bring that spiritual ideal into practical reality. "When a moral ideal comes about, therefore, it is the inner power lying within the content of this ideal that guides our actions. It is not because an ideal is given us as law that we act in accordance with it, but rather because the ideal, by virtue of its content, is active in us, leads us." This ideal that comes about within the **I** of the human being and leads us actively from within, is the part that was evident in the descriptions of the work that Chris and Terrence did in the garden. They were inspired by the ideal of the work ahead of them, and that work, though it tired them day after day, offered them a way to grow strong, in body, in will, and in self-reliance. Ed Rodriguez, a social worker who works closely with the Triskeles program, helped to describe some of the opportunities that are available to the youth. I will describe the work, the achievements, and the outcomes of the program with my own imagination of a sunflower that will accompany the four-fold picture that I outlined above while weaving in some of the stories I heard.

Starting at the base of the picture, (see drawing page 13) with the **roots** in healthy soil, down in the **earth**, this is the most **mineral, physical** part of the scene that I will describe. There, in the body of the earth, in the garden, we have the most immersive aspect of the program. The youth had to get their hands dirty, they had to handle great volumes of vegetables or weeds, to weigh and measure, to deal with gravity, heat, bugs, compost, and all aspects of the earth when it comes to growing a

garden. The experience was grounding and centering. The program helps focus and keep youth from some of the common unhealthy distractions. This relates to the roots of the plant, and we can imagine a thick and thriving tangle of roots here at the bottom of the picture, surrounded by healthy soil and earthworms and other beneficial soil micro-organisms. This may also be part of the ‘immense’ benefit to the youth in the program.

The next part of the picture, we come up a little, from the roots to the **stem** and **leaves** of the plant. This relates to that **etheric, life body**, where **fluids** are circulating. Because this has the rhythmic, daily forces at work, we see that this part allows for healthy habits to form. It unfolds over time. The youth worked daily with a repetitive set of tasks, up early day after day, and out to the land. They learned life-lessons, they followed the seasons, and they tended to the needs of soil and plants and animals. They made progress; they got stronger, growing like the leaves of the plant, unfolding along the stem. They ate life-giving food that they had grown and harvested, they developed healthy habits and practices that sustained them through the heat of the summer. They met goals and felt a sense of achievement. Chris said, “I saw how much progress we made and it made me want to be involved. Terrence helped me, inspired me and edged me on. I was not alone.” About the food program, although some had to overcome fear of new vegetables, Terrence said, “We grew it and it tastes great!”

As our plant grows taller and taller, soon it puts out **flowers!** This is the stage related to the **air** element, the **animal** kingdom, and we can imagine the birds and butterflies and bees hovering around this most lovely bright sunflower. This flowering part of the picture, relates to our **soul**, as described above, to our likes and dislikes,

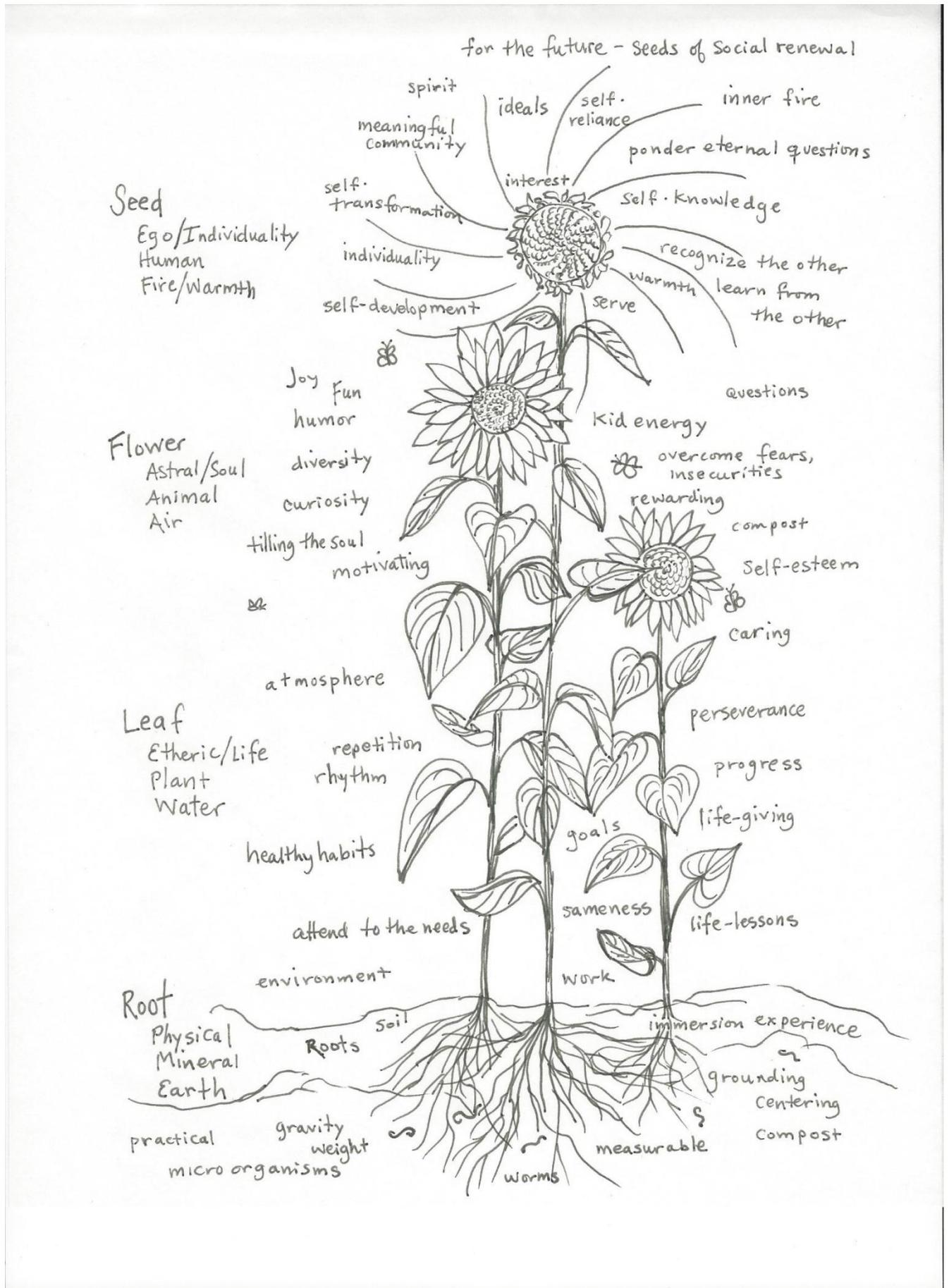
and to our thinking and feeling and willing. Recognizing beauty is another part of the experience. Terrence described how he became more comfortable in the work which eventually “helped me overcome fears; fear of bugs!” Here we see that the diversity of life and of tasks is important, in keeping up the interest of the youth, also the variety of people that they worked with. Along with this they overcame fears and prejudices, not only of bugs and vegetables, but of different people. At Camphill’s Sankanac CSA they learn from adults with disabilities who have been doing this work for years and years, and who have a sense of vocation, and can teach well how to do various tasks. Todd Newlin, gardener at Sankanac CSA, described how he has come to learn to recognize the abilities and strengths of those who work at the CSA, with or without disabilities, and to help set them to the needed tasks in a way that is manageable to each. “I want the kids to learn that our folks (especially those with disabilities) know and can lead and teach and be examples of the work.” Terrence talked about overcoming obstacles, and of how good everything looked when they would finish a job. Overcoming insecurities, gaining self-esteem, and pride in work done well, perseverance, motivation; these were well described by Ed Rodriguez with much enthusiasm as he told me of his concept of ‘compost of the soul’. “We all have garbage. We don’t want to get rid of it but turn it over. Tilling the soul, I call it.” Todd describes how much he loves “That kid energy!” that comes into the garden with the Triskeles youth. And Terrence and Chris described some happy moments, at Kimberton CSA, full of fun and joy, the lighter moments that helped to balance the labor. “After tough jobs in the heat we would have some fun, drive the tractor, play with the dog and cat, or climb a tree!” “Have a water fight!”

Out of the work come the lessons on the land, then come the questions. Questions become the curriculum, and lead to thoughts which then meet with ideals. Mason Vollmer, one of the teachers in the program, wrote the following: “Gardening teaches not only horticulture, but also kindles the human spirit through something we might call the “metamorphosis of the soul.”—Interest awakens responsibilities, later this ripens into love for the world.” This love for the world was evident in Chris and Terrence in the bright eyes, the excitement they felt for the program as they described it to me. This leads us on to the last part of the picture.

Here we have the beautiful and geometrically organized **seeds** that come from those lovely flowers. The **seeds**, related to the **ego, or Individuality**, are the more spiritual part, and it is the spiritual part that is the imponderable, invisible aspect of the whole picture. (There are other spiritual parts of the human being also outlined in Theosophy, beyond the scope of this brief introductory sketch.) Seeds of self-knowledge, self-development, can be experienced as youth are transformed through meaningful work, meaningful relations. This work helps the youth become themselves, who they truly are. Ed has seen that the service part of the work is very meaningful. That people are in it for the other and not only for themselves. Thus the garden and the Triskeles youth program help to sow seeds for social renewal. The garden is a place where all senses can be engaged. Ed spoke of the idea of the garden as a platform for introspection and a place to ponder eternal questions. Here is the home of the ideals. This may be part of the ‘immeasurable’ benefit of the youth program!

Clemens described the funding for this program as coming from a variety of sources. Food For Thought has been supported by a contract with Chester County to support youth and workforce development. The program also receives important grants from local funders. About 85% of Triskeles' annual budget goes to create and sustain the youth programs. As to why Clemens started Triskeles, he described that after a long involvement in Camphill communities, he wanted to help build a positive future in another endeavor, and "how we care for work, place, and social life." About his work in the garden, Chris summed it up as follows, "Overall it helped your spirit grow more, it helps you be open and it sets your vibe. You're just a happier person." Terrence said, "Working at Sankanac CSA, we brought that experience back here," meaning home to their neighborhood, where they have a garden of their own, growing kale for the local Kimberton Whole Foods store.

These spiritual ideals that inspire gardeners to create their gardens anew each year, and then are drawn out of the garden, through learning lessons, by the youth and all who work there, this is the spirit in matter. This is what will help the Spirit of Sustainable Agriculture to thrive.



References:

Kaplan, L. (2015) Sustainable agriculture education: Sankanac CSA and green

interns. *Camphill Village Kimberton Hills NEWS*, Summer.

Steiner, R., (1994) *Theosophy, An Introduction to the Spiritual Processes in Human Life*

*and in the Cosmos*. Steiner Books. Hudson New York, USA:

Anthroposophic Press.

Steiner, R., (1995) *The spirit of the Waldorf school*. Hudson, New York, USA:

Anthroposophic Press.

Steiner, R. (1978) *The theory of knowledge implicit in Goethe's world conception*. Forest

Row, England: Rudolf Steiner Press.

Vollmer, M., (2015) *Growing Gardens-Growing People Creating the great school garden*

*Volume 1*. Downingtown Pennsylvania: Blevins Press.