

Starting Your Own Calendar of the Soul Group

A Handbook



To my question about what could be done to prepare oneself for the Christ-experience of St. Paul on the Road to Damascus [Steiner] replied, 'This becomes possible when one experiences Christ in the cycle of the year.'

Friedrich Rittelmeyer (published commentaries)

Artwork: Sophie Takada Bourguignon (Easter verse)

The Genesis of the Idea

The group work format with the Calendar of the Soul has evolved from the experience I first had with Walter Alexander's group on Zoom. Week after week we were looking at the verses of the Calendar in a purely phenomenological fashion. I was touched by the slow, spacious rhythm of the encounter and the attention to detail. I proposed the use of Karl König's images within the space because they had been a source of inspiration for years and because art fits the work with the Calendar, as Steiner encouraged it from the very start.¹

In two groups that I started soon after I saw the potential of introducing a format of facilitation in which the group takes collective responsibility for its own functioning. The central task for this devolves to a facilitator. The other tasks can be subdivided among the participants. The resulting group is therefore quite different from a typical study group.

Here are some of the goals that we can achieve. We can collectively reach a better understanding of the verses, both in a more analytical way by striving toward a better understanding of words and sentences. Likewise we can add the artistic element to the analytical by lending attention to the overall feeling of the verse, and by using available artistic renditions of the verses.

Contemplating the verses together adds an element of support and camaraderie and therefore an added motivation to working with them during the week. Finally, the collegial dimension, the work under the inspiration of the new group soul, has a community building effect. For greater results there is nothing like an in-person physical attendance. However, even remote presence can lead to a tangible experience of community, discovery and support.

The History/Origin of the Calendar

We know that Rudolf Steiner devoted a great part of the second stage of the development of the Anthroposophical Society (from about 1910 to 1916) to the new Christology. The period was inaugurated in 1909 with the revelations about the etheric Christ in our times. In the same year, Steiner spoke of the two Jesus children—the Solomon Jesus and the Nathan Jesus—

¹ The publication in which appeared the first Calendar of the Soul included drawings of the zodiac signs by Imma von Eckhardstein according to Steiner's sketches. These new signs were not meant to represent zodiacal constellations, but rather the "spiritual forces active in the cosmos." In addition to these were five images representing the great epochs of Earth evolution, from Old Saturn to the present.

in the lecture cycle on the Luke Gospel. And these revelations, which were already part of the Fifth Gospel, formed the prelude to the lectures that carried that name in the year 1913.

Central to the above impulse was the publication of the *Calendar of the Soul* in 1912. The Calendar is a meditative path that unites microcosm and macrocosm. It portrays how the individual soul's path is affected by the macrocosmic unfolding of the seasons seen at their deepest level. This is how Steiner described it:

I have tried to draw up verses for meditation, the effect of which will enable the soul gradually to discover in itself and in its own experiences the connection with the great cosmic constellations. These formulae for meditation do in all reality lead the soul out of its narrow confines to experience of the heavens. These fifty-two verses will enable the soul to find access to happenings in the great universe, and thereby to experience the spirits working in the onward flow of time. But if you ponder on the texts of the verses in the Calendar, you will discern an element of timelessness, in rhythmic alternation; an element that is experienced inwardly by the human being, the laws of which run parallel to those of time in the outer world.²

Further, in the introduction to the second German edition of the calendar in 1918 Steiner had this to say: "The year has a life of its own, and the human soul can share in that life and become part of it. ... You should take these weekly meditations quite particularly into your hearts, for they contain what can make the soul alive and what really corresponds to a living relationship of the soul forces to the forces of the macrocosm."³

A Path of Self-Knowledge through Feeling

Steiner indicates that the meditative work done on the verses of the Calendar is such that "... the human spirit can be experienced in the context of the changing moods of the year from week to week and the soul's weaving can be found in images gained through impressions of the course of the year. *The aim is self-knowledge through feeling.* Through the verses expressing the characteristic mood of the respective week, this '*feeling self knowledge*' can experience the timeless cycle of soul life in relation to time. It needs to be clearly stated that the intention is to create potential for a

² Rudolf Steiner, *The Calendar of the Soul*, lecture of May 7, 1912.

³ Quoted in Rudolf Steiner, *The Calendar of the Soul*, Daisy Aldan translator.

path of self knowledge.” (emphasis added)⁴ Something similar has been said by Karl König in his extensive work with the Calendar: “Each single verse of the Soul Calendar contains not only a spiritual content which can be grasped intellectually but a powerful and substantial emotion, a strong feeling that changes from week to week. It is more important to carry this feeling in its ever-changing form through the year, than to connect oneself with the intellectual content of the verses—though this is necessary to achieve that feeling.”⁵

In the experience of this author and of many others the understanding of a verse comes most naturally during the corresponding time of the year. It’s not as easy to elucidate a Christmas verse during the summer, mostly because we are immersed not only in the mood of a specific verse but also in the flow of the summer verses in which its sense emerges most potently. In effect the course of the year mirrors and repeats human/cosmic evolution and each verse recapitulates stages that humanity has achieved and others that lie in the future. To illustrate just two of these let us look at the times following Easter or those following Christmas and the Holy Nights. Verse 3, shortly after Easter, reads:

Thus to the World-All speaks,

In self-forgetfulness

And mindufl of its primal state

The growing human I:

In you, if I can free myself

From fetters of my selfhood

I sound the depths of my true being.

In the first three lines is echoed a memory of the primeval state of participation of humanity before the Fall. This is possible because through the Christ impulse the sphere of cosmic life—corresponding to the life and tone ethers—draws near to the human being after Easter. At this time of the year we live in the echo of what Barfield calls “original participation,” the early primeval communion of humanity with the spiritual world. It is

⁴ Rudolf Steiner, *Preface to the First Edition* [of the Calendar of the Soul]” in Rudolf Steiner, *The Anthroposophical Calendar of the Soul*, translation by Richard Steele.

⁵ The following is Karl König’s recognition of the quality of the work done with the Calendar of the Soul: Karl König, *The Calendar of the Soul: A Commentary*, 80–81).

then at this time of the year that we can have the clearest feeling of what humanity experienced at the time before the Fall.

To take an opposite stance let's look at the complementary verse (50) of shortly before Easter:

Thus to the human ego speaks
In mighty revelation,
While it unfolds its very forces,
The joy of growth throughout the world.
I carry into you my life
From its enchanted bondage
And so attain my truest goal.

At this time of the year the human being lives in feeling a prefiguration of the fully realized co-creative human spirit. Once she achieves the "spirit birth" (Spirit Self) announced in verses 44 and 45, the human being can free the elemental beings from their state of enchantment in matter and help them achieve further evolutionary goals. This is obviously something that may not have been achieved by the human being meditating on the verse. Nevertheless, this is the time of the year in which we can have a best possible feeling for this evolutionary possibility through meditating on this verse of the Calendar.

An Informal "Charter"

For best results with this kind of work it is good to be clear about a few things. Working with the Calendar is best supported in keeping in mind its feeling-artistic quality. Understanding of the verses is certainly essential, but it is best achieved in a phenomenological fashion, through the feeling experience of working with the verses; through a careful look at the meaning; through the dimension of dialogue and common discovery.

With time—or according to the accumulated experience of the members—something else becomes apparent: the Calendar is a time organism. The verses form part of a flow. Therefore the Calendar can best be understood in relation to itself; in relation to the phases that characterize the two halves of the year (verses 1 to 26 or 27 to 52) or the quadrants (spring 1 to 13, easter 14 to 26, fall 27 to 39, winter 40 to 52); the qualities inherent in the verse and its complementary or the verse and its "cross" (13

combinations of 4 verses each). The Resources section indicates where to further explore this matter.

Finally, attention should be given not only to the learning but also to the collegial dimension of learning together. We can ask ourselves: Are all the members participating or involved? Do we give space to each other and to the silence in between? Is there a feeling that we are creatively evolving together rather than falling into a routine? etc. While the facilitator(s) are primarily concerned with this, it pays off to encourage everyone to be co-responsible.

The format

The format is devised in such a way as to deepen understanding of the single verse and its integration into the whole, with the added support of an artistic rendering. It also serves to introduce an element of camaraderie and mutual support to motivate our individual work. If once a week we can touch base and have a meaningful experience of the verse, then the work becomes more self-sustainable during the rest of the week.

In light of accumulated experience a meeting of 1 ½ hours seems to be optimal. The format includes the following parts, some of them optional:

- Social time before the official beginning; recommended but optional.
- Beginning with reading of the verses: German version followed by the English translations the group has selected.
- What emerges from the reading of the translations: phenomenological analysis.
- Looking at an image of the weekly verse: there are a variety of artists who have illustrated the Calendar. Karl König's drawings are recommended for the richness of his imaginative world. See other ones in the Resources section.
- A phenomenological look at the complementary verse.
- A phenomenological look at the drawing of the complementary verse (time allowing).
- Choosing a focus for the meditation part: the facilitator asks the question and the group may or may not decide on a section (1-2 lines) to focus on (maybe a part that the group wants to better understand).
- 10'-12' meditation time: this part and the following section form the heart of the format; they should not be omitted.

- Meditation sharing ("dew gathering"): those who want share insights gleaned from the meditation time. This is done without crosstalk.
- Closing and revision: one way to invite feedback is to ask about "celebrations and mournings"; insights about what brings us joy and what may need some attention.

Notes to the Above

Social time is recommended in order to warm up the space; it is all the more needed for remote gatherings.

Looking at the complementary verses could be replaced with a contemplation of a series of verses, the most common one being two or three preceding the given weekly verse; this helps develop a sense for the progression and dynamic of the Calendar.

No matter how you choose and facilitate the various sections of the format, it is recommended to devote attention to the meditation part and the following sharing, the heart of the meeting, to make sure that it happens in a spacious, comfortable fashion, that it is not rushed.

Finally, for a self-led and facilitated group it is very important to take stock of itself and realize how it is doing. This is especially so in the initial sessions until the format is established, or when introducing changes to the format.

A note to the participants. Your role is important too! Try to be sensitive to the facilitator's needs, especially when he experiences difficulties. By raising your awareness about the format and helping him/her support its integrity you're also strengthening your future facilitation skills. See further tips for the facilitators below.

What Is Necessary and What Is Advised

As much as possible, without causing confusion or duplication, it is good that tasks be shared. The Zoom or video account, with the weekly reminders, can be handled by another person than the facilitator. The preparation of the material (verses, translations, images) could fall to either of the above or to a third person. Sharing tasks strengthens the cohesion of the group and its group soul.

Having a German-native or German-speaker is an obvious plus. It allows the group to check the nuances of the different translations in relation to the original.

Placing the meeting closest to Sundays, if not on Sunday itself, allows for a preparation that is followed with many days of meditation/practice with the verses.

While Karl König's drawings are probably the best-known artistic renditions of the verses, the group can have recourse to other resources. See below.

Finally, if nobody has a personal Zoom, or similar account, the group may decide to share the cost of a subscription.

Tips for Facilitators

Two or more facilitators best support a group! What if the facilitator cannot come to a session, is sick, loses her voice, etc.? The group also benefits from different facilitation styles!

It is important that the facilitator always offer the opportunity for review to have a feeling of how the group is progressing, even if often there may be nothing to report, other than reasons to celebrate. Review is most important when the group is trying something new. It is recommended that the group, and the facilitator(s) most of all, become fully comfortable with the format before proposing changes. Once a change is proposed try asking "Is there anybody who doesn't feel comfortable with this change?" rather than "Is everybody OK with this change"? This is done in order to encourage all voices and avoid falling into peer pressure patterns. The same is true once a change is being tried out. Once more encourage diverging voices, rather than homogeneity. A change should be initiated and accepted because it serves everybody's needs, not out of sheer curiosity, or inability to object.

When implementing a change, here is a useful rule of thumb. Make sure a decision is positive (what you want to see happen, not what you want to stop from happening), concrete (not a vague intention) and feasible (one that can be clearly implemented and reviewed for progress).

The best facilitator lets other people shine and doesn't need to take centerstage. The only time he needs to do so is when he is called to uphold the format for the benefit of all—as in the situation in which there is a drift causing a change in parts of the format for which the group has not clearly expressed a wish. Change should be the result of a clearly expressed intention. The facilitator is in fact the guardian of the format and the agreements that underpin it.

A last comment. The Calendar verses correspond to a dynamic vision of the course of the year. It needs to be adjusted from year to year due to the change of the Easter date. This means that some adjustments are most often necessary from Christmas to Easter, such as repeating some verses or doing two verses on certain weeks. Once Easter is reached the verses follow each other regularly until Whitsun. Some adjustments may be necessary for the period going from Pentecost to Saint John, which is the next festival coming on a fixed date.

Resources

The Calendar of the Soul and Essays about It

Rudolf Steiner, *The Calendar of the Soul* (Mercury Press): Rudolf Steiner's German verses are presented side by side with six different translations and one paraphrase (Owen Barfield).

Rudolf Steiner, *The Calendar of the Soul*: lecture of 7th May 1912.

Karl König, *The Calendar of the Soul: A Commentary*.

H.D. van Goudoever, *A Contemplation about Rudolf Steiner's Calendar of the Soul*.

Eleanor Merry, *A Commentary to the Calendar of the Soul* with illustrations by Valerie Jacobs, translation by Ernst Lehrs.

Luigi Morelli, *Exploring Themes of the Calendar of the Soul*, available at <https://millenniumculmination.net/>

More resources available at Rudolf Steiner Library online: <https://rsl.scoolaid.net/bin/home>

The Calendar of the Soul in Art

Karl König, *An Inner Journey through the Year: Soul Images and the Calendar of the Soul*.

Anne Stockton, *The illustrated Calendar of the Soul: Meditations for the Yearly Cycle*.

Sophie Bourguignon Takada, *The Calendar of the Soul*.

Laura Summer, *Fifty-two Weeks: Painting and Drawing through the Course of the Year in Relation to the Calendar of the Soul by Rudolf Steiner*.

More resources available at Rudolf Steiner Library online:
<https://rsl.scoolaid.net/bin/home>

My Availability to Work with You

As I have done with other groups, I can offer 3 free coaching sessions to any group that wants to start out. The following are some of the pre-conditions before starting:

- At least five people committed to participate to the three sessions
- One person ready to assume the role of contact person and ready to facilitate the second and third sessions
- A subscription to a Zoom or other online video-conferencing platform, and some basic knowledge about how to operate it
- Access to a number of English versions of the verses. The easiest source is *The Calendar of the Soul* by Mercury Press, which includes the German original accompanied by 7 English versions.

I will conduct the first session. The facilitator will conduct the two following ones and receive feedback and tips on how to manage the group on his/her own.

I can be reached at Luigirenato@pm.me to set up the coaching.