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KRISHNAMURTI
SCHOOLS

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An Educational Journal

This is a journal on education that is brought out annually. It is an anthology of writings by educators, teachers and thinkers exploring a new vision of education in its many dimensions—philosophy, psychology, classroom experience, curriculum, nature and environment, and contemporary issues. It lays special emphasis on J Krishnamurti's principles of education. It will be of use to teachers, parents, educational administrators, teacher-educators and any individual interested in education.

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On Inquiry

I think there is a process of learning which is not related to wanting to be taught. Being confused, most of us want to find someone who will help us not to be confused, and therefore we are merely learning or acquiring knowledge in order to conform to a particular pattern; and it seems to me that all such forms of learning must invariably lead not only to further confusion but also to deterioration of the mind. I think there is a different kind of learning, a learning which is an inquiry into ourselves and in which there is no teacher and no taught, neither the disciple nor the guru. When you begin to inquire into the operation of your own mind, when you observe your own thinking, your daily activities and feelings, you cannot be taught because there is no one to teach you. You cannot base your inquiry on any authority, on any assumption, on any previous knowledge. If you do, then you are merely conforming to the pattern of what you already know, and therefore you are no longer learning about yourself.

I think it is very important to learn about oneself because it is only then that the mind can be emptied of the old, and unless the mind is emptied of the old, there can be no new impulse. It is this new, creative impulse that is essential if the individual is to bring about a different world, a different relationship, a different structure of morality. And it is only through totally emptying the mind of the old that the new impulse can come into being, give it whatever name you like—the impulse of reality, the grace of God, the feeling of something completely new, unpremeditated, something which has never been thought of, which has not been put together by the mind. Without that extraordinarily creative impulse of reality, do what you will to clear up the confusion and bring order in the social structure, it can only lead to further misery. I think this is fairly obvious when one observes the political and social events that are taking place in the world.

*J Krishnamurti, excerpt from the Fourth Talk in Bombay, India
20th February 1957*



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Editorial



Here we are with the sixteenth issue of the Journal. Run your eye over the titles on the contents page and you will get an impression that themes based on *children, teaching and learning*—core concerns in any journal of education—are surrounded by themes such as *nature, space, spirit, touch, retreat and looking inward*. How are these connected with education? That there is a vital link between all these themes and the educational enterprise is what I wish to show.

To take a step back ... Recently, a group of students of an MA programme in education spent several days at one of our schools. After some days of curious and critical observation, they posed a question: We notice that students and teachers look relaxed, alert and engaged in purposeful activity and learning ... We would like to know, what are your educational aims and what assumptions about human nature inform these? This was not an easy question to respond to, and it set me thinking. Must educational aims be based on *assumptions* about human nature? Perhaps in the main they are.

Look at various contemporary forms of the educational enterprise. To take three broad categories: schools founded by religious groups seek to base themselves on the certainty of a received world view, with their adherents at the centre, along with a derived morality and practices; schools that are more commercially-minded consider students and parents as *consumers* and cast themselves as *service providers* in the *education market*; government and government-aided schools—in theory beholden to the ideals of the Indian constitution—must aim at inculcating a sense of national identity, along with democratic values such as social justice and equality (... that the reality is far from the aims is a different matter!). Each category of school here bases its aims on a certain definition of human beings and society; this in turn rests on some assumptions about human nature.

What assumptions about human nature inform the educational aims of the schools from which this journal emerges? While holding this question,

I am led to reflect on the major preoccupations and common threads that run through the articles in this issue.

One concern of the teacher-author of *Close Encounters of a Natural Kind* as well as the scientist-author of the *Calendar of Nature* is of renewing a vital relationship—that of young people with nature. In the context of climate change and other kinds of human impact on nature, both see the role of schools and education as key in developing a deeper emotional connection, along with intellectual comprehension of processes in nature, which will motivate change in our behaviours. *On the Threshold of Touch* leads us through the meditations of a forest-dweller on this theme of human–non-human contact, with implications for human relationships as well. The sensibilities alluded to in these articles derive from a basic premise—that human nature is intimately tied in with nature. The educational concern that follows is the need to awaken this sense of relatedness, with multiple consequences for our behaviour and lifestyles.

Space and Spirit shares the pithy observations and musings of an architect who questions the quality of psychological and physical spaces modern living has led us to construct, and suggests creating a *spirit-based* design that honours nature as well as our deeper human potential as spiritual beings. To the extent that our schools echo these concerns, we might ask: Are these our assumptions about human nature too?

One might say that at the centre of the educational enterprise are children, and more than one article presents perspectives on the nature of children and their learning, with implications for our responsibility as adults. We have two educationists exploring these facets through rich images and metaphors, in *Singular and Plural* and *Child as a Kite*. Their viewpoints, centred on the uniqueness of children, perhaps underlie assumptions that many teachers in our schools instinctively adopt in the primary and upper primary years. What is also poignant is the description of the journey made by a self-avowedly traditional school in Goa, which undertook to begin to ‘protect... children from the harmful stress of achievement and yet allow for learning to take place’ and to bring back the ‘smile on their faces’.

When it comes to the secondary school years, how does our responsibility shift or widen in its scope, given the fact of syllabi, examinations and life choices in a complex social structure? That there is a shift in approach

demanding by the students' growing maturity and their approaching engagement, as young adults, with a fast-changing world is implicit in the accounts presented in *Self and Society* and *Project-based Learning*. In *Learning in Friendship and Leisure*, the writer speaks of a shared learning journey of an altogether different kind, lightly raising questions about the limitations imposed by the structure of school itself. And if school has its limitations, what about university? In *Teaching at University*, the author, while critiquing a university system that is focused on examinations, certification and careers, also suggests the possibilities for deeper learning that higher education could offer. She bases this on the assumption that young people often come 'thirsty for authentic learning, for authentic life', and suggests that teachers as well as the *system* need to be cognizant of the responsibility to find ways to draw in their wider life concerns into the teaching-learning process.

In many of the above pieces one senses an underlying perspective that places a capacity for inquiry at the heart of education, suggesting that inquiry, this truth-seeking, is itself intrinsic to human nature and must therefore be open to education. Can this inquiry—at a fundamental level—be into human nature itself? The author of *An Invitation to Look Inward* proposes that this may be the most valuable thing we may attempt to draw ourselves and our students into, and suggests some concrete ways in which a whole school's practices may be conducive for this. *An Experiment in Self-Observation* draws directly from Krishnamurti's pointers to share a specific way of approaching this, while *From the Mind's Attic* documents a teacher's struggles to be aware of his own inner movements. *On Retreats* speaks of the value of 'taking time out' or 'stepping out of time' and takes us through a brief tour of approaches to retreats, from those based on spiritual traditions to more open-ended occasions for free observation and inquiry.

If I were to now respond to the MA students of education, I would say that a deeper aim of education is to enable us—teachers and students—to *inquire* into our own human nature, including our assumptions, thinking and actions, and seek creative responses to the challenges of life. It is in this perspective that the varied themes of these articles are connected. We sense that it is such inquiry that releases insights and energies that could have a healing and transformative effect on human lives as they are lived today.

ALOK MATHUR

An Invitation to Look Inward

TANUJ SHAH



Krishnamurti felt quite strongly that one of the major functions of education is to nurture the capacity to look inward. This was based on the insight that the whole outward structure of society emerges from the collective thought of humanity, the foundation for which is each individual's beliefs, traditions, values, world views, experiences, desires, fears, envy, ambitions and so on. The ability to look at this *complex movement within one's self* without escaping from it in any form, he suggested, would lead to right action in one's life.

How do the Krishnamurti schools go about doing this?

To be able to look inward, a quiet mind—a mind that has slowed down sufficiently for its movements to be observed—is necessary. Nature provides an environment conducive to such a slowing down, and these schools are set in the midst of great natural beauty. Nature has a soothing and calming effect on the mind. People have also felt that a certain healing takes place when we are surrounded by nature—it doesn't *add* to the confusions of the mind and also creates space for our thoughts to slow down.

The Krishnamurti schools consciously structure times during the day when students can sit quietly. Efforts are made to provide students with sufficient leisure time in their schedules. A lot of time is also given to activities that provide avenues for self-expression, such as arts and crafts, music, dance and poetry. These, too, may result in slowing the mind down. All this contributes to creating an environment conducive to looking inward.

Looking inward is not easy. It raises disturbing questions and causes discomfort. Therefore, the ambience of the school is important. It is only when there is a quality of care and affection in a non-judgemental atmosphere

that looking inward can take root. In the Krishnamurti schools student-teacher interactions are vibrant. Students frequently approach teachers with their personal issues, such as falling out with a friend or feeling low after losing a match. This becomes an opportunity for the teacher and the student to delve deeper into the matter together and touch the core of the child's unhappiness without passing any judgement. This may also happen when a child has infringed some school norms. There is great receptivity to looking inward at such a moment, and a sensitive teacher can help a child face her fear and discover its cause. All this is possible when a teacher's authority is absent in these interactions. In fact, what a student may sense is that the teacher is also looking at her own inward movement. Students, too, contribute to the ambience of the school. Sometimes, the peer group can create an unsettled atmosphere through teasing, bullying and groupism. Teachers have to be alert to such possibilities and take appropriate steps to counter them.

Care is taken in designing the curriculum, and developmentally appropriate content is chosen to ensure that it does not become burdensome for the child (especially in the junior and middle school). Assessment and evaluation are designed to encourage self-reflection. The subject disciplines not only examine the outer aspects of knowledge, but also try and link up with the movement of the inner. Nationalism, for example, is studied by examining how self-identity is formed. While studying the theme of diversity, students meet a range of people with different backgrounds from theirs and find themselves watching their responses in these situations. Similarly, themes such as prejudice and discrimination are taken up in social studies classes and approached from both the inner and the outer perspective. Environmental issues invariably look at the role of the individual from the standpoint of using resources responsibly as well as of the inner movement that creates the need for excessive consumption. The need for an orderly, logical approach is stressed in the curriculum—for outward order facilitates inward looking.

Culture classes are another area in which the capacity for looking inward is nurtured carefully. One class a week is set aside for this. A range of issues and themes are examined in detail and opportunities created for the students to follow their own inner movement and respond from there. One key theme taken up in the junior and middle years focuses on the many influences on one's life—parents, peers, media, books and experiences. These are examined carefully to help students become conscious of the way in which

they form *world views*. Sometimes a student may make a controversial statement, such as ‘People who don’t want to work resort to begging.’ This becomes an opportunity to examine how this view was formed, without condemning the statement.

The role of experience in moulding people’s behaviour is also examined, especially the way they hold their hurts and its impact on their relationships and outlook on life. The role of pleasurable experiences—and the craving for repeated experiences of this kind as a driving force for one’s actions—is also looked at. Themes of envy and jealousy crop up frequently in the context of relationships and, wherever possible, are examined as *live* issues. In these classes, morals and values are never handed down but instead examined. The primary mode for conducting the classes is inquiry through discussion.

The growing years between twelve and fifteen can be difficult for students, and the way they are helped to negotiate this tricky passage can have a bearing on their openness to looking inward in later years. Multiple approaches are required to deal with the physical, emotional and social needs of this age group. Some of these issues are taken up by adults more conversant in this area, while other aspects are embedded within the curriculum. Attempts at broadening students’ horizons are made consciously: more responsibilities are given to them and clear boundaries drawn to create a safe environment for everyone. *All this is done in an environment where students have access to understanding and affectionate adults.*

There are inherent difficulties associated with looking inward. The flow of thoughts is constant; in fact, one can get overwhelmed with myriad thoughts. Thoughts are also super-fast, and it is not easy to catch one’s self in the moment. There is also a tendency to separate the thoughts from one’s self and start analysing them as if *objectively*. In Krishnamurti’s words, the observer is the observed, and any attempt to separate the two results in the postponement of right action. Then there are the modern influences of computer games, online chatting and mobile phones, which do not give space for one’s thoughts to slow down. All this makes it even more critical for schools to create opportunities for a pause in the mechanical operation of thought and awaken it to the possibilities of a different way of being—operating from a mind that can put thought in its right place, and from which flows right action.

There are also dangers associated with looking inward. One can easily become self-absorbed, shrinking away from the world and becoming woolly in one's thinking. In the process one can develop a holier-than-thou attitude, a feeling that one is advanced on the spiritual plane! To counter this, it is important that students be well grounded in the outer, which has to be used as a mirror for the inner. For example, they should be involved in a lot of physical activity, where the body becomes a mirror for the thoughts. One's relationship with others is an area fraught with difficulties and thus provides a good context for looking inward. Raising one's sensibilities towards beauty, whether in good literature or the fine arts, is another antidote to these dangers, as is developing a rigorous, logical approach in one's thinking.

However carefully considered, no set of thoughtful practices in a school can guarantee that a given student will accept the invitation to look inward. The hope is that at some point in their lives, these young people will realize the beauty and power of inquiry as a vital, relevant response to the challenges the world is facing. This message is more valuable than any other they will have learned at school.



Singular and Plural: Understanding the Individual and the Group

S ANANDALAKSHMY



I am going to begin with a simple grammar lesson in English, which is approximately at the level of class 2, although we might come upon it at earlier or later stages of our education. Of course, every child knows the concept of one and many long before the grammar is learnt. The singular word *pencil* has the plural *pencils*, *apple* has *apples* and so on. The common word game of supplying the plurals can go on for hours, and the exceptions, like *child–children*, are often delivered with a great flourish by the English teacher, who hears a student in the class give the plural as *childs* or, sometimes, *childrens*.

My focus here is not on the spelling or structure of plural nouns, but the implicit assumption that the plural word represents the sum of the individual words. For instance, ten beads come from the addition of ten single beads. Even if the beads are of different colours and sizes, we would be right in saying *ten beads* if they added up to ten. We would also say *one book* and *many books* or even *thirty books*. When the

students' notebooks are collected by the class monitor, there could be a pile of thirty books. But consider a situation where we have the following books on the teacher's table: one set with ten copies of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens and another set with one book each by William Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll, Agatha Christie, James Joyce, Isabel Allende, Somerset Maugham, Bertrand Russell, P G Wodehouse, Jane Austen and Hans Christian Anderson. We would be right, of course, in saying that there are two sets of ten books on the table. But you will admit that the plural word *books* for the latter set tends to cloak the variety in the books. This collection is significantly different from the ten copies of one book or the thirty notebooks of the children. When we add up ones, we do get a total that can be checked and verified. But there is a taxonomic factor of note in an addition of very similar things or of diverse things with individual characteristics.

There are two reasons for our dissatisfaction with the same label *books* for

these three sets of books. If one were stranded on the proverbial desert island, there is no question about which of the three sets of books one would hypothetically choose to have. Effectively, the criterion for the category system is different, although seemingly alike. So we have to examine the parameters we select for classification.

There is another factor in operation here. I think I must have thought it up myself (as I have not read about this anywhere). I have chosen to give it a name: the law of the 'proximal-distal effect in perception'. Let me elaborate on this law. The more familiar we are with a set of objects, the more clearly we distinguish the fine differences among them. The farther we are from them in distance or familiarity, the more easily we see the similarities among the units that constitute a group. For a group of objects at a distance, we find a single label quite acceptable. When faced with somewhat similar objects in a group, we are quick to note the differences. This makes cognitive common sense, of course. Consider, for example, the skill of identifying tiffin boxes, casseroles, lids and serving spoons after a potluck dinner. Women often have an unerring sense in such matters. This finely honed skill can be interesting when applied to people. We would, for instance, point out the ways in which the six-year-old triplets growing up in our neighbourhood can be distinguished from each other, or the minute details of

how four sisters in our extended family are different and how one can tell them apart. At the same time, we are easily persuaded to characterize the Chinese as *hard-working* or North Americans as *extrovert*, never mind that their numbers run into millions and that we may be generalizing from a very small sample, like $n = 3$.

This preamble about grammar and category systems or taxonomy leads us straight to the theme at hand: the world of children and their relationships. Almost everyone here would have spent some time with a group of children. We will be the first to admit that looking after ten children in a group is different from the sum of looking after ten children individually. The important difference is the dynamics of group interaction. Both the physics and the chemistry of group interaction combine to constitute a unique social science. Surely all of us here immediately understand what is being discussed—and yet it would be difficult for us to find a book on this social science in any library. A group of children of the same age are also qualitatively different from a group of children of different ages. Anyone who has worked with mixed-age groups or vertical grouping would vouch for this. See how many variations of the plural we have here!

Extrapolating the example of the sets of books to groups of children, we can begin to see what schools and teachers expect and why the school's taxonomy

goes counter to the individual child's progress. The most common category used in the grouping of children is their age. The assumption is that chronology is justification enough for teaching the same lessons to them, at the same pace and in the same way. Individual styles of learning and current levels of mastery are not even considered. The classroom transaction is aimed at a mythical average level, which some in the class might find difficult and others tedious and repetitive. The immediate rewards learners can expect are for the speed of learning and the ability to produce *the right answer* on command.

A high-tension wire of competition is strung up inside the class and its role justified as *motivation* for children to do well on the assigned tasks. It never works that way. Children who have missed a connecting word or concept could feel lost and confused and would still be decoding the page for some clues. The fact that a couple of their classmates have already received a pat of approval from the teacher does NOT motivate them to progress. They may need more time to gain the confidence that the topic is within their reach.

The classroom setting should enable all children to do their best—and in the way they choose. Children enjoy challenging themselves to complete a difficult task well, or a moderately complex task fast, much more than just doing better than a class fellow. The singular child in a plural

classroom deserves to be recognized as an individual. The Activity-Based Learning (ABL) methodology recently introduced in the schools of Tamil Nadu has been a step in the right direction. It has succeeded in bringing more children rushing into school as energetically and enthusiastically as they generally run out of school after the last bell!

At the same time, one must recognize that a collective effort supplies its own energy and even a child who has not understood the teacher does catch on, almost effortlessly, when a classmate explains it. It is a singularly good observation that a plural environment is most productive for learning!

One can say a great deal about category systems in use. Children with disabilities or special needs seem to be a category in the school administration. So if the school has built a ramp, it chooses to flaunt itself as *disabled-friendly*. There are other forms of disability that would require special provisions, but most school administrations choose to ignore them. Children with special needs do not necessarily learn best if, as a group, they are always isolated from the rest of the children. For different subjects and activities, they could be shifted around to the mainstream classes in the school, with great advantage to all the students. It requires flexibility and imagination on the part of the school administrators to manage the different combinations

competently. In the Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Children's Centre in Lady Irwin College, we had a separate section for children with special needs (mild and moderate), but we kept moving individual children or small groups to the mainstream classes whenever they could fit in comfortably for specific activities.

An English teacher with a penchant for puns labelled children with special needs as 'past imperfect, present continuous and future tense'! While this may sound smart, I feel that the teacher should train herself to move away from the prejudice reflected in these puns on grammatical categories and treat these children as persons with their own traits and preferences, strengths and weaknesses. The focus has to be on the present, the *now*. As a wise person said, 'You can't change the past, but you can ruin the present by worrying about the future'!

We should be a bit wary of a *perfect solution* to any problem, because equations change and children grow up. In other words, the absolute knowledge of what has worked once is less important than the willingness to negotiate a suitable solution at each point. Take the concept of inclusion, for instance. Many of us want it, campaign for it, advocate it and follow it. This has been a welcome trend for the past twenty years or so.

In my view, inclusion should begin in the heart. It is not done only by sharing classroom or playground space, although this should definitely be tried. Sometimes, there could be practical problems. However, treating the child as a person and a friend and adjusting to her special needs is real inclusion. It is also important for the teacher to treat the child as a child first, rather than to focus on the disability. It is my observation that volunteers who try to help with visually handicapped children tend to be sympathetic, kind and rather earnest, instead of being friendly, light-hearted and responding with a sense of humour. What these children need is what all children need: fun, fellowship and opportunities to learn new things.

Accepting diversity, supporting individual initiative, adopting a variety of methods for discussion, teaching and theatre activities—all these fall under the larger label of plurality. Add to this a feeling of connectedness to different peoples, languages and religions; to plants and animals; to the land and sea and sky; to the sun, moon and stars. There is no greater satisfaction for us—as teachers, special educators, social workers or activists, managers or administrators—than this feeling of being connected to each other, to everything in the environment and to the cosmos.



Project-based Learning

MEREDY BENSON RICE



Last November, Oak Grove School welcomed to its beautiful campus both current and prospective families for an All School Showcase and Open House. Teachers took this opportunity to share any one of their class or subject level's signature projects as a way of demonstrating the power and impact of project-based learning. The school has been involved with project-based learning for a long time, and has increasingly embraced it over the last several years as one way to develop the *arts of living and learning* at the core of the school's approach to classroom practice. These arts include inquiry, communication, academia, engagement, aesthetics, and care of/relationship to self, others, and the world.

Why are these arts, particularly the art of inquiry, so important for 21st century learning? While an education based on rote memorization of facts and information may have served previous generations, the sheer volume of constantly changing data available to us today makes this approach to learning problematic—and possibly misguided. While some memorization of core concepts is still important, students today need to know how to access information, synthesize, evaluate, and make sense of it. They need to be practiced at questioning, reflection, challenging assumptions, analysing evidence, and looking at things from multiple points of view.

Many of us are familiar with the old saying 'Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand.' Well-designed projects have the ability to meet not only the learning goals of the teacher but also the personal interests and passions of students; in other words, to involve students in a way that is truly engaging. Project-based learning moves the student and teacher away from one-answer, standardized facts that must be memorized and towards the formulation of good questions, the exploration

of possible answers, the quest for and evaluation of evidence, and the articulation of possible (and probably complex) outcomes. Many of the best projects end up with more questions than they began with!

Well-designed projects have at their core the art of inquiry and far-reaching, open-ended wonder. They begin with a driving question or challenge that centres on a significant issue, area of study, or problem. This creates for the student an authentic reason to learn essential content and skills. Guided by the spirit of inquiry, the student begins to acquire knowledge, concepts, and skills that are then applied to the investigation at hand. Interesting, complex questions and challenges require students to step up and engage in higher order thinking and problem solving.

Meaningful projects have embedded within them opportunities for student choice. While a whole class studying American history and literature may be involved in a project focused on *The Great Gatsby*, the 1920s, and driving questions framed around *The American Dream*, for example, within the project may be opportunities for individual students to focus on music, clothing, architecture, or prohibition, depending on student interest. One junior-high class project's driving question was: Through an engaging, hands-on project that required you to take apart an everyday object, could you learn about energy, natural resources, culture, and the environmental impact of everyday things? This project, called *Deconstruct It*, had students taking apart computers, iPods, cell phones, televisions and more. While the project had certain criteria and goals set by the teacher, it also allowed for a wide range of student choice and, therefore, engagement.

Engaging students through choice shifts the student from passive recipient to active participant. Students engaged in this way are much more likely to come to lasting and deep understanding rather than superficial 'forget it after the quiz' knowledge. Equally important, empowering students with choice and moving them into the driver's seat of their own education encourages initiative, independence, and responsibility. If we want students to grow up into competent, caring, and responsible members of their communities and the world at large, if we want to grow citizens who will be actively engaged in transforming society, rather than passively accepting the status quo, then we need to give students opportunities in school to exercise

their participatory muscles. When I walk into a classroom and see students discussing, fact-finding, questioning, arguing, producing, and problem-solving together, I feel confident that those muscles are getting a workout!

Complex projects usually have at least some component of partner or group work. When projects are designed so that students can only accomplish certain goals via teamwork, students have opportunities to develop and practise important life skills. Contributing to the efforts of a group requires listening attentively to other members of the team, communicating clearly through speech and writing, and learning the art of collaboration. When projects include presentations, especially to authentic audiences, students must develop and practise effective public speaking as well as a variety of technological competencies such as Excel, PowerPoint, film-making, podcasting, model building and web design.

Assessment of projects is an important part of the planning process. Most effective is the use of rubrics with clearly articulated expectations. As most projects are complex, multiple rubrics are usually necessary. Some teachers will, for example, have an ongoing self-assessment rubric, for the individual student and the group or team, that will articulate expectations on processes such as time-management, inter-group communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, and the ability to stay on task. Individual rubrics for discrete components might be necessary—when the project includes a research paper, for example. And finally, there might be a presentation or product rubric for the final outcome of the project.

Oak Grove School geometry students do a Tessellation Project wherein they learn about mathematical transformations (translations, reflections, and rotations) on various polygons that lead to a culminating project of creating M C Escher-type artwork. Students are instructed to design a tile and use it to tessellate at least a half sheet of plain white paper. They then use coloured pencils to create an artistic final product. The students 1) construct a parallelogram or a rhombus and perform two translations; 2) construct an equilateral triangle and perform one rotation about a vertex or construct a rhombus and perform one rotation about a midpoint; and 3) construct a kite and perform a glide reflection. The students are given a rubric to judge their own work as they proceed through the project.

Tessellation Final Project Assessment Rubric

	Approaching Standards	Meeting Standards	Exceeding Standards
Do they tessellate correctly? (50%)			
Did you follow directions for creating the starting shapes and doing the assigned transformations? (30%)			
Were you accurate in your cuts, measurements, and tracing? (10%)			
Does your artwork display effort, neatness, colour and creativity? (10%)			

This project not only keeps students highly engaged in mathematics but allows them to integrate their interest in art as well.

But does it work, really? While there is a growing body of evidence indicating that when teachers shift from mainly direct instruction to at least some project-based learning, students produce more intellectually complex work, I would be remiss if I didn't issue a word of caution! Like other approaches in the classroom, project-based learning can be highly effective or a complete waste of time, according to how thoughtfully each individual project is designed. Teachers must invest considerable time planning ahead to ensure that projects have clear goals and criteria for learning; include student choices and teamwork; and are driven by compelling questions and challenges. Teachers must know ahead of time what students are expected to understand, know, and do as a result of the project, which requires more *backward design* than traditional lesson planning. In addition, teachers must be available and attentive throughout the process to facilitate, assist, and give feedback.

On the other hand, the potential gains from project-based learning are well worth the time and effort, and are a level risk. A really excellent project may only rise to its potential excellence on the third or fourth try, when a teacher has reflected back and ironed out the kinks.

Project development is often more fruitful and engaging when teachers work to plan them together. At the lower grade levels, this can lead to

interesting multi-age projects, allowing mixed-age groups to work together on a common goal. At the upper grade levels, projects allow for collaboration between subject areas—interdisciplinary projects can be particularly compelling for students because they begin to see the interconnectedness of their learning. Common opportunities for integration are between literature and history or mathematics and science, but once teachers start to collaborate, integration possibilities are seen everywhere: mathematics and art, music and history, and so on.

To briefly review: the main goal of project-based learning is not only a product or presentation (although assisting students in the creation of high quality work is important), but also the process of getting there. The process of a thoughtfully considered project encourages students to engage in the act of learning. The students become active, self-directed, and involved participants in this process rather than passive recipients of information. The emphasis is on helping students acquire the skills or arts of inquiry (observation, questioning, fact-finding, research, analysis, self-reflection, and so on), communication (speaking, writing, listening), academia (core content knowledge), aesthetics, and engagement. In addition, project-based learning contributes to the development of participatory citizenship and can empower students to apply these qualities to any of their future interests.

Oak Grove School does not embrace any single educational method to the exclusion of others. Project-based learning is one of a number of teaching strategies that make up the rich palette of possibilities available for our teachers. Well-designed projects in the hands of skilled teacher-facilitators are one way—a very powerful, meaningful, and engaging way—to enrich student learning.



Mushtifund School, Goa: The Story of How a Mainstream Traditional School Experimented with Change

VASANTI PADTE



The purpose of writing this article is not to project any story of achievement. The sole objective of relating this experience is to make other traditional schools aware that they can protect young children from the harmful stress of achievement and yet allow for learning to take place. It is the story of an experiment to save children from the pressures of competition and the consequences of comparison. In this way, their innocence, their capacity to listen and their sensitivity are not destroyed. As the children grow older, we hope they will remain open to the subtleties of life and flower in goodness. Our experience is that the experiment seems to work.

The idea to start a school based on Krishnamurti's philosophy of education arose when we were inquiring into why adults lose their capacity to listen, and why our minds become incapable of deep reflection on any issue. We began to feel that children in their formative years must grow in a sensitive and affectionate environment and that this must be the

foundation of their adult life. If not, as they grew they would tend to become callous and indifferent. The education system seems to contribute in large measure towards this.

In 1992–93, a small group of us were invited as advisors to the primary section of Mushtifund School by its trustees. Mushtifund School (*mushti* means handful) was started by a group of people who collected funds by requesting individuals to contribute a handful of money! It is a traditional day school located in Panaji, Goa, catering to middle- and low-income families living in and around the area. The school has both English and Marathi sections.

The location of the school was far removed from anything we had in mind. The five-storeyed school building, situated in the centre of a bustling town, adjacent to a crowded street, had neither open space nor a natural environment. Behind the school lay the main temple of the town, always busy with visitors and vendors.

However, what energized us were the innocent faces of the hundreds of children who seemed in dire need of something different, and it seemed to us that if we could make a small difference in their lives, it would be worth all the trouble. The school management trusted us fully and gave us complete freedom and cooperation at all levels. We periodically kept them posted on what we were doing.

We began by making contact with the teachers. I interviewed the teachers and selected some of them based on their sensitivity, openness and willingness to cooperate in a new experiment. Later, we conducted refresher courses to enhance subject competence, and the teachers felt confident that they would be helped and supported.

In the beginning, the teachers had no staffroom due to paucity of space. A small secluded space was created by rearranging cupboards. We had frequent meetings and the teachers were encouraged to read books and discuss them. I asked them to write about themselves—perhaps a striking experience that brought change in their lives or a childhood experience with family and school. They had the liberty to write freely, without having to show it to anybody, and they wrote diligently. We also discussed issues such as the status associated with different kinds of work—no work is less or more important if you do not associate with it an image of importance.

The teachers were sent to various other schools to visit, stay for a few days and study the schools' philosophies and methods. These included the Krishnamurti schools, as well as others offering alternative education.

Initially, we gave admission purely on a first come, first served basis to children living in the surrounding areas. We thus had children from various social and economic strata: children of maids and watchmen as well as their employers, all sharing the same classroom. We requested that some columns from the admission form, such as religion or donor's name, be removed. The management agreed. We also tried to restrict the number of children in a class. However, not many schools existed in that area, so we did not have much leeway in the matter. The children themselves were not interviewed, but their parents were given an idea about how we were trying to bring changes that would allow for learning without stress.

We put aside textbooks in the English section that did not come under the direct purview of the government, and selected replacements to suit the changing times and our perceptions of that change. Topics were reorganized in sequence and structure, taking into consideration the age of the children and their capacities. So, while no change was made in the syllabus, subject teachers of classes 1 to 4 sat together to choose topics that were relevant and to ensure a gradual transition to the next grade.

We decided to stop all examinations, homework and structures of competition. The major challenges we faced were of convincing parents that this endeavour was worthwhile and then establishing a structure to assess the progress made by students. We had to determine whether a child was grasping the subject content or not and whether some children needed more attention. Some sort of assessment therefore became essential. In a class of 50–55 students, this was a difficult task. Moreover, we did not want either the children or their parents to be aware of when the assessments would take place. All of this was challenging, but the teachers responded very well. Teachers were requested to maintain a register of the children's classwork performance. Depending on the assessment, they could decide to repeat or revise a particular topic. These records were for the teachers' individual understanding, and were kept confidential from all except the principal. Children were assessed not only in academics but in other areas as well. The reports were descriptive in nature, and there was no quantification of performance. A child's inability to understand a topic was dealt with sensitively.

Before abolishing examinations and all competitive structures, we had met with the parents. This was a crucial undertaking. The parents were from different social, economic, and educational backgrounds. The school tried to reach out to them. With each group of parents we faced

different challenges, and these helped us bridge the gaps in our own perceptions. We encountered a fair amount of resistance, which, not surprisingly, came from the more educated class. We requested these parents to give us a chance to *experiment*, without harming the child's academic career. We stopped giving homework, so that parents could not put pressure on their children and thereby create resentment towards studies. Some parents wondered what the children would do if there was no homework! We suggested various ways in which parents could spend quality time with their children, as well as engage them in other areas of children's interests, such as games, arts, music and so on.

We wanted to bring to the parents' notice how examinations create havoc in education, how at a very young age children get adversely affected by the relentless demands for performance. We spoke to them about the potential damage examinations can cause to the learning capacity of children. The fear of examinations, fear of punishment, and fear of not getting a rank lead to cheating, and breed violence and corruption. Fear prevents real learning and encourages rote learning, which is evident in present-day education. We told the parents that we wanted to protect the children's innocence and their innate sense of goodness. We wanted to see the learning mind nourished.

To have complete freedom from comparison, we stopped all tournaments.

All activities took place, but with the competitive element removed. We noticed that the children enjoyed these activities and that most of them participated enthusiastically.

Teachers of the Marathi-medium section, which is directly aided by the state government, also wanted to implement this system. So, without violating government rules, we modified the system for them to adopt. Interestingly, the local government also is now interested in doing away with examinations. In fact, the education department has been very appreciative of our experiment. To involve other schools in Goa, we are planning to have workshops with the help of teachers from the Krishnamurti Foundation India and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

J Krishnamurti's philosophy and teachings form the backdrop to all our efforts. In a small way, Mushtifund School is trying to create an environment of change. This, we would like to believe,

comes close to what Krishnamurti meant when he said: 'The whole atmosphere of school undergoes change when there is no sense of competition and comparison.'

The changes in Mushtifund School took place over two whole decades, and we hope other schools in similar situations do not lose heart when attempting the change. While many of our original teachers have remained with Mushtifund, many new teachers have also joined and slowly merged into the stream. Principals have also changed. They question the philosophy, but make honest attempts to understand our point of view. Luckily, they have been open to new ideas and have the interests of the children at heart. It is teamwork—and the trust, respect, and concern among the management, teachers and parents—that has made this remarkable change possible. If all our efforts lead to creating smiles on the faces of even a handful of children, it is enough.



Close Encounters of a Natural Kind Nature-based Curriculum: from Intent to Action

THEJASWI SHIVANAND



In my childhood, nature had an amorphous, seraphic form. In this role of cosmic proportions, he often shouldered a heavy burden—he could absorb all the violence that issued in my anger, melt the orgies of pride that possessed me often, and consume the omnipotent grip of desire. I only had to go on a walk in the nearby woodland, and his caring arms would guide me through a looking glass that transcended the daily self-obsessed state. He seemed particularly a connoisseur of negative emotion! Nature, with an uppercase N, had a definitive presence in my life. On walks in the countryside today, I gleefully continue to endow this being with various stellar qualities, even though I now allow myself to deny his actuality and therefore any intentionality on his part in action!

The movements of the mind appear to me as always externalizing cause and effect—the cause of happiness or pain is real to someone out there. Nature is often caricatured as a redemptive mother goddess who can miraculously cause these

movements to cease. While I have fallen prey to this temptation as well (with the exception of changing the gender of the being), I will restrict further comment on the role of nature to my interest as a teacher in a school: Can nature be part of a curriculum for an inquiring mind that is interested in understanding these movements? With these very movements clearly on an apocalyptic warpath to transmogrify nature and, therefore, humankind as well, close, living contact with the natural world appears to me inevitable and urgent.

Curricula in conventional schools—usually dictated by distant regulatory bodies—mostly relegate the role of nature to a few biology or environmental science practical classes on classification and biodiversity. These frameworks consistently, if not intentionally, restrict nature to an abstract appreciation of earth processes and often make superficial attempts at understanding the human impact on our planet. These structures appear to be geared to the mind in examination mode! Translating intent into curricula and action

appears to be the invariable challenge that we face in schools, and my questions for this process in Centre For Learning are inescapably inclusive of questions on nature.

What questions?

‘Is that a real snake?’ is a question that emerges with startling inevitability when people see a photograph of a child in CFL handling a snake. Often, a flood follows the initial query: Are children not afraid of snakes? Have there been incidents of snakes biting children? And well, many more, often exasperating questions! I wonder at the increasing number of apartment children who are unfamiliar with snakes and routinely live in morbid fear of these retiring creatures, a fear that extends to lizards, insects, mushrooms and even large flowers! While our evolutionary heritage has endowed us with a fear of poisonous species, there are many snakes out there that are placid, and beautiful, and important members of the local community. How many of us are comfortable or familiar with the daily happenings in the natural world surrounding us? The urban cocoons that we thrive in are teeming with life, to which we are usually oblivious. Given the norm of apartment homes and schools, perhaps the short-term unpredictability and long-term unfamiliarity of the natural world incites fear in many of us. As an educator interested in understanding the movement of fear in learning, I am interested in the processes

that give rise to it. Nature seems to expose the storehouse of innate and conditioned fear responses, and intimate contact may help us understand some of these movements. Fear may release its grip—as I have seen happen in several children—and this release may facilitate learning. Is there an end to fear itself in being with nature? That I do not know.

I have noticed in some children, and in myself, a strong tendency to *get lost* in the wonders of nature. While completely immersed in observing flowers, birds and insects, hours pass before self-possession becomes the dominant mode of existence. Usually, immersing oneself in the lap of nature is immediately followed by wanting to share the experience with someone, and even if not, thoughts of self-aggrandizement seep in subtly. A bird watcher may be smug about the length of her bird list, for instance. I am at once aware of a paradox, a philosophically intractable position: on the one hand, my sense of self is *lost* in nature, and on the other, I am looking to it for self-fulfilment. To restate the problem in an educational context, I have often wondered at the causal mechanism in learning anything for its own sake, in the absence of external motivation to learn (such as this very subtle self-fulfilment, for example). A crucial question that an educator grapples with on a daily basis is about the roots of motivation and resistance to learning. Can nature be an avenue to learn about these movements? Is there actually a pause in the

interminable image-making movements of the self while in intimate observation of nature?

Television documentaries and the World Wide Web have brought the world to our doorstep; their rendition of the living world as a dizzy series of acrobatics and close encounters has perhaps reduced life around us to a slow, boring landscape where nothing much happens. Experiential contact with nature should force us to reconsider this view; close encounters are possible, even if not spectacular, on an everyday scale. The occasional brilliant display in swarms of migrating blue tiger butterflies, the shocking moths around a bright lamp on a stormy night, and the short burst of flaming summer blossoms of the *palasha* trees punctuate the otherwise regular, interesting patterns and processes that include the daily opening of buds and flowers and the seasonal egg-tadpole-frog cycle.

It is abundantly clear, on walks with children or otherwise, that the search for novelty is a ceaseless mission of the mind. Is it in the very process of searching for novelty that a moment-by-moment re-creation and strengthening of the self-image is perpetuated? The very same movement that can lead to an innocent, acquisitive spree of collecting shells, beetles, or dried flower petals drives our strong consumerist culture, which is dramatically shortening the future of life on this planet. I often wonder: Can nature

facilitate a pause in this movement? Can there be a quieting of the mind, a slowing of the thought process?

Some caveats and prescriptions

Are these unrealistic expectations of nature? Even if this is a half-attempt at a philosophical framework for extending the role of nature in education, we are convinced of the real value that close encounters of the natural kind bring to many children. We have seen students survive serious emotional crises on the strength of their relationship with nature; young people deeply caught in the web of relationships can relax in nature: a non-judgemental and non-coercive space. Is nature a cure for the psychological ills of the human condition? Unlikely. But it is perhaps valuable in holding a mirror to the various movements of the mind.

As an educator I am often in confusion when with children and nature. I have often asked: Can I *teach* them to observe nature? Should it be open-ended observation or should one intervene? Does nature observation mean acquiring a skill? Does this mean intervention from another who is skilled? Intervention in the form of guiding a specific skill—holding binoculars, giving pointers in sketching and note-taking, providing names of plants, birds, insects—is perhaps useful in documenting and understanding the experience in some common, shared manner. It is also often felt that children must engage with what they encounter,

and that directing them is conditioning and narrowing their experience in some sense. An *open, guided* strategy is perhaps the via media to introduce the natural world to children!

Sense of place

In working with children of various ages at CFL, we have attempted many strategies over the years to engage them with nature, and have drawn up a skeletal curriculum of nature activities for the inquiring mind. A long and fruitful association with the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary in Wynaad, Kerala, has been a constant conceptual and introductory source for many of these activities.

For younger students, we looked at the possibility of the following: comfort with natural surroundings; ability to be quiet in natural surroundings; picking up simple patterns in nature; and sensory exploration—audio-visual, smell, taste, touch, a sense of place. These curricular *objectives* look at some means and modes of being in contact with nature, and relate to the intent of looking outward, being quiet, and directly experiencing.

Over the years of working with children, we have observed that developing an intimate connection with the local landscape and life is essential in relating to the natural world. In a campus of several acres of woodland, surrounded by a rocky and forested landscape, we have an excellent resource for developing this sense of place. With the youngest students,

activities take the form of nature walks with quiet periods and solo time, sketching in a nature journal, and simple exercises in sensory exploration. They have favourite locations where they cluster and play. When we question children, we notice that their familiarity with the location extends to some knowledge of changes happening at that place: perhaps a new caterpillar, bird, flower or fruit. On walks outside campus, they encounter life in nooks and cracks as they clamber over rocks to play—banyan saplings, balsams, ferns, owls, lizards, geckos, skinks and snakes. They are often excited at seeing something new—a dead dragonfly or butterfly, a *Gloriosa* lily—and have many questions relating to form and function, some of which may be sophisticated for their age. There is often a detailed familiarity with life around their favourite rocks and spots on campus and outside: trees, ferns, birds, insects.

The sophistication in questions progresses with age, and can take on ecological overtones of inquiring into interconnectedness. Questions on species identity and taxonomy and rocks remain, and strengthen, and the learning process makes the ancient neighbourhood of granite that is over two and a half billion years old a fascinating place to be for the ten- to twelve-year-olds. The idea of a continuously inhabited ancient land is often startling to encounter. We hone in on the sense of place by revisiting locations and exploring habitats on campus over

seasons, surveying the landscape through long walks and camping in the nearby forests, and sketching. Children are also involved in taking care of the school aquarium and dogs. In relating to other living forms, we hope there will result a recognition of the common themes of life and living things.

Identities begin to emerge in adolescence and along with this comes a dip or an upswing in the students' interest in the natural world. Quite a few older students are ardent bird-watchers or butterfly enthusiasts by now, birds and butterflies being the most flamboyant and visible faces of diversity in the surroundings. Several are drawn to the many species of seasonal wildflowers and reptiles as well. These students survey the biodiversity of the campus and the surrounding forests, and contribute to a detailed knowledge of life there through inventories, life-history studies and chronicles of seasonal change. Exercises like mapping parts of the campus or the agriculture-forest mosaic in the surroundings allow them to access parts of the campus and beyond that are usually not in daily focus. They also bring in issues of living in a human-dominated and modified landscape on a larger scale. The various aspects of the landscape—forest, watershed, rural and urban settlements—and their connectivity can become questions of study. The local questions can transform to a larger scale, and our General Studies programme looks at social and environmental issues in this wider

context. For many, the depth of familiarity with the land translates to a depth of affection and connection.

Students of all ages travel away from campus, visit wilderness areas elsewhere in India and meet people working and living in these areas. The Western Ghats, Kutch, Bastar, the Himalayas, and Arunachal Pradesh are some of the places they have visited. Some of the oldest children may spend from a few weeks to many months apprenticing with people who work and live in these places.

Some questions remain...

In educating a small number of mostly urban, middle-class children, I am often faced with the question: What is the motivation behind this nature education? In our rapidly changing world, where drastic action is called for at all levels—social, economic, political and psychological—a deeper understanding of the impact of our actions and an attitude of care for the land is sorely needed. And this is where the nature education programmes of schools like CFL can make an impact. Another question often asked is: Can these programmes be scaled up to larger geographical spans? Given sufficient interest in policymakers and teacher training/educators, perhaps they can. Whether these programmes will survive the existence of an atmosphere of external motivators such as achievement and success, I do not know; I will hazard that they may not.

These programmes need not depend on a rural setting with a large enclosed campus; they can be suitably modified for urban and rural schools with differing constraints—usually the lack of natural or wooded spaces in the former; and overburdened teachers with limited resources and motivation in both types of locations. The policy decision of introducing environmental science as a compulsory theme across all ages is a good

beginning, but its transformation into an examination subject makes it sterile and abstract, frequently disengaged from close observation of the immediate surroundings. This curricular aspect needs a thorough overhaul to include more contact than content. Understanding nature needs intimate contact, and this renewed relationship can open a new way of looking at the world and, perhaps, of living in it.



On Retreats

DONAL CREEDON



From ancient times to the present, seekers of truth have felt the call to dwell in mountain silences, to live in the hush and shadows of the forests or even to go to the deserts where nature is shorn of all excess, to get away from the throng and maddening crowd, and discover an invincible peace. A *retreat* has been seen as an ideal situation for the spiritual aspirant to work intensively on himself or herself.

In my own case I have spent some years in various types of Buddhist retreats from the *Theravada Vipassana*, the retreats of the *Tibetan Vajrayana* tradition, to solitary retreats where one is immersed in total darkness for a period.

Generally, Buddhist retreats are informed by a particular view or perspective and contain specific structures and daily regimens of practice. In some, the structure is very demanding, involving silence, restricted diet and long hours of practice. The structure is a kind of alchemical container in which the work takes place. Often, the initial experience is not of peace or well-being but of the onslaught of thought when the contents of the psyche in all their glorious contradictions are revealed to the conscious mind. To use the alchemical image—there is a heating of the contents and an experiencing of blackening. The student, in theory, sits through the storm and watches carefully the flux and detritus of consciousness as it displays itself and disappears in a seemingly endless stream.

In the *Vipassana*, for example, there is a strict daily programme of sitting and walking meditation. There is a simple focus on the breath coming and going and the cultivation of mindfulness, which means the mind is with whatever it is experiencing in the present. The aim is to see directly that all things, including the body, mind and the outer world are impermanent (Pali,

annica), no self (*annata*) and suffering (*dukha*). The word *dukha* refers to a whole range of experiences, from a kind of underlying existential angst to the most palpable aspects of both physical and psychological suffering. This insight, in principle, can release the mind from the grasping and the craving, which were taught by the Buddha as the causes of suffering.¹

In the three-year *Vajrayana* retreat one follows a kind of curriculum of practices. These have specific aims and operate in the field of the known. Basically, there is an attempt to purify the body-mind complex and to deconstruct our habitual notions of who we are and what reality is. It is important in this endeavour to examine motive, to loosen the knots of self-centredness and to develop a concern for all living creatures. This is seen as essential groundwork for *liberating insight* to arise. By *liberating insight* I mean a direct perception of the mind as being empty in nature. I will return to this later. These retreats presume acquaintance with the main Buddhist teachings on the nature of suffering, emptiness and primordial wisdom.²

In the solitary dark retreat there is no technique, although one may get a simple instruction. There is no support or structure apart from the period of retreat, which could be anything from a few days to forty-nine. Since one is immersed in pitch darkness it is not possible to know the time. So, one may not know whether it is day or night. One may experience time as incredibly slow or fast or non-existent. The emphasis is on awareness, free of any object. All methods are seen as fabricated, useful up to a point, but in themselves binding. This kind of retreat has its dangers and can bring up the most fundamental fears, such as the fear of annihilation, of not being. Attention is directed to the nature of the mind. The mind being the root of all problems, when the root is cut, there is liberation. This metaphor is used in the tradition. Its meaning is that when there is a direct perception into the nature of one's mind, the source of all problems is cut through. We could say the self or thought is abolished, or that the mind is revealed as emptiness.³ Meditation in this context is *unfabricated*, resting within the space of awareness. Although these words imply a subject resting, in fact there is none. Awareness is centreless.⁴

I have led various retreats or, as I prefer to say, co-created these with the participants. Retreats now attract a range of people with a variety of backgrounds and interests. Some are Buddhists, others are interested in meditation as a way to solve or answer their questions and problems. There is

also the image of the meditator as someone at peace, dwelling in some kind of blissful state of absorption. This is an illusion, of course. In the past few years, although maintaining some features of the traditional retreat, such as sitting meditation, I have tried to frame retreats as part of the natural inquiry into living rather than practising with an aim. We have dialogues and a different approach in terms of tradition—for instance, instead of passively studying a text we examine and inquire into it. I feel that only in an atmosphere of freedom can any seeing and flowering happen. The strict containers may have their point in certain contexts, such as in the three-year retreat. The result, however, can be further contraction in the body-mind and a hardening of will. Thus, you have the ambitious *meditator* seeking more and more experiences, which lead not to liberation, but to further entanglement in thought, and a spiritualized ego.

The problem with methods and structures is well articulated by Krishnamurti, who dismisses all of these as themselves constructs of thought and therefore unable to move a person beyond conditioning. They give continuity to conditioning and create new forms of imprisonment. He also questions the motive for such things, stating that where there is motive, there is distortion.

In relation to retreats Krishnamurti states:

I think it is essential sometimes to go on retreat, to stop everything that you have been doing, to stop your beliefs and experiences completely, and look at them anew, not keep on repeating like a machine whether you believe or do not believe. You would then let fresh air into your mind. That means that you must be insecure, must you not? If you can do so, you would be open to the mysteries of nature and to things that are whispering about us, which you would not otherwise reach; you would reach the God that is waiting to come, the truth that cannot be invited but comes itself.

Thus, approaching a retreat in the context of Krishnamurti's teaching is subtle and demanding in a way that is not obvious. Can one have a retreat without any structure? Can such a retreat happen without degenerating into distraction and endless talk? Can one have a retreat where the very first step is freedom? Or, is it, as traditions say, that one needs structure, one needs guidance, otherwise the participants may just follow their own particular proclivities and the deeper layers of conditioning are left under the carpet?

A few years ago we attempted such retreats at the Rajghat Besant School. There was minimum structure. We chose a theme, decided certain parameters. The parameters were a period of sitting quietly in the morning and evening as well as a time for dialogue. There was complete freedom to come or go. We did not watch any videos. It was very simple. We agreed to carry the inquiry and inward dialogue throughout the day.

On one occasion we used the following as a pointer:

We often live with a sense of tremendous speed propelled towards a vague future in the company of the twin terrors: hope and fear. Life seems always to lie in that future. We miss completely the in-dwelling life and the life around us and live in the realm of thought and projection. Thus the greater background, the space of awareness and the mystery and depth of being-in-itself is obliterated by the hard speed of thought and habit. What does it mean to be fully present in our living? Is it possible to be present to the world around us; to the wind in the trees, the bird in the air, the woman sweeping the floor and the man at the gate, to beauty and sorrow? Is it possible to be present to the internal world of thought and feeling and of speech, action and reaction? And going further, what is presence in itself; free of any object, presence without becoming?

Although it is difficult to pin down exactly what was taking place, there certainly was a movement of listening and watching, both outwardly and inwardly, and a gathering of energy. Watching in the quiet darkness of the morning, seeing the light grow and the shadows draw back as the sun rose. Seeing the silver and gold on the waters of the Ganga. Hearing the rustle of the leaves in the morning breeze. Watching the boatmen and the delicate white birds and the shadows moving over the waters. Noticing all the details of everyday life coming into clear view as in a mirror. Inwardly, one noticed the thoughts, feelings and moods moving and changing like clouds in the sky. Watching the watcher.

At lunch or tea, a question might occur, which we would discuss and examine as part of the ongoing movement of inquiry. In the evening, there was another period of sitting quietly together. There is something lovely about sitting in silence without any kind of compulsion or rules. Afterwards, the dialogue started with a natural silence and from that silence questions emerged. Then, a return to silence.

So, what is a retreat here? We might call it *taking time out* or *stepping out of time*. Simply allowing a gap in the hurry, a gap that allows space to emerge, allows stillness to be heard, beyond the word, a gap where thought loses its insistence and the mystery of being and not knowing pervades.

When there is no fixation, no concentration or direction, we may find that the senses relax their grasping quality, their hold on the spontaneous unfolding of being-in-itself. At a certain point, the residues of the past, residues of memory, may emerge and vanish in open awareness. Although this takes place without any effort or structure, it has its own rigour, its own demands, which are not an imposed burden but a quickening and a vital awakening to the whole. The essential point is, as Krishnamurti said, that ‘people bring their own seriousness, interest and enquiry’.

Can such an approach also uncover the deeper currents of conditioning? Can it move from the surface to the depths of being-in-itself? Can it open into the immeasurable? One cannot say *yes* or *no*, but leave the question there, as an open door, a welcoming without waiting.



Notes

- 1 The primary source of this approach is found in the *Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness* or *Satipatthana Sutta* and the *Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing* or *Anapanasati Sutta* of the Pali canon.
- 2 The sources of these approaches are the *Vajrayana* texts and instructions of the Indian *siddhas* such as Tilopa and Naropa.
- 3 The nature of mind refers to the *mind as it is* without any conceptual overlay. When you look into your mind you see that its essential nature is emptiness. It is said that this realization actualizes *awareness-wisdom*. Mind-nature (Tibetan, *sem nyi*) is distinguished from the ordinary thinking mind (Tibetan, *sem*). The ordinary mind is ground in habitual patterns, while mind-nature is described as beyond thought and expression. Words such as *original face*, *face of awareness*, *emptiness*, *suchness*, *luminosity*, *clear light*, *primordial wisdom* are used to indicate this nature.
- 4 The sources for this kind of retreat are the inner teachings of the direct awareness traditions of *Mahamudra* (Great Seal) and particularly the *Dzogchen* (Great Perfection) *pith* instructions.

Self and Society: An Approach to Teaching Social Studies

VENKATESH ONKAR



We are talking about ... schools cultivating in the young that most 'subversive' intellectual instrument—the anthropological perspective. This perspective allows one to be part of [one's] own culture and, at the same time, to be out of it. One views the activities of [one's] own group as would an anthropologist, observing its tribal rivals, its fears, its conceits, its ethnocentrism. In this way, one is able to recognize when reality begins to drift too far away from the grasp of the tribe. We need hardly say that achieving such a perspective is extremely difficult, requiring, among other things, considerable courage. We are, after all, talking about achieving a high degree of freedom from the intellectual and social constraints of one's tribe...

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*

Educational curricula over the ages—whether defined formally or informally, within the home or at school—have their roots in a very simple yet profoundly important question: What kinds of capacities are we looking to nurture in children through our education? What kinds of skills, abilities and attitudes do we hope will deepen as a result of our support as adults? At Centre For Learning (CFL), a small semi-residential school outside Bangalore, we have the opportunity to explore this question with both parents and children in close and intimate, yet rigorous ways.

Thinking about social studies provides an ideal way in which to focus the challenge of our educational intent at CFL. Social studies curricula, and indeed the overall educational project, should, we feel, nurture the capacity for analysis, for critical thinking and the weighing of evidence, all framed by the ability to empathize deeply with the experience of those very different from ourselves. We should, ideally, gain the ability to question social messages that bombard us from all sides: messages that tell us about our identity, who we are in terms of race, class, gender and religion, and which define us in

relation to *social others*. Particularly with regard to history, we need to examine the way the past constructs the social present and the ways in which the ideologies of the present are used to read the past. Finally, and most importantly, we believe such questioning should lead us inwards into our psyche, into the very processes of identity formation itself, and its social consequences—in terms of creating division and conflict, the sense of *self* and *other*.

This broad framework of *critical thought* is one backdrop against which we run our school and its educational programmes. And yet, critical thought, for us, is itself grounded in deeper questions regarding a responsible relationship between self and society. How are self and society intimately embedded in one another, and how are we to deepen our understanding of this mutuality? Are the specific social orientations we are now accustomed to the only ones available, or are other fundamentally deeper and more peaceful forms of relationship and social structures possible? Obviously, these are not questions that can be contained within some abstract history curriculum tucked away in a teacher's mind, but are rather vital and important questions permeating all aspects of our social and personal lives.

How do we explore such questions within our curriculum? A lot of our emphasis is on the *constructed* nature of

social reality, both historical and contemporary. This may perhaps be an easy point for the adult intellect to grasp, but it is one that needs to be patiently explored in all its ramifications with students. A simple way to do this in a history class is to show children differing source material dealing with the same events. Colonial encounters, for example, offer an interesting and rich possibility. Through close readings of such complex and multi-faceted sources, children come to see the role of interpretation in constructing historical *fact* and the ways in which such interpretations build our sense of the present.

To consolidate the point, we can offer children many alternative explanations for historical phenomena. As an example, we study the Indus Valley civilization in middle school (around class 6). One of the sub-themes is the collapse of the Indus Valley culture. We can explore various explanations with children: Was the collapse due to economic causes; climate change; the depletion of natural resources? What exactly is the strength of the *Aryan invasion* hypothesis? Each of these explanations comes with its own logic, the outlines of which even young students can enjoy and engage with. Through such lines of questioning and evidence, children (as young as eleven and twelve) come to appreciate the complexity of the problem as well as the biases from which we are tempted to construct solutions.

Sources need not be rooted in the deep past. A study of lakes and tanks in Bangalore taken up by our senior students, for instance, reveals the layered and complex nature of the city as it is today, as well as the way it is viewed by different groups in society, each with their own specific interests. Students interviewed fishermen whose livelihoods depend in part on fishing rights in the tanks, and discussed the ways in which these rights had been diminished by the privatization of these—as lakes. They also spoke to residents (of various social backgrounds) who lived in the neighbourhood of the lakes regarding their perceptions of the role of the lakes in the socio-economic life of the city. They documented conversations with researchers and NGOs who worked in the field of water resource management, urban planning and urban ecology. All of this was supported by a study of historical colonial accounts of the construction and usage of tanks as lakes. Through this process, it became quite clear that various competing interests colour the construction of social and geographical reality, as well as its interpretation. Simply walking through the city's historical market area, which our middle school students do as part of a 'Bangalore project', reveals as much, albeit in a simpler form.

In a more abstract context, through an understanding of social institutions (marriage, the family, religion, the media), children get a glimpse of the relative nature

of these constructs, as well as the urge in themselves and others to take these constructs as *the* truth, *the* way of creating social arrangements. We spend a lot of time with students (and among ourselves as adults) trying to understand this urge within ourselves to define a particular aspect of social reality and to psychologically identify ourselves with it, simultaneously perceiving the institution as defining *us* and our sense of identity: a mysteriously circular process.

A theoretical knowledge of the constructs that surround us is one thing, but to gain an intimate understanding, both for ourselves as teachers and for our students, we find that a deep experiential approach is vital. It is only when we actually engage directly with the people who face the brutal constraints of various social structures that we appreciate the power of their impact. In other words, our social studies curriculum tries to emphasize sensitivity to the lived experiences of others, in very practical terms, in the hope that this might lead to a very different conception of social relationships and responsibilities among young people.

One example is a module on human rights that the senior students studied some time ago. The idea behind this course was to study the abstract conceptions of a rights-based approach to social equality: its history as well as its expression in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, our students also engaged

(in quite some depth) with individuals who faced discrimination in daily life: people with disabilities, children with no access to education, slum dwellers with no secure housing and so on. The study and documentation went on for several months. Similar processes take place on our annual excursions, which can last up to 15–20 days. High school students (classes 9 and 10), for example, travelled in the Western Ghats some months ago, and one part of their excursion was an attempt to understand issues surrounding mining in the region—both the social and the environmental impact of the mines. Engagement with these dimensions of social reality cannot always be confined within the walls of a traditional classroom or indeed within the framework of traditional schooling.

The question of the direct engagement with others from very different social locations raises a potentially troubling question. When middle-class and upper-middle-class children from privileged backgrounds engage with *the disempowered*, won't the encounter smack of condescension? Isn't there an element of voyeurism in this exchange? On the contrary, we have found that these experiences, when coupled with some knowledge and background, evoke understanding and a sense of connection. They are not treated lightly by students. These experiences seem to lead young people to emphasize the similarities

between themselves and social *others* rather than the differences. The capacity for empathy, when evoked, seems to override the power equations implicit in such engagements.

I have tried to develop a few strands of our thinking behind the teaching of history and, more broadly, social studies, at CFL. We feel that it is the process of gathering evidence and analysing it that is most important in a social studies or history classroom. Our emphasis is on discussion, on open-ended inquiry, rather than fixing explanations through ideologies. It is equally on finding empathetic responses to social issues, both the everyday as well as the structural. The process of analysis and the learning of critical skills are more important to us than covering a lot of content. Of course, my selection above doesn't convey the complete picture. I have left out significant strands in the material we study (geography, for example), as my emphasis is on a description of a curricular philosophy rather than on describing specific content or skills and how these are systematically developed across the age groups.

The mood of investigation cannot obviously be contained within an abstract description of a *social studies curriculum*. The intellectual and emotional life of the school, of the entire learning environment, should ideally support and nurture this sceptical energy. It then becomes possible

to see many aspects of daily living as well as intellectual inquiry as part of a project on understanding oneself and others.

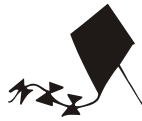
One of the questions I had begun with was that of a responsible relationship between self and society. There is no guarantee at all that any curriculum, or any set of experiences, will guide us, adults and children, into responsible thought and

action. Yet it is our hope that, through dialogue, through a patient and rigorous investigation of the psychological and social currents of everyday life, and through frameworks that emphasize empathy and compassion, we can gain insights into society and ourselves (and the relationships between the two) that are fundamentally transformative in nature.



Child as a Kite

Y SREEKANTH



We face many dilemmas in life. Whether to treat a child as a child or to consider the child as a future adult is among the most contentious issues that confront many of us. This echoes a basic dilemma about the goals of education. Liberalists hold the first view, while believers in social efficiency support the second. Liberalists believe that a child learns and behaves in a manner appropriate to his/her age, and that this learning and behaviour should not be conceived of from the point of view of adults, but of the child. On the other hand, those who support notions of social efficiency are of the view that all education must make a child live up to the expectations and needs of society. They believe that to make a child into a desirable individual he/she needs *moulding* and *correction* at every stage of life. These two divergent perspectives represent two extreme views on the purposes of education—one lays emphasis on the child's autonomy, the other on the needs of society.

It is not uncommon for a very large segment of our population to support the second view. This is more so in a world that is encountering rapid changes, technological advancement and competition in every sphere of life. It may be difficult to question this trend, which is seen to have its positive outcomes. Children exhorted to succeed sometimes manage to do so. However, this should not deter us from questioning the price we have to pay when we try to shape their paths in predetermined ways. We ought to question whether we have allowed sufficient space for the thought process of the child to develop. Endless activities like classwork, homework, project work and assignments leave little time for thinking about life itself. A modern-day child hardly gets an opportunity to make a journey into the worlds of wilderness and fantasy, and to experience freedom and passion.

The kite, an inanimate and inexpensive object, represents as good an illustration as any of a child's life, and we may draw upon this analogy to respond to the dilemma. The image of the flying kite relates directly to the idea of freedom in childhood. In fact, many a child feels so curious and jubilant at the thought of flying a kite. The colours in which kites are made, the heights they can reach, and the wild journeys they take in the sky make them a valuable treasure, which children like to lay their hands on. Kites are an easily accessible symbol of their own imagination.

While a kite can enjoy flight, it needs indispensable support to do so. It needs a frame and a shape and it needs strings to accomplish this ride. The absence of any of these can hinder its dream of flying high. In my view, parents and teachers largely provide the frame and the shape in children's lives, and in nurturing them, they operate much like the kite strings. Their role is thus crucial for the kite's journey towards unscaled heights. They need to provide support, give it a lift and make it fly. While this cannot happen without them, they are not there to chart out, or hinder, its further journey. They must eventually hand over the kite to the winds. The winds, which take the kite with them, reveal themselves when they lift the kite upwards and onwards, at times dipping downwards too. Kites are meant to be up in the sky, enjoying the oscillations, and not getting entangled in trees or transmission lines. Nor are they meant to slice each other or get stuck on rooftops. The joy of life is in flying—and flying endlessly.

A kite and its flight have a lot to teach us. While it is our bounden duty to provide the required support to children, parents and teachers are not there to restrict their ability to grow as free individuals. The role of shaping them, as in the shaping of kites, is to make them ready for their present and future flight, not to curb their journey. The strings that are attached represent only that degree of control which will enable them not to falter or get stuck in unwanted obstacles. As long as the child is doing well in flight, parents and teachers need not pull at the strings unduly. The winds of destiny, which are not in our control, ought to make us realize that we are supposed to do only what we have to do, and leave the rest to the child's destiny—rather than reprimanding the child for not moving in this or that direction, or not achieving this or that. It is in the interaction of the kite and the winds that there is beauty and immense joy, and we may see this in our children's lives as well.

The above analogy gives scope for reconsidering our role as parents and teachers, and especially at the present juncture, when there is tremendous pressure on children to perform. Yes, we want our children to progress. But often we expect them to progress faster than they can and do more than they are capable of. The amount of work to be done by children within fixed time limits, with time-bound tests and examinations as the norm, can render the whole effort meaningless. Do parents and teachers have the time to ponder over the reasonableness of burdening children with something they themselves, if they were honest, would never be willing to do? Children end up working under pressure from parents, teachers and peers. It is as if a kite's flight—which is its essential *nature*—is restricted by the very string that lifts it off the ground to fly.

If this state of affairs continues, a child will no more be a child; he or she will be burdened by the future role of an adult. The joy of the present will be forsaken completely for an imagined future. We must realize that children too have a life of their own, and should be given scope for enjoyment at every stage, in keeping with their physical, mental and emotional capabilities and requirements. Otherwise, it is like trying to shape a kite so heavy and unwieldy, with a frame so thick, that it cannot even take off.

What is required is a fine balancing act that facilitates, without restricting. There is a very thin line between the two, but our judgement matters here. Strings are there to lift the kite and not the other way around. Letting go of the strings is like abandoning the kite to the vagaries of shifting currents, while pulling the strings very hard can derail the very purpose of the kite. It is the flight of the kite that gives joy, not the string. The kite is at its best when traversing its own space in the sky. Let us enable our children too to take flight and find joy in life.



Learning in Friendship and Leisure

ASHNA SEN

This is a description of a special month-long coming together of a few students and staff from Brockwood Park, UK, in India. The first Calcutta Academy, as it was named, took place in early 2010, and this article reports on the second, held in early 2011.

Editors



Home is the first school for us all, a school with no fixed curriculum, no quality control, no examinations, no teacher training.

Charles Handy

An Air India plane had just landed at the airport in Calcutta, on 4th January 2011, and the atmosphere was suddenly abuzz with anticipatory excitement. Four students from Brockwood Park School in Hampshire, UK, together with a Mature Student and their teacher, emerged from the immigration area to a warm welcome by their hosts. Thus commenced the second innings of the Calcutta Academy, an appellation denoting both the venue and the root word *Akademikos*: a place where inquiring minds, led by Plato, assembled many aeons ago as *philosophers*, i.e. lovers of wisdom. Alas, the fairly capacious ten-seater Tata Sumo proved to be a bit cramped after everybody's luggage was heaped onto the back row of seats, barely leaving four

spaces in the middle row for the group of six. As one would imagine, the ride to the neighbourhood of Salt Lake, which the Brockwood guests would call home for the entire month, was nothing short of a roller coaster ride. Upon their arrival, the four students—all girls this year, in contrast to the all-boys troupe of the previous year—emerged from their curled-up, foetal postures, dragged their luggage to a common room and began to unpack the upper layers of their suitcases, shyly concealing their slight apprehension about how the next few weeks would unfold in a country they were visiting for the first time. It was indeed such a long journey, all for like-minded seekers to gather and understand, study and get to the essence of each subject that they chose to explore

together, purely for its own sake, without any diploma or paper acknowledgement of their efforts or, for that matter, any particular external incentive.

Before any of us could embark on our lofty endeavours, the visitors had to first overcome jetlag, make their acquaintance with mosquitoes, learn to sleep through the mad cacophony of yelping dogs that decided to play their symphony orchestra only past midnight, tolerate the endless *thud-thud* of an adjacent construction site, and ignore the ceaseless drumming practice for the annual Sports Day at the opposite park! After all, the students had arrived at a city *in extremis*, ever evolving, ever decadent, and yet all-encompassing.

The group brought with it its own energy, flavour, and particular chemistry, both between the individuals and as a collective. The expertise of the three teachers, including the two hosts, both former teachers at Brockwood Park School, and the Mature Student, who was attending his second Calcutta Academy, covered a wide range of subjects. Their competence ranged from mathematics, physics, and philosophy to literature, history, art and music *inter alia*. Our day seamlessly moved from sessions of mathematics and philosophy in the mornings—ranging from syllabus-related directed examination study to questioning the nature of trigonometry or of numbers themselves—straying into history or art, and music theory in the latter half of the

day. A simple home-cooked vegetarian lunch served as a break.

The entire group was interested in learning together, with a serious effort at unearthing our individual likes, dislikes, prejudices and predilections towards various subjects or topics. Why had mathematics been so alienating in the past? Was it the result of a bad classroom experience? What are the big fundamental questions that underlie all learning? Are subjects connected, or do we end up super-specializing the topics until there is nothing left? Quite like the elusive quest for the perfectly sharpened pencil tip ... the pencil ultimately disappears.

We spent several weeks immersed in various subjects, exploring the core of each problem that we encountered—ruminating over ideas, theories, and philosophical bases of fundamental questions about nature and our purpose on this planet. In addition to examining specific topics, we also made an attempt to link seemingly disparate areas like mathematics and art, and were pleasantly surprised to uncover the mathematical art of M C Escher, whose paintings had inspired many a mathematician. All pattern has, after all, a mathematical basis. While the journey into mathematics began with trigonometry and calculus, it broke free of convention with a tie-up class with art. We explored Escher's paintings and patterns and created our own, inspired by images and lectures. This gave an impetus to our

understanding of mathematics, and the students became that much more eager to explore the scope of the subject beyond the classroom, even venturing on to atypical areas like *Vedic* mathematics.

The philosophy class was held in the nearby park, a short, pleasant walk from the house and a welcome change of scene—a perfect setting to allow the mind to soar up to the sky. The main idea circling in our minds was to dwell upon the nature of mathematics. An essay by Heidegger, *Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics*, formed the template for our discussions, which were both animated and fruitful. The history class was wide in scope, but covered mainly European history. The demarcation between subjects became naturally blurred, in a way that seeks to clarify rather than befuddle. The music theory class dealt with the arrival of tempered tuning in modern music and the special way that alters the natural mathematical musical ratios.

Our typical day began with a yoga session on the rooftop among the twittering avian visitors from near and far: crows, canaries, budgerigars, orioles and sparrows, who left their commentary with us. A few students preferred a run around the park grounds opposite the house, sometimes indulging in a mock game of football with local amateur players. Before our lessons began, a couple of students would slip into the neighbourhood market, with its makeshift stalls dotting the entrance, to start the morning off with a

drink from a medium-sized green coconut. Happy debating with the vegetable vendors lining the park would ensue, and produce from the nearby villages would be brought in soon after. A few students befriended a roadside tailor hawking his stitching and mending skills. When the academy was over, the students left with all their torn clothes darned, many of their oversized skirts or blouses altered to fit perfectly, and a promise to the tailor that they would somehow stay in touch.

The warmth arising out of thus living and learning together; eating south Indian *idlis* and *dosas* for breakfast; playing with an eleven-month-old toddler; intensely engaging in bargaining for an insanely underpriced deal at the handloom emporium markets; sipping tea together at the Oxford Bookstore; and remarking on what postcards to select and send home was a catalyst for learning without effort. Most evenings were laced with creative joy, and on any day one could spot the students and teachers alike scattered about the house, pencils and drawing books in hand, attentively painting their subject, or immersed in a book, or perhaps scribbling notes. From the sheer volume of drawings: sketches, portraits, patterned tiles (some akin to Escher's patterns), watercolours, charcoal drawings and ink paintings, one could surmise how everyone's creative instincts had been whetted.

Many evenings ended with a movie session, and each film selected became,

quite by accident, a visual continuation of the day's lessons. For instance, *Chihwaseon*, a Korean film about a painter whose madness and artistic genius are both essential for his craft, became an instant favourite with everyone, resonating with their own vision and artistic pursuits. Watercolour murals drawn during a pre-dinner session found their reflection in Hayao Miyazaki's hand-drawn watercolour animation. Bookish discussions on Mughal history from the afternoon's class were seen through the lens of Bollywood that same evening—in the biopic *Jodhaa Akbar*, the story of the great Mughal Emperor Akbar and his Rajput Hindu princess bride, Jodhabai. Books became our best friends, and the students appeared to quietly devour reams of writing, whether novels by Dostoevsky or an encyclopaedic treatise on how the brain works.

Attempts like the Calcutta Academy raise questions as to their apparent measure of *success*. Clearly, learning becomes effortless once the pressure to perform or be tested is lifted; more importantly, learning itself, for its own sake, provides the only incentive, one that suggests a deeper inquiry into the essence of every subject that we touch upon. One ingredient we found that was essential to learning without fear or effort, learning with delight, was *leisure*. The bustle of a school term, a long to-do list, and the general insanity of modern life rob us of this very basic quality. Suitably, the

etymological root of the word *school* is *leisure* or *spare time*. Did we then, through our simple living and unfettered thinking, discover what it takes to be truly able to learn: a state of leisure, in the truest sense?

A wider question that underpins this attempt to bring teachers and learners together in one place, without any sense of competition or external motive besides the impetus of learning itself, is: Why do we not experience this sense of togetherness in our typical classroom setting? Is learning and therefore any kind of exploration of mind related to friendship first? Without an atmosphere of love, can the love of learning happen? Can we become excellent at a subject without the sense of competition that is often an automatic accompaniment to most academic environments? Are we saying that comparison and a sense of mutual mistrust of fellow learners obstruct true understanding? These questions are open-ended and meant as an exploration of the possibilities of study and of the art of learning.

What the academy showed me personally, at many levels, was the magical effect of a natural camaraderie arising out of friendship. Perhaps the main motif for the effectiveness or *success* of our endeavours—if at all one can make such an assessment—were the drawings that emerged as a marriage between art, mathematics and philosophy, tying various themes into a collective whole. An image

that comes to mind, itself a subject for
the painter's palette, was of the students



On the Threshold of Touch

SUPRABHA SESHAN



Behaviour exposes the content of your consciousness.
J Krishnamurti

*A*s a long time environmental educator I've been exploring imitation, song, touch and body-in-nature as channels of empathy between humans, and also between human and non-humans. My concern, and that of my colleagues at the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary, is the death of the living world and the insane degree to which modern humans are *out of touch* with life. Our premise is: to be human and alive requires the company of non-humans. Our experience is: we return to the living world through participation and surrender, when we touch, and are touched by, the many intelligences of the forest.



A convivial empathic life for me is about song, and touch. Mimesis, I've found, is also a great way to discover another, by *inhabiting* their person (without hurting them).

How about for you? How do you come close to another?



Dating back to a conversation with the physicist David Bohm in the late 1980s, I've been aware that 'placing oneself in the shoes of another' is critical to empathy. It's harder to do it with persons you are in dysfunctional situations with, but the fact is, you do it unconsciously, you *become* the other (in similar or *opposite* ways), or you take the other *within* you even when you don't want to. This can lead, strangely enough, to understanding and empathy, or to separation and violence. Which way we go seems to depend on whether we

are present to each other as living *beings* or if we are absorbed in projections of each other—in other words, with *things*.

Mostly I've been intrigued by what appears to be a play between creatures (ourselves included). A play of mirror actions and movements, mirror emotions and moods, mirror speech and thought, mirror attunements and awarenesses, mirror bodies and minds. I observe these through verbal and body language, held body states (openness and closure), reflexive action, perception and behaviour. What happens to my vision when my eyes follow the path of an eagle in the sky? What happens when I follow the print on the screen? A kind of inscribing happens: fluid with the eagle, fixated with the print. What happens to me when I look at another's expressions? I feel my face doing funny things, and my body too. What happens when I imitate another? I get a sense of what it is to *be* that person.

Then, years later, I stumbled upon mirror neurons. At the time I was observing how dogs and their human friends seem to resemble each other; how parents are mimicked by their children (to the children's own dismay!); how members of a community seem to be reflections of each other in healthy and unhealthy ways; how live music generates profound empathy; how trees, rain, animals, rivers and plants make me feel and behave in certain ways; and how cultures in different ecosystems seem to have different characters. My queries led me to mirror neurons, among other things.

Mirror neurons are special motor neurons that fire when you watch (through your eyes and your imagination) someone else do something—a movement, an action of any kind. This *watching* makes you feel you are doing the action yourself (though you may not be conscious of this). These neurons have been noted in monkeys, birds and humans, and are thought to be important for learning, for acquiring language and other skills, through imitation. Some people go so far as to say that mirror neurons and imitation are part of empathic relations with others, and are important *drivers* in cultural change.

I found it really interesting when I read somewhere that mirror neurons don't fire when a person sees an *inanimate object* in motion, that they are responsive to other *persons*. I don't recall any mention in the literature of how mirror neurons work between different species, but I'd like to propose that they fire (and you may think this is stretching things a bit) also when you watch non-humans, not only other humans.

Very young children often see other life forms, including trees, plants and insects, as persons. Many see rock persons and stream persons and mountain persons and star persons too. I know I do, and that my human friends at the Sanctuary relate to plants and animals in this individual, personal way. When you spend long hours watching fish (and frogs, birds, trees and rivers), or working with plants and animals, I do believe a mirroring happens, a kind of play between beings. It's to do with how you regard the other and how the other regards you (and responds to you), and that there is mutual affect. You both change and you change each other, simply in *attending* to the other.

Rather than pursue the academic debate on adaptation and natural selection (and evolutionary determinism) or enter that domain where sociobiology, neurobiology and ecology commingle, I just explored, within my immediate world, this strange process at work, this mirroring. I observed it between all kinds of creatures, in all kinds of situations.

Sometimes I think: the world is as wonderful as it is because of mirror neurons, or mirror somethings (plants are biochemical, not neuronal beings) and that it is as dysfunctional as it is because of mirror neurons, or mirror somethings. They can take us, if we're wise (and lucky), to communion or they can trap us in the terrifying *hallway of mirrors*. I've experienced both, and been witness too.

Sometimes I think: the most confounding line in Bob Dylan's repertoire is, *what cannot be imitated perfect must die*. Sometimes I think: humans are more subject to influence than we would like to acknowledge, or believe; that, in fact, life is all about influence, about all that *flows in*.



A few years ago, I began to realize that thoughts often appear to me first in melody, a sequence of notes, usually in a minor key. When I hum these out aloud, I feel I know what I really want to say just then and also that I know how to say it. Although I've sung in an improvisatory way since I was a child, it is only recently that I've come to understand that it arises from a direct desire to speak with someone, and that in fact it is very precise. No ambiguity and double entendres involved.

I also like to imitate birds, monkeys, frogs and other beings when they call. I do it quite unconsciously; it's an old habit of mine, to honk, and hoot,

and squeal in the forest. I don't know that I ever get their phraseology and meaning, but in doing so, in actively imitating non-humans, in their presence, I *feel* closer to them, and I know they sometimes *move* closer to me, and sometimes seem to call back. These days, I see it more and more as a form of vocalized, full-bodied, open-hearted talking to other creatures.

Vocalizing like this is a part of my day, and sometimes even my dreams. It certainly is a part of the forest.



But it was the elephants who really made it very clear to me, during two episodes earlier this year, when they stayed with us at the Sanctuary.



Briefly: I sang to the elephants many times during those days. Or rather, I uttered sounds that *sometimes* were musical (to human ears), but more often were spontaneous responses to the elephants' own vocalizations and body sounds. To everything I heard from them, I offered something in return. These included yells and shouts, long steady notes, a throaty roar, a weak trumpet and many spontaneous songs of my own. Sometimes I just sat or stood there in silence, venturing as close as I could, without threatening them or myself, and close enough to feel the fullness of their great presence.



I don't know that I ever understood what they were saying, or that they understood me, but I know I understood something about *being with them*, and that perhaps they understood something about being with me. I'd like to think that they came to recognize the voice of a woman singing to them, a sound very different from all the men shouting at them to drive them away, all along their migratory range. Imagine if you were a refugee, desperate for food, driven out of your home, and all you got were shouts and threats and explosives and electrocution and the awful portent of starvation and insanity, and how, in all this conflict, someone singing to you might make you feel there was a friend around.



Disclosing my secret—that I sing to elephants, and talk to them—is another way of saying I know something about them from my feet upwards,

and from the back of my throat, my chest and belly. I can't tell you a thing about pachyderm biology that can't be said in two or three lines, but I can follow them close, and I feel the pull of their bodies upon mine, their movements mirrored by my own.

Whatever I knew about them (read, heard, remembered) meant nothing when I was actually there with them, alone, under the full moon on a cool February night, at the far edge of the Sanctuary.



So I've been discovering this year that there is a perfect distance between creatures, no matter who they are. I'm discovering the converse too: there is a perfect touch between creatures, no matter who they are. Between plant and plant, plant and insect, insect and bird, frog and snake, elephant and elephant, elephant and human, water and root, sky and tree, light and leaf, fish and stone. Distance and touch are essential to communion.



Touch: feel, make contact with, make intimate, meet without cutting, caress, connect

We think of touch as something we do with our hands and fingers only. I'm interested in the convergence that happens also through the skin (warmth and cold, pleasure and pain, the full spectrum of sensation), the soles of one's feet (stance, balance, stride and grip), one's eyes and ears and nose (molecules and waves); through one's back and belly and limbs (the flex of muscle, weight, torsion and action); through voice and thought (direct speech), mind and heart (memory, experience, intuition, emotion, feeling and attention). None as discrete as they appear on this page. None located in one person, or species, or entity, or organ or system, or thought; or in time (to one moment).

Touch dissolves boundaries, and opens the inner to the outer (assuming they are experienced as separate) and vice versa. The world flows in, changes you; you flow out, and change the world. Touch is the manifestation of the question asked by writer Derrick Jensen in an amazing book called *What We Leave Behind*: Where do you end and I begin?

Intimacy and distance; touch and space; push and resistance; action and reaction; fall and friction; collision and explosion; always mutual, always

perfect, always the most appropriate gesture and response, unless of course someone has to eat.



Through my plant and animal and human friends, I've also been discovering the lines of transgression. Usually these signify death, through eating. Perhaps it's not right to consider eating an act of transgression, but I looked up the word. It means, to step upon, to infringe upon boundaries. Of course, in nature, everybody is somebody's food, so eating might just be one of those energetic exchanges called upon by organisms so that the great web of life continues.

I don't quite understand what happens emotionally between creatures up until the moment of death, so I'll use the word transgression for now; I'm assuming it's not easy for the one being eaten.

Elephants taught me a lot about a different kind of transgression, not just the eating kind (though they ate a lot from the land we'd protected for so long). I wanted them to eat; yet I knew we would have to turn them away soon.

I'm referring to moments of near-death. I could easily have been killed during those days. If I'd ventured too close to their babies, I would have been, for sure. And if they'd ventured too far into the Sanctuary, they would have been trapped, a kind of death too. It would have led to a lot of conflict.



To end with, some thoughts on another kind of touch.

A lot of time is spent by me, and a lot of us modern humans, tapping, touching, stroking keyboards. Every imperative to do this (i.e. stroke keyboards) is obvious and necessary and urgent; we just do it without thinking; turn on the machine and get in there to work, play, relate, learn, share, plan, create, be entertained.

It's fun, and quite often useful and meaningful even, and it can sometimes be lovely, especially when you connect with friends.

Whatever the imperative, if you look at it on a global scale, a lot of us, millions and millions of us now, stroke plastic keys a lot of the time, and respond to imperatives of the virtual world.

Just think, hundreds of millions of us around the world spend more time touching computer keyboards than anything else, than *anything else*.



What are the implications of this? I'd like to hazard some guesses.

In the machine world: we touch *what* we need, or *what* we desire and identify with. We protect *what* we touch.

Things.



In the living, sentient world, we touch *whom* we need and identify with. We protect *whom* we touch.

Beings.



I'd like to take it a step further. In the living, sentient world: we touch *whom* we love.



Whom do you touch?



Space and Spirit

AR SHIRISH BERI



Let me start with some basic questions that we need to ask ourselves: Why do most of our modern living and work environments make us exhausted and dispirited? Why do most of these environments tend to become life-sapping spaces rather than life-renewing ones? In spite of having good material specifications, excellent technological support in terms of lighting, climate control, equipment and other facilities, what makes these spaces lifeless?

All the measurable three-dimensional prerequisites for a good working environment seem to be in order. What I find amiss is the hidden, immeasurable dimension—a dimension that helps integrate the individual with the wholeness of life, that which exalts his own worth and supports the regeneration of his body and soul. We may call this the *spirit* dimension and ask: Why has our contemporary space failed to include this vital dimension in its multifarious vocabulary?

Let us begin with a quick look at our contemporary values and the quality of spaces created. This might reveal what may be ailing us and our environment today. Over-dependence on technology reduces the natural, pluralistic diversity and spontaneity to monotonous, predictable repetitiveness. This numbs our aesthetic appreciation and sensitivity. When short-sighted commercial goals are pursued, superficial gloss and attractive quick-appeal wrapping becomes more important than the inner content. Alienation from the direct, natural, real experience is further heightened because of indulgence in packaged artificial reality on television, computers and sense simulators. This is accompanied by an excessive use of synthetic materials, plastic grass, nylon flowers and artificial climate control.

A self-centred, greedy, consumption-oriented lifestyle, with undue importance attached to economic gain and security, leads to an over-cluttered

way of life. Excessive consumption leads to wastage and the concept of disposability. Stealthily, this idea of disposing and dispensability has also crept into our human relationships. Today's insular, segregated spaces have taken us further away from our fellow humans, and brought about our alienation from the healing and rejuvenating powers of nature. The solace and mental comfort derived from healthy interactive human relationships is missing. The adoption of high speed as a part of our daily lives—speedy transportation, speedy work output, speedy cooking, fast encounters—has not only changed our perception of time, but is also contributing to the deteriorating quality of our lives. Our inner psychological space experiences a cluttered confusion—a reflection of the chaotic clutter and information overload of our outer physical space.

All this tends to fragment the wholeness and unity of life. Whatever country, race, or religion we may belong to, we have all been experiencing the above phenomena. The issue is, are we going to continue in the future on the same path that we are on now, or could we pause and re-examine our parameters and priorities in life? It is definitely possible to pause and change course towards a richer and a more harmonious life.

Our concern as architects ought to be this: Can our designs enrich our human spirit or would they further contribute to the growing poverty of this *human spirit*?

What is this *spirit* and how does it relate with *spirituality*? To me, spirituality is the awakening of consciousness from self-centredness towards universal totality. In simple words, it is to relate and belong to this fascinatingly interconnected web of life, to feel like an integral part of this cosmic reality.

Can we integrate our small lives with Life itself and harmonize with it? Then a feeling of empathy for everyone and everything around us would unfold beautifully within us.

Why do 'I' feel satiated when my plants are watered after a long dry spell?

Why is it that 'I' feel free and happy when our dog is untied?

What makes 'me' bubble within at the sight of a bubbling, frothing stream or waterfall?

Why does a feeling of weightlessness engulf 'me' at the sight of that bird's lovely flight?

Why do 'I' feel cleansed, refreshed in a beautiful, clean environment?

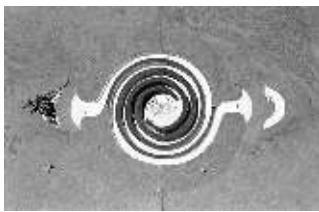
Why is it that 'I' feel balanced and harmonious within in a well-designed space?

Could our spaces too be designed in such a way as to give a glimpse of this universal totality? Could they relate to their surroundings and integrate with them? Could they not include the sky, the hills, the birds and the trees as a part of their space-forming vocabulary?

As designers, we need to work with a child-like spontaneity that comes from the absence of conditioning. This pen is not just a pen for a child; it can transform into a plane or a train, a sword or a stick, a lamp post or an injection syringe. We tend to brand an object and thereby miss all the potential multiple possibilities that it offers. We need the courage to create unique and path-breaking designs.

Unfolding the spirit involves the creation of a self-organizing dynamic order in the working together of the implicate and the explicate. It also implies our shift from the measurable objective consciousness to the immeasurable subjective consciousness, while functioning simultaneously at multiple levels. Could our spaces be designed in such a way as to give a glimpse of this universal totality? Could they relate to their multiple contexts, grow out of them and integrate with them?

In the Japan Design Foundation's International Design Competition, with the theme *In Quest of Spiritual Comfort and Mental Relaxation*, our entry was conceived as the state of dynamic balance between the introvert introspective movement and the extrovert outward-bound movement. The changes in the human mind are brought about by the gradual change in the quality of space that it experiences.



*Japan Design Foundation
Competition © Shirish Beri*

The spiritual happening

Could our space designs act as an interface between the dynamic forces seeking expression from within and those coming from without? Can the inner space within our consciousness harmonize with the outer space that we create?

Instead of just responding to the measurable rationale of the clients' brief with a matter-of-fact objective consciousness, can we expand upon the brief and then design with a more value-based subjective consciousness?

Can our design include both the measurable and immeasurable elements of life? For me, the subjective attitudes that shape a design are far more important than mere utilitarian requirements. These concepts and attitudes are what add life and spirit to the functional spaces, e.g. the step wells of the past as compared to the bore wells of today, or the old well-crafted food granaries compared to the shoddy, leaking godowns of today.

As they say, the house is made up of measurable walls, roof, floor, doors and windows, but the essence of the house lies in its emptiness, the quality of its immeasurable hollow space.

In South India, before work on a new house is started, a ceremony called *garbhanyasam* is performed, which means the impregnation of space for the creation of a building. This is a beautiful concept. An empty hollow copper vessel symbolizing space is held in an inclined position and seeds of five different kinds of grain, symbolizing external energies and resources, are thrown inside as an act of impregnation. Space is considered as something living.

In India, the lady of the house draws *rangoli* designs outside the front door every morning with coloured powders, to welcome the new day, or a guest, thereby starting the day with a creative activity. This activity recognizes the importance of space (by decorating it) and of time (by conscious awareness of a new day).

Spaces that are in touch with nature and its forces have been proved to have a rejuvenating effect on our body and soul. Can our designs act as a catalyst in bringing us closer to nature and to our inner spirit? Can the man-made and the natural be integrated so that a symbiotic relationship develops

between the two? Then, sustainable designs that respect the spirit of this earth would spontaneously happen, and spaces can embody a healing quality.

A few months after a group of primary school students shifted into their new campus, which was designed around a tree, the teachers and matrons told me that the students had been less violent and destructive. They now appeared more joyous and creative. On being asked to write an essay on *My Best Friend*, many students wrote about this tree. The trees in my farmhouse and beach house have almost become like family members, whom I wish on arriving and bid goodbye while leaving. The rain falling in the courtyard has become one's sibling.

Children are more sensitive to space and nature. I remember an incident at my friend's place. We were sitting inside the hall. From the doorway, I could see my friend's three-year-old daughter swaying harmoniously on the terrace. I became curious. I went to her and asked her what she was doing. She said, 'Don't you feel this breeze blowing here? I am swaying with it, like those branches and the leaves of that tree.' Now, isn't that wonderful?

Spirituality is to be connected, connecting to others as an extension of oneself. Can our designs contribute to the universal values of communicating, sharing, caring (not only with fellow humans, but with everything) by designing appropriate interactive spaces?

Spirituality is not an end product but a continuous, flexible, proactive, living process of evolution and growth. Kahlil Gibran gives a beautiful simile for how a house should shelter its inmates—not like a deadpan glistening bandage film that covers a wound, but like our living eyelid that shelters and covers the eye. This example implies a live process—with flexibility, manoeuvrability and adsorption. Can our spaces display this flexibility to grow, evolve, change and adapt? Could we design dynamic spaces that proactively adapt themselves to changing needs?

With true spirituality, there comes simplicity—a simplicity in spite of the diversity, plurality and complexity, a simplicity that has the presence of the essence and the absence of redundancy. Can our designs shed the redundant to reach a level of simplicity that is potent and strong by itself?

With spirituality comes honesty. There is no place for hypocrisy to disguise any reality. To overcome the casualness and the stylized fads and imitativeness that have crept into our designs, we really need to have silence,

to pause and to re-examine our premises, understandings, values and attitudes, and translate them into the spatial language.

Can we create holistic, value-based designs leading to an architecture of belonging, of caring; an architecture of honesty, spontaneity and simplicity?

Ultimately, it is the kind of Life that we understand and live that finds expression in our work and behaviour. In order to bring about this renaissance in our designs for outer spaces, a renaissance has to happen in our inner mind. Only then will our designs breathe life into spaces. Instead of becoming energy-sapping, dispirited spaces, they would become spirited spaces that rejuvenate us, that delightfully affirm life, to bring joy and beauty in our lives.

May our architecture celebrate Life!



An Experiment in Self-Observation

WILLEM ZWART



One of the vexing questions in Krishnamurti's teachings is *how* to become aware of the contents of our consciousness. Is there anything we can do to aid this journey of discovery, or is any question that starts with *how* automatically doomed to failure since it presupposes a system, a technique, or some form of authority? Krishnamurti has always skilfully dodged the *how* question; but, in two public talks in 1944 and on a few other occasions, he suggested an experiment in self-observation, one that can be conducted by oneself but also in an educational setting. And what better context for this than the senior social studies class, which has as one of its goals the fostering of self-awareness and self-knowledge? So, last December, I sent my students into the proverbial Oak Grove wilderness and asked them to conduct an experiment in self-observation.

Krishnamurti described this experiment on Sunday, 28th May 1944, under the peaceful shade of the oaks of the Oak Grove next to the school, while the Allied troops were fighting the Axis powers in

Italy and elsewhere in the world. He told his audience that he would like to suggest a way to assist in the excavation of our minds. He pointed out that everyone knows how to keep a diary. His *way* was a little different: rather than keep a *retrospective diary*, he asked his audience to 'try to write down every thought-feeling, whenever you have a little time'. He recognized how difficult this was because our 'thinking is too rapid, disconnected and wandering', but he encouraged his audience to stick with it.

Ideally, one would do this whenever one could during the day and examine what was written down in the evening. In this way, he claimed, one would gradually learn to 'be able to follow each movement of thought-feeling'. Then, this 'journey of self-discovery' would give access to ever-deeper layers of the mind. As these layers were revealed and seen in the right way, with choiceless awareness—a passive and active alertness at the same time—one would understand oneself and become still. And, he said, 'with stillness comes highest wisdom and bliss.'

Two weeks later, on Sunday, 11th June 1944, Krishnamurti asked his audience whether they had 'tried to write as I suggested'. If they had, they would be 'beginning to develop that mirror which reflects your thoughts-feelings without any distortion ... and so self-knowledge becomes wider and deeper', because 'you not only comprehend the present momentary action and reaction but also the past that has produced the present'. He warned not to 'treat this writing down as a new method, a new technique', and to keep in mind that the essential thing is 'to become aware of every thought-feeling'. He concluded by saying, '... it is this discovery, this understanding that is the liberating and transforming factor.'¹

On Tuesday, 7th December, and then again on Monday, 13th December 2010, with the Irish economy in danger of becoming the latest casualty of the world-wide economic crisis, the senior class left my classroom and spread out over Oak Grove School's beautiful, spacious, and silent wooded campus. The students found a spot to be alone, armed with a pen and paper with which to record their thoughts and feelings. Some sat in the Oak Grove not far from the same spot where Krishnamurti had outlined his experiment in self-observation in 1944. Before leaving the classroom we read his instructions together and discussed the intention behind them.

Then we read a short excerpt from

the *First Walk* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*:

*So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbour, or friend, nor any company left me but my own.... But I, detached as I am from them and from the whole world, what am I? This must now be the object of my inquiry.*²

Upon their return, I asked the students to destroy the pages with their recorded thoughts and feelings and to write a short, reflective essay on the experience. At first, the exercise was not easy for students. One student wrote, 'It's strange to take the time to sit down and analyse your thoughts. It takes you deeper than just the first assumption you had about a certain thought... It allows for the realization that a lot of your thoughts are superficial.'³ Another student found it not at all a pleasant experience: 'Well, to my surprise, as I sat on a rock below an oak tree there was so much... it soon became overwhelming. Thought after thought, page after page, it all made absolutely no sense. I guess I had never actually tried to observe my thoughts in such a way.' A third student was dismayed to discover, 'how self-centred I am, when left alone with my own thoughts. I wonder if this is how others feel too. I noticed that many things that I wrote down had to do with me.'

Gradually, however, frustration gave way to learning. Students expressed amazement at the speed and seemingly random nature of their thoughts; observed

that there appeared to be a link between their thoughts and the environment they were in; and noticed that by really attending to their thoughts and feelings they would sometimes end. As one student put it: 'It provided me with the opportunity to take a step back and assess a certain situation and all of my feelings as well. It allowed me to express all my disappointment, anger, frustration, and sadness. And then, after processing all of that, I could let it go. It was over and done. The issue suddenly became insignificant.' Several students echoed the sentiment that upon closer observation, the attachment to, and identification with thought became less pronounced or disappeared altogether.

'Each thought is like a mouse visiting your kitchen at midnight—you may remain sleeping soundly and let it run its course, or you may worry yourself, your ego, and attack a thing of little threat,' a student concluded. In general, students valued the experience and what they learned from it: 'I'd say it was something that is good to do, to sit and analyse what the hell it is you are thinking all day. It is good to let go of those thoughts many times.' But questions remained as well.

As one student put it, 'Overall, this left me with a lot of questions and hardly any answers.'

As explorers and discoverers of our consciousness, being faced with a lot of questions and few answers is an exciting and, yes, occasionally unnerving prospect as well. Any help is appreciated on this journey of discovery. Krishnamurti's instruction to write down our thoughts and feelings and take some time to understand them was a welcome suggestion in this regard. He proposes a *how* (rather than a *How*), and a *way* (rather than a *Way*), and, judging from the outcome of our seniors' experiment, his *way* has real practical merit. Even in the space of only two classes most of our seniors reported learning about themselves and about the mechanics of thought. Whether their discoveries will lead to full liberation and transformation, as Krishnamurti claimed that May–June of 1944, under the oaks of the Oak Grove, is still another question. But as the case of the student who reported understanding and then being able to let go of a difficult issue demonstrates, just a few moments of self-observation can have real and lasting consequences.

Notes

1. All quotes from J Krishnamurti, *Ojai 3rd Public Talk 28th May 1944* and *Ojai 5th Public Talk 11th June 1944*. See also *Bombay 8th Public Talk 7th March 1948*, and *New Delhi 5th Public Talk 18th January 1961*.
2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (London: Penguin Classics, 1979), p. 27.
3. Student quotes with permission of the Oak Grove School Senior Class of 2011.

The Calendar of Nature: Connecting Children with Nature through the Observation of Trees

SUHEL QUADER



The natural world is changing so rapidly that entire landscapes are being unrecognizably altered within a few decades. These changes are driven by humans in one way or another. We affect these changes directly, in removing habitats for mining, dams and houses, and in continuing to hunt species on the land and the sea. Human activities also have indirect effects, for example, in spreading invasive species, and in nudging the earth's climate further and further from what wild species are used to.

The need has never been greater for individual and collective action to stem this tide of change and loss, and for the social and political will to temper our desire for more and more. Only then will future generations be able to wonder at the beauty of a coral reef, the grandeur of a rain forest, or the hypnotic stare of a wild tiger. What is required for this action to occur? Simply put, we need an emotional as well as intellectual engagement with nature. We need to experience an emotional connection through which we value nature for its own sake—otherwise we lack motivation; and we need to use our intellect to understand the problems facing the natural world, and to devise solutions.

The question I would like to pose here is this: Can we engage both the hearts and minds of children in nature through a constructive school-based activity? I think the answer is *yes*, and below I describe one such activity.

Climate change and phenology

One of the dramatic effects of climate warming, an effect that cannot be explained away by sceptics of climate science, is on phenology—the timing of seasonal events in the natural world. Seasonal cycles in temperature and

rainfall influence bird migration, the flowering and fruiting of trees, and the reproduction and growth of virtually every living organism. The change in climate, from decade to decade, changes these seasonal cycles and, in consequence, seasonal patterns in nature. The change in phenology in response to changing climate has been well documented in North America and Europe. Summing over various phenological measures, including migration time and the emergence of leaves and flowers, spring is calculated to be arriving three days earlier every decade in these regions.

In the tropics and the developing world in general, and in India in particular, very little is known about decade-to-decade changes in phenology in response to changing temperature and rainfall. There are anecdotes about drastic shifts in flowering, for example of the Amaltas (*Cassia fistula*) in Kerala, but we simply don't know how widespread such patterns are.

The project

To document these possible changes, we have started a project called SeasonWatch. In SeasonWatch, we invite members of the public to contribute systematic observations on the timing of fruiting, flowering and leafing of trees. The basic activity consists of choosing a tree to monitor, visiting that tree once a week, and noting down simple details of its leaves, flowers and fruits. The tree can be anywhere—in your garden, along your street, at your office, or in your school premises. A year's observation allows you to draw up a calendar for your tree, which can then be compared with other trees of the same kind, with other parts of the country, and with other years. The figure shows an example of a year-by-year comparison taken from phenological observations of trees at Rishi Valley School in South India.

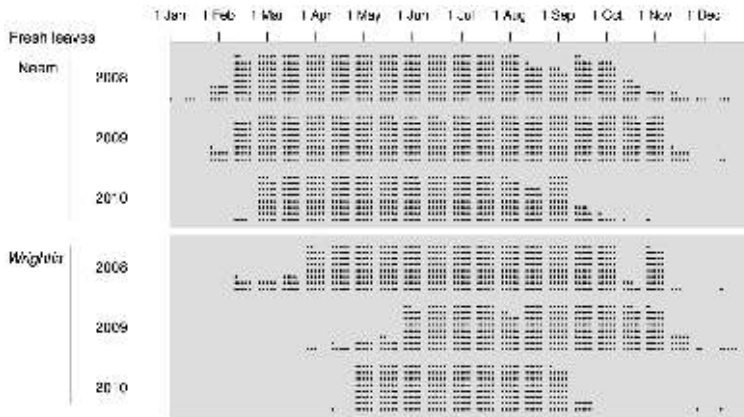


Figure: Patterns of emergence of fresh leaves in two species of trees, Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) and Pala Indigo (*Wrightia tinctoria*) at Rishi Valley. Forty individuals of each species have been monitored fortnightly since end 2007. Each dot represents a tree with fresh leaves. Clusters of dots mean that many trees had fresh leaves. You can see that the emergence of fresh leaves begins a little later for *Wrightia* than it does for Neem each year. For both species fresh leaves emerged over a longer period in 2008 than in 2010. *Wrightia* shows a particularly shortened period with fresh leaves in 2010. The difference between the years might be because of differences in rainfall in the previous years: total rainfall was around 900 mm in 2007, but only 600 mm in 2009. The reduced rainfall in 2009 may have led to lowered food production and storage by these trees, and therefore a delayed and shortened leafing period in the following year.

What can these observations tell us? At their most basic, they build up a simple documentation of seasonality. But they also allow us to compare yearly changes in phenology with year-to-year changes in climate, and to warn us about potential disruptions in ecological networks. The possible disruptions arise from the fact that plants are the backbone of any ecosystem. They produce food out of carbon dioxide, water, sunlight, and little else. Everything else depends directly (herbivores) or indirectly (carnivores, decomposers) on the food that plants produce. Since much of this food is produced seasonally (as leaves, flowers and fruits), any change in plant seasonality can profoundly affect the animals that depend on plants. There are already a couple of examples from temperate regions where a mismatched change in phenology might be leading to population decline in some species.

So SeasonWatch helps to document potential changes in phenology and to provide a warning if things are not going so well. But how can it contribute to an emotional connection with nature? The idea here is that, by noting down what a tree is doing, week after week, a person develops a bond with that tree. I have been monitoring two trees on my walk to my office for almost two years now and I have begun to think of them as *my* trees, not so much with a sense of ownership, but rather with a sense of responsibility. As I begin to understand the various interconnections affecting my trees—the rain that stimulates fresh leaf growth, the soil that provides nutrients, the birds and butterflies that visit it, and the constant threat of the road-widener's axe—my sense of responsibility broadens out from the individual tree to the larger world around. Whether, in fact, such an emotional connection develops in those who participate in SeasonWatch remains to be seen. This may not happen

spontaneously and so we must develop additional tools and activities to encourage it.

Having already gone through a long period of educational and social programming, adults may be less susceptible to developing these emotional connections. But children have perhaps not yet been fully co-opted into the modern world's disdain for nature. For this reason, SeasonWatch has a strong emphasis on drawing in schoolteachers and children to the project.

SeasonWatch in schools

In our schools programme, children monitor trees, and teachers coordinate the activity. The activity can be class-based; or it can be carried out as part of a school nature club, as in many of the schools we work with in Kerala. The basic activity is standard: a child chooses or is assigned a tree, and then spends five minutes at the tree every week, noting simple information about its leaves, flowers and fruits. Now, doing this week after week can get very dull, so we are working on a weekly activity book that will make participation both more interesting and more educational. Some activities can be more creative, like sketching a leaf or the entire tree; others encourage cross-disciplinary application, such as estimating the height of the tree using trigonometry or simple ratios (the ratio of the height of a tree to the length of its shadow is the same as that for a student, or a pole of known height). Students can discuss their favourite nature-themed poems and what imagery best evokes the rustling of leaves in the wind; and they can document the variety of creatures from ants to bats that inhabit their tree. They can explore the texture of its bark and fruit; and examine the bumps and spines of its pollen under a microscope.

In this way, SeasonWatch can be expanded or compressed according to the needs and flexibility of the school and children. At its most basic, participating in SeasonWatch requires just five minutes a week, to note the state of leaves, flowers and fruits. At the next level, children would work on the pre-designed activities described above. But if tree-based exploration is embraced wholeheartedly into the school system, the possibilities are limited only by the creativity of teachers and the children themselves—for example, for language class, children could write a poem about their tree; for maths, they can use the tree to explore counting, fractions, trigonometry, and fractals, depending on their age; for physics, they can address questions of

stress, strain, structure, stability and elasticity; for biology, they might investigate carbon storage, pollination, dispersal and biodiversity. Through all this, we might perhaps emphasize that the tree is not just an object that provides us something that we want (shade, fruit, wood, oxygen), but a living, breathing, growing entity with a history and a future—and it is one of billions of such organisms that share the world with us.



SeasonWatch is a Citizen Science project run by the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore, and the Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysore, with support from Wipro Applying Thought in Schools. SeasonWatch is still in the fledgling stage, and apart from the protocols of monitoring phenology, all other project-related activities are still being thought through and developed.

The project covers about 100 species of trees, but for our schools programme, we focus on a subset of 25:

Jackfruit <i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i>	Devil's tree <i>Alstonia scholaris</i>
Jamun <i>Syzygium cumini</i>	Purple bauhinia <i>Bauhinia purpurea</i>
Pride of India <i>Lagerstroemia speciosa</i>	Indian coral tree <i>Erythrina indica</i>
Indian gooseberry <i>Phyllanthus emblica</i>	Flame of the forest <i>Butea monosperma</i>
Campbell's magnolia <i>Magnolia campbellii</i>	Indian laburnum <i>Cassia fistula</i>
Box myrtle <i>Myrica esculenta</i>	Pongam <i>Pongamia pinnata</i>
Mango <i>Mangifera indica</i>	Tamarind <i>Tamarindus indica</i>
Banyan <i>Ficus benghalensis</i>	Neem <i>Azadirachta indica</i>
Mast tree <i>Polyalthia longifolia</i>	Walnut <i>Juglans regia</i>
Himalayan cherry <i>Prunus cerasoides</i>	Gulmohar <i>Delonix regia</i>
Himalayan Maple <i>Acer villosum</i>	Egyptian mimosa <i>Acacia nilotica</i>
Himalayan Rhododendron <i>Rhododendron arboreum</i>	East Indian walnut <i>Albizia lebeck</i>
	Red silk cotton tree <i>Bombax ceiba</i>

Website: www.seasonwatch.in Email: sw@seasonwatch.in

Other Citizen Science projects designed for schoolchildren

Project BudBurst: plant phenology project (USA).

<http://www.neoninc.org/budburst/>

Nature's Calendar: plant and animal phenology (UK).

www.naturescalendar.org.uk

School of Ants: documenting ant diversity (USA).

www.schoolofants.org

World Water Monitoring Day (USA).

<http://www.worldwatermonitoringday.org/>

From the Mind's Attic

KRISHNA H



*It is as though you have an eye
That sees all forms
But does not see itself.
This is how your mind is.
Its light penetrates everywhere
And engulfs everything,
So why does it not know itself?*

Foyan

One of those nondescript days at work. Nothing unusual. This morning, I feel emotionally flat and pale, like the damp, discordant notes from the rusty, slacking strings of an untuned guitar ... The sameness which I experience today is discouraging. Children scramble around towards no apparent destination in unnameable excitement.

Adolescent kids always seem so sprightly outdoors. What happens to them when they are indoors in a classroom? I wonder. Is there a problem with the classroom structure? Or maybe they have a high need for entertainment ...

‘What are we doing today? May we not do the workbook today? Please?’ plead six voices in effortless harmony. ‘Of course! Whatever you want!’ I reply, tongue-in-cheek, but they know what I actually mean.

I walk into a class staring at the faded, much-used red-oxide floor. The same six children on the floor with feet outstretched under strange blue *chowkis*, closed books and wide-open eyes, are waiting for me to settle down. ‘I see your *chappals* outside are not kept properly; you have two seconds to arrange them,’ I mock-threaten them. They run out and organize their

chappals, mischievously displacing mine. Am I to get angry and establish my seriousness or take this childish behaviour in my stride? I smile and let it be. But it is not really over in me.

What will this mean in the long term? They will end up not taking all this seriously! I must react. No. That's not right. Argh! Doubts and counter-arguments surface . . . Am I being dishonest? Must I tell them how I feel? No. I don't have to lay bare everything. That would be irrelevant and unprofessional!

These conversations, all this inner drama, remain invisible to the students and others, and often even to myself. The convoluted thoughts, long-winded arguments, quick exasperations and, at times, deeply cynical or fragile feelings, constantly chasing one another, criss-crossing or co-existing in irreconcilable dissonance, are often invisible.

It is not very difficult to guess the inner complexities of other adults' minds. Most often I assume they must be similar to mine, in structure at least, if not in content. Behind all those rationalizations as a teacher, adult and colleague, there stands poised the struggle with some very basic confusions and conflicts. Much of this is unspoken and sometimes underlying (maybe even driving?) many *rational* discussions amongst people. *But we often expect children to make their inner lives visible to themselves and to us. Their inner drama is more available for our adult gaze, it seems.*

Something about our daily interactions with children brings to the fore some struggles within, which may otherwise lie submerged in a seeming self-possession that occludes awareness. These moments of *talking with oneself* so often bring all those happily hung, photo-framed images of being *contained*, *mature* and *free* crashing down to earth, shattering our delusions about self and life. And this is why I treasure teaching and working with children.

Me versus my image of me

'Uncle, he can't run fast only. I came first!' a six-year-old triumphantly shares on reaching me. 'That's okay. We all run at different speeds. No need to compare,' I respond wisely. Minutes after this, a group of children run up to announce, 'Our coordinator last year—she was so much fun!' 'I am sure,' I reply as their current coordinator, in deliberate cheer, taking an awkward glance at the mild discomfort in me, a reaction that quickly surges ahead of my awareness. We part ways after some chit-chat, but I am left thinking. *How did*

they mean that? Did they mean their current coordinator is not good enough? I hope they were not comparing teachers! Must I clarify with them? I feel a flash of connection with the six-year-old and his keenness to win the race.

Who I think I am and what I need to be

‘I am afraid of what others will think of me,’ says a twelve-year-old in a dialogue class. *Poor thing! She must be so insecure ...* What others think of me: this one’s a universal. Both children and adults seem to relentlessly worry about it. *I am not so afraid of what others think of me,* I tell myself with relief. The same weekend, for no apparent reason, I find myself struggling with what I think of myself. *Am I good enough at what I am doing? Am I genuinely inquiring and self-critical? Am I capable of quiet and awareness?*

Letting go

‘Why must everything in dialogue class end up in *insecurity* or *feelings* or something like that?’ an irked thirteen-year-old protests in a dialogue session. ‘Not necessary. Where do you think they must end up?’ I ask, generating no useful reply. ‘If you think you have solved the problem of insecurity completely, then we won’t talk about it,’ says my colleague. Silence prevails. *Are these issues and questions age-inappropriate? Is there a discomfort in looking at insecurity? Or is it a matter of low stamina for such dialogue? But they do sometimes have original and insightful things to say ...* A sense of urgency to solve the problem of insecurity lingers, remaining for a few days. Then I receive a call from my investment agent. There is some confusion with where he has put my savings and even before I realize it, insecurity floods my mind momentarily, with the fear of losing the money. *Fat lot of insight I have on the nature of insecurity!*

I am important too

‘He doesn’t like me, Uncle. He was teasing me! That’s why I hit him,’ sobbed an eleven-year-old in anguish, after a petty skirmish with his friend. ‘You don’t know that. He didn’t even speak with you. You are making it up in your head,’ I reply firmly. *What a high need for appreciation and acceptance from people this child seems to have!* Over the next two days, my students show consistently low interest in writing in class. One even mutters under her breath that the class is *boring*. We have the usual *talk* that such a situation warrants, but my mind has embarked on a slippery emotional downhill. *How can they be so uninterested? Is it the activity that they are bored with or is it me? Is there a lack of relationship, or a*

general apathy specific to this group? No easy answers are forthcoming, but one question opens many doors: What is this need for appreciation and acceptance that I suffer from?

Me in control

‘Schools are not meant to be nice places. They make teachers very powerful. Teaching is a socially sanctioned strategy to mould children, where a few adults exercise control over children’s lives on behalf of parents and society,’ a precocious student once commented. ‘Interesting analysis, but that need not be the case everywhere, no?’ I remember telling him. *Is his clever commentary even partly true?* What frightens us when children behave in ways that we don’t have control over? Unsupervised leisure time for students, their questions, their unpredictable behaviours, sometimes even their childish mischief, all seem to have some capacity to threaten us as soon as they are interpreted as our loss of control. *Are we such frightened, fragile control-freaks? Must we decide so much for children? But surely children cannot decide everything for themselves . . . there will be utter chaos and indecision in the school! But how are we so sure?* The same voice vehemently argues on.

Many such examples compete and tumble down when I rummage through my mind’s attic, but after a point it is all mere storytelling, I suppose. While living and relating with others, especially children, the mirror is constantly held up, though I don’t always seem to be paying attention. Sometimes, the worry about having to be attentive obscures all the things that are clearly in sight! This recurrent tension and mental wrestling, though not a deep distinguishing feature of my work in school, seems to remind me that I must always slow down, watch and at times look out for questions that lie at every corner, waiting to leap on me unprepared. *But all this is not my personal neurosis, I hope. I am sure all teachers go through this. Don’t they?*

What must I lay bare about myself and what must I expect of others? What must I talk about with children and their parents? What must I not talk about? What must I deem important and what must I overlook in my relationship with others? Such questions are a large part of my thinking and living. When students resist dialogue, I think they are not interested in inquiry. When a parent wants the features of this *alternative* education and not the questions that drive it, I think I am being used as a mere service provider. When parents are over-anxious about their own child, I tend to become righteously angry about their self-centredness. Are these unwarranted

judgements, idiosyncratic preoccupations or valid questions? *Maybe experience will change everything . . . maybe all questions and confusions will clarify themselves in time . . . I hope. But several years of teaching have freed me from very little of this inner tussle! Work-in-progress, I suppose.*

It definitely helps to talk outside of oneself, to others. Some of these anxieties dwindle to nothing on speaking with my teacher friends, some of whom have been teaching for over twenty years now. Their questions seem similar, though of varied shades and manifestations. None claim freedom from any of the preoccupations that dominate my particular brain. However, experience has taught them awareness of these recurrent psychological auto-mechanisms. Awareness also seems to have taken care of the dysfunction these questions and conflicts may potentially cause in one's daily life. *But is it possible to be completely free? Or is freedom just a matter of degree?*

Talking with children is a constant reminder that we—children and adults—are all of the same kind but vary in degree. We are similar in our conflicts, in our being and our psychological lives. And talking with adult colleagues makes it evident that we are all similar in our professional questions and philosophical moorings. Maybe this is more so in a deliberately flat, non-hierarchical, teacher-run school, where regular dialogue is a constant leveller. Although dialogue can churn up an acute sense of difference, it mostly eases the isolation. It seems that we are all in the same boat on frequently turbulent waters.

But some people do seem wiser . . . and absolute equality is a myth. No structure by itself can solve the problem of this divisive mind . . . the voice speaks again within.



Teaching at University: Challenges and Concerns

DEEPTI PRIYA MEHROTRA



Is authentic learning possible in the heady atmosphere of an elite university, or is the race for degrees and prestigious jobs too overwhelming? As a student in Delhi University during the 1980s I found learning possible, *despite* indifferent teaching, an examination-oriented system, and an ethos that was often pretentious. Of course, a great deal of learning took place outside the classroom, where I was fortunate to find infinitely varied learning opportunities.

After completing a Ph.D. in the early 1990s, I chose to work at research and writing projects linked to grassroots action for social change, rather than join the university system. University seemed to be an ivory tower, fundamentally alienated from people's lives and concerns, disengaged from grassroots action and wider realities. A decade later, I agreed to teach one course, *Gender and Schooling*, to teacher trainees (final year students of the four-year B.El.Ed. programme) in an undergraduate college. The course theme allowed for an extension of concerns I was

already involved with, and offered scope for sharing some of these in-depth with younger people.

Teaching turned out to be an amazing experience. Over the next nine years I taught diverse courses as guest faculty, across the disciplines of education, journalism, peace/conflict studies, political science and philosophy. Interacting with students proved to be immensely fruitful and mutually enriching; however, many questions remain in my mind regarding institutionalized higher education.

Framing the challenge

Is real education possible in a highly competitive, examination-oriented system, where students are required to go through standardized syllabi, imbibe and reproduce *knowledge bytes*? Does a bureaucratic system, with its in-built rigidities and limitations, allow space for authentic learning? What about individual life concerns and meaningful inquiry?

Our universities are basically designed to prepare young persons to fit into the

higher rungs of a competitive, consumerist economic system. Despite this, is it possible to encourage and empower students to swim against the current? Can a university classroom allow deeper questioning? Can it embody living, breathing space and spark off inquiry, awareness and insights? Do committed teachers—of whom there are several—make a vital difference to students?

The answers are provisional and mixed: both *yes* and *no*. It *is* possible to work within contradictions. Young people come in thirsty for authentic learning, for authentic life. It *is* possible for teachers to use the space of the classroom in creative ways that touch hearts and minds, inspiring explorations into unknown places. Yet the system sets severe limits; all the contradictions do *not* melt away. Students are also driven to pass examinations and head for careers. They need help to figure out how to keep alive a spirit of inquiry and respond creatively to the burning issues of the present age, even as they manage practical concerns.

Exploring possibilities

Within the broad parameters of course, syllabus and examinations, it isn't easy to make space for authentic learning. Initially unsure about handling examination-oriented teaching, I stuck to the syllabus, prepared and delivered lectures. The second year, with more confidence, I took up the preset themes and topics in a different order, which flowed more

organically, and elicited students' views, inviting far more participation. I relaxed, allowing the atmosphere to be freer, conversations to flow more naturally. I found this did not interfere with students' performance in assignments and examinations. The classroom became a lively place, a place for play, dialogue and insightful sharing. Fears receded into the background—our mutual fear of examinations, and apprehensions about each other.

I was grateful to be teaching in new and demanding departments, with responsive students and several sensitive colleagues. Indeed it is a privilege to have students whom one can meet regularly through a whole year. Teachers influence, and can deeply affect, the lives of students. A classroom can become a subversive space: a place for reflection, thought, awareness, and attentive mutual listening.

But often, differences cropped up with authorities over routine matters such as enforced attendance, strict assignment schedules and rigid assessment methods. These procedures seemed to be guided by an overall disciplinarian mentality and authoritarian ethos. Enormous energy flows into such dead-ends, whereas we could easily be more flexible, benefiting all concerned, bringing the same energy to bear on things that matter far more. Individual students need more attention that is affectionate and understanding, rather than judgemental and supervisory.

Intellectual aspects too need more attention, if we are to live up to our responsibility of *educating*.

As I lived through our classes, some things became clear. Young people are thirsty for meaning and direction. If they detect hypocrisy, disinterest or shallowness, they can be rude and dismissive. They are curious about the teacher: the particular human being she is, what she believes in, whether she lives as she believes. Honesty is appreciated, even if it shows up vulnerabilities, shortcomings and frustrations.

A teacher's openness and sharing go a long way towards building a relationship. Sharing one's life, thoughts and feelings with students is a natural process of reaching out with trust, and it is reciprocated. A teacher need not be fully sorted out. Even more important, she need not pretend to be sorted out. It makes sense that she leave space for her own growth, and for students to approach and help her clarify her own understanding. A relationship requires mutual respect and trust. As one learner among many, the teacher need have no pretensions to knowing everything.

Education is linked to life, to particular lives. Subjects (every subject) can be taught in ways that make classroom learning relevant. Teachers can bring different perspectives to the attention of students through their words and thoughts, as well as by encouraging each

student to think, speak and research. A vibrant atmosphere builds up when many more people question, speak, inform, assert and voice opinions, unlike in a purely lecture mode.

The teacher needs to be aware of the atmosphere in class. It is possible to be flexible rather than rigidly adhering to a pre-decided schedule. For instance, if students one day seem to be exhausted, unhappy and under-slept, why carry on with a theme that they can hardly absorb? Instead, we could build conversations around their current concerns, linking these where possible to subject matter—be it sociology, philosophy, psychology or education.

Teachers lay down certain ground rules. These may not coincide perfectly with the rules of the institution. For instance, there may be teachers who do not believe in imposing attendance or arbitrary hierarchies. Taking a stand, even if it goes against the ruling orthodoxy, can help stimulate students to think and form their own judgements.

A teacher helps bring out students: the silent one, the angry one, the one with strong prejudices, the thoughtful one.... As an atmosphere of trust builds up, class becomes a non-threatening zone, providing collective support to students to think through issues, even take difficult decisions. The classroom can nurture personal transformation and courage, aid in moving beyond family and social norms,

beyond helplessness and despair. Students may become confident, assertive and mature enough to tackle difficult situations in creative ways.

Teachers need to model non-violent conflict resolution and demonstrate ways to deal with anger. A colleague describes her challenge with a group of journalism students who constantly disturbed others with impatient remarks, fidgeting and outbursts. Although they troubled her a great deal during the year she taught them *developmental communication*, she remained patient but firm. Three years later, she happened to meet Jyoti, the erstwhile *gang leader*, who spontaneously apologized: 'I should have paid more attention in class, ma'am!' Despite her earlier inattention, something had seeped in, for Jyoti now came across as a very thoughtful person, a good listener, working with a developmental organization!

Students learn subtle lessons in class. Smriti invariably had her hand up in class, and was angry and hurt whenever the teacher didn't immediately ask her to speak. The teacher explained that several students in class were less vocal, habitually silent, so she preferred to ask them to speak first, to draw them out. Although initially unconvinced, Smriti finally understood. A year after completing her B.El.Ed. she came into college one day, sought out the same teacher's class, gently knocked, asked permission and sat at the back of the class, quietly. She explained, 'I

miss this class so much. I never get to ask questions or give my opinion now!' (She was pursuing a post-graduate degree.)

Teachers can play a significant role by helping channel anger and unhappiness in constructive directions. I recall students angry about *curfew* timings for girls while their own brothers could be out till much later; one whose grandfather never spoke to her all his life because she was a girl; another who was expected to regularly help her mother cook while her brother studied; one whose younger brother was sent out with her to market to *protect* her; others being pushed into marriages they didn't want; one who was refused by a prospective groom on grounds of dowry; another who challenged property being given only to her brother; others angry about sexual harassment on buses and roads; one who suffered sexual abuse during childhood by an uncle; and so on. When they are helped and enabled to articulate, critically analyse and place individual situations within wider social perspectives, thinking clarifies and understanding develops. This releases their energies to make constructive moves. They seek help to come to terms and resolve pressing issues. They begin seeing even their parents as people who need help to reflect and change. They realize that parental restrictions are often born out of fear and anxiety, and they can initiate meaningful dialogue on those issues. Once parents see their daughter's capacity to handle matters in a mature way, often they

relax and loosen restrictions. Often they begin seeking her advice on important issues. A student, Dharini, said that her parents look to her for advice regarding her younger siblings. Vartika's parents sent her to the B.El.Ed programme because they thought teaching was the ideal profession for women, since they could be home by afternoon and look after the kids. By the fourth year of her course, they realized something quite different had happened to their daughter. As she observed, 'They realize I have become a critical thinker!' They were worried about, yet also rather proud of, the change in her.

College can be a centre, a base from which students branch out into the world, returning to share and discuss what they have seen and experienced. For instance, students of journalism went to Jantar Mantar, the quintessential spot for protests, where those ousted by the Narmada Dam project and the victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy were staging a *satyagraha*; each student sat with one person and tried to understand her/his reasons for being there. This was a life-altering exposure for some students. Later, they discussed what they had learnt and were motivated to go deeper into the issues, to research and write.

Going out of one's way to engage students' deeper interests can yield significant results. Teachers may observe and notice big things and small. It is worthwhile to never give up on a student,

however hopeless her case may seem. A student of journalism just wouldn't write her first assignment, which was simply to write a page about *anything*. Two or three weeks past the deadline, enquiries revealed that she was interested only in fashion. She was encouraged to write on this and she did! By the end of the year, she was interested in much more. She seriously researched *water* as a developmental issue and the class gave a standing ovation to her presentation on the theme!

Often young people amaze us with their courage and inventiveness, taking steps beyond what we could ever imagine. Arpita, a bright student, looked sad and upset one day, her arm in a bandage. Outside the class, she explained that her father came home drunk as usual the previous night, and started shouting at her mother; Arpita intervened, and he hit her. He was an engineer, worked at his job all day, and drank in the evening before returning home. Among several things we discussed that day, I explained that alcoholism is a disease and requires appropriate treatment. A few weeks later (after the vacation) Arpita looked pleased. She informed the entire class that her sister and she had locked their father in a room at home, slipping in food at mealtimes. They explained to him their reasons for this action, but refused to open the door for several days. It worked! He remained sober and well behaved through the year. Arpita, meanwhile, completed her course, took up

a job as a teacher, and continued studying part-time.

Effective action such as Arpita's is in no way divorced from education. During the same year, we were studying social and political theory, as well as feminist theories, and such learning actually grew nuanced and interconnected, took on flesh and blood, in intersection with lived concerns. Clearly, it makes sense to integrate theory and practice, in a dialectical relationship, building understanding from the ground up.

Teaching and knowledge continue to be basically conceived within narrow disciplinary boundaries. *Multi-disciplinary* and *inter-disciplinary* have become catchwords without anyone quite appreciating why or how. They seem to be more a fashion than a conviction.

Continuing concerns

No system can ensure intellectual vigour or for that matter moral fibre; however, it is possible for a system to ensure the opposite! Many of our educational institutions are socially and politically disengaged, unrelated to students' life-worlds, as well as intellectually sterile. Professors hardly expend as much energy in reading as they do in playing power games, vying for jobs and perks, promoting favourite students, and setting up personal fiefdoms. Surely students learn something from all this: manipulation, opportunism, compromise and mediocrity. The common notion that 'these are the ways of the

world' gets confirmed. Universities are part of the general rot we see in society, although they claim to be leaders in the advancement of human knowledge and consciousness. They seem to have lost track of the original rationale for their existence: as spaces for free inquiry; nurturing excellence, originality and resources for learning; expanding knowledge for the benefit of the wider world. Instead, they exist in a moral vacuum, with little social purpose and uncertain quality.

The university system in India generally has no way of ensuring that a teacher teaches. There is no way of tracking what happens in class, whether a teacher keeps abreast of her subject, has an understanding of education, or even whether she takes classes regularly. Although some teachers are highly committed, surely there is need for a far greater degree of transparency and accountability. Within a system where the remuneration is fairly high, much of it paid out of the public exchequer, it ought to be everybody's fundamental right to know what kind of teaching takes place in our universities. Tragically, there is no forum for students to voice their discomfort with teachers, or insist on quality.

The lecture method reigns supreme in university settings, despite its limitations being increasingly acknowledged in the realm of school education. At university level, it is taken for granted that *knowledge* is a fixed body, transmitted in top-down fashion. Construction of

knowledge by learners, recognized today as key to relevant education, is somehow missing in the sphere of higher education. This lack leads to students graduating with limited academic capabilities. It follows that research is mediocre, and university teaching more or less the same dull, repetitive, uninspired process.

On the whole, the system as it exists whittles down the teacher's initiative and damages the student's spirit. Yet, given that there are students who want to learn and teachers who are committed, can we not imagine and make better alternatives? Can

a university nurture excellence consciously, respecting individuals, honouring worth, engaging creatively with the realities of our times? Or will students and teachers who are passionate about education and learning have to look outside for more conducive spaces? It is true that we have several new universities today, which are possibly creating different kinds of spaces for meaningful education. Some of the old dilemmas and contradictions may get reproduced, but there is hope, as well, that a wholly different ethos may develop.



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