

**Journal of the  
Krishnamurti Schools**

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No 21, January 2017

JOURNAL  
OF THE  
KRISHNAMURTI  
SCHOOLS

# JOURNAL OF THE KRISHNAMURTI SCHOOLS

No 21, 2017

## **An Educational Journal**

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

### **Editorial Team**

Viju Jaithirtha, D Anantha Jyothi, Alok Mathur, Kamala V Mukunda,  
Jayashree Nambiar, Venkatesh Onkar, P Ramesh, O R Rao

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Dear Reader

Kindly share this Journal, after your perusal,  
with a school nearby or a school you know,  
or a teacher who you feel will enjoy this,  
so that it reaches more educators.

Many thanks  
The Editors

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## CONFIDENCE

So, is it not important to find out why we are confused? Can anybody, except a very few, say that they are not confused politically, religiously, economically? Sirs, you have only to look around you. Every newspaper is shouting in confusion, reflecting the uncertainties, the pains, the anxieties, the impending wars; and the sane, thoughtful person, the earnest person who is trying to find a way out of this confusion surely has first to tackle himself. So then, our question is this, What causes confusion? Why are we confused? One of the obvious factors is that we have lost confidence in ourselves, and that is why we have so many leaders, so many gurus, so many holy books telling us what to do and what not to do. We have lost self-confidence. Obviously, there are people, the technicians, who are full of confidence because they have achieved results. For example, give a first class mechanic any machine and he will understand it. The more technique we have, the more capable we are of dealing with technical things, but surely, that is not self-confidence. We are not using the word confidence as it applies to technical matters. A professor, when he deals with his subject, is full of confidence—at least, when other professors are not listening—or a bureaucrat, a high official, feels confident because he has reached the top of the ladder in the technique of bureaucracy, and he can always exert his authority. Though he may be wrong, he is full of confidence—like a mechanic when you give him a motor he knows all about. But surely, we do not mean that kind of confidence, do we, because we are not technical machines. We are not mere machines ticking according to a certain rhythm, revolving at a certain speed, a certain number of revolutions per minute. We are life, not machines. We would like to make ourselves into machines because then we could deal with ourselves mechanically, repetitiously, and automatically—and that is what most of us want. Therefore, we build walls of resistance, disciplines, controls, tracks along which we run. But even having so conditioned, so placed ourselves, having become so automatic and mechanical, there is still

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a vitality that pursues different things and creates contradictions. Sirs, our difficulty is that we are pliable, that we are alive, not dead; and because life is so swift, so subtle, so uncertain, we do not know how to understand it, and therefore we have lost confidence. Most of us are trained technically because we have to earn our livelihood, and modern civilization demands higher and higher technique. But with that technical mind, that technical capacity, you cannot follow yourself because you are much too swift, you are more pliable, more complicated than the machine, so you are learning to have more and more confidence in the machine and are losing confidence in yourself and are therefore multiplying leaders. So, as I said, one of the causes of confusion is this lack of confidence in ourselves. The more imitative we are, the less confidence we have, and we have made life into a copy book. From early childhood up, we are told what to do—we must do this, we must not do that. So what do you expect? And must you not have confidence in order to find out? Must you not have that extraordinary inward certainty to know what truth is when you meet it?

So, having made life into a technical process, conforming to a particular pattern of action, which is merely technique, naturally we have lost confidence in ourselves, and therefore we are increasing our inward struggle, our inward pain and confusion. Confusion can be dissolved only through self-confidence, and this confidence cannot be gained through another. You have to undertake, for yourself and by yourself, the journey of discovery into the process of yourself in order to understand it. This does not mean you are withdrawn, aloof. On the contrary, Sirs, confidence comes the moment you understand, not what others say, but your own thoughts and feelings, what is happening in yourself and around you. Without that confidence which comes from knowing your own thoughts, feelings, and experiences—their truth, their falseness, their significance, their absurdity—without knowing that, how can you clear up the whole field of confusion which is yourself?

*Third Talk in Bangalore, 18 July 1948*

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## Editorial



Last year when the Journal was being brought out there was deluge in many parts of the country, Chennai being the worst hit. This year around as the next issue is being brought out, we are anxiously awaiting rains. Water, whether it ravages or impoverishes, is a sustainable source of life. However, for water to be a life giving force, it needs to move on without stagnating. The same is true of life and its movement, succinctly captured thus by Krishnamurti:

Have you not noticed that if you sit quietly on the banks of the river you hear its song—the lapping of the water, the sound of the current going by? There is always a sense of movement, an extraordinary movement towards the wider and the deeper. But in the little pool there is no movement at all, its water is stagnant. And if you observe you will see that this is what most of us want: little stagnant pools of existence away from life. We say that our pool-existence is right, and we have invented a philosophy to justify it; we have developed social, political, economic and religious theories in support of it, and we don't want to be disturbed because, you see, what we are after is a sense of permanency...

*This Matter of Culture, Chapter 17*

The Journal in many ways keeps this movement alive by constantly raising questions, making connections and building relationships. The making of this Journal comes in the wake of the teacher's conference held at The School, KFI, Chennai. Both the conference and the Journal seem to evoke a deep sense of interconnectedness not just with each other but with life as a whole. So whether one is looking at the earth as a mere third rock from the sun or a universe that is immensely old and vast as does Anand Mathew Kurien in his article, in 'The Context of our Lives', or at a beautiful pink flower on a touch-me-not plant as in Sunitha Mahesh's 'Learning with Wonder: Environmental Studies for the Young', one is aware of the deep need to connect with nature, for when you connect to nature, you connect

not only with yourself but also with the vast humanity. Both OR Rao and Simon Boxley mirror these reflections as they draw from the same words of Krishnamurti:

There is a tree and we have been watching it day after day for several days...If you establish a relationship with it then you have relationship with mankind. You are responsible then for that tree and for the trees of the world. But if you have no relationship with the living things on this earth you may lose whatever relationship you have with humanity.

OR Rao has an evocative subtitle for his article, 'A Meditation on Science, Poetry and Spirituality'. The main title, 'A Tree, A Flower, A Fly and a Centipede' is even more intriguing. He draws from the work of Krishnamurti, Blake, Tennyson, Aristotle, Einstein amongst others as he ponders with an empathetic spirit on the commonality shared by all living forms. With tongue-in-cheek humour he comes up with pithy statements such as, "Moral: Philosophy and poetry do not mix well" or "Moral: Science and Poetry do not mix well". Underlying this lightness and humour is a deeply touching moment, when he shows how in the death of the humblest of life-forms, we are all united by the realization of fragility and transience of life.

Equally moving is Sandilya Theuerkauf's article 'Opening our Senses: Guided Exercises in Nature Awareness'. He examines how the separateness from the planet is causing a distortion in our relationship. He raises hard questions such as, "Can a farmer see more than his crops? Can a bird-watcher appreciate something other than birds? Can there be a relating where it does not matter who we are? We always perceive through ideas; is it possible to suspend what we know?" He also shows how when, "we are being aware of the body, the breeze, the temperature, the smells, the sounds, the colours and shapes around us, we are not so caught up with who we are." The guided exercises do show how one can open one's senses in order to become more aware of nature.

Written along similar lines is the article by Simon Boxley, titled 'The Revolution Now'. As the title suggests there is a sense of immediacy and urgency as the author forces us to acknowledge that, as far as our future on the planet goes, "the future is now". The irony is that "it is harder to feel the loss of biodiversity than it is to feel one's own hair and nails grow; it is harder to feel the gradual death of one's ecosystem than it is to feel one's own slow dying".

A different kind of interconnectedness is explored through the twin articles on teaching history by Indus Chadha and Krishna Menon. Both

of them strongly articulate how "we are the rest of the humanity". Aptly titled, 'Self and the Other' and 'What do I Learn when I Teach History?', these articles show how history could be used to dismantle prejudice and the hidden dangers of identity. They further point out how the study of history could pave way for self-knowledge. While Indus Chadha urges the readers to look at the study of humankind through pluralistic narratives, Krishna Menon uses Krishnamurti's phrase of functioning "without a centre". Both articles are written with a sensitivity to the human condition and with live examples that one can readily relate to.

If study of humanities in the shape of history can pave the way for a study of self, the reverse is also possible. In the oft repeated words of Krishnamurti:

There is a common relationship between us all. We are the world essentially, basically, fundamentally. The world is you, and you are the world. Realizing that fundamentally, deeply, not romantically, not intellectually but actually, then we see that our problem is a global problem. It is not my problem or your particular problem, it is a human problem.

The truth of these words are beautifully brought out in three articles which, in exploring the vicissitudes of childhood, show how care and consideration coupled with sensitive handling can be life lessons for students, teachers and parents. Bina Shivram takes us through the inner-scapes of children and tries to look at things through their eyes in her article, 'Vignettes of Conversations'. It deals with the travails we are all familiar with, such as hurt, embarrassment, wanting to belong, wanting to be cared for. Jayashree Nambiar's 'Examining Fear: The Daily Life of School' too looks at slices of life taken from everyday happenings at school. She not only looks at the fears of children, but also draws attention to the fears of teachers and parents. What is remarkable about the article is the direction it gives to a school concerned with the issue of fear, in the form of some workable solutions. Aarti Kawlra in 'Approaching Adulthood' draws special attention to the angst of the contemporary teenage identity with a humorous sobriquet, the 'me-myself-and-I generation'. She rightly points out that the struggle with relationships that this generation faces is a work-in-progress and the learning that is to be gained from being relationship-minded rather than being image-oriented.

There are other types of internal landscapes too—three short but deeply reflective pieces on 'beauty', 'pressure' and 'meditation' are portrayed by Vaishnavi, Aravind Ranganathan and Venkatesh Onkar. These articles

persuade us to believe that tending to our own inner spaces becomes our responsibility, and might be our most significant contribution to the world around us. Venkatesh has an interesting take on meditation, which one needs to discover for oneself without any preamble. In this context the editors' jointly formulated contribution on the theme of 'confidence' carries valuable insights that are relevant to the current day scenario of education. A companion piece to this is the frontispiece quote by Krishnamurti on the same topic.

On a different note, what does Krishnamurti mean by stating that "religion is at the core of education"? Mary Kelly explores this question in 'On the Religious in Education'. Despite the gravity of the topic, she is able to carry the reader through effortlessly. Of special interest are some of the questions she uses in dialogues with her students such as, "What are my fears and how do they keep me from seeing the truth? How am I violent in my daily life? Can I watch my thoughts as I watch a cloud pass by in the sky?" The importance of dialogue is well-valued and is a gateway to serious contemplation and discussion. Geetha Waters in her article calls it 'The Vital Learning Ground'. She suggests that Krishnamurti, often beginning his talks to students with "What shall we talk about today?" left the whole of life open for consideration. She shares how our intimate connection with the wider context of life is a gift that Krishnamurti has bestowed upon his listeners. But it is not always easy to have a dialogue. Having a dialogue is not just exchange of opinions. Gurvinder Singh in his article 'What Prevents Dialogue' explores the nature of the challenge and what prevents dialogue from 'flowing like a river' between friends.

What is described above is a specific kind of dialogue. What also happens in many of the schools is an on-going dialogue between varying partners—school and parents; school and community; school and educators. Highlighting some of these specific partnerships are some articles written with much clarity and insight. Willem Zwart in 'Partners in Self-Understanding' and Meredy Benson Rice in 'It Takes a Village: Shining a Light on the School-Home Partnership', draw attention to the parent-school partnership. While the former article articulates some broad principles, the latter outlines some best practices of this partnership and should serve as a beacon of light to all schools which desire such partnership. Prema Rangachari's 'The Vidya Vanam Story' is a heartwarming account of how a school attempts to meet a community's unique needs for education. This is the story of a school set up in a tribal community, which is committed to giving the tribal child

a tremendous sense of empowerment. Its unique methodology is a two-way lane, in which both the community and the school mutually learn to respect each other. Another unique methodology is explored by Carole Sylvester Gray in her article, 'The Montessori Approach and a Krishnamurti School'. This article highlights the importance of learning by receiving sensorially from the environment. It also shows how Krishnamurti schools are well placed to follow this methodology.

Finally, there are twin articles which, though they lie on opposite sides of the spectrum, seem to be addressing similar issues. One talks about tradition and the other about technology and they explore the place of these in schools. Jaai Deolalkar's article, '*Aadona Kallaatta* (Tossing Five Stones) Traditional Games at the Valley' translates the excitement of a week-long celebration of these games. It seems to have brought the entire school under its spell, transgressing the boundaries between different generations and subject disciplines. On the other hand, Ashwin Prabhu and Arvind Ranganathan throw up an altogether different kind of challenge in their article, 'Examining Adoption of Technology in Schools'. What is interesting about the article is that they do not provide definite answers to the issue of technology in schools, but provide a framework for anybody interested to examine this for themselves. The outcomes can be different for different schools, depending on what constitutes its idea of education. In their words, 'The application of the framework may even lead to a clarification of the school's educational aims and throw up questions that have hitherto been unexamined'.

As you can see, the journal has a rich variety of articles; and it promises an engrossing read for anyone who cares to dip into this moving stream and partake of the diverse fare on offer.

**D Anantha Jyothi**

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## A Tree, A Flower, A Fly and A Centipede

### A meditation on science, poetry and spirituality

○ R RAO



As I sat one morning in my office at Vasanta Vihar, gazing with a 'vacant eye' at the lovely garden with its great trees and shrubs, flowers and lawns, all bathed in the golden sunlight pouring down from the blue sky, displaying to the eye every shade of green from the lightest and most delicate of the lawn and of the bushes and flowering plants, to the deep cool shade of the plant nursery in the distance, it was as if, for a moment, there was no space between the retina and the scene displayed. But then my gaze strayed and rested on a centipede slowly creeping across the threshold into the room. An unaccounted-for association of thoughts brought three pieces of writing together in my mind. Two were poems by Tennyson and Blake, and the third was a passage by Krishnamurti, which may be called a poem as well. All three are about living forms in nature (a tree, a flower and a fly) and each is arresting in its own way.

There is a Tree...

There is a tree by the river and we have been watching it day after day for several weeks when the sun is about to rise. As the sun rises slowly over the horizon, over the trees, this particular tree becomes all of a sudden golden. All the leaves are bright with life and as you watch it as the hours pass by, that tree whose name does not matter—what matters is that beautiful tree—an extraordinary quality seems to spread all over the land, over the river. And as the sun rises a little higher the leaves begin to flutter, to dance. And each hour seems to give to that tree a different quality. Before the sun rises it has a sombre feeling, quiet, far away, full of dignity. And as the day begins, the leaves with the light on them dance and give it that peculiar feeling that one has of great beauty. By midday its shadow has deepened and you can sit there protected from the sun, never feeling lonely, with the tree as your companion. As you sit there, there is a relationship of deep abiding security and a freedom that only trees can know.

Towards the evening when the western skies are lit up by the setting sun, the tree gradually becomes sombre, dark, closing in on itself. The sky has become red, yellow, green, but the tree remains quiet, hidden, and is resting for the night.

If you establish a relationship with it, then you have relationship with mankind. You are responsible then for that tree and for the trees of the world. But if you have no relationship with the living things on this earth you may lose whatever relationship you have with humanity, with human beings.

Krishnamurti

### Flower in the Crannied Wall

*Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies,  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
Little flower—but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is.*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

### The Fly

*Little Fly  
Thy summer's play,  
My thoughtless hand  
Has brush'd away.*

*Am not I  
A fly like thee?  
Or art not thou  
A man like me?*

*For I dance  
And drink and sing;  
Till some blind hand  
Shall brush my wing.*

*If thought is life  
And strength and breath;  
And the want  
Of thought is death;*

*Then am I  
A happy fly,  
If I live,  
Or if I die.*

William Blake

On first reading, all these pieces are very similar, displaying as they do, a deep feeling for the living forms and showing an empathetic spirit. However, on closer and more attentive reading, Tennyson's poem shows some peculiar qualities that separate it from the other two. Does a poet who contemplates the beauty of a flower with deep feeling "pluck it out of the crannies" where it has grown? Can a poet, by an act of intellectual understanding of the flower's structure, arrive at an ultimate understanding of "what God and man is?" When we ask these questions, we come to see what is peculiar in this poem. Outwardly, it has the form of a poem but its inward spirit is more analytic and scientific than poetic. Tennyson's skill and mastery enable him to put his thoughts in poetic form and he almost carries it off. However, it is thought and not feeling which is at the heart of this piece. This becomes clear when we contrast this poem with some lines from Yeats' 'A Prayer for Old Age':

*God guard me from those thoughts men think  
In the mind alone;  
He that sings a lasting song  
Thinks in a marrow-bone.  
...*

'Flower in a crannied wall' is a hybrid, an uneasy mix of the scientific and poetic spirits. This understanding provoked me to write a 'modernized' version of Tennyson's verse, with my centipede in the office as a subject:

#### **Centipede on The Office Floor**

*Little centipede on the office floor,  
I pick you up and hold you in my palm  
You lie there coiled in the perfect Fibonacci spiral  
And I hold you, genes and chromosomes and all  
Little worm—but if I could understand  
The mathematics of the strange Fibonacci form  
And also how your synapses snap and axons fire*

*I would grasp your central nervous system entire  
And what you are, neurons and all and all in all  
And so know what God and man is.*

However, tongue-in-cheek modernizations apart, we need to ask what exactly impelled Tennyson, in spite of his feeling for the delicate beauty of the flower, to pluck it and look at it in this analytic and theoretical way. We find that what prompts him to do this is a sense of wonder at the delicacy and intricacy of the structure of the flower. And the wonder in turn merges into a curiosity which is scientific in nature. He is impelled to ask what could be the reason why the flower was so delicately and intricately made, and where it fitted into the larger whole of the plant, "root and all, and all in all", and even beyond that, in God's own scheme of things. Here the poet has slipped into a ratiocinative frame of mind, reasoning in a teleological manner.

Teleology is a term derived from the Greek *telos* meaning 'purpose' or 'end' and *logos* meaning 'reason' or 'science'. It is a term applied to any system attempting to explain a series of events in terms of ends, goals or purposes. Aristotle argued that according to this way of thinking, all nature reflects the purpose of an immanent final goal or *telos*. To describe this simplistically for instance, the final purpose or *telos* of the mango seed is to grow into a mango tree. The *telos* of the mango tree is to yield fruit for the nourishment of human beings and other beings. The *telos* of human lives is to realise the intentions for them of God or the Divine Transcendental source of all existence. The teleological argument for God or the Divine is that the wonderful order in nature could not exist but as a manifestation of a divine immanent purpose.

Now it becomes clear that Tennyson, struck by the wonderfully delicate design of the flower, is impelled to try and understand its place in the design of the plant, "root and all, and all in all", in terms of this logic, and having thus understood the design of the plant, he hopes to take a giant teleological leap to understand God's design in the Universe, and man's place in it. It is another matter that this way of thinking had, by Tennyson's time, lost much of the appeal it enjoyed in earlier times and had been replaced by more mechanical models of thinking like Darwin's explanation of the evolution of species by the processes of random mutation and natural selection. We also have to note that Tennyson himself had cast doubts on the validity of the teleological argument, with his description of living beings

feeding upon each other for their sustenance when he says in 'In Memorium A.H.H.', "Nature red in tooth and claw",

And again he asks in the same poem,

...

*Are God and Nature then at strife  
That Nature lends such evil dreams?  
So careful of the type she seems  
So careless of the single life.*

...

Be that as it may, what we need to note is that Tennyson is no longer speaking as a poet responding with his whole being to the being of the flower, but has detached himself from it, and has lapsed into a scientific, analytical and philosophical mode of thinking. Moral: Philosophy and poetry do not mix well.

At this point I found that the angels of serendipity which brought these three poetic pieces together in my mind at the same time, were assiduously at work again and ensured that I was present when a Krishnamurti video was being played in Vasanta Vihar, and I heard him say, "First of all, observation is not analysis. When you observe a flower, you see the beauty, the quality, the colour, the perfume, the untouchable beauty of it. And after that you can analyze. You can look at the flower, tear it to pieces, if you want to—I hope you won't—tear it and look at it. The analyser thinks he is separate from that which is analyzed. That is the whole psychology that the analysis is separate from the analyzer." Here, Krishnamurti points out the difference between the analytic-synthesizing scientific approach and that of poetic receptivity.

'Observation', as opposed to 'analysis', is what Blake spoke about when he wrote, "The grateful receiver bears a plentiful harvest". But to reap the harvest of beauty, one has to be open to receive it and not analyse the beautiful object. (Strangely and coincidentally Van Gogh, another great artist, also said, "Painting harvests eternity".)

All this is not to suggest that the scientific approach to Nature is inhibitive of the feeling for beauty or of the life of the spirit, but only that its aims are different. In fact no less a person than Einstein has said, "I maintain that the cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research" and "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the

cradle of true art and science". And Paul Dirac, one of the founding figures in the field of nuclear physics, said "It is more important to have beauty in the equations than to have them fit the facts."

However, even though Einstein's deep cosmic feeling may be the *fons et origo* (source and origin) of scientific research, the beauty that is referred to here is an intellectual beauty such as is described in Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem 'Euclid Alone has Looked on Beauty Bare', in which she says,

*Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare  
Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace*

...

This is an abstract beauty which the mathematician apprehends. The mathematician *qua* mathematician and the scientist *qua* scientist do not respond to the whole of their experience of life with whole of their being, but in an oblique indirect way through the intellectual faculty in an analytical quantitative mode. In science, certain aspects of our experience are abstracted out and dealt with in terms of concepts which have a specialized meaning and have little to do with human life as it is lived 'inside the skin' of human beings. They have nothing to do with our experience of the world full of meaning, which our living faculties of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell bring us. For instance, in the Newtonian science of the dynamics of moving bodies, the terms 'motion' and 'movement' do not refer to the sensations we have when we move about walking or running or travelling in a vehicle. They belong to a network of abstract concepts such as 'inertia', 'rectilinear inertial motion in a straight line', 'mass', 'force', 'gravitational attraction', 'acceleration', etc., the relations between which are described in a few 'simple' formulae like  $F = m \times a$ , and which can explain and predict all movements of masses of bodies in astronomical and terrestrial space. In the science of thermodynamics which studies heat and other forms of energy, 'heat' is not what we experience when we come near a fire, but a quantity measured in terms of joules, and temperature readings. Light is not that which reveals to us the colourful scenes and objects in the space before us when we open our eyes, but is described as electromagnetic waves of different wavelengths and frequencies. Taste and smell are not the sensations we have when we eat a peach melba ice cream or smell a rose, but are only chemical compounds acting on our taste buds and olfactory organs. Moral: Science and Poetry do not mix well.

All this is not to imply that Science and its offspring Technology have no impact on our daily lives, for that would be too absurd. We live

enmeshed in the World Wide Web woven by science and technology which have (seemingly) delivered tremendous power into the hands of humanity. It is a truism that this is a double edged power. It gives us robotic laparoscopic surgery, life-saving organ transplants and much else on the one hand, but also the horrors of modern warfare including Hiroshima, the weaponry for terrorism, global warming, and much else on the other. All these forms of outer power do nothing to bring clarity to our minds. Only the inward look of observation can do that. And poetry and other forms of art which have originated from that inner vision can also help us to gain inner clarity.

Be that as it may, we now turn with some sense of relief to Krishnamurti and Blake. As we read the pieces by Krishnamurti and Blake, and begin to listen to the cadence of their voices, we move with them into the hearts of that beautiful tree and the tiny fly about which they write. We can feel with Krishnamurti as he enters into the life of the tree and lives and breathes with it, following its changing moods as they change through the day with the rising and setting of the sun. As the tree spreads its peaceful presence all around, the commonality of all living forms, including all humanity of which one is a part, is felt, and we begin to understand what is meant by the statement, "If you establish a relationship with the tree, then you have a relationship with mankind". Beauty's action, as Shakespeare says, may be, "no stronger than a flower", but this tree has shown that this action is very strong indeed.

In Blake's poem it is death, and not the presence of a living being that brings home to us the commonality of all living beings. It is the death of that humblest of life-forms, the common fly, whose life has been brushed away by a thoughtless hand, that shows the fragility and transience of all life, including that of human beings; and it is in the realization of fragility and transience that all are united. But that leads to no melancholy conclusion, for in a typically ebullient Blakean way he is happy to live or die with the fly and happy to dance and drink and sing as the fly is happy in his summer's play. This is surely one of Blake's 'Songs of Innocence' in which he celebrates the joy of life.

'And that is the note on which this article ends along with another 'adaptation', this time of Blake.

#### **Centipede on the Office Floor**

*Little worm, little being  
My heedless heel*

*Has crushed away  
Your thoughtful life  
As you wound your pensive way  
Across our human floor.  
Am I not a worm like thee?  
Or art not thou  
A man like me?  
For I work  
And wonder and think  
Till some mindless virus  
Should enter me  
And I sink.  
Dear reader  
Would you not prefer  
With Blake to work and wonder  
And breathe and think  
Rather than with Tennyson  
And the philosopher-poets  
To analyze and theorize  
And botanize  
And sink?*

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## Vignettes of Conversations

BINA SHIVRAM



*The most fruitful and natural exercise for our minds is, in my opinion, conversation.*

Michel de Montaigne

Conversations create spaces which build and nurture relationships. In these spaces, qualities of listening, patience and compassion are tacitly embedded and strengthened. It is one way we make meaning of the world in a collaborative manner, speaking with and listening to another. Conversation makes it possible to perceive and understand things in multiple ways. By articulating one's views, thoughts and feelings, one gets in touch with oneself. Through conversations, one learns as much about oneself as one learns about another. When there is talking together, one also gains clarity to resolve the conflict and arrive at a decision. So conversations act as a two way process—looking outside and looking within. This article contains excerpts from a session on 'Conversations with Children' at a staff meeting in The School KFI.

### **Excerpt One: When my words hurt my friend**

It was a Class 4 story writing session. One child who was working on gaining confidence with spellings approached the teacher, and in a very soft voice requested help with a particular word. In turn, the teacher asked him to attempt to spell it. When he did so and gave the right spelling, she appreciated his spelling ability and he went back to his writing. Neither of them noticed that one of his friends, a rather confident child, had observed the entire conversation. As the former tried to write the word, he made an error and immediately the latter child made a loud comment, "Oh my God! You still have not gotten the spelling right. You always get your spellings wrong!" The teacher intervened and took the child away and sat him aside. She approached the child who had trouble with the word, helped

him again with the spelling and asked him to continue with the activity. She wrote a note to the other child asking him to observe his friend carefully and quietly. As the class ended, she asked him what he had observed. He said he saw that his friend's face was red, his eyes looked like he was about to cry and he seemed very upset. She asked him if he knew that his friend was upset even as he spoke those words. To that the child replied that he did not know, and it wasn't his intention to see his friend so upset. When asked what he was going to do about it, he said that he was going to apologize and tell his friend that he did not mean to hurt him. After a small pause, he said that the next time around, maybe he would try to think before speaking.

*Thus the teacher, instead of lecturing the child about his insensitivity, helped him to observe the impact of his behaviour directly, and learn a deep truth.*

### **Excerpt Two: Taking others' things**

A ten-year-old had just come into middle school and was taking time to settle down and make friends. Added to this was her difficulty with academics, and we saw that she was feeling small about herself. Conversations to help her deal with her difficulty only found her reticent and not very open to talking.

It was at this time that many students reported that some of their stationery, pencils and crayons were missing in the classroom. Around the same time, the middle school trip happened and suddenly one found this child gain in confidence, easily tackling physically daunting tasks such as rappelling and bouldering. She glowed in the appreciation of her peers as they marvelled at her strength. When we returned, I told her to continue to challenge herself physically, and this opened a channel of communication which continued over the days.

She began to trust me and our conversations became about school, her academic difficulties and her interests. One day she came to me along with a friend whose pencil pouch had gone missing. She said, "Akka, we can go look for it. Maybe we will find it." Her confident tone intrigued me and we went around the campus till we found the pouch at the specific place that she had led us to. I now thought that perhaps she was the one who had been taking the missing items, so I asked her to use her sense of 'detection' to find the other things too. She agreed immediately and as we went around the classroom, we retrieved things from different locations. I knew I had to help her understand her actions without damaging her new-found confidence.

I began talking to her—“Why would anyone take other people’s things? Should we not help this person return the things they had taken?” Interestingly, she always referred to herself in the third person, all the while expressing her anxiety and seeking reassurance for that person. I told her that it took courage to do the right thing. Slowly, all the missing items came back and each time, I acknowledged the courage of the person who had returned the things before the whole class. She would then come to me smiling and say, “I think this person has understood now what to do.” And I would only smile back.

*Here the teacher has given space to the child to work out her own difficulties, without any direct confrontation, yet pointing out clearly that these were misdemeanours.*

### **Excerpt Three: When I embarrassed my friend**

I came into Class I to find two children crying. They were the best of friends but were blaming each other, “She was so nasty to me.” “I didn’t do anything and she says that she will not be my friend.” I first separated the two, got the rest of the class back to their work, helped the two to calm down and then spoke to them individually. Here is a reconstruction of my conversations with each of them.

*Akka* (A): “Now tell me exactly what happened.”

Child 1(C1): “I only told her that her underwear was showing.”

A: “Oh! and then...”

C1: “She told me to shut up. She was very angry with me. She told me she was not my friend, I was a bad girl, and she would never talk to me. I am not a bad girl. You know that no, *Akka*.”

A: “Yes I do. But why do you think she told you that? She really loves you.”

C1: “Maybe because I told her that her underwear was showing.”

A: “And why did you tell her that? Were you making fun of her?”

C1: “I would never do that.”

A: “But you know that when you tell someone something like that, it seems like you are teasing them.”

C1: “But I was not *Akka*. I did not want others to see the underwear and laugh at her.”

A: “Is that really what happened?”

C1: “No. They all started laughing. I really love her *Akka*. She is like a sister to me. I did not like it when they laughed.”

A: “How did they know that her underwear was showing?”

C1: “Because I shouted it out to her.”

A: “So you really did not mean to hurt her or tease her.”

C1: “NO. I really wanted to help her.”

A: “Then why do you think she got angry?”

C1: “No, *Akka* I think she was not angry. I think she felt sad and got upset. That is why she shouted at me. I think I should have gone to her and whispered that her underwear is showing, so that the others would not hear me. I should not have shouted.”

A: “So what will you do now?”

C1: “I will go and give her a big hug and say, ‘sorry’.”

*I then spoke with the second child.*

*Akka* (A): “Do you feel like talking to me? I can see you are very upset.”

Child 2 (C2): “I am feeling very sad. She is always shouting at me. I love her so much.”

A: “But you told her to shut up, and that you will never be her friend.”

C2: “That is because she was very rude to me. She shouted so loudly that everyone looked at me and started laughing.”

A: “Do you think she was making fun of you?”

C2: “No! She would never do that. I know she loves me. But she should not have shouted.”

A: “What do you think she should have done?”

C2: “If she wanted to tell me, she should have come and told me softly in my ear.”

A: “Then you would not have felt sad.”

C2: “No.”

A: “So what shall we do now? Will you remain angry and sad?”

C2: “No. I will go and tell her what she should have done.”

*With very young children, talking to them individually helps them see the whole picture, and resolve the conflict with each other.*

### **Excerpt Four: The ‘difficult’ child**

Here was a child who had a difficult relationship with both peers and teachers. He had to be kept away often because he physically hurt others, destroyed

others' belongings or spoiled materials kept in class. He did not know how to regulate his behaviour as he was unfamiliar with The School's culture of not imposing harsh consequences on children.

The approach I took was to indirectly talk of the joys of having friends, chatting with *Akka* and being part of activities. I also made a conscious attempt to meet the child briefly every day, to ask how the day went, whether he enjoyed playing with his friends. He shared that talking and listening made him understand things better, and he actually started smiling more often. This child seemed to need affection: a small hug, an arm around the shoulders, or a ruffling of the hair. The softening was palpable.

*Here the child experienced a feeling that there was someone who was really interested in him. The teacher's affection, explicit in her actions, helped the child feel wanted and this brought a positive change in his overall behaviour.*

#### **Excerpt Five: I like that boy**

As I arrived in school one morning, a seven-year-old girl came running to me, and hugged me, crying inconsolably. She was nervous and frightened. I calmed her down, reassuring her that I will help her with her difficulty. Once quiet, she described an incident from the previous day. She liked one of the boys in her class, and had told this to a close friend. She also chose to sit beside him during class. Though she did not feel strange or worried about her action at that time, later on she felt that this action of hers would be misconstrued and misread. She felt anxious, embarrassed and a little ashamed about this feeling or desire to be with a particular boy. I helped her see that the feelings she expressed were honest and not as grave as she made it out to be. Maybe the not-so-nice feeling stemmed from stereotypical ideas of boy-girl relationships from peers or the media. I counselled her to look positively at such feelings of love and affection, but at the same time also told her that it need not be an exclusive relationship in school.

*The child was helped to observe her own fears and the way she succumbed to stereotypical images.*

#### **Excerpt Six: Why is the world unfair?**

The Class XI students had finished an interaction with students in rural Rajasthan. They were from different worlds, and shared their concerns, aspirations and questions. This two-hour conversation threw light on their circumstances and was quite a moving experience.

We then began the next leg of our journey. The class slowly got into a celebratory mood and started singing popular songs. Suddenly, one student came to the teachers sitting at the front of the bus, and began to cry. She was touched by the difficulties the rural students faced, and wondered at the unfairness of life. She was well-off, while for many teenagers in the same country, life was completely different. She felt like doing something about this, such as joining organizations like the ones we had just visited. She also wondered how her own classmates could so quickly forget what they were moved by just half an hour back, and sing so happily.

It was a delicate conversation. In an attempt to make her feel better, we did not want to trivialize her feelings. We did not give immediate justifications like the world is full of such contradictions, and one should learn to become tough and deal with it. Nor did we want to push her into an activist mode of solving the world's problems. So we spoke about what it is to stay with a question. How does one deepen the question for oneself, and what is the place of an emotional response? Slowly the conversation turned to observations of the town we were passing through. She stayed quiet for some time and then joined her friends.

*The teachers allowed the student to stay with her questions and feelings, without pushing her to seek solutions.*

A conversation is like walking together through a situation. It is not rushed, and gives space for reflection. It helps to build meaningful relationships with the children and to understand them in a deeper but non-intrusive manner.

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## Examining Fear

### The daily life of school\*

JAYASHREE NAMBIAR



Three statements I read recently from a talk of J Krishnamurti with students struck me as most significant as I was thinking about fear in schools for this conference.

- When the mind is afraid there is no sympathy, there is no affection. Fear produces hatred, jealousy, envy . . .
- This fear that pushes you during life like a shadow is a terrible thing. Do you know what a shadow is?
- It is difficult to be rid of fear; it requires a great deal of inner search. And I think it is a thing which you should talk over every day. As you talk over mathematics, geography, so this also should be gone into.

I write these statements because it is this exploration that we are committed to in the KFI schools that question the role of fear. These statements acknowledge the all-pervasive nature of fear and the difficulty of being rid of it, and assert that affection and sensitivity cannot be where there is fear.

Is it true that fear pushes you through life like a shadow? Fear, like a shadow, is intangible, irrational, all-encompassing. We know of fear as anxiety, sorrow, anger, envy. Yet, we rarely see these as manifestations of fear. 'Shadow' is a remarkable word.

We are a school that is committed to this exploration and, yet, I want to underline how incredibly difficult it is to be rid of fear. I will take five situations from daily life and attempt to understand a little about this thing called fear in schools.

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\* This article is adapted from a talk given by the author at Centre for Learning, Bengaluru, at the 2015 conference 'Worlds of Fear: School Cultures'.

## I

Once, during the athletic events of the senior school, I passed by a small group of middle school students who were meant to be watching the events. They were sitting apart, engrossed in making mud sculptures. I paused out of curiosity to watch them, quite fascinated, and asked what they were making. They looked up in what appeared to me as some sort of guilt and said, "No, *akka* (older sister), we just took a break. We are going back." An innocuous enough incident, but I was shocked at the discrepancy between my thoughts and theirs.

This small and innocuous situation raised a significant question for me. Have we, in our anxiety that younger students do not wander off unsupervised during the senior school athletic events, become prescriptive, giving too many instructions? Being prescriptive arises in the teacher from anxiety, not wanting to lose control. Being mistrustful of children's abilities and sense of responsibility, we, as teachers, order the lives around us, sure that when we are in control, things can go as planned. We inform and instruct.

This has a multiple impact on children. They learn that they have to follow what is said and are frightened that they will be censured if they do not. This diminishes the student's sense of responsibility rather than strengthening it. Then there is resistance to the control. The student remains uninvolved and not accountable. Significantly, being prescriptive makes students dependent and resourceless in the long term, while the teacher feels efficient in the short term.

Is it possible for the teacher and the students to plan together the requirements for an event, for the teacher to watch over the students and intervene at aberrations alone, and then too with questions rather than admonishments?

A student of Class XII did not attend a chemistry class. He assured me that he was studying the subject sitting just outside the classroom. Sufficiently puzzled, I asked him why. He said that he knew the examination answer papers would be given out that day and discussed, and he knew that he had not done well at all. This student has been at school for fourteen years. He knows the insects on campus, the mongoose and cat, and where snakes are likely to be. He is the student who, in junior school, noticed the somewhat large stomach of his teacher and advised her to go to the doctor, because when the same thing happened to his mother, his baby sister was born. He is concerned that the staff member who fumigates the classroom as a preventive for mosquitoes does not wear a mask. So what has

gone wrong? Or has anything gone wrong? Why was he not responsible for his own work?

Facing consequences of action or inaction can be frightening, and avoidance through rationalization or, in this case, escape, appears to solve the problem. Regret over what could have been done is an awful feeling. What is that mettle or state of mind that can allow one to accept oneself, reflect and take help, and see the outcomes as learning opportunities? What allows for the low sense of self-worth that gets reinforced by peers, parents and perhaps the teacher? How do we strengthen students to be realistic in their assessments of themselves, to face things as they really are and accept the consequences? And what comes in the way—fear of facing the teacher and friends, the parents, of oneself and the awful task of getting back to study for the next exam?

In a similar vein but to push a different point, a student, when asked how the exams were (she was taking exams for the first time in school in Class 8), replied, “Tests and exams are never a problem. It is fun to study and write the exam. It is the results that are the problem!” What makes the result the problem? The excitement and anticipation that make your marks never what you expected, the teacher’s non-approval, thoughts of parents’ responses, and most important, your peers? Often the student feels he or she does not know why the mark given is the way it is and feels frustrated about the effort and fearful of the next set of exams.

This incomprehension is key. The student feels judged and found wanting. Caught in this feeling, the student decides he or she no longer has the agency over effort and the power is handed over to the teacher, to superstition, to an unnatural sense of regret and inadequacy. This incomprehension is what I have found most detrimental. This is further exemplified by the following. I have noticed that with the move from qualitative evaluation to the quantitative, the student tends to give up power over his effort and work. Often, in the younger classes, we would hear a student tell a teacher that she has done her work but is not happy with it and would like to redo it. We rarely hear this in senior classes, perhaps because there is too little time to redo work; but mostly because he or she simply feels she does not know. Often the response of such a student would be, “I don’t know. You must tell me, *anna* (older brother). Only you will know.”

I feel this is at the root of student fear—judgement by another. If one only looks at the vocabulary in this context—to *give in* an assignment, to *submit* work—the giving in and the submission involved is built in.

For a teacher, too, questions prompted by fear arise, and not just in the initial years. Have I made the right decision to teach? Will I be able to support myself and my family on the income? Will I be a good teacher? It quickly moves into deeper areas: my colleague’s classes seem better than mine. Students hand in work on time to my colleague but not to me. My colleague’s classes are quieter than mine. This translates into diffidence, rigid positions, complaints and difficulties in working with colleagues. It could translate into heavy-handed responses with students, expressions of frustration and tension in the classroom. A teacher needs to be a learner, be interested in understanding the human condition and experience the discontent that allows for humility and the affection that allows for care of oneself and of the other.

Once, at a meeting with parents, there was a poignant statement that has remained with me, “I want my child to be honest but I also want him to lie when he needs to.” One of the greatest challenges that a parent has is the need for conformity. We live in a world of ambiguities and it is our task to find sane responses. Whether to buy a child a smart phone or send her for tuitions or allow him to go out with friends unsupervised are vexing situations for parents. Informing all these is the fear that the child may see the parent as bad in comparison with other parents.

There is the other question that parents grapple with—“Have I done the right thing in seeking admission for my child in an alternative school?” The parents feel they want the intention of the school, they are struck by the pedagogical methods and they feel the programmes are significant to their child’s growth. Yet there is the fear of what they see as this ‘right’ kind of education. There is the feeling that society will not change, human beings can never change. So children are encouraged to fit into society as we know it today. Despite all that we see and feel and think, we, as parents, want the child to conform to the present systems with the hope that the best will happen.

## II

While learning must be grounded in affection, seriousness and an appreciation of the right kind of demands on the student and teacher, fear may yet permeate through the cracks. It is important to experiment with structures that diminish fear in the classroom.

The mixed-age classroom affords an interesting learning context. There is no arbitrary pre-fixed standard that the teacher has to teach to as the

students are of different ages. In the engagement with the students therefore, the teacher is not teaching a class, but students at multiple levels. Multiple levels exist in groups of same-age students as well, but given a set standard it is convenient to ignore that students do not learn at the same pace, to same level and to the same efficacy in spite of being of the same age.

Such a learning context demands that the students learn individually and from each other in addition to learning from the teacher. The teacher then becomes the guide and facilitator of the learning process and not the dictator of it. This allows the student to recognize and begin from where he is, minimizes the outside expectation to conform to an expected level and thereby minimizes the fear of not doing well and being judged.

Narrow confined spaces—built up and monotonous spaces—encourage fear. In a similar manner, minds can grow narrow and monotonous. Schools need to enable students to pursue their interests through projects that are based on student research through books, the internet, conversations with people and through observation. There is freedom in such learning. Trips that challenge physical fears and that allow for risk-taking, exposure to geographically different places, meeting with people who challenge current paradigms, and being involved in work with the land—these open and stir the mind to unknown realities, significant possibilities and a freedom to think for oneself. This loosens fear in a fundamental sense. Young people often think of what they want to do in the future and the school is where adult fears are often learnt.

Exclusion created by homogeneous ways of learning, passive acceptance and, therefore, conformity, and a focus on and celebration of individual achievement at school—all these can contribute to a culture of fear in the school. Here are a few questions that educators need to ask:

- All of us learn in very different ways. Why do we believe that there is only one way in which students learn? How many ways of learning can we encourage in the classroom?
- How do students become active in and responsible for their own learning? How do we help them to be creators of their knowledge, in other words, learn how to learn?
- Do games and sports at school necessarily have to be about winning and losing and individual achievement? This notion very quickly excludes from the playground all except those skilled at the particular games the school chooses. Could Sports Day be a celebration of sports for all?

Inherent in a culture of fear are expectations of others, notions of failure and success, comparison, a lack of well-being and trust. In open conversations among teachers, and among teachers and students, there is the potential of examining assumptions and beliefs we have of each other. It is only in speaking with a student, without labelling her, that the teacher can understand the problem. It may be even possible to listen, ponder and stay with a situation rather than attempt to find an immediate solution or consequence. It may be in the refusal to escape into a solution that the problem is actually understood. Relating with each other needs to be at the centre of every action. Among teachers, too, there are mannerisms and personalities, just as there are with students. How do we create a culture of working together? Only such a culture has the possibility of eliminating fear.

We need to tread lightly on this earth, in our schools and with each other and to bring to our daily lives, in the words of Krishnamurti, “a quiet meditation”.

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## Self and the Other\*

INDUS CHADHA



The summer that I was 5-years-old, I took my first flight alone to spend my holidays with my grandparents. My parents prepared me well—they even read aloud and recorded my favourite stories on an audio cassette which we put into our Walkman for my long solo journey. But there was one question they neglected to answer. “What should I do if the flight crashes?” I had asked. “It won’t...” they had brushed my question away. So when the flight attendant came out into the aisle and announced that one of our engines had failed and we would have to turn back to our point of origin to make an emergency landing, I wondered what I should do.

A man a few rows ahead of me got up from his seat and started shouting at the flight attendant. He was obviously afraid and seemed to hope oddly that he could frighten some comfort out of her.

I remember him saying over and over again that he had a young child with him on the flight and that made me conscious of the gravity of the situation and the fact that I was so young and all alone myself.

I felt tears start to well up in my throat and took small sips of my orange juice to wash down the urge to cry. And then, out of the blue, the young man sitting beside me started talking to me. He asked me what I was studying at school and when I told him our theme for the last term had been pirates, he exclaimed that he was a ‘shippie’ and knew all about them.

For the next couple of hours, as we wove our way anxiously back across the South China Sea, landed sans one engine in Hong Kong, remained seated inside the aircraft as repair work took place, and then made our way bravely out again and into the Bay of Bengal, reaching the brightly lit Bombay airport in the early hours of the morning, the young man engaged me kindly in a lively conversation about shipwrecks and sunken treasures that allowed me to forget that I was in trouble.

Without a doubt, he too had reason to fear for his life—but he somehow found the courage to overcome it and comfort the small child sitting beside him. As I skipped into the delighted embraces

of my grandparents who had spent a harrowing night at the airport with scant information about my whereabouts, I turned back to wave at my new friend and knew that I would never be able to capture in words the full measure of the compassion that he had extended to me, though I tried. My grandparents thanked him profusely but I think they too realized that what had transpired between us was beyond simple comprehension; for where they had been expecting a frightened and distraught young child, they had found me in good spirits, full of stories about ships and gold coins. “I’m hungry...” I told them and we hurried home so that I could be fed. And as my friend walked towards the line of black and yellow taxis and disappeared into the dawn that broke over a familiar Bombay sky, I sensed that I had dodged a bullet.

When I heard about the horrific hostage situation at the Holey Cafe in Dhaka a few weeks ago, I felt a familiar pang of panic at having had a narrow escape. My husband and I had had dinner at Holey a couple of months before the attack while we were in Dhaka for the Microfinance Network’s annual conference to which he had been invited. If we had been there on that fateful night, our table with people from Nigeria, Egypt, Mexico, Armenia, India, and of course our gracious Bangladeshi hosts, united by their mission to alleviate poverty around the world, with so many foreigners and women in western clothes, would have likely borne the wrath of

the militants. Fortunately, we were not. Nonetheless I felt heartbroken about Dhaka because the city had welcomed us so warmly. Our hosts from Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC) were extraordinarily hospitable, making us feel very much at home in their city, their country. Perhaps, even more than that, with all Bangladesh’s resilient and creative efforts to pull itself out of poverty, I felt terribly sad that it should have to go through a manmade setback like this.

I also felt startled because I had returned from Bangladesh feeling so hopeful about the possibility of a secular Islamic country. Our tour guide, Mahadi, took us to the Star Mosque, the Dhakeshwari Temple, the Armenian Church, and our hearts were warmed by his unwavering pride in Dhaka’s composite culture. And Bengali culture, as I had expected from conversations with my Bangladeshi friends, seemed to hold our two neighbouring countries together—from *bhapa aloo* and *macher jhol*, to exquisite *jamdani* weaves and bright *Dhakai* sarees, and Bengali language and literature.

But the thing that moved me most of all was the truly heroic tale of the young Bangladeshi man who refused to leave behind his two friends—young women from India and the United States—and escape to safety even though the militants gave him a choice. To be told that you have a way out but not to take it if it means leaving ‘others’ behind is, perhaps, at the very heart of what it means to be human, to be humane. How many of

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\* This article originally appeared on the Kafila blog (<https://kafila.online/2016/09>).

us can say that we know what we would choose if confronted with that most impossible choice between life for the love of ourselves, and love for the rest of mankind? I suppose the real question is whether there can be a dichotomy between the two at all. For aren't we, each of us, the rest of humanity?

Apart from the labels—Hindu, Muslim, Indian, Pakistani, American, Afghan—aren't we all just a bunch of friends sitting down to dinner together at a table somewhere? Where does the self end and the other begin?

I teach history to the eighth grade at an unusual school founded by the philosopher J Krishnamurti who believed firmly that divisions between human beings are the root cause of so much of the world's suffering. To teach history to thirteen-year-olds with their fresh eyes and keen senses of social justice still intact is an extraordinary privilege. And we are fortunate to be exploring together the story of India, one of the oldest continuous civilizations and most diverse composite cultures in the world, at a time when history, like so much else, is being fiercely contested all around us.

As we sit down together twice a week, we pause to think of the people who paused themselves to ask the question, "Why must the world be this way?" As my students create their own pastiches of the Buddha's sermons, of Ashoka's edicts, of Sangam poetry, of the conversations in Akbar's court, of Sufi songs and Bhakti poems, of Gandhi's writings, of Ambedkar's

constitution and of Nehru's letters, we cannot help but ask the same question ourselves, "Why?" We cannot be unmoved by the universal in each of those unique quests for meaning.

And we discovered these repeating motifs in history across time and place. Our preoccupation with social justice led us to read about Race in America and the Holocaust, moments in world history where prejudice led to the dehumanization of marginalized communities. We found all kinds of intersections in the different narratives we encountered. Two boys in my class, one who explored the life of Abraham Lincoln and the other of Adolf Hitler, wondered whether, when faced with great adversity in one's early life, one has the choice to either close one's heart or to open it up.

We found powerful resonances between oral histories of refugees of the Partition, those who fled from Tibet, and Holocaust survivors, which were shared in our class by people who either inherited them or experienced the upheavals firsthand. Perhaps the greatest 'aha' moment came when an 84-year-old Holocaust survivor told us the fascinating and poignantly conflicted story of her family's escape from Antwerp to New York where she lived before life brought her, serendipitously for us, to Bengaluru. She told us how she still constantly asks herself what skills she should be developing in case she finds herself in a concentration camp. We were familiar with the horrors of Nazism, but her pervasive anxiety

brought home to us how deeply it wounded the psyche. And then a girl in my class asked her what she had found the most difficult to leave behind. She answered, without hesitation, "My German nanny. Because I loved her..." History is made up of the countless complex lives and loves of people like you and me.

Perhaps because I am the granddaughter of refugees who fled from Lahore to Bombay during Partition, I have always believed that the personal is political. I was named for the Indus River that unites the splintered Punjab by flowing through it by my father. He did everything in his power to protect me from the inherited trauma of displaced people everywhere, but could not keep from me a resistant and abiding sense of nostalgia. I cannot think of India's independence unfettered by the 'memory' of my seventeen-year-old grandfather running through the streets of Lahore with a bullet wound in his thigh, knocking desperately on doors, seeking shelter from the senseless communal violence exploding around him. At one stage, he ran into a restaurant only to be thrown out by its British owner who rebuked him saying, "Now go to your Gandhi!"

The reminiscences of ordinary people can tell of great political and social events with an unparalleled human truthfulness. And the truth is that if you lay out high school history textbooks from both sides of the border on the floor beside one another, as a cousin of mine has done with a Pakistani friend, you will see how

there can be entirely different accounts of the very same events even if nobody is 'lying'; simply because history, like memory, like narrative, is deeply subjective. And perhaps, therefore, the best way to dismantle prejudice is to encounter as many pluralistic narratives as one possibly can, to open up one's heart when faced with conflict.

Our world today is increasingly divided along countless axes—nationality, religion, language, caste, class, race, gender, sexual orientation—and, truth be told, if we look for differences then we can find them everywhere. But, for all those countless differences, our lives and loves, our fears and wishes, our anxieties and aspirations, are surprisingly universal. Whether it is the growing heartbreak of the refugee crisis or the chilling spectre of radicalization, if we are able to see even a flash of ourselves in the eyes of the 'other', we will make more compassionate choices in our policies and practices, in the personal and the political. For the most powerful response to a hate crime is unflinching hope. As a young Indian Muslim Air Force Officer vividly demonstrated last October, when he said after his father's horrific lynching over rumours of having eaten beef, "*Saare jahaan se acha, Hindustan hamara... Mazhab nahin sikhata, aapas mein bair rakhna...*".

Because to go back, indeed, to Gandhi, "An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind". It is difficult to read the newspapers these days Dhaka, Dadri, Istanbul, Nice, Munich, Kabul,

Baghdad, Dallas, Baton Rouge, Kashmir... When I feel melancholy, I remember a morning not long ago filled with the songs my students composed inspired by the Sufi and Bhakti poet saints we admired together. With guitars, tablas, a harmonium and a keyboard, they set to tune poems that they had written themselves. One went, "Between Sanskrit and Urdu, between Rumi and Kabir, between *masjid* and *mandir*, how many boundaries have we made? *Nahin masjid*

*mein, nahin mandir mein, dil mein hi hai khuda...*" And another said "Religion, colour, boundaries and caste, do they really matter? Let's get together, start anew, and not make divisions between me and you. We share the same sun, moon and stars, so why can't we share the same love?" I suppose there is no need to despair, at least not yet, for there are still thirteen-year-olds in the world with no room in their hearts for prejudice. Not yet.

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## What do I Learn when I Teach History?

KRISHNA MENON



In a previous issue of the Journal, I came across an interesting article by Kabir Jaithirtha, titled 'What do I Teach when I Teach a Subject?' This essay is an attempt to carry forward that conversation by asking a similar kind of question regarding the discipline of history.

Jane Goodall, in one of her engaging books on chimpanzees, made the pertinent observation that there are various windows through which we can grasp the world. Science and religion are two such windows that immediately come to mind. In this essay, I suggest that there are other windows for us to peer through, and that a study of history may be one such window which opens up a wonderful vista on the human condition.

So why exactly do we profit from a study of the past? The answer lies in the simple fact that the past hasn't quite vanished, but lies much closer to us than most of us imagine. Just as the theists remind us that god is closer to us than our jugular veins, the same could be said of history. None can escape its power to shape various aspects of our being. For history is, as one thinker pointed out, the driving force which lies hidden outside and inside

us. To many of us, however, history seems too remote to be worth bothering about, except as a means of securing higher marks in examinations. But does a study of history have any value as an end in itself, beyond such a utilitarian purpose? Can a peep into the past provide us a key to unlocking the mysteries of the present? Can an understanding of past ages lead to that inner wisdom which is essential for a life of sanity? Can we imbibe some of the values Krishnamurti talks about through a study of history? Or, is there a necessary contradiction between focusing on the past and the wisdom of living in the moment?

In this essay I attempt to show that knowledge of the past, if it richly informs our ways of perceiving the world, is one of the best guarantees to a life of contentment. We would attain an inner state of harmony through a deeper and more holistic insight into our present condition. And in the process, we would grow in that intelligence, as Krishnamurti points out, which helps us order our lives in a sane manner. We would gain a truer insight into what is known as the 'art of living'.

My assumption in making the above claims for history is that the distinction between the inner and the outer, if seen as contrasting and separate spheres of existence, is an illusion created by thought. The inner and the outer are two sides of the same coin, and therefore, privileging one over the other could lead us down a blind alley. The inner state of wisdom could be attained just as well through an outer journey such as that provided by a study of history. It is, therefore, possible that some of the values of Krishnamurti's teachings may be imbibed through such an outward journey. These values would stand us in good stead not only during our student years, but throughout our lives.

“Know thyself!” This has been one of the guiding principles of sages across the ages for experiencing true freedom. But how do we attain self-knowledge and not flounder in the quagmire of self-deception? The traditional path to self-knowledge is a rather difficult inward journey, comprising practices such as mindfulness and meditation. While these inner paths clearly lead to self-knowledge for sages, they could be very hazardous for lesser mortals, for the ‘bungled and the botched’. The very subjective nature of such journeys makes the uninitiated all the more prone to the pitfalls of self-delusion. Since most of us tend to be novices in this area, we are faced with a grave danger of ending up in an enhanced state of spiritual bondage the more we attempt moving into ourselves. We could easily find ourselves being pulled deeper

into the treacherous sands of self-deception with every attempt to be free of it! And there is nothing more pathetic for the human spirit than the deluded belief that it is safely en route to salvation when, in reality, it is moving in exactly the opposite direction! In such a hazardous situation, we may be wise to search for alternative paths to self-understanding which are more concrete in nature.

And here history could be of great benefit. Since we are all—to a lesser or greater extent—the products of the societies in which we happen to find ourselves, a study of the histories of these societies would be a reliable guide to self-knowledge. Such historical knowledge, being more concrete by its very nature, would greatly mitigate the perils of self-delusion for the unwary. It would give a person a genuine insight into the forces which have shaped him and are continuing to do so. It would throw a powerful beacon of light to illuminate the biases and assumptions which permeate his view of the world, and therefore his very sense of self. A study of history, by thus expanding our outer field of vision, would deepen inner awareness too.

What is more, undertaking such an historical journey would enable us to avoid confusing cultural practices with laws of nature. A study of history makes us aware that what we generally take to be ‘obvious’ or ‘natural’, is often nothing of the sort. On becoming acquainted with diverse cultures across space and time, we realize that other people have frequently held beliefs and values quite contrary to

ours, without being any the worse for it. The concept of a ‘natural’ or ‘right’ way of living then becomes suspect. In the process, history aids in destroying the myth of sacrosanct ‘cultural traditions’, which have existed for all eternity, by showing up the invented nature of many such ‘traditions’. A study of history thus provides the best antidote to the virus of narrow cultural fanaticism that is fast sweeping the world today. By acquainting us with diverse e points of view, and by pointing to the recent origins of many of our ‘age-old’ traditions, history could serve as a corrective force. The growing plague of cultural fanaticism is also the result of an unwarranted certainty about the truth of one’s own customs and traditions. History functions as a powerful antidote here too. It shows us that some of the most cherished beliefs of the past have later become absurd to later generations. If this is the fate of some sacrosanct beliefs of the past, we may be persuaded to take a second look at our own cherished beliefs, and to learn to hold them lightly.

The British journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge, in one of his talks delivered during the 1960s, very aptly described modern culture as, “a gigantic exercise in narcissism”. He pointed out that we moderns seem to be more thoroughly enslaved by our own egos than were preceding generations. And he was speaking at a time when Facebook and other such social media were yet to put in an appearance! The situation, therefore, has only got far worse today. The way of deliverance, according to him,

lay in moving out of the prison of our egos. There is nothing very novel about this—it has been propounded, almost universally, by mystics across the ages. And yet there is much value in being reminded of this pernicious prison we are busy walling ourselves in, in an age of increasing self-absorption. The deliverance suggested by Muggeridge, is the same as that pointed to by Krishnamurti when he asks us to “function without a centre”.

However, an immediate dilemma faces us. How are we to dismantle the walls of this prison, or how do we ‘function without a centre’, when the currents of our age so powerfully pull us in the opposite direction? What if the ‘centre’ is as treacherous as quicksand, pulling us deeper into it, the more we struggle to be free of it? Telling someone to be free of this centre, to swim against the tide, without showing him a way of going about it, may not serve much of a purpose. It could easily lead to disillusionment and to the softer option of peddling selflessness without actually practicing it. The preaching then turns out to be a convenient mask for indulging the exact opposite. We then end up even more spiritually depraved than before, with the added sin of hypocrisy! We will find ourselves in the unfortunate situation of the Pharisees about whom a wise sage once remarked, “Ye outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” Or else, the very act of preaching gives us such a good feeling, that we end up deluding ourselves into believing that we are the

embodiment of these sublime teachings. We become infected with the virus of self-deception to a far greater extent than those who are less burdened by such lofty ideals.

This is where history comes to our rescue again. The essence of history lies in an awareness of the endless march of humanity across space and time. By revealing to the individual this unending procession of humans through the ages, history makes him aware of his very transient and insignificant place in it. Just as science, by opening up the vastness of the universe to our view, provides us with a truer perspective of our place in it, so too does history broaden our outlook by directing our gaze to the larger picture. It shifts our focus away from an endless obsession with ourselves, towards the broader horizons that lie well beyond the individual. By pointing to the rather insignificant space occupied in this larger scheme by the individual self, history could puncture the individual ego, with all the benefits that come out of this. The individual then learns to take himself a little less seriously, perhaps with even a touch of humour! To the extent that the individual's sense of self-importance gets deflated, the prison walls of his ego weaken and will come tumbling down. The individual gains a tremendous sense of liberation, and the world becomes a better place for everyone else.

The spiritual crisis sweeping the twenty-first century seems to be one

of identity. Professor Huntington tells us that the issue of cultural identity is coming to take centre stage in the twenty-first century. In modern parlance, an 'identity crisis' seems to be threatening the human race today. The path to salvation is believed to lie in the sculpting of a strong personal or group identity. In order to achieve this, one stream of popular thought inculcates in people a strong belief in the unique 'essence' of their cultural traditions. These 'essences' are believed to make people of diverse cultural traditions almost as different from one another as are distinct species. People are being persuaded to search for their cultural 'roots', so that their turbulent souls may find a place of rest. Many, therefore, are busy searching for their ethnic roots by putting their ancestors through a rigorous examination. In the recent American presidential campaign, for example, the question of whether a candidate is an 'American-American', 'Indian-American, or 'Mexican-American', was considered a matter of cosmic significance. The rumblings of such identity politics—from the college campuses to the national stage—is threatening to turn into an avalanche of epic proportions, burying us all under its madness.

However, all this obsession with identities clearly violates the wisdom of the sages. As the Bible warns us, "Wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction." The sages have consistently pointed to the dangers lurking in the seductive appeal of identities, and

none more so than Krishnamurti. He has repeatedly alerted us to the fact that individual and group identities create more problems than they attempt to solve. The terrible violence of the twentieth century, arising largely out of the moulding of various kinds of group identities, seems to bear him out. What is overlooked in this obsession with cultural 'essences', is the common humanity that we all share. The oneness of humanity, pointed out by Krishnamurti and other seers, is lost sight of in this frantic search for ethnic roots. We can perceive the disastrous effects of such oversight in the waves of barbaric violence surging across the world in recent times.

The problem lies in the inherently seductive nature of identities. They provide us a false sense of security in an increasingly uncertain world. It is, therefore, very difficult to even become aware of the hazards that lie hidden in them. History teaches us that identities, whether ethnic, racial or religious, are no more than human constructs. There is nothing sacrosanct about them. A study of history makes us aware that the search for our roots inevitably carries us all the way back to our common origins as homo sapiens in Africa. Any other root is bogus and implies an arbitrary halt at some point in our search. A glimpse into history, therefore, prevents us from treading that path to hell which is paved with the debris of dubious identities.

Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, once remarked that the greatest

threat facing modern man is the madness generated by the intoxication of power. As he best put it, "All men would like to be God if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility"! Unfortunately, the 'few' referred to by Russell don't seem to be under any threat of extinction. Muggeridge was also pointing to this impulse to power, when he remarked, "How foolish and inept is man when he sees himself in the likeness of God". From Hitler to Mao, from Idi Amin to Stalin, one can see the disastrous consequences of such megalomania. Once again, a study of history is of help in deflating such a tendency to pride. History is replete with examples of men who have attempted to play God by shaping their fellow humans into distinctive moulds. They built magnificent palaces and cities to display their power. But, as a recent writer aptly points out, "Intended to be monuments to their owners' everlasting potency, they serve mainly as their tombstones!" A peep into these ruined cities and palaces that once housed such men, a glance at the pathetic remains of all the Caesars who once strutted the world's stage, compels in us an awareness of the transient and fleeting nature of all worldly pomp and power. The truth of the words of Jesus Christ who lived two thousand years ago then strikes us with the force of a revelation, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". Along with the poet, we then pause to ponder:

*Oh, why should the spirit of mortal  
be proud?*

*Like a swift-fleeting meteor, a fast  
flying cloud,  
A flash of the lightning, a break of  
the wave,  
He passes from life to his rest in  
the grave.*

...

Extracted from the poem 'Mortality' by  
William Knox

If a study of history can induce such  
humility in us, it would have served its  
purpose in full measure.

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## Approaching Adulthood

AARTI KAWLRA



*M*y son is fifteen years old. We have both quick and deep conversations as a way of sharing what is uppermost in our minds. In the past, our exchanges have generally orbited around the four h's—health, hygiene, homework and happiness. Lately, however, there has been a shift in favour of discussions pertaining to recurring attitudes and patterns of behaviour that are distinctly 'me'-centric. In this article, I piece together several such short but candid conversations around this new point of attention. I am particularly interested in going past explaining away self-focused pre-occupations and conduct as 'just a phase' and instead, I draw upon some of the insights provided by my son to understand how young people respond to the ramifications of a fast approaching adult world.

### **“There is so much going on in my head!”**

The thing about teenagers is that communication is not a strong suit. How does one make sense of the world if one's head is swirling with unarticulated thoughts and emotions about how the world sees 'me'? In junior school, there was circle time, and being spontaneous was easy. In high school, one is under the gaze of one's peers and words and feelings often get entangled in a complex maze of emotion. Articulating a thought-emotion is a 'problem' or a 'task' and one can easily reach the point of being continually muffled or misunderstood.

In a Krishnamurti school, there are many opportunities both inside and outside the classroom to express oneself without judgement. There are a number of tools to assist in the pouring out of the million questions teeming in one's mind. I am reminded of the time during the 'Thinking Together Workshops' at Vasanta Vihar, when many young and mature adults articulated their thoughts with abandon. Can it be that communication appears to be laborious only when we no longer wish to nurture the multitude

of questions that arise and, instead, revel in the comfort of answers that we have allowed to take root?

**“You have no idea how much pressure we face to conform to trends in fashion, music and sport. It is painful for me to live up to and sustain the image of myself that is out there in the world.”**

Is the need to please those in our inner circle and to be liked by all who one meets, the characteristic feature of an adolescent alone? I confess I do this all the time and I am well past my teens. How many times have we all caught ourselves being passive, accepting without resistance the many customs and rules we have grown accustomed to obeying? And how often do we seek to find and express alternative ways of thinking and doing things? And, most importantly, do we not in fact disregard the latter and even persuade ourselves into conforming to ‘group thinking’ for the comfort of habit and safety in numbers it provides?

Is it fair to club together all fifteen year-olds under the singular image of the ‘me-myself-and-I’ generation? I want to reconsider this media fuelled, parent-reinforced label attached to young people. Externally imposed, and often internalised, labelling can easily be threatened by any interaction, event or demand. The built image of a ‘socially acceptable’ teenager shatters easily and dematerialises very quickly, like a hologram or a mirror reflection, under the pressure of intimidation. Interventions around the image are invariably experienced as pain, depriving the young person of the myriad opportunities of wholeheartedly receiving and responding to the uneven flow of adult life.

**“I am not the same person with my friends as I am with my family. I feel like I am many different persons all rolled into one. I don’t understand why. I don’t know who I am.”**

Finding oneself whilst being in a relationship with others is not easy. We seek to mould ourselves into a single idea or image. The fear of being judged on account of a persona we have donned often prevents us from having meaningful relationships. We struggle in our relationships because we are often trying to be comfortable with the fit when in fact our thought-emotions correspond to so many different personalities at the same time.

Holding on to one’s own sense of self in isolation and in relationship with others is a work in progress. It is a learning that is gained from being relationship-minded rather than being image-oriented and fulfilling

expectations. The ambiguity or conflict we experience in our relationships with others jostles closely with intimations of self-worth and is not specific to adolescence. When we are deeply sorry, it is because we have turned our attention to the relationship and to the dynamic of the exchange rather than the fixity of our individual guise or role. It is a reminder that one’s ‘reputation’ barely touches the surface of the many layers of our inner life. Don’t we all want to be heard in spaces of open listening and sharing, free from the conditionality and constraint of a label? Perhaps it is time to focus on teenage years as a time for intense inward and outward exploration rather than explaining it away as a perilous phase.

**“I find myself being disinterested and disengaged. It is a condition and an attitude I am told whose opposite is passionate involvement. We need spaces and activities that do not challenge who we are.”**

Teachers and parents expend a lot of time grappling with the ‘problem’ of teenagers being casual rather than passionate in their daily routine and behaviour. For a majority of young people themselves, however, passionate involvement is easier said than done. Without an overt talent and a family environment that nourishes the ability, it is difficult to find one’s passion. How does one generate enthusiasm for something when one is unsure about one’s area of interest in the first place? At school, the curriculum demands extensive and general knowledge rather than deep immersion in an area of one’s interest. If one does get involved in a passion, it is usually trend induced and extra-curricular as in sports, music or other hobby-like involvements.

The point I would like to make is that passion is overrated for teenagers and adults alike. It instils extreme competitiveness on account of it being publicly recognized as a challenging feat. Shifting the emphasis in the direction of learning in small insignificant and routine steps inserted in one’s daily life will take away the pressure to perform from the activity. Careful nurturing of reflection and steady practice steers clear from the ‘game’ of reputation and identity and holds true for anyone regardless of their particular stage or phase in life.

Recently, a renowned New York-based psychotherapist, Robi Ludwig, likened menopause with adolescence, on account of the latter’s emphasis on the self, reminding women of a certain age-bracket to “live the life they’ve always dreamed of”. I think it is time we begin to rethink the prevailing age-specific characterisation of persons and to resist symptomatic diagnosis and relief in the language of phases.

## The Context of our Lives

ANAND MATHEW KURIEN



In astrobology and planetary astronomy, there is an idea called the ‘Rare Earth Hypothesis’. It argues that the emergence and evolution of a complex multicellular life form on earth required an improbable combination of astrophysical and geological events and circumstances. It tells us that our existence on this planet as a species was a highly improbable event, yet one which became a reality! In short, we are very lucky indeed to be here. It is good to be reminded of this at times when we are feeling particularly self-enclosed and short-sighted. Often we fall into thinking that the whole world revolves around our narrow concerns and needs, and we see this tendency in ourselves and in our students.

My friend and I once had an interesting conversation about the purpose of education. She said something that I’ll never forget, “I think an important purpose of education is to learn about the context of our lives, that is, to find our place on this earth.” This got me thinking. How often do we ponder about the context of our lives? How often do we talk to children about the context of their lives? Do we even know how we came to be where we are right now—the set of events, circumstances and choices, both ours and others’, that led to things being the way they are right now? The answer, of course, varies from person to person but there is also an objective context that we are all part of.

Looking back in time, it took a very long time for us to be part of this cosmic context. The beginning of the universe 14 billion years ago, the formation of earth 4.5 billion years ago, millions of years of evolution of different species from the ocean to land and all the way back to about 160,000 years ago when our ancestor, *Homo sapiens*, was born. We moved from place to place hunting and surviving and in the process spread all over the earth. However, once we invented agriculture about 10,000 years ago, we started to settle down at one place. This brought about, for some people,

more time and space for intellectual activity, curiosity and questions that led to the invention of mathematics, language, art, science and philosophy. There were also revolutions, wars, overuse of resources, and here we are in the twenty-first century not in the most ‘civilized’ state as a species.

For putting things in perspective, let us scale this enormous dimension of time to a more perceivable unit of time—one year. Given below is a timeline of events with the actual age of the event and a scaled age, as if the universe were one year old. In the table, we are an hour old as a species and the people alive today have been around only for at the most two seconds. In fact we will only live for less than two seconds and this is our context in the dimension of time. What about the dimension of space?

Historical Milestones

Historical Milestones	Age [in years]	Scaled Age [Approximate]
The Universe	1,375,000,000	1 year
The Earth	454,000,000	4 months
Homo Erectus	2,000,000	13 hours
Homo Sapiens	300,000	2 hours
<b>Homo Sapiens Sapiens (us!)</b>	<b>160,000</b>	<b>1 hour</b>
Origin of Agriculture	10,000	4 min
Oldest Civilizations	5,000	2 min
Industrial Revolution	200	4.6 s
End of World War II	72	1.6 s
<b>Average human life expectancy</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>1.6 s</b>
First Personal Computer	40	0.9 s

We live in a country that is huge and diverse, on the largest continent on the planet. The earth is huge enough for us to take a whole lifetime to explore all of it. But the earth is small compared to planets like Jupiter and not to mention the sun that is so massive that it keeps us warm in spite of being 150 million kilometres away. What about our solar system which is only a speck in the Milky Way galaxy, which in turn is  $10^{17}$  (1 followed by 17 zeros!) kilometres wide? And there are  $10^{11}$  other such galaxies in the universe! The universe is unbelievably old and unimaginably enormous and from this cosmic context of space and time, we are an insignificant carbon unit on the ‘third rock from the sun’. Yet we are the same species

that arrogantly believed that we were the centre of the universe just a few hundred years ago!

In this very short span of time, we live in relation with others around us. However, while people may talk of such relationships often, most of us are oblivious of their complexity. Here is an exercise I have performed with children about an everyday incident that will give us some perspective into this matter. One day, I go to my workplace wearing a new cotton shirt. My colleague looks at me and says, "That is a really fine cotton shirt that you are wearing!" I smile, feel a little proud and get to work. What did I do to feel proud of it? Can I trace the history of this shirt?

I bought it from the shop in the city that is run by an honest businessman who worked very hard all his life to have that shop up and running despite tough competition. Some truck driver drove the truck that brought the shipment of shirts that had the one I bought. It was packed neatly by someone in a factory who did it well so that it wouldn't get dirty. It was stitched by a tailor who worked very hard to make ends meet. He too did it quite well or else he would have lost his job. The cloth came from a weaver; for all I know, it was dyed by a mother who wished for a better paying job to support her children! The thread used to make the cloth was rolled by someone. Of course, you might protest that a few machines did all the work, but there were those who built and operated the machines. Then there was the cotton that made the thread, and the people who worked in the plantation growing the cotton. And in all of this, what did I do? Nothing! I only had the money to buy it. All that work went into it, and I get to be the proud owner of the beautiful cotton shirt.

What about all the other shirts in my wardrobe? The watch I wear, the pen I use, the fan I sit under in summer, the machines I use at home, the gadgets, the furniture, the cosmetics I use, the toilet I flush and the garbage I throw out every day? Not to forget the most important things of all—food and water. Behind each of these things is a group of people who worked to make it the way it is now. Thus we are, unknowingly, connected to so many people and to nature in our lifetime. We realize that a doctor, cook, postman, a scientist, builder, weaver, tailor, the teacher, the cleaner, the dancer and computer programmer, all need each other. It is ironic that we live in a world where people who grow food have very little to eat, those who make our clothes have very little to wear and those who build our houses often have very small homes of their own. If we had to grow and cook our own food, what kind of food would we eat? If we had to stitch our

own clothes, what kind of clothes would we wear? If we had to build our own houses, how big a house would we build?

We live in a universe that is immensely old and vast and while we live in it, we are ridiculously insignificant and within this insignificance we are hopelessly, hilariously, dependent on nature and others for the comfortable life that we live! And yet we often think that we are who we are because of our own qualities or hard work while our context was largely defined by decisions taken by others. It surely must be the purpose of education to make everybody conscious of this inevitable truth of life.

We have looked at this issue only in one direction. The other direction, in my opinion, is a lot more important. The purpose of right education must not only be to understand this unimaginably tangled, inextricable web of social dynamics, but also to help ourselves probe the depths of our being and to understand how I, as a person, am part of this complex web. Not just to take...but also to give. While we are who we are because of our history, we are also responsible for defining a future—one that does not show much promise from the way things are going.

Krishnamurti said, "Truth is a pathless land." The truth is for each one of us to seek out for ourselves in our lifetime. It would be presumptuous to think that children will understand the context of their lives while in school. But as a wise teacher once told me, "The child's learning is the byproduct of the teacher's learning." When we try to understand the context of our lives, we play a major role in laying the foundation to start the thought process in children too.

## Aadona Kallaatta (Tossing Five Stones)

### Traditional games at The Valley

JAAI DEOLALKAR



Each year we devote a week of our academic calendar to exploring a chosen theme at a deeper level than usual through immersing ourselves in it as completely as possible. As we thought of a theme for this year, some of us remembered spending entire afternoons outdoors playing ‘unorganized’ games as children—*woh kagaz ki kashiti, woh baarish ka paani...*—the fun of returning home with dusty feet only when our mothers called us home after sunset, and hot summers spent playing *saap seedi* in the shade. More than anything else, we wanted to share this sense of joy with our students. The challenge before us was how to reach out to the children with that same energy and enthusiasm. We wanted it to be something that they felt drawn to intrinsically, not ‘just another activity’.

We remembered Savita Uday, a former parent of the school who is deeply involved with preserving traditional wisdom and folklore, and invited her to school for discussions and sessions with the teachers. In 1973, her mother had documented 200 traditional games played by the communities in coastal Karnataka. However, when Savita and

her mother recently visited the same places again, they discovered that children were no longer playing these games and were instead enrolled in summer camps that imparted vocational training. Savita explained that traditional games used to be played by everyone in the family, thus fostering intergenerational bonding. The very nature of the games encouraged participation and there were no ‘spectators’ watching from the outside. Traditional games cultivated important interpersonal skills such as listening and speaking, and also involved negotiation, decision making, and problem solving, at the same time as challenging the body in creative ways. Moreover, these games promoted a positive sense of cultural identity and belonging, and yet adapted themselves remarkably well to regional differences. The games encouraged creativity and craftsmanship as children learnt to play them using simple materials that were easily available—whether they were growing up at the seaside or surrounded by paddy fields—like shells, seeds, stones, pieces of glass bangles, broken bits of broomsticks, and courtyard floors as boards. Savita made a passionate pitch for

not losing touch with traditional games, which provide an alternative to today’s virtual reality.

We felt that rather than talk to teachers about traditional games and their many virtues, it would be more meaningful for all of us to play the games together. So we spent one afternoon playing board games, song story games, outdoor games, and hopscotch, with many teachers remembering their own regional variations, and everyone enjoyed themselves thoroughly. We experienced first-hand that traditional games have no teachers and students, and can be learned very quickly and easily. We were keen to share the games with our students and we soon played some of the games with the children of Junior and Middle School.

On Sports Day, we allotted a place to play traditional board games. We thought we would begin in a simple manner. We used sticks, stones, and seeds from The Valley so that everyone would see that traditional games did not require any special materials. The children quickly began to play traditional games in small groups everywhere and enjoyed themselves so much that they had to be encouraged to rejoin the other activities that had been planned for their classes. We organized traditional games for the support staff and parents to play with each other, with children encouraging them and wanting to join in. We were also happy to see the support staff sharing their own versions of the board games while passing by the traditional games area, and

a few people started to document those as well. Parents participated enthusiastically, teaching traditional games and helping other students and parents play.

And finally, Traditional Games Week arrived. We devoted an hour at the end of each day for the whole school to play traditional games. We knew it would be impossible for each class to play every game and so each group focused on one game—once they had played it enough, they were welcome to wander into other classrooms, courtyards, and games fields to see what others were playing and join in.

The children were glued to the games in a way we could not have imagined—with Class 10 enjoying the same *uffungali* game that Class 1 also enjoyed—and our own confidence to teach and play the games grew. As we had hoped, everyone played and we broke away from the “If you are good at the game, then you can play...” mindset of conventional games. The traditional games were inviting and inclusive without requiring any prerequisites or proficiencies. There were some unexpected and heartening exchanges between children of different age groups, a ‘secondie’ playing with a ‘twelfthie’ and delightfully winning too. Still, the beauty of it is that traditional games can be quite complex, requiring critical, analytic, and strategic thinking.

For those afternoons, the school was filled with a wonderful energy as we discovered that traditional games have an intrinsic quality of drawing us all into them which was apparent in the rapt

attention and engagement of students and teachers. A life-sized snakes and ladders game was painted on the floor so that children could stand and play instead of using counters. A courtyard was turned into multiple hopscotch courts with five or six different versions being played with different geographical elements like seashores, riverbeds, fields, granaries, kingdoms and courtyards. Since the boys didn't seem to know that hopscotch was traditionally a girls' game, they too uninhibitedly enjoyed playing it and continue to do so during their free play time. *Lagori* and *bagh aur bakri* were the most popular games on the field. It was an overwhelming response on the ground overall, and we could hear the enthusiastic energy flowing from the games in progress. Even the otherwise self-segregated middle schoolers—who were very particular that they remained boys with other boys and girls with other girls—came together to form a huddle, tug each other without inhibitions, or generally roughhouse together as they played 'tiger and the goat' and other outdoor traditional games. We remembered how, earlier in the year when children had been curious about what traditional games were, we had mentioned *gilli danda* and one child had said, "Oh, I often play it at home...", and then he went on to elaborate that he played it virtually. We felt glad to have given the children alternatives to the ubiquitous video games and commercial entertainment of today.

We began with the simple but we ended with the sublime. On Friday, we had an

exhibition by Mandira Kumar, founder of *Sutradhar*, Bengaluru, of traditional games that showcased master craftsmanship and highlighted the centrality of traditional art forms in daily life. Made with *kalamkari*, embroidery, natural colours like indigo, cow dung, papier-mâché, tamarind paste, seeds, stones, metal, wood, collected from all over India and around the world, Mandira's exhibition traced the evolution of games across time and space—a variation of *alugulimane* from Africa, *ganjeefa* that was also found in Persia. From simple counting games to complex strategic ones—tic tac toe, *navakankari*, *pagad atta*, *chauka bara*, *pacheesi*, *pagade*, *ganjeefa*, *chaturang*, checkers, snakes and ladders, *bagh chal*, *aane nai atta*—it was a wonderful journey. We could see the connections between language, history, mathematics, and culture. We marvelled at how traditional games develop a sense of logic and imagination in children as well.

After Traditional Games Week was over, a teacher entered her classroom and discovered the children were quietly playing complex board games with a lot of involvement during their free play time. We were inspired to make traditional games for our annual school mela and the children enjoyed crafting some of the games they had played. The children carried the games with them on excursions as well. Now that the children have tasted the joy of traditional games, we can feel it resonating everywhere.

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## Examining Adoption of Technology in Schools

ASHWIN PRABHU AND ARVIND RANGANATHAN



### The promise

Technology is seen as a revolutionary agent in many fields of human endeavour, including education. Much has been written about the opportunity that technology provides in restructuring the entire approach to formal education. A couple of decades ago, television promised to make education, until then accessible to only a privileged few, available freely to the 'masses'. The internet is now offering a similar promise of not just easy access but much more.

When Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs) first appeared, it seemed as if higher education in colleges and universities was under direct threat. With instruction material from the most reputed educational institutions in the world made available free of cost and with ready access to the teachers in those institutions, why would one pay extraordinarily high tuition fees to attend college when the same knowledge was available from one's home?

In recent years Khan Academy has made available a large collection of short, simple and explanatory videos across a range of subjects. They have gone one step further in aligning this content with educational curricula and providing a testing and assessment platform for schools to individualize student learning,<sup>1</sup> a holy grail of sorts in modern educational discourse. Will Richardson, a popular speaker in educational forums, stresses that, "It's an amazing time to be a learner",<sup>2</sup> a statement which draws our attention to the fact that we live in a world today of abundant content with easy and instant access to the sum of human knowledge. Richardson argues that there has existed a disconnect between what schools want children to learn and what children really want to learn for many years now. Technology can bridge this gap today by allowing 'productive learning' to happen, where

children will pursue individual questions they want answers to and will find the means and resources for this with the help of the internet.

Technology is seen by many as a force which will enable a shift away from an industrialized, same-age classroom model and allow for children to discover a spirit of enterprise in themselves as they explore learning, unencumbered by place, time and convention.

### **A critique**

A contrarian voice is questioning the assumptions of the above promise. The critics of a technology-led revolution argue that education is not just about efficient imparting of knowledge. Even where that has been the objective, studies have shown that heavy spending on technology has not necessarily improved standardized test scores.<sup>3</sup> More fundamentally, it is argued that teaching-learning is essentially a human experience.

In an article titled 'Unplugged Schools',<sup>4</sup> Lowell Monke states that one of schooling's most important tasks is to compensate for, rather than intensify, society's excesses. For instance, the Waldorf schools worldwide have chosen to subscribe to a teaching-learning methodology which emphasizes physical activity and using one's hands in daily tasks in a bid to promote creative thinking, movement, human interaction and improved attention spans—skills which they believe are inhibited by computers. As part of a study<sup>5</sup> in 2004 to explore the application of digital technologies for the socio-economic growth of poor communities in India, Kentaro Toyama has suggested that technology cannot replace strong leadership, good teachers and involved parents and, in the absence of these, can act as an amplifier of socio-economic inequalities.

Yet more critics of the indiscriminate use of technology in today's world such as Nicholas Carr ask if we are unknowingly sacrificing depth, clear thinking and originality in favour of speed and cross-learning by incorporating digital tablets connected to the internet into the classroom.<sup>6</sup> It is suggested that deep learning is a result of slow and deliberate thinking.

Technology seems to be nudging learning into becoming an individualistic act, in a world in which relationships are increasingly becoming virtual, rather than face to face. Will this ready acceptance of the digital world only further magnify this phenomenon? What could be the impact of this for the future of education?

### **What should a school do?**

We are at a juncture in time now where there is a push from all around—parents, educators and the government—for schools to adopt technology and become modern.

The word 'technology' can mean different things in an educational context. On the learning side, it could mean schools providing laptops to each student to use as a learning tool when connected to the internet, to work on class assignments and submit homework. On the teaching side, it could mean a 'smart classroom', a phrase used to define a classroom which has ready access to the internet, large projection screens and digital whiteboards to deliver and capture multimedia-driven classroom lectures. Yet others suggest that technology be used to enable parents to have direct access to student records and communicate with the school, using websites and messaging tools.

### **Defining the framework**

It appears that stakeholders in the educational system, be they policy makers, schools or parents, often choose to take one of two polarized viewpoints, for or against, implying progressive thinking or the lack of it. A closer examination of the question of whether a school should adopt technology or not reveals that the real benefit perhaps lies, not in responding with a ready, pre-meditated 'yes' or 'no' answer, but *arriving* at one after evaluating and applying the question in specific educational contexts, which in turn may be informed by a broader educational philosophy.

This insight then allows an educator the time and space to not hurry towards a conclusive solution but to pause at various points and re-examine the issue from different aspects. It is also clear that one, or even a few questions alone, might not be sufficient to comprehend the issue in all its complexity.

What one would perhaps then need would be a way of thinking, a 'decision framework' if one will, to approach the issue. We find that such a framework can be built by asking a set of focused, individual questions in logical order spanning multiple, larger categories of questions. Such a framework could be a useful tool-kit which educators can use in situations concerning a specific technology-adoption dilemma in their institutions.

We have given below a sample framework with four categories of questions.

### A Decision Framework

<p><b>What is 'it'?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is 'it'? (a simple description)</li> <li>• How does 'it' work?</li> <li>• What does the school need to have to be able to use 'it'?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Why does the school need 'it'?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a current 'need' or 'problem' of the school which 'it' is serving?</li> <li>• Is the need being addressed a significant one for the school?</li> <li>• How is the need being addressed by 'it'?</li> <li>• Are there other solutions which address this need? How do they compare with 'it'?</li> </ul>
<p><b>How does 'it' change behaviour?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is 'it' currently synergistic with the school's larger educational philosophy? Could 'its' adoption or 'its' future evolution cause a drift away from this philosophy?</li> <li>• Will 'its' adoption cause new, undesirable patterns of behaviour or suppress old, desirable behaviour, either in teachers or in students?</li> </ul>	<p><b>What are the real 'gains' and 'costs'?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who benefits from the use of 'it' and how?</li> <li>• What are the new, previously impossible gains for the school?</li> <li>• What is 'its' full lifetime monetary cost for the school?</li> <li>• What are the non-monetary costs? Are there other tangible or intangible losses (loss of culture of the school, relationships etc)?</li> </ul>

In the framework above, 'it' refers to the technology that is being considered.

#### Applying the framework

It can be an instructive exercise for educators to apply this framework in real-world situations regarding technology adoption. As an illustration, we have chosen to examine online learning platforms which allow students to take control of their learning and work on skills of their choice, at their own pace, resulting in individualized learning paths in the classroom.

#### What is 'it'?

An Online Learning Platform has substantial online educational content and assessments across subjects.

These platforms allow each student in the classroom to:

- Pursue a self-paced individual learning plan
- Use multiple digital resources to learn a topic: text lessons, lecture videos, practice tests, solutions, study techniques and online discussion forums
- Take online assessments with real-time results and answer keys
- Compare one's performance relative to a class
- Pursue the topic for further learning

It also allows the teacher to:

- Track and understand individual academic progress of each student in the classroom
- Modify learning paths for students based on progress
- Compare the class performance relative to a larger population

#### How does 'it' work?

The Online Learning Platform provider has created large amounts of educational content which is centrally stored on the provider's computer servers. The provider has then created a website which allows users to create individual accounts and access this content through a computer/tablet/smartphone. The website software tracks the content used by each individual user account, along with other information like tests taken, marked scored and learning paths pursued. The user does not have any data storage requirements and does not need to install any specialized software applications on computers to be able to access these platforms.

**Curriculum:** The given curriculum is structured into modules, topics and concepts in a ladder, sequential manner for each subject. Criteria, such as pre-requisite knowledge for certain concepts, are built into the curriculum.

**Learning material:** For each concept, an introductory text or a video which explains it is made available. Other tools like animations, real-life images, graphing and simulation aids and audio material are provided.

**Assessment and testing:** Assessments are both formative and summative. Questions are typically in the MCQ (Multiple Choice Question) format and drawn from very large question banks. They can be tailored to a student's preference in terms of difficulty levels. Results are instantaneous, and suggestions are made for further study and testing.

**Learning pace:** Each student has the flexibility to progress as fast or as slow as she wants within a learning path. The student can re-visit a topic multiple times and within that topic take multiple tests.

### **What does the school need to have to be able to use 'it'?**

The school will need the following to be able to implement it:

- Internet access
- Access to an online learning platform (either free or purchased, subscribed or developed)
- Individual student access points (tablets, smart phones, PCs, laptops) to the online content either provided by the school or purchased by the student
- Technical (computer) and platform-specific training for teachers on how to use the website

### **Why does the school need 'it'?**

*Is there a current 'need' or 'problem' of the school which 'it' is serving?*

There is a need for teachers to be able to come up with strategies for individual learning to happen within a common classroom.

*Is the need being addressed a significant one for the school?*

Students in any given class are at different levels of understanding and ability. With a common instruction mode within the physical classroom, some students may be bored and feel held back (because the level is 'too low') while others may be disengaged and feel inadequate (because the level is 'too high'). Creating differentiated instruction plans so that each student is engaged actively in their learning is a significant challenge.

*How is the need being addressed by 'it'?*

This online learning platform approach has the possibility of allowing students to deepen their learning at home on an individualized basis through watching lectures and taking tests. They can come to the classroom to clarify doubts, plan their learning paths and submit physical assignments. This allows each student to progress at a pace which is customized for her which in itself is desirable for the classroom, allowing students to take responsibility for their own learning.

*Are there other solutions which address this need? How do they compare with 'it'?*

The school could look at employing an alternative non-technology based approach where more than one teacher is available for the class. The classroom could be split into multiple groups of students, based on

their current academic comfort levels, and the teachers could work with each of these groups separately after a common, introductory class to enable academic reinforcement and deeper learning. The school would have to explore creating sufficient ladder academic content in the form of lesson text, tests and practice exercises at multiple levels which would then be used for the smaller groups.

### **What are the real 'gains' and 'costs'?**

*Who benefits from the use of 'it' and how?*

The student:

- is not tied to a common lesson plan
- is freed to pursue her own learning paths, suited to her abilities
- is able to get immediate, online feedback
- can revisit and practice lessons as often as required

The teacher:

- is freed in many ways—classroom management, preparation of materials, paper correction
- will now have time to provide specific feedback to each student based on individual progress and performance

The online learning platform website:

- acquires a new set of users resulting in generation of valuable student and school performance data

*What are the new, previously impossible gains for the school?*

Teachers in the school will now have access to objective data pertaining to individual student performance and difficulty areas at any point of time as well as aggregate data rather than an impressionistic understanding.

*What is 'its' full lifetime monetary cost for the school?*

While there may be no content licensing or subscription costs depending on the choice of the online learning platform, one should also look at other allied costs like computer laboratory hardware upgradation, classroom infrastructure enhancement (whiteboards, projectors, screens, audio-visual systems) and service and maintenance costs for this hardware.

*What are the non-monetary costs? Are there other tangible or intangible losses (loss of culture of the school, relationships)?*

Adoption of an online-based teaching approach like this could cause a change in the current relationship between the teacher and the student and between the students themselves. In the current context of the school, the teacher is responsible for the entire well-being of the child and not just the academic aspect. This will have to be discussed and examined carefully. How would the student see the school in this new context? Would it impact the other non-academic work and activities the student partakes in at school?

### **How does 'it' change behaviour?**

*Is 'it' currently synergistic with the school's larger educational philosophy? Could its adoption or its future evolution cause a drift away from this philosophy?*

The school is a place where one learns both the importance of knowledge and its irrelevance. It sees education as not just academic competence and mastery but as a way to understand oneself and how one relates to the larger world. Academic excellence, while very important, is still only one aspect of the educational endeavour of the school.

The school is concerned with relationships and how the student relates to other people around her, both inside and outside school. To use a predominantly technology-based approach, where children (and teachers) would spend substantial amounts of time in front of a computer, is a concern and a departure from a culture which emphasizes learning about oneself through contact with nature and other human beings.

*Will its adoption cause new, undesirable patterns of behaviour or suppress old, desirable behaviour, either in teachers or in students?*

In teachers, this new technology-heavy approach may lead to a lack of flexibility and creativity in classroom teaching. Another concern is that teaching may become an essentially narrow and mechanistic process focused solely on results.

In students, this may lead to greater sense of disconnect, with nature and people. Learning may also become a very individualistic process with very little interaction with classmates or the teacher. Dialogue and conversations allow for a student to learn from others, to see approaches and perspectives that may differ from one's own. A process of thinking together and struggling together could be abandoned.

Adoption of this approach could result in an unduly measurement-oriented culture in the school.

### **Conclusion**

In the preceding section, we have applied the framework to online learning platforms that allow for individualized learning paths. Here is a summary of the salient points that have emerged:

- The technology addresses a real need in the classroom—that of students being able to learn at their own pace and along a path suitable to them.
- It provides an efficient solution to this need. Complete information about a child's learning process is readily available to the child, the teacher and if need be, the parent.
- This very efficiency might make learning mechanistic and result-oriented, focusing on that which can be done only through electronic media. This might cause a move away from sensorial learning and contact with nature.
- A highly individualized learning environment might impact a child's relationship with others and prevent collaborative learning.

Where a school places emphasis on results and individual success, this might be a promising technology to adopt. In a school where sensorial learning and relationships are important, this technology might be detrimental. Whether this technology may be adopted without a loss in sensorial learning and relationships is open to further examination.

We see that the application of the framework provides for an objective reasoning of a stance that a school might have otherwise taken 'intuitively'. It might also lead to reconsideration or a change of position. In any case, it could allow for a more nuanced understanding of the various factors involved and move schools from a generic for-or-against stance.

In Krishnamurti schools, it is likely that many decisions will hinge on questions in the bottom left quadrant of the diagram above, which deal with philosophy, culture and relationships. Academic excellence is only one part of the entire learning process in these schools and even what constitutes academic excellence is often debated—is excellence merely that which can be measured?

Different schools using the same framework may come upon different responses and conclusions, depending on what constitutes education in that institution. The application of the framework may even lead to a clarification of the school's educational aims and throw up questions that have hitherto been unexamined.

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## What is Confidence?

EDITORS



*When I was three, I had a friend  
Who asked me why bananas bend,  
I told him why, but now I'm four  
I'm not so sure...*

Richard Edwards

This is the paradox about confidence. We think that confidence stems from acquired knowledge, or ability, or experience; but it could in equal measure emerge from ignorance. In this poem, there is perhaps more to the tentativeness of the four-year-old persona than his feeling of certainty when three years old.

In the context of schooling, how do we understand confidence and its import? Why is it so often seen as something necessary to develop in our students? How do we go about doing this? What could be the implications of building up confidence in children? Maybe, in the first place, it would help to unpack the word 'confidence'.

The word confidence is derived from early fifteenth century Middle French or directly from Latin *confidentia*, from *confidentum*, meaning 'to have full faith, to be bold'. It comes from the intensive prefix *com* + *fidere*, 'to trust'. The other synonyms include 'self-assurance', 'self-reliance', 'self-possession', 'boldness', 'courage' and a certain sense of 'cool headedness'. We can sense in all these meanings a building up of the self, often against the rest of the world. The repeated use of 'self' suggests a more than a life-size picture of the individual. If you put any of these words into a search engine to find images, you get caricatures of either puffed up people, or batman-like superhero postures.

When a young child enters the portals of school, this self-building apparatus is already in operation. In the school, it appears to get further reinforced at every step. The emphasis on individual achievement, on getting higher grades, on competition, on comparing oneself with others, all work in this direction—the individual versus the rest. But here a troubling question arises—if a child is taught from the start to stand out, to be separate from the rest of the world, where and how does he learn to meet life?

### **What is the problem with ‘confidence’?**

A large hoarding advertises a school in Bengaluru with the picture of a young schoolboy with these words printed boldly beside him—‘I Can. I Will. I Must Be... the Best’. What do we make of this, and what do we feel for this child? The whole purpose of schooling seems to be that of building up his self, the ‘I’ that needs aggrandizement, and placed on a pedestal set apart from the rest. Thinking of the pressures he must internalize in order to ‘be the best’, we might end up feeling sorry for this child. Does not his education, from the very beginning, aim to isolate him, an individual, from the rest of the world. Contrary to the belief that in this approach lies the development of a positive set of attributes, it may in reality be creating a seriously distorted picture of his personhood.

Recently, in a culture class at one of our schools, the students were asked to dramatize some of the group dynamics that they were experiencing—such as group formation, exclusion—and then draw their own inferences from this enactment. In their zeal to justify or to resolve the so-called crisis within their class group, they concluded that everyone was ‘good’ at something—some at studies, some in sports, and others in art; and if someone was not good enough at anything specific, he or she was at least a ‘good human being’. It was comic how ‘goodness of being’ became the last resort when one was not good at anything else.

Isn’t there a problem with an upbringing and an education system that are constantly fostering this sense of ‘I have to be good at something’? Parents send their children to schools, expecting that their child will become strong, resilient, and confident. Teachers are supposed to build this confidence through the process of schooling. But can we pause and ask—as adults are we ‘confident’? Aren’t there times when we experience anxiety, or feel insecure, uncertain? How do we process these feelings, or understand what is happening around us, what is shaping us from inside? Do we help children understand these emotions as they arise in them?

Most systems of conventional education do not concern themselves with drawing out what is inside children. They mostly seem to exert pressure from the outside through various forms of comparison, competition, evaluation, praise and criticism. Students thus end up being shaped by their feelings of success and failure, their emotions caught in a search for self-validation along external yardsticks. As students grow up, apart from school, there is now a whole parallel industry that purports to teach you how to project yourself, how to appear to others, how to impress, and how to exude confidence. In this bid, there are millions of children, worldwide, who lose their inner balance and feel either inflated or defeated by such a system. It is like a double-edged sword, in which the machinery used to build up individuals, is also the one that cuts them down.

### **Is our idea of confidence a red herring?**

As children, we often look up to some sort of role models, persons who exude confidence. They could be seniors in the school, peers, parents, heroes, or teachers. As we grow up, we realise that they too have their insecurities. We discover that our heroes are also human beings with strengths, but shortcomings too. We realize that our parents and teachers also have their faults, that they are not infallible. This is beautifully brought out in the poem ‘The Follower’ by Seamus Heaney in which he talks about his father:

*I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,  
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;  
Sometimes he rode me on his back  
Dipping and rising to his plod.*

*I wanted to grow up and plough,  
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.  
All I ever did was follow  
In his broad shadow round the farm.*

*I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,  
Yapping always. But today  
It is my father who keeps stumbling  
Behind me, and will not go away.*

Must we not tell children that there need be no idols whom we emulate, no posturing that will lead to so-called confidence through life, and that there is no sense of security in all this. Undoubtedly, many children are often insecure. They could be insecure about peer relations, a situation at

home, or their performance in academic learning. They may be insecure because they want popularity or acceptance. What is our response? When a child is insecure about, say, his math ability, how do we respond? Typically, we try to reassure and build up a child's confidence. Why do adults try to smooth things over? Can we *accompany* children who feel insecure, without ourselves feeling insecure and tense, and needing to fix it with a measure of 'confidence-building'? Can we instead tell the child to 'stay with it', and not to run away from it? Can we tell him that the pains of living and learning are there, that they are opportunities to learn about themselves? Can the teacher not negate the feelings of the young person, but enable them to become aware of and work through these?

Confidence, like capacity, is not something to be asserted; there is nothing substantial in it. In asserting confidence, we put ourselves out-of-sync with ourselves, and therefore out-of-sync with the world. If we say self-consciously, "I am confident", there is no reality beneath it, it is empty. It is just another projection of our personality.

Krishnamurti says in *Freedom from the Known* that, "a confident man is a dead man". Such a statement is so shocking to most of us that it hits us in the face. What could he have possibly meant by that? For a teacher or for that matter anyone else, it is not easy to grapple with such a statement. Perhaps some light is thrown on the matter when one looks at another statement of his in *The World Within*. He says that, "capacities and gifts are dangerous friends". He explains why they are dangerous:

You are encased in your own capacities and gifts. And they are dangerous friends. They become the end in themselves and lead to much misery and sorrow. Your food, your clothes, your postures, and your pleasures are making you weary and dull, your mind is becoming insensitive and losing its quickness of understanding. In this state, how can you dig deeply? (pp.188–89)

We, as teachers, are often quick to label ourselves and the students—"I am confident" or "I am not confident"; "she is or is not confident". Certainly, as teachers we don't want our students to lack confidence, or to be diffident. However, can we meet situations without perceiving them through a framework of opposites, that is, of confidence *vs* diffidence? How do we respond to a situation without this division? How do we meet situations as they come, rather than holding on to something 'in me' that would enable me to meet situations. There is a fixity to "I am confident". That's why it's a dead thing.

### **Is there another way of perceiving confidence?**

In reality, confidence is not a fixed thing. It flows in and out through our day. We may go through states of being nervous and uncertain, as well as states of being at ease and energetic. Should we then not draw attention to these fluctuations rather than pursue an illusory permanent state? Is it possible to meet situations, while remaining in touch with these inner and outer shifts and movements? Maybe confidence is simply the understanding that there will be ups and downs in the course of life. Perhaps the only security lies in knowing that things will not always be the same. When one acknowledges that life is not a matter of simply achieving pre-determined goals, but is full of uncharted changes, then accepting and living with change becomes easier. When one is faced with a new emotion or challenge one doesn't have to shrink like a 'wet meringue', as in DH Lawrence's poem 'How Beastly the Bourgeois Is':

...  
*Oh, but wait!*  
*Let him meet a new emotion, let him be faced with another*  
*man's need,*  
*let him come home to a bit of moral difficulty, let life face him*  
*with a new demand on his understanding*  
*and then watch him go soggy, like a wet meringue.*  
*Watch him turn into a mess, either a fool or a bully.*  
*Just watch the display of him, confronted with a new demand on*  
*his intelligence,*  
*a new life-demand.*  
...

The poem highlights a mind that has sought achievements and accumulations, but has never developed the capacity to meet the unexpected.

So, we as educators could also look at the word 'confidence' as the 'capacity to meet life'. Instead of trying to build confidence in oneself or in another, we could educate ourselves to meet life situations as they come. Building the capacity of a student so that he gets high grades in a test may be a good skill. Teaching a student how to respond without berating himself when he gets low grades, to be sensitive to a friend's problem, or be mindful of the deprivation of a poor person nearby, is an even higher skill. Life is full of such micro-situations that hold potent and valuable lessons in living life and relating with others. We need to learn how to be responsive to these, and to help children be responsive and vulnerable too.

We adults could thus learn to meet life by being relaxed and attentive to life. We could learn to be at ease with changing situations, meeting situations as they arise; and not hold ourselves tightly wound up. We would then learn to work our way through the inevitable difficulties that life brings to each one, perhaps even meeting these in good cheer. We then feel a part of the movement of 'life', not just as the movement of 'me'. This will perhaps leads us to not just trust in oneself but trust in life. 'To trust' is after all another original meaning of 'confidence'. In this there is no need to puff up our chests like supermen bracing ourselves against the world. We learn to flow with the situation, not against it. And paradoxically, this way of being could show us how to be more rooted in ourselves and in the movement of life.

A story is told about Saint Francis of Assisi hoeing his garden. A travelling pilgrim saw Saint Francis working in his garden and asked the saint, "What would you be doing right now if you knew this was the last day of your earthly life?" Saint Francis replied, "I would continue hoeing my garden." He proceeded to do just that.

If school were our garden, then we too need to continue hoeing our garden, steadily and patiently, paying attention to all that lies within this space. We may let children know that nobody is special, although in a way everybody is unique. We would educate without creating 'specialness', recognizing that there are many aspects to all of us, and that glorifying one or two aspects only distorts us. We may then teach our children to meet life in all its nuances, rather than go through life in preparation for some imagined future, or waiting for some apocalypse to shake us all up. We would learn to hold ourselves lightly, with confidence in life, and find ways of communicating this quality to our students.

### **Some thoughts on**

**BEAUTY**

**PRESSURE**

**&**

**MEDITATION**

## Beauty

N VAISHNAVI



I walk into school every morning down a path strewn with differently-coloured flowers in the different seasons of the year. A yellow golden carpet when the copper pod tree is in bloom, a bright red when the *gulmohar* tree is blossoming and a fragrant white when the *maramalli* flowers gently waft down in the morning breeze. And when I cross the wild *badam* tree, I can see red bugs scurrying about, in pairs and sometimes in groups, going about their business. I stop a while to see them before I move on towards the school building.

The banyan tree is like the good friend who waits patiently everyday in the morning at the gate to greet you. Its awe-inspiring presence gives me the sense of it being all-pervading, and yet grounded. And if I am quiet and observant enough, I have sometimes seen a mongoose scampering about its roots or a pitta bird sitting on its lower branches. My feet sometimes also take me to the 'tiled area', a quiet space of green foliage where I sit under a tree, looking at the blue skies through the swaying tree branches. The sights and sounds of the school resonate with immense beauty and serenity. The ambience that emanates from them is both uplifting and humbling for anyone who is part of it.

It is peaceful, before the day takes over, before the children arrive and before I get into my work. There is beauty all around me, and in this moment of quietude. It calms me, even as my senses come alive and alert, filling me with energy and a sense of purpose for the day. I have often found that this quiet allows for meaningful reflection and thinking. I cherish this time when I am not immersed in any task or work, a time when I am with myself.

The school is a beautiful space. Beauty that goes beyond the trees and the other small creatures that live in it. I see this beauty reflected in the conversations I have with my colleagues, in the disagreements and discussions, in the many experiences in school that help me understand my own responses to people and situations. I say this because I have felt it helps me appreciate others, to accept different ideas and opinions, to question and observe in the realm of relationship. I see the same in my interactions with students while trying to understand something, be it in the class or outside, when we come upon an idea or a thought and learn to examine it, understand it, together. Affection and respect seem to be the qualities that are essential to help build this 'beautiful' relationship between teachers or between teachers and students.

In my journey as a teacher in the school, I have often wondered, is it the natural beauty of the school campus, or the intangible beauty of its space that makes the school what it is? What gives the school its character? Perhaps it's a combination of the two, for without one the other would hold no meaning. And if that be true, how can we nurture these two aspects of beauty to create vibrant and meaningful learning spaces in our schools?

## Pulls and Pushes

### On pressure

ARVIND RANGANATHAN



During a discussion with a group of children about comparison, one of the students said, “When I am good at something, others come and talk to me about it. When someone who is better at the same thing joins the class, they go and talk to them, and I feel left alone. The attention I got was gone and that leaves me sad.”

For the rest of the conversation we proceeded to discuss our need to feel good within and how the lack of it makes us behave in different ways. This experience is as true of adults as it is of children, and this has been written about previously. Insecurity runs very deep within us. The fear of ‘being nothing’ is a primal driving force. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the human society we see around us is essentially a manifestation of this deep inner insecurity in various forms.

We could ask if an expectation that is planted by someone outside different from one’s own desire to be noticed? An expectation from a parent may be justified as ‘being for my own good’—it provides motivation to work harder towards a goal—but it also sets the child on a path of seeking validation, which often feels inadequate if and when it comes, setting in place the need for further validation, perhaps from another person.

When does an external expectation become an internal pressure? Does that pressure then have a life of its own even when the original expectation is removed? As an adult, I feel pressured to respond to various pulls and pushes—children, parents, work, my own desires and fears and minutiae of all kinds. Meeting each of these in an attempt to please all feels futile. Yet, things need to be attended to and one’s energy seems limited.

Pressure feels real, it is a physical sensation within one’s brain. There is a squeezing or a throbbing. But pressure is merely the result of a thought. Or a series of relentless thoughts that begin to have a life of their own. It is curious that something as fleeting as thought can have such an impact. Perhaps the impact is most when thoughts are not allowed to be just fleeting.

Our inner spaces affect our outer spaces and disturbances on the outside are sometimes pointers to imbalances inside us. Tending to our own inner spaces then becomes our responsibility. It might be our most significant contribution to the world around us.

## Meditation\*

VENKATESH ONKAR



The sense of agency we experience in daily life, our sense of control over ourselves and our environment, is deeply and intuitively felt, but it deserves thorough and critical examination.

We did not choose our genes, nor did we choose the environment we were brought up in. We cannot control the depth and nature of our responses to experiences, even though we may expose ourselves to enriching experiences. We did not build our brains or our bodies, with all their chemical reactions (which anyway lie outside our conscious control). Even if we don't believe that 'mind' is an expression of physical brain states, we do not choose our mental states or our 'souls'. We can't choose the thoughts that pop into our brain every minute of the day. We can certainly choose to follow certain trains of thought, but it is a mystery as to why we can do this sometimes and not others. We can, in a muscular fashion, exert our willpower in difficult circumstances, but again it is a mystery why this works sometimes and frustratingly, crucially, fails at others. We can certainly follow our desires, but we can neither create nor eliminate them at will. Sometimes we find ourselves in a state of attention. Often, we walk around in a daze. Neither state is in 'our' control.

In short, the bright bubble of consciousness that so fascinates us through life, upon which we spend so much of our energy, trying to shape it according to our desires, rests delicately upon a vast, deep architecture that is effectively outside our control. The

process of meditation, it seems to me, is a deepening awareness of the mystery of this unwilled life, and a deepening recognition of the fundamental limitation of the sense of agency. There is no controlling 'I,' an ego inside that is running the entire show.

This seems a frightening realisation. If a person commits a crime, is she not responsible for it? I feel the fear is based on a mistaken notion of responsibility. As a society, we can be perfectly clear that certain actions are morally wrong, and we can, if need be, lock up the people responsible (they might repeat their actions) while treating them humanely. There is no need to hate a 'person' out there who is responsible for the act. In fact, the growing notion of the unwilled life might open up deep areas of empathy and compassion, both in personal and social contexts.

In a school environment, we can ponder over how a child learns, how effective teachers are nourished, how organizational structures enable or disable wisdom. All these processes are profoundly unwilled, but this does not mean there is no such thing as intelligence that moves towards creative action. Faced with any life situation, 'we' process various scenarios and ultimately settle on one course of action. While there is no one inside doing the choosing, our system as a whole—bodies, brains, minds—can learn what insight is.

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\* The ideas on agency presented in this article are wholly unoriginal. I learnt them from Sam Harris' lovely essay 'Free Will'.

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## On the Religious in Education

MARY KELLEY



As I sit here on the back porch of Pine Cottage on a lovely late-summer afternoon, I feel a deep sense of tranquillity because I'm alone and yet enveloped in nature's womb, soothed by the swooshing sounds of the leaves as they tremble and shake in the soft, warm breeze. My mind jumps from the peace and beauty I experience now in the present to thoughts of excitement and some anxiety aroused by the impending approach of a new school-year at Oak Grove on the other side of the valley, my sacred place of learning and discovery. I can hear someone listening to an audio recording of a Krishnamurti talk inside the Study Centre, and subtly, the familiar cadence of the muted voices reminds me that I am in a truly sacred place, dedicated to those serious enough to boldly explore truth and bravely enquire into the meaning of life. This is why learning for me is of the utmost importance, because I've realized that it is what gives significance to my whole existence. I therefore feel that teaching can only be a sharing of such learning with others, my younger companions, which makes it not only a matter of affection rather than intellectuality, but also something profoundly simple and human.

Awareness of this essential qualification leads me to reflect on what is—for me, at least—the relative unimportance of teaching methodologies and techniques. Far more important than any particular way in which a teacher may seek to fulfil her function is the state of her heart—whether it is full of love, or empty and given over to abstract ideas and ideals instead. If one were to suggest that there are five degrees of general teaching-methodology with one being utterly unstructured, free play and five being rigorously regimented and rote-memorization, would a teacher necessarily fail to evoke a genuine interest in learning in her students if she were to make use of one extreme method or the other? If she really loved her students and cared for their well-being, would it make a great deal of difference whether

she taught them using rote-memory exercises (such as memorizing poems or speeches) or just laughed and played games with them for part of an afternoon? Or would there really be much of a difference if she stuck to the middle course and balanced both approaches?

I think that our success in teaching relies almost entirely on the relationship the teacher has, not only to the students, but to herself, to life as a whole, and to nature. Krishnamurti said somewhere that the teacher is the centre of the classroom, and I take this powerful observation to be very important as it indicates that, if I am to call myself an educator, I need to learn about *myself*—daily, hourly, from moment to moment. In order to do that I must be able to look honestly at my thoughts, my ideals, my judgments and assumptions, and then, having learned of them fully, to put all of that aside, naturally and easily, in order to *learn*. This requires me to understand that I am, in point of fact, 'nobody', that I do not know what it means to be a 'good' teacher at a Krishnamurti school, nor do I know how I can 'awaken intelligence' in others. I am only in a position to *learn*, but not in order to 'know' anything necessarily. This *not knowing* doesn't exempt me from the urgency I feel burning within me to hold a special space for these questions to blossom, both for myself and for my students. I feel that, being in such a state of nothingness, I can hold questions open without the need for any concrete answer, prescription, or how-to method that might otherwise strengthen the images I may have of myself and my assumed role.

For instance, there is a very persistent question I continue to ask myself: "What does Krishnamurti mean by stating somewhere that 'religion is at the core of education'?" I know that this, of course, does not refer to *organized* religion with all of its rituals, beliefs and superstitious practices. So if not that, then what *is* this 'religious essence' he speaks of?

After recently reading Mark Lee's new book, *Knocking at the Open Door* (2014), and discussing it with others, I was quite surprised to learn that Krishnamurti repeatedly and explicitly qualified his understanding of education as 'religious' (op. cit. pp. 137 and 146–48). To the casual reader of Krishnamurti's books that might appear somewhat perplexing at first, but I suddenly realized that it made perfect sense. That's why it's so hard to describe to a stranger his teaching on education—because it's ultimately quite as non-intellectual (non-verbal), as utterly *inexplicable*, as the Buddhist notion of 'enlightenment' or the Christian 'salvation by grace'. All those

who talk and write on such things don't necessarily know anything about it! We each have to experience it for ourselves, but *how*? Krishnamurti would say, firstly, by not asking "how"; just *do* it. Okay, so let's try that!

What is religion, or 'religious education'? In the first place, it must not be what people say it is or what we think it is. What did Krishnamurti himself say (not that he's an authority!)? In *Education and the Significance of Life* (1953) he wrote:

Religious education in the true sense is to encourage the child to understand his own relationship to people, to things and to nature. There is no existence without relationship; and without self-knowledge, all relationship, with the one and with the many, brings conflict and sorrow. Of course, to explain this fully to a child is impossible; but if the educator and the parents deeply grasp the full significance of relationship, then by their attitude, conduct and speech they will surely be able to convey to the child, without too many words and explanations, the meaning of a spiritual life (pp. 37–38).

From that I gather that religious education means *learning to know oneself in relation to the whole environment* (see *ibid.* pp. 53 and 55–56)—that is, holistically and unitively, in terms of both the One and the Many, or 'God' and 'Nature'. Now this is a really heady notion, so, "Of course", to explain it "fully to a child is impossible". But earlier, on page 29, Krishnamurti had written, more positively, that "surely, it is possible to help the individual to perceive the enduring values of life, without conditioning". In other words, "surely", it *is*, or must be, somehow possible to do what we thought to be impossible, to teach what we don't even know. But how do we do this? By deeply comprehending "the full significance" of religious education—that is, by *learning, ourselves, who we are*—and then, by our own attitude, conduct, and speech, we teachers "will surely be able to convey to the child, *without too many words and explanations*, the meaning of a spiritual life".

I stress the words in the last clause to point out that Krishnamurti is more intent on assuring us that this *can* be done, that we can *teach* our children the real meaning of religion, than on explaining to us in so many words *how* we are to do it, according to what pattern of ideas or standards. Because we must find that out for ourselves; we must grow into it naturally, with creativity, not by imitation or conformity. Religious education, then, is teaching by *learning together*, not by giving explanations or formulations of some goal and then devising methods and procedures to reach it. This involves a kind of deep, spiritual *communion* between

the teacher and her students and that, I think, is what Krishnamurti means by describing it as 'religious'.

It seems to me that sitting with a question like 'What does Krishnamurti mean by stating somewhere that religion is at the core of education?', is of the utmost importance to a teacher at any Krishnamurti school, since these schools were founded for the purpose of awakening intelligence not only in the students attending the school but, perhaps even more crucially, in its staff members. So what *is* 'religion' to me? Does it play a role in why I am at this school, why I travelled across the country to be here? Surely, it has everything to do with it and yet I suppose I would prefer to give it another name, such as love.

As I reflect on my first year at Oak Grove, love is the only word that comes to my mind that expresses what I experienced with my new school family, and it is what I would credit all of my learning to, as well. I am in a place where I'm allowed to love my fellow-learners, and that is precisely what is happening! Beyond that, do I really know what love is? Or, for that matter, what it looks like in practice? The moment I try to describe an experience in which love is present, I somehow seem to spoil it or turn it into something on a pedestal. As Krishnamurti would put it, "we've made love into such a shoddy affair". And yet, surely, love is the essence of what we mean by religion, and the very condition of education. At Oak Grove School we call it 'the Art of Caring and Relationship', and this is at the heart of what makes the school so special and unique. But are we really living in this way with each other as colleagues as wholeheartedly as we might? I wonder if more care needs to be put into approaching our relationships with each other as fellow teachers with the same learning mind that the student has with the teacher and vice-versa. Can we hope to 'awaken intelligence' in our children without doing so ourselves in our relationships with each other?

Another thought I had was that if something is truly religious, then one would be willing to give one's whole life and self to it. I feel that way about learning, especially in a place like Oak Grove, which is why I find it so easy to put the ego, myself, aside and probe deeply into my relationships with those whom I work with. I ask myself, as well as others, do we really care about this? Are we ready to give our whole lives to it? Are we willing to question all that we do, think and feel? Can dialogue occur without the motive of persuading others of one's own way of thinking, and would that not be a *religious* activity? And would that not be education in the highest sense?

The way to enter the religious in education with my students often takes the form of a dialogue. Following is a list of some of the questions that most inspired lively dialogue in my classroom last year:

- What are my fears and how do they keep me from seeing the truth?
- How am I violent in my daily life?
- What is it to care about someone or something?
- What does it mean to listen with one's whole body?
- What happens when I compare myself to someone else?
- What is the difference between learning and collecting information?
- Why does the mind constantly seek entertainment?
- What is intelligence and can it be learned from a book?
- Does competition cloud my ability to see what is? How does it do or not do so?
- What is the difference between pure observation and judgement?
- Do I know what it means to love?
- What quality of attention does silence bring?
- What is mindfulness?
- What is my relationship to nature?
- Can there be freedom without order?
- Does school prepare one for life?
- Can I watch my thoughts as I watch a cloud pass by in the sky?
- Why does one so often resort to violence before peace?
- What is meditation and does it really have any place in my life?
- Does every question need an answer or can I just sit with the question?

I imagine I'll be discovering similar or entirely different questions with my upcoming class this year. But, unlike planning a math or science lesson, to look into the future and determine such activities for a group of students I haven't even met yet would be pointless. It would show that I was putting the means before the end without even knowing the end. All one can do is to be aware of those opportunities for real learning to blossom on their own and to allow space and time for them as they present themselves.

What I *do* feel is important to consider are ways to make opportunities for my students to sit quietly—or, as some may call it, to *meditate*. I also would like to bring in some of my recent experiences with chanting and

yoga *asanas*, since I've lately had the privilege of learning how such rhythmic sound and movement, combined with deep breathing, can bring about further awareness of and learning about oneself. But what I insist upon is that I'll only be sharing with my students what I am myself learning, because I recognize that my role and responsibility, as the 'centre' of our classroom, is to offer to my young fellow-learners the opportunity to discover their own sense of the religious essence of life.

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## The Vital Learning Ground

GEETHA WATERS



I have been volunteering at the Krishnamurti Centre in Summer Hill, Sydney, since it was opened by Andrew Hilton in March 2012. It was a great opportunity for Krishnamurti Australia to generate interest in the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti in the city of Sydney. It also gave me a wonderful opportunity to further explore his work with children and explain how he unveiled our powers of observation as being the vital ground for learning to take place.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my work at the Krishnamurti Centre is listening to anecdotes about the impact of Krishnamurti's teachings on people's lives. One comment a young man made about his encounter with Krishnamurti's work left a lasting impression on my mind. He declared that he had been given the *Commentaries on Living* by his father on his fifteenth birthday. To his surprise, he found it to be the most interesting book he had ever read! After reading the book, he said, he had begun to observe his thinking for the first time in his life. Soon, he realized the fact that thinking usurps the feeling of action! By now, we were both leaning forward with our elbows on our

knees, sitting on the edge of our sturdy white chairs. Thankfully that morning, I had put aside the two which had begun to wobble in the far corner to get them out of the way. The trucks trundled past outside, their brakes hissing as the vehicles came to a halt at the traffic lights. The pedestrian crossing remained empty and the drivers waited impatiently for the lights to change.

Over the next hour we explored the difference such an insight into the movement of thought could make on the mind. I took down an old brown copy of Krishnamurti's *Education and the Significance of Life* from a corner shelf. The young man was studying at Sydney University. He was doing a course in anthropology because he loved to learn about indigenous cultures around the world, he said, laughing self reflectively. "I know it is the past, and Krishnamurti would probably not approve of such things, but I find it fascinating!" he admitted looking rather apologetic.

"Can it be, that before the advent of classrooms, timetables and strict curriculum guidelines, so totally unrelated to

our direct perception of the flux of life, the intensity of 'seeking' for truth would have been less of a grind than it is now?" I asked. We had been discussing our attitude to indigenous people and our complacent attitude to modernity. The common assumption that modern times are complex and thereby more superior enabling us to look down on older cultures, had been the first assumption to be set aside.

Why had Krishnamurti placed such emphasis on direct perception and direct learning from life? From sitting through his talks year after year over a twelve-year period, that was the clearest message I could readily relate to him. All other teachers went straight to the curriculum and covered content zealously with careful attention to detail. They were covering the portions assigned to them. Krishnamurti on the other hand, would often begin with, "What shall we talk about today?" This question left the whole of life open for consideration. Often in the middle of a discussion, he would suspend a line of thought and ask of no one in particular, "What are we talking about Sirs?"

The train of thought we were pursuing in an attempt to follow what was being said, would cease and the room would fill with attention as we became aware of ourselves deep in thought while life went on all around us. Our intimate connection with the wider context of life was the gift that Krishnamurti often pointed to when he spent time with us. The grandeur of the intricate web of life which sustained us all

was never too far away from our minds when he was on campus. Even though he only spent a few weeks with us each year, he left behind him an impression that beauty and wonder is in the actual realm of living and not in our recollection of some theory or formula handed down by previous generations. Not only was he raising awareness of the complex network of thought clamouring for attention in our heads, he was also entreating us to be aware of the sublime feeling of life itself cradled by the magnetic blue hills of the Deccan plateau.

Growing up in that astonishingly beautiful valley I learned to appreciate the fact that intelligence does not rely on my memory alone. Memory is in fact suspended in the wider context of life actively sustaining us. To lose sight of this fact is to get caught in the narrow groove of identification which is inspired by an intense desire for truth emulating the feeling of action. The young man had seen this at the age of fifteen and I was thrilled to hear of his discovery.

"We are learning together, exploring together, investigating together!" Krishnamurti would often emphasize while he was speaking to us. He was vigorously drawing our attention to the living ground we occupied. To push his point across, he would look through the glare of spot-lights turned on his low dais to try and make contact with the students sitting on the floor before him. I wondered why he tried so hard to put this fact across to us. At that time I had no idea how surely the habitual grip

of conditioning would surely begin to draw on my memory insisting that my knowledge base was the centre of all that is right and true.

By pleading with us to observe and not lose sight of the flux of life in our search for the right answer, Krishnamurti was also skilfully introducing us to a process of keen inquiry which would continue to rake over the dead leaves of yesterday's preoccupations every day and reveal the truth about life in the light of a new day every day. Staying abreast of the flux of life, the mind learned to draw on the storehouse of memory at will and not get carried away by a craving for the ultimate fix of being right all the time. Rather than being conditioned to depend on my limited knowledge base, with Krishnamurti's intervention in our education, I learned to exercise my intelligence as a whole. At the time, I did not realize the full implications of his holistic approach to

learning. By shifting my attention from my knowledge base to my powers of observation, he had transformed the way I learned from life. Once I began to explore my powers of observation, I never lost sight of the significance of life. Like the young man at the Centre, I gradually began to appreciate that although thoughts cleverly usurp the feeling of action, in their restless search for answers, the act of perception, effortlessly transcends the accumulated pool of knowledge we are conditioned to rely on. Only observation can reveal the vital context in which life as a whole is unveiled. Directing our attention early to the fact that human intelligence naturally transcends the knowledge base through observation and that we can therefore effortlessly appraise the whole realm of life as it unfolds, is the timeless gift of Krishnamurti's holistic approach to education.

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## What Prevents Dialogue?

GURVINDER SINGH



In the context of a Krishnamurti Study Centre, small group and panel dialogues are often organized to bring people together to explore serious issues of life. Dialogue is different from debates or discussions. A dialogue does not aim to achieve a specific goal or win an argument by convincing and persuading others. Instead, the purpose of these dialogues is to enquire into the questions of daily living. In dialogue, one is willing to examine one's beliefs and assumptions. Often these dialogues are challenging—one needs to explore the nature of the challenge and what prevents dialogue from flowing like a river between friends.

This article explores some of the stumbling blocks to dialogue in Krishnamurti Schools and Study Centres as well as in other forums where dialogue is attempted. Significant time and energy goes into organizing such a dialogue—this article explores some of the considerations for organizing dialogues in these spaces. Immense care and thoughtfulness is required in facilitating as well as participating in a dialogue. This article examines factors which may prevent a dialogue.

### **Intent of dialogue**

The intent is to create an environment in which sensitive individuals can examine afresh matters that concern each one of us so that the investigation is carried out not as an academic exercise but to probe deeper into life's problems to gain insight. One finds that most of us do not have the capacity to ask fundamental questions and stay with the question. For example, "Is there psychological evolution?" Is it possible to ask a question and go into it with such meticulous care that the answer comes out from the question itself?

Looking for a result prevents dialogue. For example, if a person wants to have a good relationship with his teenage son or daughter and he comes to the dialogue with some expectations, this would prevent the act of learning

because he would be concerned about how he is going to apply what is going on in dialogue to this particular relationship all the time. The intent of the dialogue, on the contrary, is to discover for oneself how one's own mind is contributing to the conflict in the relationship in the first place.

The resolution of the problem in relationship does not come about through wanting tips and pointers from others, but to learn the process of thinking and to see through the illusions and deceptions of the mind. A goal-oriented approach prevents learning of the processes of the mind as one gets easily satisfied with ready-made answers.

The facilitator should make the intent of the dialogue clear before the start of the dialogue. Dialogue is not about some concepts or theories. It has everything to do with our daily lives and the state of the world in which we co-exist. Self-enquiry and dialogue is rooted in the fact that we can indeed explore together and discover truths which may have escaped us so far. One essential aspect of dialogue is to hold conclusions very lightly so that the mind is in a state of learning and observation and, thus, within a space in which insight can happen. The primary responsibility of the facilitator is to have this quality in himself and, therefore, be able to facilitate this in others.

### **Format of dialogue**

Some of the formats in which dialogue can be organized have been given below:

- Dialogue among friends: In this format, individuals who are serious about examining the existing human situations get together to delve into the nature of the human mind.
- Dialogue based on a theme text: a text of Krishnamurti's teachings is read together and the dialogue is around the questions raised in the text.
- Dialogue with a panel of persons who are quite familiar with the process of dialogue: In this format two or more persons may be invited to open up a theme. The panellists have a dialogue among themselves and then the participants ask them questions.
- Dialogue with a facilitator: In this format one person is designated as a facilitator who will take up a subject, talk for few minutes about that subject and then open the forum for discussion. Most of the communication will take place between the facilitator and participants. This may turn into a question and answer session.

### **Role of the facilitator**

A facilitator is needed in all these formats of dialogues. The facilitator is the person who makes the process of dialogue flow smoothly. He is not an authority who controls the process of dialogue. He is very careful that, in the process of facilitating, he does not become the centre of dialogue and start steering the dialogue in a pre-determined direction.

It is necessary to point out that the role of the facilitator cannot be defined in terms of what he should do and what he should not do. All that is needed is awareness of what is going on at that moment and realization of the fact that the problems that arise in the course of dialogue are the product of the way we all think. Therefore, one cannot find fault with what a particular person is saying. Rather, the underlying cause of the problem can be discussed in the dialogue so that it becomes clear how our habits and attitudes hinder the process of communicating with each other. When the facilitator notices a pattern emerging that prevents dialogue, he may then gently point this out.

Some participants may only sit quietly and listen to what is being said. Perhaps they may be feeling hesitant. The facilitator can then encourage such individuals to express their thoughts. Dialogue without a facilitator is a challenge. Sensing a lack of authority in a dialogue, one of the participants may start telling others what to do and what not to do. He may start dictating rules on the basis of his own judgements and conclusions. Other participants may get offended. Hence, the participants themselves have to be alert to such a situation arising and gently point out as to what is going on.

By being fully aware of what is going on, the facilitator can ensure that the dialogue adheres to the main theme under consideration. He is also cautious and alert that his intervention does not discourage the participants from enquiry. The facilitator can play a crucial role in avoiding the various pitfalls discussed here.

### **Dialogue is not merely an intellectual activity**

People who find dialogue intellectually stimulating need to be aware of 'what prevents dialogue?' Dialogue offers a unique opportunity to be with one's thought-feelings simultaneously. The mind does not want to stay with uncomfortable feelings, and has a strong tendency to move towards intellectualization. Usually, the participants are committed to certain ideas, opinions and beliefs and they argue from their respective points of view. The facilitator may help the participants to realize that their knowledge,

beliefs, prejudices, ideas and opinions divide us and that we need to explore the issues of life with a fresh and objective mind. In the dialogue, the participants need not try to convince each other of anything. Rather, the mind needs to be in the state of enquiry and understanding.

In dialogue it is imperative for the participants to make a distinction between the art of seeing and conceptualization. Conceptualization is the process of forming ideas. In dialogue there is a tendency to pick up statements that resonate with ideas that one has already formed. The problem is that the person often labels the statements as right or wrong and this labelling process prevents us from finding out the truth of the matter.

There may be a tendency to respond quickly to a question raised during the dialogue without completely listening to what the other person has said. The inner conceptual commentary that goes on in the form of judgement and interpretation of what the other person is saying also prevents us from listening. Responding means to listen and attend to what someone is saying so completely that one hears not only the words, but also what is behind the words.

We can listen to each other and observe our own reaction only when there is complete attention. Attention indicates affection. Dialogue rooted in affection is vastly different from the dialogue of the intellect. We can listen to each other only when there is no screen of prejudices, no screen of resistance and no screen of ideas, opinions, judgements and conclusions.

### **Enquiry without framework**

There is an art of enquiry, an act of observing, and articulating from that observation. From experience we find that most of the time, this does not happen. Rarely do we take up a question and investigate it together. The academics have great difficulty with dialogue because they have a theoretical framework within which they converse with each other. The framework gives them the meaning and direction. They are not able to enquire without the framework. So, there lies the difficulty in dialogue. In a dialogue there is no framework within which one enquires. The mind is too vast and too complex to fit into a framework. Thinking tends to run ahead of observation. This happens in the form of projection or speculation. Then the seeing is no longer precise.

### **Being second-hand**

Quoting others is a distraction from dialogue. Quoting Krishnamurti may give a person a false sense of confidence and a feeling of authority in what

he is saying. On many occasions words are not accurately quoted because of too much reliance on memory; or the quotes are misinterpreted so as to convey one's own point of view.

The most distracting aspect is to narrate anecdotes of Krishnamurti and adding one's own imagination to the anecdotes in order to 'score points' during the conversation. The anecdotes do not address the immediacy of the issue that is being discussed. The same applies to quotes and anecdotes of religious or spiritual leaders both living and dead. We need to be really careful and not get distracted by ideas that we have already formed.

### **Identification with memories blocks dialogue**

As a participant, one needs to be aware that words and statements evoke memories through association. Getting carried away with reactions and associations in our memories prevents listening. Reactions arising out of past memory take us away from the movement of dialogue. The word 'anger' may trigger the memory of oneself getting angry and the story behind losing control over oneself. One needs to be aware whether one's verbal expressions in dialogue are arising out of memory or out of seeing the functioning of the mind directly.

### **Observation of oneself is the key to learning**

Dialogue has the potential to open the door to a wider movement of learning and a subtle shift may happen that leads to clarity of perception. The process of dialogue could clarify the teachings in the context of one's own life. Dialogue could show the limitations and contradictions of one's way of thinking. Observation of oneself is the key to having a dialogue. This implies that the participants are involved in the act of observation of thoughts and feelings as they arise. It is then that there is a possibility of movement within oneself.

In our day to day life we need to be aware of the operation of our own mind and our responses and reactions to the various challenges that we face. We also need to use our senses to observe nature and be aware of the immediate environment where we live. Shortly before his death in 1992, David Bohm, while having a conversation regarding the vagaries of dialogue, said, "I think people are not doing enough work on their own, apart from the dialogue groups." What is being suggested is that apart from attending dialogues, it is essential that the individual is involved in self-study. This may involve writing one's thoughts as they arise, reading books and listening to audios or videos of Krishnamurti's talks and dialogues.

In considering what prevents dialogue, one becomes alert to the inner movement of thought and to the outer movement of conversation among the participants. There is no effort to control or steer the dialogue in a particular direction. The alertness has its own movement and the outcome of dialogue is unknown. Through alert awareness and attentiveness, the participants in the dialogue learn the art of listening, the art of observation and the art of learning. Learning is the outcome of observation of things as they actually are.

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## Learning with Wonder

### Environmental studies for the young

SUNITHA MAHESH



Nature is part of our life. Our school campus has its natural beauty, still intact. There is silence and quietness that permeates and penetrates each one of us. To be in communion with that, to look at, love and admire everything around us—a flying bird, a beautiful pink flower on a touch-me-not plant, a broken branch—to be part of it, to be aware and feel that we belong to all that out there, is what we have attempted in our learning programmes.

Environmental Studies or EVS as it is usually called, is one of the subjects introduced in the mixed-age (7–9 years of age) vertical group of the Junior Section in The Valley School. EVS is a vast pool of experiences, concepts, experiments and information that describe and connect with the world around us. It is one of the most interesting subjects for primary school students as it pertains to their immediate environment and encourages them to wander around the beautiful school campus. However, the important challenge for teachers is to infuse a spirit of enquiry into the learning process; not merely asking for a definition or a conclusion, but by earnestly observing what is around, with curiosity and humility. In this process, the environment becomes the medium for engaging young minds in the excitement of first-hand observation of nature and natural phenomena, and for understanding patterns and processes in the natural and social world. A further challenge for the teachers lies in designing the programme for a dynamic group of children of varying ages, with diverse needs and capacities.

#### **Main objectives of the programme**

The main objectives of the EVS programme are:

- To nurture wonder and curiosity in young minds.
- To bring in the quality of attention, silence and solitude in children.
- To explore, understand and make connections with their immediate

environments—school campus, neighbourhood and home—and from there to the wider world.

- To observe with attention the water, soil and different life forms in their natural habitats and document what they see.
- To inculcate in children the ability to question and reflect on their observations about natural materials and phenomena, and to make meaningful inferences using the scientific processes of experimentation, recording and analysis.
- To provide opportunities for learning through hands-on activities, art and craft work and personal experiences.
- To introduce the sciences and social sciences as an integrated whole.

### **Themes and modules over a three-year cycle**

The fact that a child spends three years in our mixed-age classrooms in the junior school led us to develop a three-year cycle for the EVS programme, which includes twelve different modules under four different themes. The four themes and their modules (in brackets) are given below.

**Theme 1:** Biodiversity in the Valley (Birds; Trees; Insects and Spiders)

**Theme 2:** Natural Elements (Air; Soil; Water)

**Theme 3:** Physical Phenomena (Sound; Light; Force)

**Theme 4:** Eminent Personalities (Helen Keller; Dr CV Raman; Mahatma Gandhi)

Thus, we have ‘Birds’, ‘Air’, ‘Sound’, ‘Helen Keller’ in the first year; ‘Trees’, ‘Soil’, ‘Light’, ‘Dr CV Raman’ in the second year, and ‘Insects and Spiders’, ‘Water’, ‘Force’, ‘Mahatma Gandhi’ in the final year of the three-year cycle.

The modules covered over a year are chosen carefully to establish close links between them as far as possible. For instance, when we begin with ‘Birds’ as the module related to biodiversity, it culminates in the adaptations of birds that enable them to fly, and this gradually progresses to ‘Air’, which is the medium of flight for these efficient natural flyers. The next module is ‘Sound’ which invariably needs air as a medium to travel in. The year ends with ‘Helen Keller’, a personality one can associate well with sound and hearing. Similar interlinks are made evident in the cluster including ‘Soil’, ‘Trees’, ‘Light’ and ‘Dr CV Raman’. This interconnectedness between modules leads to a natural flow of content and establishes a good integration of concepts.

### **Teaching approaches**

The year usually begins with a topic on biodiversity because it is closely connected to the immediate environment and is mostly done outdoors. These topics nurture the qualities of attention, silence and solitude. Field study, direct observation, documentation and interaction with resource people are the main approaches to learning in these modules.

Themes 2 and 3 lend themselves to learning through exploration, experimentation and analysis. Children develop an understanding of the basic physical concepts through direct experience with everyday objects, participating in carefully designed activities that promote questioning, collecting, displaying and discussing data. The year ends with the study of a renowned personality. In the cases of Helen Keller and Dr CV Raman, there is a clear link between the personalities and the other modules within the group. While covering this theme, children get a glimpse into the lives of these people and understand the significant contributions made by them to society.

### **Dynamic curriculum**

The curriculum is itself inspired by the environment and is dynamic, as it allows learning to take place inside and outside the classroom. The fact that the content is not based on a specific textbook, allows the teacher and the student, both learners in their own ways, to make connections and appreciate the flow of ideas. The learning process, which often begins with observation, supports the fact that when you pay attention, you see things extraordinarily clearly. Every child can express her understanding depending on ability and skill, either in the form of pictures, illustrations, words, sentences or paragraphs. Hence, there is no comparison or competition, enabling each child to learn at a pace and at a skill level appropriate for her. It encourages the individual child to take direct responsibility for her learning. Each class also witnesses a learning process which is a complex web of interactions between teachers and students and between peers. Paired and small group activities enrich the peer interactions and learning, as children with different skills and abilities come together to work.

### **Teacher: A learner with the student**

This predominantly activity-based programme emphasizes the role of the adult as a guide, a facilitator, and an active participant in the whole learning process. It is absolutely necessary for the teachers to ensure dynamic planning and preparation and provide adequate resource material to support learning of the different children in her group. The challenge for the teacher is not

to 'teach a class' but to enable every child to learn through participation, discovery and personal experiences. Since the focus is on embracing the pristine moments of experiencing a reality or a phenomenon, the magic lies in how a student can understand or represent through their own words, rather than through definitions, the unravelling of the mystery that is nature. The teacher too is an active learner along with the children.

### **Some unforgettable moments**

There have been several moments of joy, wonder and excitement in young minds, which we, as teachers, have cherished in our interactions with our class groups. The most memorable one for me was when the entire junior school gathered to see the emergence of a beautiful Common Crow butterfly in one of the classrooms. The children had collected the caterpillar during their walk and had observed with great curiosity its transformation into a cocoon and then into a beautiful butterfly. Yet another heart-warming sight was the experience of seeing children hugging a tree in groups of two or three to measure the girth (circumference) of its trunk. The spark of amazement in the eyes of children, while we discussed the challenges, contributions and achievements of Helen Keller was yet another unforgettable moment.

### **Enrichment and integration**

The programme is enriched through the contribution of senior students, other teachers and experts from outside who are invited as resource people to accompany children for walks, to give assembly presentations, or simply talk to them about their experiences. The Junior School excursions are planned to revolve around topics in the EVS classes every year. The art and craft activities within each module are integrated with the art classes. Making of models, herbariums with flowers and leaves, tree calendars and group cooking are other related activities. Poems, short stories and skits related to the modules are learnt and discussed in the Hindi, Kannada and English classes, thus integrating the topics with language study.

Through the EVS programme, we attempt to nurture sensitivity in children to the fact that every element in our environment has significance and value in itself. This has meant that we learn to look at the environment in a holistic manner, not just for human survival and human benefits but also for the interdependence and well-being of all other life forms. It is more earth-centric than human-centric. It is an approach anchored in a love of life, of every other creature on this planet, an approach where the interconnectedness of life on earth is reinforced—an approach that is the need of the hour.

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## **Opening our Senses**

### **Guided exercises in nature awareness**

SANDILYA THEUERKAUF



We often speak of the importance of nature observation in our curriculum in Krishnamurti schools. How do we develop this sensibility in students and educators? The author grew up in a rainforest in Kerala and has, over many years of interacting with students, developed simple yet powerful exercises to facilitate processes of attention while in natural surroundings.

This article has been written in a question-and-answer format.

### **What, according to you, is the value of nature in our lives?**

We need to relate to the planet we live on, somehow, as people. There *has* to be a deeper connect in all of us, as this alienation is destroying the planet. Apart from the personal or therapeutic value, so to speak, whether people know it or not, if we live without anything to do with our landscapes, there is something lacking in our lives. This lack may manifest in different ways.

In children, definitely, the value would be that if there is some contact with nature, and if the sense of care is more, then the chances of these children looking after the planet are also more. Our planet is in this state because we don't care what it is that we are losing, we don't see it and we don't value it.

Maybe, if we were to give time and energy to paying attention to a place, then apart from care, there can be endless learning and appreciation because there is also such beauty, such diversity on this earth. This can happen in vast landscapes, or also in a small garden. There are so many worlds everywhere, there is life everywhere, life that is not only ours.

### **What do you think comes in the way of our relating with nature?**

Let's say we are, as people, alienated from nature. It is not only those who live in urban areas, this alienation is there among those who live in rural areas also. It seems we all lack a quality of appreciation, of care and understanding. This separateness creates distortions in our relationship.

We do relate to nature in different ways, as farmers, tourists, scientists, birdwatchers and so on. But is there something that is common to all these? Can a farmer see more than his crops? Can a bird-watcher appreciate something other than birds? Can there be a relating where it does not matter who we are? We always perceive through ideas so is it possible to suspend what we know? There is the romantic relationship with nature, for example. But these ideas blind us, like filters, stopping us from really seeing what we are looking at. This is not to disregard other ways of engagement or to belittle them—of course all of these too should happen. But these are not enough. We need to engage with nature *regardless* of fears, background, knowledge and purpose. We give importance to the particular. We like to tick-off on our lists—birds, butterflies, trees, flowers. We always define the scope of our engagement with nature but this is quite narrow, and it blinds us to the ‘whole’. Can we realise that we relate from created images?

#### **How do we get past these filters?**

Is there something like reaching out to a place ‘as a whole’, and what does that mean? Life is much more than these particulars and we can feel it. Is there a way of being connected to this feeling? A state of *being* where one is giving attention to the place, where categories of thought do not matter. Stored up ideas inevitably affect our present relationship.

Can we reach a state of *only* using the senses fully, putting aside all thoughts that do not concern the place, including thoughts that are *about* the place? Is it possible to be so present that it does not matter who you are? By this I mean taking energy away from the thought processes, to give attention and energy to the sounds and sights around one. We can try to put all our energy into just that, to be in a place with just that, without interpretation, not governed by memory and habit. There are moments when we are attentive to so many things all together, where thoughts naturally quieten down. When we are being aware of the body, the breeze, the temperature, the smells, the sounds, the colours and shapes around us, we are not so caught up with who we are.

#### **How do we draw children into this relationship with nature?**

It sounds like a paradox to say that to pay attention to the outer world, we need to begin with inner awareness. But it is not so in reality. To be able to get the imagination going, we need continuous exposure, regular time outdoors. But to begin with, we need to examine the fears, resistance, preconceived ideas (of beauty for instance). We need to be able to talk and exchange these views in a group.

Are children in touch with all this within themselves? The youngest ones walk, swim, climb, garden and look together at things. The older ones enjoy all this, and in addition, they can engage in conversations. There is also sketching, bird-watching, theatre, movement, adventure, exploring, studies of soil or rocks or plants, and so on. All these can be explored to bring children closer to the natural world.

#### **Can you outline your guided attention programme?**

There has to be a practice built up, which implies repetition over multiple sessions. I wouldn’t introduce more than one or two new suggestions in a single session. As we repeat the exercise over time, all that has been established will repeat, and new ideas can be brought in. At the end of every session, we gather to share our experiences.

It helps to be in a place where there is ‘natural beauty’, but it can be done anywhere where one can hear birds, feel the breeze, without an excessive disturbance of loudspeakers or traffic.

To begin with, there has to be a common understanding among us as to the purpose with which we are coming together. After having a conversation about it, and some basic ideas have been established, we can begin the process.

The first exercise is to close one’s eyes, as sight is our dominant sense, and tends to take over all other senses. With the eyes closed, we can go through a process of being aware of different parts of the body. We then relax the body so that it can become still. It would include consciously relaxing certain muscles that are tense, and resting our busy fingers.. This awareness of all parts of the body lays the groundwork for what follows.

Guided listening is the next exercise. I ask the group to be very aware of the ears, before beginning to listen—to have a sense of ‘opening out the ears’—as if they were partially closed till now. If there is a repetitive sound nearby, I ask them to reach out to that sound, become aware of the direction in which it is coming from, and ‘to listen with a lot of energy’. While listening to this sound, we bring attention to sounds coming from other directions. Then we slowly bring in distant sounds, paying attention to sounds that are close and far away. Maybe even reach out to spaces from where no sounds are coming. This is done over a period of five or ten minutes, to point out some of these sounds, and to examine what is happening in the mind as we listen. How long are we able to keep this listening alive, and when do we slip back into thinking unconnected thoughts? Knowing that this

span is very short, it helps to remind the group to re-start the process over and over.

What is the intensity of this listening that is happening? What is happening while we are listening? Are there just sounds or is there a quick labelling? There are also connected thoughts, connected to what we are hearing: 'sound of a bus, a bird flying, leaves rustling'. This is a more subtle tendency. Can we give so much energy to the listening that we are not analysing what we hear?

When repeating the exercise, we can encourage a greater scope of attentiveness, such as noticing the breeze blowing past us, or the smells in the air.

In a later session, after going through all the steps of body awareness, stillness and guided listening, I ask the group to open their eyes. They are told to not do it all on a sudden but to restrict the eyes a bit to begin with. The purpose is to just let the eyes be open. I would ask them to let the eyes rest on a space directly in front, whether somewhere on the ground or at a distance. This would immediately cause the ears to close, so the next exercise is to keep the eyes open, not looking around and taking in much, but to go back to being attentive to the ears and the sounds. In other words, we do the listening exercise with the eyes open.

In the next session, I gradually give attention to the eyes also. I separate the senses to go into each one for clarity, but they are all connected. In the same way as with the listening, I ask them to rest the eyes on something in front, and then to open out their focus to be aware of what is on the periphery, to guide them to be aware of the spaces above and below, to the left and to the right, near and distant, so that the eye can see a full circle. I also ask them to stretch this circle as much as possible, so that what is in front is no longer in sole focus. This is not done to give importance to anything that may be of interest such as a butterfly, a beautiful flower or an insect. We try to give undivided attention to the full circle. This may cause the whole scene to become out-of-focus, so we do not try to change that, but keep the energy on looking and being aware of any processing that our mind tries to do.

The next step is to ask the group to split apart and be alone for a time. To begin with, it could be for half an hour, when each person does the same exercises on their own. In these spaces, I always suggest something that they could try to do on their own, such as walking in open focus, noticing their

own choices of paths and places, being attentive to what in the environment is drawing them. I then tell them to deliberately move away from these more comfortable paths and places to sit. I ask them to go out and look at small, near spaces, and larger distant spaces and to reach out and touch surfaces. They could then choose to do something with their hands, re-arranging fallen objects, and notice the tendency to impose patterns and frameworks, rather than just 'playing' with the objects.

Through all these repeated sessions, does the place bring forth a response in each of us? There may be a feeling that we have to walk in a sedentary manner, sit meditatively and be quiet and dignified! But what are the other actions that the place can move us to do? Can the place spark an impulse in us to run, to crawl, to lie down, to climb, and to make sounds?

We may lack the ability for sustained attention, but we can try to put our energies to allow for moments of complete awareness. Is there something to be discovered, something new, operating in us at this moment?

**Often we hear someone say, 'I am not a nature kind of a person!' What do they mean and what is your response to that?**

But where do these images and attitudes come from? They are a result of our conditioning, and can we examine this? We have a sense of not belonging, of feeling separate, indifferent, having many fears and feeling physical discomfort when we are not surrounded by our comforts. One needs to first realise that there is this feeling, of fear or indifference or separateness. Then, realise that everyone has eyes, ears, and can sit quietly. We could ask the person who feels this way to "simply look and listen". That does not take special knowledge or skill. It is not an interest-based activity; everyone can be encouraged to attempt this, it opens doors.

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## The Revolution Now\*

SIMON BOXLEY



This little essay is about urgency, but it is about calm urgency, unhurried urgency. It is about the need for educators such as myself to be now what we must be tomorrow.

### Responsibility

The challenge for me as a university teacher is how I approach the question of the burden of responsibility I hand to my students. I am taking it that the same challenge might be felt by all educators, at least all those who think seriously about education, such as those at Brockwood Park School. It is felt most acutely by those engaged in the work of disrupting, of making ‘dis-ease’, ‘dis-quiet’, and ‘dis-contentment’.

Contrary to the spirit of Krishnamurti, much of the education in schools in England, and a fair bit in universities, involves telling and explaining. Such teaching and lecturing can be conscious or unconscious. It can be aware of its ‘violence’ or not. Teaching can be precisely *violent* when it breaks open complacencies, prejudices and unquestioned assumptions. I ask whether such violence is an inevitability, whether all education worthy of its name, that which unsettles and disequilibrates, is an act of violence.

When educators take the potential violence of our own activity seriously, we also need to be mindful of the responsibilities with which we burden our students. I have said ‘burden’, not just to be provocative, but to give a sense of how difficult it is to be left wondering, dissatisfied and uncertain without an obvious means of enacting or performing that uncertainty in a world of certain truths. How can one be uncertain about capitalism in a world dominated by commodities? How can one be uncertain about endless

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\* This article is based on a talk given at a conference at Brockwood Park School. Early in the article, the author uses the term ‘violence’ in a special way to mean that which creates ‘disturbance’ or ‘discontentment’.

consumption in a world tired and drained by the ceaseless depletion of its limited resources?

I have said ‘responsibility’ because uncertainty of this type asks of the learner these questions—will you be passive in your uncertainty, or will you be active? Will you withdraw from the world, into the monastery of the mind, or will you find a way to wriggle through the cracks in the certainties of the mind, and of the society about you? For as Leonard Cohen says, “there is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in”.

I take as my example something which is close to my heart, the issue of how we educate for and in a biosphere that is so damaged as to look increasingly irreparable, a planet which has seen the total population of one species—ours—double in the last 40 years (Starr, 2015), and the global population of all wild fauna halve in the same period (WWF, 2014). Many formerly biodiverse ecosystems have become so hollowed out, their interconnections so cauterized, as to bring into question their survival over the medium term.

It is harder to feel the loss of biodiversity than it is to feel one’s own hair and nails grow; it is harder to feel the gradual death of one’s ecosystem than it is to feel one’s own slow dying. However, once you have been made more intensely aware of your body in progressive decay, or once learning has taken place which brings you into a closer awareness of the collapse in biodiversity and the malfunctioning of your own biotic life support systems, you have the *responsibility*, as to how you respond.

### Awareness

Our education works systematically against awareness. The philosopher Baird Callicott, said of the great ecological thinker, planter of the seeds of ecocentric ethics, Aldo Leopold, that for him, our education is, for the most part, “a process of trading awareness for things of lesser worth” (Callicott, 1989, p.226). In schools, when we trade in our awareness, we do so for book-learning, for facts and knowledge, which comes between us and the immediacy of our experience.

So, even when education is necessarily about telling, and explaining, this teaching can be done in the ‘now’, with an awareness of its meaning, or it can be done unthinkingly, it can be done consciously or unconsciously. When one teaches about our relationship with nature, whether that teaching occurs within or without the classroom, it can be conducted with, or in the absence of, an awareness of the responsibility it places on the student

right now in relation to her thinking. It can acknowledge that, as far as our future on the planet goes, “the future is now”, or it can say, “have these facts, regurgitate them another day.”

Those of us who try to be aware of ourselves and our learners as we teach, attempt to avoid alighting upon a perch, but continue unceasingly to wheel above the certainty, asking ourselves what we can all do today—teachers and learners together—to speed the advance of the cracks in the fossil fuel culture of fast-burn capitalism, for this is a world of ‘madness’.

Among his last works, Krishnamurti’s reflections on nature feature prominently, and often take the form of little word paintings and sketches, interspersed with philosophical and spiritual ruminations. Krishnamurti’s last journal (Krishnamurti, 1987) starts with a reflection upon the ancient hills around his place of residence in California, and their fragile ecosystems: “wherever you go...man is destroying nature, cutting down trees to build more houses, polluting the air with cars and industry.” (Krishnamurti, 1987, p.14) He calls this ‘madness’ and asks, “Do you know the world is mad, that all this is madness..? And you will grow up to fit into this. Is this right, is this what education is meant for, that you should willingly or unwillingly fit into this structure called society?” (ibid.) The reflections in this text seem to grow out of their environment, out of the Californian hills, they are attentive to the place within which they are set. In each case they turn from outward attentiveness to meditative inward attentiveness, and back outwards to the responsibilities of the learner and the teacher:

There is a tree and we have been watching it day after day for several days...If you establish a relationship with it then you have relationship with mankind. You are responsible then for that tree and for the trees of the world. But if you have no relationship with the living things on this earth you may lose whatever relationship you have with humanity. (ibid. p.9)

[T]he healing of the mind... gradually takes place if you are with nature, with that orange on the tree, that blade of grass that pushes through the cement, and the hills covered, hidden by the clouds. This is not sentiment or romantic imagination but a reality of a relationship with everything that lives and moves on the earth. (ibid. p.10)

It is our intention... to create an environment, a climate, where one can bring about, if it is at all possible, a new human being...To live is to be related. There is no right relationship to anything if there is not the right feeling for beauty, a response to nature. (ibid. p.89)

So, he turns for the source of his transformative pedagogical vision to images of unsullied nature:

So, look at nature, at the tamarind tree, the mango trees in bloom, and listen to the birds early in the morning and late in the evening... See all the colours, the light on the leaves, the beauty of the land, the rich earth. Then having seen that and seen also what the world is, with all its brutality, violence, ugliness, what are you going to do? (ibid. p.13)

Insofar as his approach calls for ‘attention’ rather than ‘critique’ in a conventional sense, ‘looking’ rather than ‘analysing’, it is amenable to a non-interventionist (at times even anti-interventionist) pedagogy of nature. In this respect Krishnamurti’s distinctive contribution to thinking about this question has proved very attractive to many of my students for the ways they can bring his ideas to those of contemporary writers such as Michael Bonnett (2013) and find echoes in the current concerns about scientism in the curriculum—an aggressive interventionism in education about environments, which seeks only to measure and quantify. Krishnamurti’s last journal, as a text for undergraduate students of education, raises questions and provokes dialogue that few other books might. But how and when to use it, these are important questions, and my responsibility as an educator.

Krishnamurti (ibid. p.60) speaks of a war on nature and on humanity, of mankind’s self-destruction alongside the destruction of the earth. From him, my students learn that integration of the human into humanity and our integration into nature are inseparable.

It is our earth, not yours or mine or his... But man has divided the earth, hoping thereby that in the particular he is going to find happiness, security, a sense of abiding comfort. (ibid. p.60)

One never appreciates the earth unless one really lives with it, puts one’s hand in the dust, lifting big rocks and stones—one never knows the extraordinary sense of being with the earth, the flowers, the gigantic trees and the strong grass and the hedges along the road. (ibid. p.71)

### **Integration into nature is integration into humanity**

If you are in harmony with nature, with all the things around you, then you are in harmony with all human beings. If you have lost your relationship with nature you will inevitably lose your relationship with human beings. (Krishnamurti, 1987, p.107)

So what does this ‘harmony with nature’ exist in? And how can education help to bring it about? Krishnamurti’s holistic pedagogy shares with that

of Bonnett (2013) something of a natural suspicion for the pre-eminence of scientism, which is seen as contributory to environmental and social crises, and with Orr's (1994) writing, a worry about the misuses of scientific 'cleverness'. But unlike Bonnett or Orr, he places particular emphasis upon what one might call each individual's spiritual education as an ecologically healing force.

[E]ducation is the cultivation of the whole brain, not one part of it... Science is what has brought about the present state of tension in the world for it has put together through knowledge the most destructive instrument[s] that man has ever known. (ibid., p.125)

In the beauty of the pedagogical revelation of nature, Krishnamurti finds something akin to the realization of global consciousness. The absence of self or, alternatively, the explosion of self into the cosmos, or nature, is reflected in Krishnamurti's analogy in this passage from one of his last talks in India in late 1985:

With the grandeur, the majesty of a mountain or a lake, or that river early in the morning making a golden path, for a second you've forgotten everything. That is, when the self is not, there is beauty... Like a child with a toy, as long as the toy is complex and he plays with it, the toy absorbs him, takes him over... We are also like that... We are absorbed by the mountain... for a few minutes; then we go back to our own world. And we are saying, without a toy, without being absorbed by something greater, can you be free of yourself? (Krishnamurti, 1988, p. 42)

Krishnamurti charges that if one doesn't understand the nature of this question—perhaps the same question posed by ecological educators from Leopold's "thinking like a mountain" (Leopold, 1949, p. 129), onwards—it is because one has *too much* knowledge; rather, one should be *simple*, for "[i]f you are very simple, deeply simple in yourself, you will discover something extraordinary". (ibid.) Simplicity, awareness: these take us back to discontentment, to the question of what we each individually do when we "go back to our own world" after the lesson from nature or from the conscious educator, to "create a new culture, a totally different kind of existence, not based on consumerism." (ibid.)

When I bring my undergraduate students from an ordinary UK university to Brockwood Park School, I am aware that for some the shock of difference, of radical unfamiliarity with the openness of an enquiry-based learning, is an act of violence upon their accumulated and settled sense of themselves, and perhaps of their place in nature. Yet, for many, I know,

it is also a revelation, the significance of which is only realized years later. One of my many students who visited Brockwood before going on to teach in a British state school later said, "Because of experiences like that, I can never wholly believe in or commit myself to the fixed answers or the measurable progress our current system requires me to demonstrate". It is indeed, a huge responsibility to 'burden' another with such uncertainty, whether in regard to education, or to our relation to nature; yet in both cases, such a transformation is urgent. It is the necessary revolution now.

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## Partners in Self-Understanding

WILLEM ZWART



Oak Grove School works closely, not only with students, but also parents. This strong sense of community has been present since our founding in 1975 and continues to this day. Parents play an important part in our school. A student remarked a few years ago that for students to do well at Oak Grove a strong partnership between students, parents and the school is necessary. Two aspects of this cooperative work are self-understanding and partnership.

Self-understanding is not easy. The playwright Tennessee Williams, who struggled with this, once cheerfully remarked, “There comes a time, when you look into the mirror, and you realize that what you see, is all that you will ever be. And then you accept it. Or you kill yourself. Or you stop looking in mirrors!” One of the most interesting mirrors we have in seeking self-understanding is the mirror of relationship. Krishnamurti put it this way:

Relationship is a mirror in which to see ourselves as we actually are. But most of us are incapable of looking at ourselves as we are in relationship, because we immediately begin to condemn or justify what we see. We judge, we evaluate, we compare, we deny or accept, but we never observe actually what is, and for most people this seems to be the most difficult thing to do; yet this alone is the beginning of self-knowledge.

Oak Grove is not just a school for students; it is a school for all of us—the faculty and staff, students, and parents. We are all learning together. This is where partnership comes in. Good partnership needs a healthy dose of self-understanding. Good partnership needs care, affection, love, attention, kindness, compassion, awareness and sensitivity.

Awareness implies sensitivity: to be sensitive to nature, to the hills, rivers and the trees around one; ...to be sensitive to the man who is sitting next to you, or to the nervousness of your friend or sister. This sensitivity has in

it no choice; it is not critical...If there is affection, a sense of tenderness, kindness, generosity, then behaviour is dictated by that affection. One of the most difficult things in life is behaviour, that is, conduct: one's manners, politeness, the way one talks, the way one feels, the way one thinks.

To best ensure that our children flourish in this sensitivity, affection, and watchfulness, a strong partnership between students, parents and teachers is necessary. Even so there are bound to be some bumps on the road now and then; that is after all part of being in relationship. When that happens, it may be helpful to remember what the psychologist Carl Jung said, “Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.”

I would summarize the notion of self-understanding in partnership as careful and non-judgmental attention and observation in relationship. This gives us insight into our conditioning, and leads to a sense of inward freedom, which brings about order. Krishnamurti would say that with that freedom come great love and responsibility. We need not take him, or anyone for that matter, at his word. We can find out for ourselves, together and individually, through the mirror of relationship and careful observation.

This opens the door to sensitivity, compassion and love. With love—for people, nature, for our world—comes goodness in action. Love also opens the door to the possibility of the sacred. This is the transformation Krishnamurti spoke about. It starts with all of us and through us impacts society and the world. In that sense, what we are doing at our schools is revolutionary.

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## It Takes a Village

### Shining a light on the school-home partnership

MEREDY BENSON RICE



Here's what we know—healthy parent involvement in a student's schooling has a positive impact on student learning. When home and school are on the same page and in true partnership, students benefit. We know that parents care deeply about their children and that most appreciate opportunities for meaningful participation in their child's education. We also know that most teachers appreciate information from parents that can help them meet the needs of students in the classroom.

In Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teaching*,<sup>1</sup> one critical component included in 'Professional Responsibilities' is communicating with families. According to the Danielson framework, 'distinguished communication with families' looks like this:

- Teacher provides frequent information to families, as appropriate, about the instructional program. *Students participate in preparing materials for their families.*
- Teacher provides information to families frequently on student progress, *with students contributing to the design of the system.* Response to family concerns is handled with great professionalism and cultural sensitivity.
- Teachers' efforts to engage families in the instructional program are frequent and successful. *Students contribute ideas for projects that could be enhanced by family participation.*

The italicized sentences above referencing student involvement denote the difference between 'proficient' and 'distinguished' communication, i.e., when a teacher can directly involve students in the home-school partnership, relations are further enhanced.

**Teacher provides frequent information to families, as appropriate, about the instructional programme. *Students participate in preparing materials for their families.***

Like most schools, Oak Grove hosts a 'Back to School Night', usually during the second week of school. The whole parent community gathers together with staff and teachers in the evening to not only learn important information about school protocols but also to mix, mingle, and get to know one another and the ways they can participate in the broader life of the school (Parent Council, Special Event Committees, Volunteerism). Parents then meet with their child's teachers in the classroom. Teachers are expected to have an overview of the year's curricula in the form of a map, syllabi, or scope and sequence document available for parents to peruse, and there is time for the teacher to review this and take questions.

Thereafter, teachers send bi-monthly email communications to their parent body roughly following this format—what we've been doing; what we are about to do; special highlights; and important upcoming dates. This is often accompanied by photos. These regular communications keep individual families abreast of what is going on in the classroom. Some teachers may involve students in helping to determine what goes into their class emails or other communications that go home to parents.

At the same time the school sends a weekly email communication called 'This Week at Oak Grove' that includes important upcoming dates, school-wide information, resources, calendars, highlights regarding school-wide activities, events, or alumni news. The email also includes beautiful photos that help parents get a better sense of school life.

**Teacher provides information to families frequently on student progress, *with students contributing to the design of the system.* Response to family concerns is handled with great professionalism and cultural sensitivity.**

Oak Grove has four formal opportunities for communicating student progress—two face-to-face parent conferences, one in the fall and one in the spring, and two narrative reports sent at the end of the first and second semester. Beginning in Grade 4, these conferences are student-led, i.e., the student is present and has worked to compile a range of student work that can be reviewed together with the teacher and parent. Often, this involves a range of reflection exercises and goal-setting for the student that is shared with the parents.

Informally, student progress is communicated much more frequently via phone calls and email and parents may request an additional conference

at any time. In fact, they are encouraged to do so when there are concerns of an academic or social nature and teachers are encouraged to respond to parent concerns promptly with empathy and respect and honest communication.

**Teacher's efforts to engage families in the instructional program are frequent and successful. Students contribute ideas for projects that could be enhanced by family participation.**

Many teachers either individually or collectively host curricular nights like 'Science Night', 'Math Night' and 'Poetry Night' where parents come to school in the evening and students share work they have been doing at school. Often teachers will invite parents to attend a celebration of the end of a large project or unit of study where students showcase their work. Additionally, parents may be engaged in meaningful 'homework' such as reading a particular book at bedtime, engaging in a student-parent interview for a class project, or a review of portfolio work sent home.

We do all this and yet...

Notwithstanding everything we know about how deeply parents care for their children, and given the degree of wonderful outreach most teachers engage in, why is it that teachers often still feel relations with parents are difficult? According to Michael Thompson,<sup>2</sup> a psychologist and school consultant, one answer is 'the fear equation'. Thompson points out that both teachers and parents come into the parent-teacher relationship with multiple latent and usually unconscious fears. Given the importance of the home-school partnership, it is worth examining how some of these fears may be influencing our ability to engage in positive home-school relations.

In a nutshell, Thompson suggests that parent fear sounds like this, "While I may look competent, I am not completely secure about my ability to parent, which makes me feel vulnerable. My child's behaviour when I am not present may reflect badly on me (and my fear is the teacher will judge me). I cannot protect my child from the world, and once in a while my worry gets out of control (and you, the teacher are recipient of my out-of-control anxiety). You, the teacher, may know something about my child that I, the parent, don't know which makes me anxious. I fear the power you have over my child (possibly because I feared the power teachers had over me). Now that my child is struggling or in trouble, all these fears are operating in overdrive."

In contrast, teacher fear sounds like this, "While I may look competent, I am not completely secure about my ability to meet the needs of every

child and that makes me feel vulnerable. I fear you, parents, see me through the distorting eyes of your child. Like you, I am a professional but our culture does not accord me the same respect as you (the CEO, doctor, other professional) and so I fear you do not respect me. I have been attacked by a previous parent so I am wary you will also attack me and therefore I am automatically defensive. I am afraid that if you are not pleased with me I could lose my job. I strongly identify with the age group I teach which makes me a great teacher of this age group, but when you are confrontational, I am frightened/overwhelmed (elementary) or protectively sarcastic/dismissive (secondary)."

On top of all this, as independent schools, parents are the ones paying tuition and, at least in the US, schools are competing for students. Where this is not the case, parents may feel their child is lucky to have landed a precious spot in an elite school. All this can additionally lead to a culture of perfectionism where the possibility of admitting vulnerability or error on either side is limited. Within such a culture, it is difficult for parents to admit that they are struggling with their child at home and ask for help. Also, within the same culture, teachers may find it difficult to admit they are unable to connect with a particular child and ask for parental support and help.

What to do? We are fortunate within the community of Krishnamurti schools to have an approach that encourages us to consider 'the mirror of relationship'. Perhaps the parent-teacher relationship, fraught with latent fears as it is, is a good place to begin. Krishnamurti asks, and I have taken the liberty of inserting *parents for wife*, 'Can I look at life—at it all—without the image? I look at everything with an image, with a symbol, with memory, with knowledge. I look at my friend, at my wife [parents], at my neighbour, at the boss, with the image which thought has built. I look at my wife [parents] with the image I have about her [them], and she [they] look/s at me with the image she [they] has/have about me: the relationship is between these two images."<sup>3</sup>

One of our elementary teachers recently shared how she approaches a potentially difficult parent interaction. She said, "Usually, I'm feeling pretty nervous because I really want things to go well but then I try to remember a story I heard about a talk Krishnamurti gave where he revealed 'his secret' to a happy life. I don't know if it's true or not, but apparently he said his secret was, 'I don't mind what happens'. So I just do the best I can

to be present, compassionate, empathetic and aware and then I have to let go, and obviously I care deeply but I try not to mind what happens and somehow that helps me relax a little and it also gives me courage.”

It begins with us, with the teachers within our schools, to enquire into our fears, and empathetically acknowledge the fears parents bring to the table. Can we take a moment before meeting, calling, or speaking with a parent, to look within and sit with our fear before it overwhelms our contact? Can we begin to bring into our awareness the mythologies we may be projecting onto the parent? Can we take a moment to consider the anxieties inherent in being a parent before we too harshly judge the parental perspective? And finally, are we brave enough to share our vulnerability with parents, which in turn might encourage them to share theirs? Empathy, compassion, and self-understanding appear to be essential in order to move beyond our mutual fears and it is clearly not an easy endeavour, but the fruits of it could be transformative.

Meanwhile, Oak Grove teachers and staff spent time together at the beginning of the school year brainstorming our collective wisdom regarding best practices for positive parent relationships. These have been collated and edited into the following document which we hope will be of interest to other schools.

### **Best practices for positive parent relationships**

Establishing, strengthening, and sustaining a positive relationship with parents is critical and worth every moment you spend on it. Here are some best practices generated by Oak Grove School teachers and staff.

*At the beginning of the year...*

- Reach out in multiple ways to your parents (student postcards over the summer, class potluck for meet and greet, class welcome email, open door to begin school in first days, be available in the parking lot at pick up, telephone calls, ‘Back to School Night’).
- Share your curricular plans for the year up front.
- Be clear with your classroom processes and expectations including making your personal boundaries clear (how you can be reached, when you check email, what is turn-around time for responding).
- Be patient as parents learn the rules and/or culture of the school.
- Encourage parents to get involved (Family Work Party, Coffee Mornings, Harvest Party, Parent Council).

- Determine communication protocols for parents with dual custody—knowing when to contact one or both guardians.

*Throughout the year...*

- Send regular, timely, weekly/bi-weekly class email communications that include important upcoming dates, what the students have been doing in the previous week/s, and what is coming up in the following weeks. Include interesting and positive anecdotes about the WHOLE CLASS (not individuals). Remember children often respond to their parents’ question, “What did you do today?” with “Nothing!”
  - Use bcc on class emails: include Head, Director of T&L, Programme Directors.
  - Be sensitive to diverse parenting styles.
  - Include photos!
- Be proactive with communication to individual families: email, telephone, face to face.
- Review communication protocols<sup>4</sup> frequently (and model them).
- Reinforce that parents/teachers/students are on the same page and equal partners.
- Encourage discussion between parents and children around homework.
- Be mindful/professional with colleagues who are parents.
- Parent Meetings: schedule responsibly, ask for agenda items ahead of time, be confident, use ‘scripts’ if necessary, create applicable and meaningful topics, provide opportunities to create/build community amongst parents, offer opportunity to dialogue around how we handle conflict.
- Conferences: use active listening, create space for parent questions.
- We are a small school in a small town, therefore, be professional always, watch ‘talk’ in public, respect everyone’s wish for privacy, don’t engage in gossip.

*Silence creates a vacuum that can easily be filled with negative projections...  
Communicate, communicate, and communicate some more!*

Even using all the best practices in the world, sometimes communications can become challenging. Here are some best practices for dealing sensitively with parent and/or student concerns:

- Email is for good news or non-controversial information. Everything else needs to be a phone call and preferably a face to face conversation.
- Direct concerns to the appropriate person (see Communication Protocol)<sup>4</sup>
- If the concern is expressed via email:
  - Acknowledge receipt in a timely way and offer to set up a phone call or face to face time to meet.
  - Appeal for time to pause and reflect; for example, thank you for sharing this concern...can you give me a day to gather some information/sit with this and then we can meet?
  - cc administration if appropriate.
- Know when to call in a colleague or ask for administrative support; utilize the team when communicating concerns. Don't go it alone!
- When questioned by a parent about a programme, policy or decision of another teacher, administrator or staff person, assure the parent that you have confidence in the professional judgement of your colleagues and encourage the parent to speak directly with the appropriate person.
- Be aware that we have multiple relationships within the school; not necessarily just personal friendships with particular families.
- When speaking with parents in that face to face conversation:
  - Use active listening.
  - Make sure parents feel heard (take notes, listen closely, do not think you have to immediately find solutions).
  - Pause before responding.
  - Share observations not judgements.
  - Create speaking points ahead of time, especially on tricky issues.
  - Think 'teachable moments' with parents and ourselves; even adults deserve 'do-overs'!

Compassionate awareness of parental anxiety and fear will help you sensitively approach parents and respond to their concerns.

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## The Montessori Approach and a Krishnamurti School

CAROLE SYLVESTER-GRAY



Oak Grove School is a place that values relationship. It is also a place that does not follow any prescribed teaching methods. However, over the years various teachers here have been trained in the Montessori approach. When this approach is adopted in its spirit, it has often been found to complement a Krishnamurti education at Oak Grove. In this article, I look at some of the tenets of a Montessori approach, and attempt to show the ways in which it has common ground with our approach in a Krishnamurti school.

### Genesis of the Montessori approach

At the turn of the twentieth century, Maria Montessori was the directress of the Orthophrenic School, a medical-pedagogical institute, where she trained groups of teachers in the care and education of children who did not function well in elementary schools and were sent to asylums for mentally challenged children. Here, she experimented with different kinds of sensory teaching materials, modifying them as she observed the reactions and needs of the children.

She spent all day, from eight in the morning till seven in the evening, with the children and teachers. At night, she

would make notes, reflect and prepare new materials. She found these children's minds deficient because their senses had never been stimulated enough. "First the education of the senses, then the education of the intellect", became the principle that was to later form her educational method. Eventually, the children in the school were able to master skills many had thought them totally incapable of. Montessori had such success with these children that she later became interested in how to educate normal children in order to create a better society.

Her first opportunity to work with normal children came when a building society decided to undertake an urban renewal scheme in the San Lorenzo slum district of Rome and renovate buildings to house poor families. While the parents were away at work during the day, the younger children were left to themselves and they would deface and vandalize the buildings. The authorities decided to gather the children together in one large room and pay someone to look after them. That someone was Maria Montessori. In 1907, the first *Casa dei Bambini* (Children's House) began. It was here

that Montessori experimented with and developed her method of education based on observation of children and the use of didactic materials. The enjoyment, sensitivity and intelligence of children exhibited in those early days laid the foundation for Montessori Children's Houses that later flourished all over the world.

Most educators using Montessori's ideas and materials find them deeply relevant even today. This is because, in her framework, the role of the teacher and her relationship to students, the quality of teaching materials, the classroom environment, and the respect for the individual child, all provide a type of education that is considered valuable for humanity. The teacher's role is not one of an authority figure, but that of a guide who helps children to help themselves. The teacher demonstrates how to use classroom materials and directs the children to a choice of activities in which they autonomously make discoveries through enquiry, concentration and observation. The teacher is expected to take her work with children seriously, observing her own behaviour and reactions in everyday life, and becoming aware of her interactions with the children. Montessori also saw the necessity for teachers to learn the art of observing nature, along with the physical and psychic needs of children.

### Some principles of Montessori education

The basis of Montessori's philosophy is that young children learn by exercising

their senses. She spoke of the child from ages three to six years as having, "an absorbent mind", which enables him to easily receive information sensorially from the environment. Therefore, the learning environment in which these children spend their days must be one in which they are free to explore and manipulate materials. The materials Montessori designed help the child develop his ability to make judgments, to compare and discriminate on the basis of size, shape, sound, weight, colour and temperature, and to organize and classify the information the brain receives. The curriculum areas include sense discrimination, reading, writing, math, nature study, science, geography, art and music. The programme begins with concrete materials for the three to six year-old child, and the materials become more abstract for the six to twelve-year-old child.

The main purpose behind the materials is to aid the child's natural learning process. The principle to be learned is inherent in the materials, and the child, when ready, manipulates these and discovers it by himself. The children are able to correct themselves without the help of the teacher because the equipment contains 'a control of error'. If the lesson is done incorrectly, the child is able to see and guess why, experiment, and make a correction. This process of learning encourages observation and concentration.

Montessori believed in an innate intelligence in children and felt that they are able to absorb their culture so easily because of 'sensitive periods' in their

development. During these periods the child shows an insatiable hunger for the acquisition of some particular knowledge or skill. She discovered that children would repeat certain movements or exercises over and over again with deep concentration, until they satisfied their inner need to understand something necessary to their growth. The materials in the classroom are, therefore, designed to aid children in these sensitive periods to acquire the desired skill or knowledge.

Because young children are by nature active, a learning environment should allow children freedom of movement. In most Montessori classrooms there are no assigned desks, so the children are free to move about the room and sit where they wish. The materials are placed on low shelves, so that the children can choose their own tasks. They can access the materials, and also return them to the original place on the shelf. Children learn not only physical coordination and grace by carrying objects around the room, but also develop a sense of order about where things belong.

Such a free environment allows children to socialize with each other and learn many valuable life lessons. They learn to cultivate patience because, often, someone will be using the material they want, so they must learn to wait their turn and respect the other person's work. Manners and social graces are exercised in group activities, for example, in serving food, and in playing group games with the teacher. A child's sense of inner disci-

pline is encouraged because he has the opportunity to be responsible for his own actions. Social interactions encourage children to become aware of each other in talking, sharing feelings, as well as observations. They also develop verbal and listening skills and learn from one another.

It is important to mention that Montessori's philosophy is not limited to an indoor material-oriented classroom. She felt children's contact with nature to be very valuable to their development because they learn observational skills, an appreciation of nature and a sense of beauty. Children are encouraged to take walks, observe nature, plant and attend to gardens, care for animals. The subject of nature study is valued to help children develop enquiry skills into themselves and the world around them. This also later aids them in the study of the natural sciences such as botany, biology, zoology and anatomy.

Another valuable aspect of Montessori's philosophy is that each child is respected as an individual and teachers observe the child's development and aid him in progressing according to his rhythm and temperament. Learning should interest and attract the child's attention, and never be forced. Since every child is different, his work should not be compared with another. In order to meet the needs of many different children, Montessori designed different forms of the same lesson, so that each child could find the method of learning most comfortable for him.

### **Montessori ideas in a Krishnamurti School**

While one cannot state that Montessori's and Krishnamurti's educational ideals are identical, they have enough in common so as to enable a Montessori-trained teacher to work harmoniously at a Krishnamurti school. Both Krishnamurti and Montessori felt that the role of an educator is to help create a new generation of human beings who will have insight into themselves, and into conflict in the world. "If education is always to be conceived along the same antiquated lines of a mere transmission of knowledge, there is little to be hoped from it in the bettering of man's future. For what is the use of transmitting knowledge if the individuals total development lags behind." (*The Absorbent Mind*, Maria Montessori, p. 4)

Both agreed that academic knowledge is only part of a real education for life. The educational goals of Krishnamurti schools include not only excellent academic training, but also the training of enquiry—of looking into ourselves. Teachers at Krishnamurti schools are encouraged to enquire into themselves and observe their own reactions and behaviour, so that their relationships with students are of a quality that enables both students and teachers to have affection for one another and acquire insight into the workings of their own minds. The best environment for learning is one in which the child is free of fear of a strong authority figure and is not pressured psychologically by competition, so that he can develop freely at his own pace.

Hence, tests and grades are used neither in a Montessori environment nor here at the Oak Grove Elementary School. This is because tests only stress a child's performance in absorbing factual knowledge, whereas the individual child's whole character and attitude toward learning is of equal importance. Oak Grove School's 150-acre campus allows students to spend a lot of time outdoors in nature. Nature classes and camping trips are an important part of the curriculum. Students learn appreciation for nature and what it means to become responsible stewards for our earth. 'The Arts of Living and Learning' programme guides students and teachers towards a whole education of the heart and mind.

Oak Grove has 'peace tables' like some Montessori Schools and in addition, we offer mindfulness classes for students from kindergarten to junior high. A favourite game played by Montessori teachers and their students is the 'Silence Game'. Here, the children practice being as quiet as they can and listen to all the movement and sounds around them. At Oak Grove, we build in silent periods at the beginning of the day during circle time, and at other times, such as when we gather together for assemblies, or pause for a moment of silence called P.A.W.S.S. (Put Attention Within for Sixty Seconds).

A good teacher will not depend completely on a single method, but intelligently adapt good educational principles and ideas from any compatible philosophy. In her attempt to study the individual child and her relation to

that child, we can see that a Montessori approach can be conducive in helping create the space and quality of education that Krishnamurti writes about.

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## The Vidya Vanam Story

PREMA RANGACHARI



*We want our children to learn English. We want good education, but we cannot afford school education in cities. So please start a school for us.*

This was the aspiration of parents from the tribal community in Anaikatti, a village near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, situated in the foothills of the Nilgiris. They were eager, like other parents, to give their children, what they felt was, the best education. They perceived education—especially English education—as a passport to a better life. Vidya Vanam was born in 2007 to fulfil this need.

If education of the Adivasi children is to be placed on a par with the rest, as is their right as a citizen of our democratic country, it becomes necessary that the integration be on equal terms. The community must be an active participant in the designing and learning process, to create a curriculum that is different yet equal. What should this alternative method be? How should the curriculum be framed? These were the questions that came first to my mind when I decided to start Vidya Vanam. But, before I framed a curriculum, I needed to understand how children—all children from any corner of the earth—learn.

As I observed the children of the community, I found that their learning began with a sense of wonder, surprise, pleasure, even rapture in seeing and watching things around them—a caterpillar climbing a twig, an earthworm suddenly disappearing into ground, ants in line carrying their eggs into the nest, following a bulbul to its nest and seeing three beautiful blue eggs. Learning begins with wonderment—with the wow factor—not knowing what something is but wanting to know. This curiosity propels the beginnings of learning through the five senses. Experiences are recorded

in memory, and trigger further experimentation and observation. Curiosity is the engine of achievement.

The young are not self-conscious. They are able to lose themselves completely in whatever absorbs them. The schools mediate this transition from the world of a solitary being to becoming a part of the larger community. How is this transition to be effected without losing the sense of wonder? This is the challenge of modern education.

Educationist John Dewey believed that schooling should be rooted in the child's experiences. The school should connect to the child's everyday life and interests at home, as well as offer new interests and experiences. Students must be engaged in meaningful and relevant activities that allow them to apply the concepts they are endeavouring to learn. Hands-on projects are the key to creating authentic learning experiences. Dewey maintained that there was a strong connection between education and social action in a democracy. In his 1899 book, *School and Society*, he wrote, "Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife." Dewey's words inspired and also endorsed my approach to creating a curriculum based on the life and experiences of the people of Anaikatti.

My association with Anaikatti began in 2003 when I volunteered to help with the *balwadis* set up in the remote villages around there. This gave me the opportunity to interact with the local people and to understand their needs. Living in the city, we are isolated from the realities of the lives of many people who are the majority in our country. We are unaware of their day-to-day problems.

The history of the tribals over the last seventy years has been one of forcible displacement and constant conflict with the state and other communities. They have been on the receiving end of dominant views. What is left of their way of living, which was linked closely with nature, has been smothered by the destruction of forests in the name of development and technological advancement. In such an environment, how can we expect education to have any importance in their lives? Nevertheless, over the years, they have felt a need to improve their lives but they are struggling with education policies that have little connection to their everyday living.

Though education has recently witnessed a rapid transformation, particularly in the areas of access, pedagogy and community participation in tribal areas, the literacy rate of the Schedule Tribes continues to be below the national average. Tribal children live in remote places, and therefore, their access

to quality education is limited. Other factors that inhibit the development of the tribal community are teacher absenteeism, lack of accountability and infrastructure, and a negative attitude towards the tribal children, all of which increase the number of 'dropouts'. Under these circumstances, integration of the Adivasi children into the mainstream has been a traumatic experience.

The standard system does not work in a country as diverse and large as ours with geo-physical, ecological and socio-cultural differences. Tribals have their own culture and socio-economic and governance systems. Sensitivity to tribal culture and life, recognition of their cognitive strengths and appreciation of their personality is necessary for a holistic education. Reorganizing the curriculum, content and the teaching-learning methods to include the tribal knowledge base and environment will increase the participation of this community in education. Along with the standard curriculum support, materials that are contextualized in local dialects and include tribal folklore will help bring these children into the mainstream. This wealth of learning material can be developed by identifying and documenting information from tribal communities. Bringing this knowledge into the classroom gives a tremendous sense of empowerment to the tribal children.

The poor performance of tribal students is usually connected with their inability to cope with educational standards. People presume that they are intellectually inadequate to cope. Empirical evidence, however, suggests that tribal children possess the same cognitive abilities as children anywhere in the world. Their low achievements are due to school-related problems. Most tribal children are first-generation learners who do not have much support in the home environment. A better designed education programme will help overcome these obstacles. Another problem is lack of sensitivity. Teachers are not aware of the children's cultural and behavioural strengths. They approach tribal children with preconceived notions of their capacity to learn. They are unaware of and uninterested in the knowledge base that the child already possesses.

Therefore, a different approach to education, not the one-size-fits-all model, is the only intelligent way to create learning opportunities for all communities. The role of education in the process of development and social progress cannot be ignored. Lack of education stifles the progress of these marginalized people. Unfortunately, what we now offer students in current schools is second-hand knowledge, which is merely verbal. But this verbal communication lacks meaning if the student is unable to link it

to an existing experience. So what follows is a mechanical reaction. Challenging the status quo will create dissent and controversy especially in a field like education. At the same time, it is not healthy for democracy if the status quo goes unchallenged.

What are the different schools of thought regarding education? The traditional system, relies on demarcation of subjects. The progressive school of thought exalts the learner's interest and is guided by that impulse. However, Dewey felt that while neither was sufficient by itself, both these strands were essential. A sound educational experience involves continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned. The reaction to the traditional methodology—which entailed discipline and regimentation and ignored the learner's interests—swung to the other extreme and led to a chaotic curriculum, excessive individualism and spontaneity, which is a deceptive index of freedom. Neither the new nor the old is adequate, as they fail to apply the principle of experience that is the bedrock of knowledge.

With all this in mind, I decided to evolve a methodology for Vidya Vanam that would be based on experiential learning, integrating today's educational requirements with the community's unique needs and inculcating appreciation and respect for their culture, knowledge base and environment.

### **The Vidya Vanam approach**

The conviction was that we had to evolve a curriculum that made learning meaningful. It had to encompass the head, the heart and the hands. Building self-confidence and a self-learning ability became the primary focus in the early years of schooling. To develop thinking and communication skills is also essential. Learning is a continuous process, and the distinctions we make between subjects do not necessarily make sense to children.

One of the innovations in the teaching methodology is that classes two to seven do not have fixed classrooms. Instead students move among different 'zones'. Vidya Vanam has four zones—languages (Tamil and English), mathematics, science, and social science. Each zone is equipped with images, artefacts, charts, models, and books to help the students absorb the information through visual stimuli and tune into the subject with ease. Also, the movement between the zones prevents them from becoming fidgety and restless, as it usually happens when they are confined in a single classroom.

Another pedagogical approach developed by Vidya Vanam is theme-based learning. This is an inter-disciplinary approach that helps

children understand that knowledge is a seamless continuous flow from one discipline to another. The key to this understanding lies in the 'WH' words ('what', 'why', 'when', 'where' and 'how'). With 'what,' the student identifies the subject of discussion and gives it a name. Once the subject is identified, the words 'why' and 'how' offer an entrance to the realm of science; 'where' and 'when' address the social sciences area of time and space. The range of knowledge covered in these question words gives a sense of continuity, a meaningful and seamless link to the learning process.

In every subject, we select and study a theme, including an artistic angle. The same theme moves through every class with extra information and extended competency. There are no prescribed textbooks. So the teachers have access to varied resource material to develop their lessons. For example, the theme might be 'soil.' In science, the children study characteristics of soil, what it contains (nutrients, microbes); the factors that affect soil formation. In mathematics, they look at ratio-proportion, volume, weight, area and measurement. In social science, the topics include ecosystems, vegetation and wildlife, landforms, topography, archaeology, excavations. In languages, they read and write essays, poems, stories around the theme, write slogans and debate issues. In arts, they learn pottery, murals and modelling.

Given this approach, all activities including sports, music, dance, theatre, arts and crafts become a part of the curriculum, and not extra-curricular. The learning process is activity-based and the environment, a mixed age group one. The teacher is a facilitator of learning who develops teaching material. The learning process is not one-way, with the teacher giving and the student receiving. Self-learning and peer learning are encouraged and the children have the freedom to ask questions.

With a large majority of the children being from the Irula tribe, the school has instituted the practice of a multi-lingual classroom. For these children, the state language is as unfamiliar as English. A multi-lingual environment helps the child move comfortably from the tribal language to Tamil to English. This is also helped by the fact that many of the teachers in senior school come from other states or from foreign countries and do not know Tamil. All communication with these teachers is in English. The ensuing 'struggle with communication' is seen as part of the learning process and getting sensitized to each other's cultures. The teacher learns as much as the children do.

The school is not just an academic centre; it is integrated into the ecosystem of the local community. The local people are a mix of the Irula

tribe, Scheduled Castes and other backward communities. Apart from involving members of the local community as teaching and non-teaching staff, there are other opportunities for the school and the people to work together. A self-help group (SHG) has been established with some women from the Irula tribe. As the tribe has the right to collect certain forest produce, these women gather honey and wild gooseberry from the forest. The school helps them generate and market a wide variety of products made from locally available materials. The SHG members also source products for the school's kitchen from wholesale dealers and sell them to the kitchen and the teachers. All these activities not only ensure their financial independence but also boost their self-esteem and confidence.

The school is thus not merely an institution where children study. It has evolved into a node where community members, especially women, come together and participate productively in its functioning. By functioning as a knowledge base and an occupational support platform, the school maintains its symbiotic relationship with the local community. This approach, where the community's participation in the school's activities is the result of a natural interaction, also fosters a sense of ownership about the school and its activities.

### **A transformational model**

Education is an organic and human system; it is about people and the conditions under which they thrive. But people do have a choice, and sometimes they don't want to learn. Every student who drops out has a reason, which is rooted in her biography. She might find school boring or irrelevant; she might find that it is at odds with her life outside school.

Schools should, therefore, represent present life, and the teacher is a part of the community that helps the student in this understanding. The curriculum must reflect the development of humans in our society and use methods that focuses on the child's interests. The information that is given to the child will be transformed into new images and symbols in the child's mind to fit with newer experiences. This development is natural. To repress this process by imposing adult views on the child weakens his intellectual curiosity. Education must cultivate the intelligence to think without formula, and it is this intelligence that will find answers to questions.

With this philosophy in mind, Vidya Vanam has refrained from defining a finished pedagogical concept and a top-down approach. The daily

routine, including classroom processes, is an integration of Montessori and constructivist principles with a grassroots engagement with the community it serves. The bottom-up approach and the vision to integrate the school into the larger ecosystem is in striking contrast to the public education system. In the ten years of its existence, Vidya Vanam's model is not just an educational pedagogy but a transformational model that has percolated through the children into the community at large.

Life is a vast realm in which we function as human beings. If we prepare ourselves *only* for a job, we miss the whole point of living. We will then know only a small corner of life. Life is not just the math and science that we study; it encompasses emotions. Envy, jealousy and passion are patterns that emerge in the fabric of life. Caught in this matrix that we call life, we remain fearful. Is it possible to provide an environment of freedom that allows questioning, enquiry and an understanding of life? All this is not possible when we are afraid. The function of education is to remove this fear and thereby, bring back the magic of childhood. Education is the process of living and not merely preparation for future living.

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## Book Review

ANJALI KRISHNA



*Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership* (1991)

Edited by C. Roland Christensen, David A. Garvin, Ann Sweet  
Harvard Business School Press.

Over the course of two vacations, I have managed to go through the volume *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*, a collection of seventeen essays edited by C. Roland Christensen, David A. Garvin, and Ann Sweet. I have found it a very meaningful and fruitful read, and would like to share my views.

Why did I pick this book to read? As a teacher, I strive to do right by students, and as there is no single easily identifiable definition of doing 'right', my effort is to enlarge my understanding of the dynamics that shape the space of teaching-learning. Within the pages of this book, eighteen teachers on the faculty of Harvard Business School have put down in detail, with great care and subtlety, the learning that they have harvested over years of employing discussion teaching in their classes. It is exciting for a teacher like me to be in the midst of such experienced mentors, and to listen to their voices as they weave their way reflectively through all that discussion teaching involves.

What kept me reading? No two ways about it—this is a complex text, a slow read, a thought-provoking clutch of articles that go in-depth into their subject. However, these articles are in a league of their own, both in terms of the richness of content and the brilliant style of writing, which makes wading through it all an exceptionally rewarding experience.

First, a taste of the content. The foreword, by Richard Elmore, is a little over ten pages long, and explains how and why this book came to be written. To quote a line that sheds light on the *raison d'être* of the book as well as on its title, "It challenges us to take a deeper view of teaching. Teaching, in this

view, is essentially a transformational activity, which aims to get students to take charge of their learning and to make deeply informed judgments about the world." This resonates with Krishnamurti, who says that the main aim of the school is to bring about psychological change, independent thinking and transformation in ourselves and in the child. This book also, "urges a transformation of the conditions of teaching". Elmore explains that the experience of those who have engaged in discussion teaching bears out the insights offered by current research, for essentially discussion teaching, "is a systematic way of constructing a context for learning from the knowledge and experience of students, rather than exclusively from the canons of disciplinary knowledge". Students construct their own learning through extending prior knowledge, and discussion teaching effectively enables this.

David Garvin has written the preface as well as the bookend articles. The preface is akin to an informative guide that sets you on your way as you enter the book. It tells us that this is "a book by practitioners for practitioners", that it is "operational rather than theoretical in tone, and that it is based primarily on distilled, articulated experience". The preface also dwells on the diverse and personal perspectives the articles offer, and the commonalities in the approach of the authors towards teaching, which is not seen simply as a gift or talent, but "an essentially human activity, fraught with uncertainties and unresolved dilemmas". All these signposts fill the hungry reader with anticipation for fare that is very authentic and enabling, something rare and unique in the abundant literature on education.

The chapters are organized in five parts: 'Learning and Teaching', 'Personal Odysseys', 'Building Blocks', 'Critical Challenges', and 'Education for Judgment'. Each section consists of essays that heart-warmingly delineate the author's journey with discussion teaching, and the lessons learnt along the way. The facets dealt with are too numerous for me to attempt to list here—the material is mind-boggling in its reach and spread. The writing is reminiscent of skilful surgery or careful excavation—of hands reaching into the folds of experience, always returning with weighty nuggets in the form of insights, questions, dilemmas, instrumental tools, and much else. To cull instances from a few essays would be to do injustice to the others, but I shall still proceed to give you a flavour of what's on offer here.

David Garvin in 'Barriers and Gateways to Learning' says "In the traditional model, the core concept is teaching; here, it is learning.... Teaching of this sort is exceedingly hard to do. It requires a shift in the role, preparation, knowledge, and skills of instructors."

C. Roland Christensen in 'Premises and Practices of Discussion Teaching', has said, "Forging a primary alliance with students means investing intellect, time, energy, and emotion in discovering who they are, where they are, and how they may best find their way to the material. Such efforts help the instructor become a true teacher."

Julie Hertenstein in 'Patterns of Participation', adds, "Continuous profiling of the patterns of student participation allows the teacher to adjust teaching tactics and tailor opportunities for participation appropriate for the individual student. These profiles also provide the basis for individual coaching."

James Wilkinson and Heather Dubrow in 'Encouraging Independent Thinking' state "The purpose of our questions and assignments should be to encourage, stimulate, and—when necessary—challenge students to articulate and test their beliefs."

As I pored over the ideas, I found myself underlining, making notes to myself in the margins, and marking out passages that thrilled me and deserve re-reading. These essays are imbued with scholarship of the highest order, as seen also in the manner in which ideas are presented, coherence being a key feature. They are excellent samples of good academic writing, lucid, well-organized, happily fulfilling the anticipation of the reader at every step.

I shall desist from saying more. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and I shall see that my classroom this term benefits from the insights generated by this book. I agree with Parker J. Palmer in his book *The Courage to Teach* that to teach is to take big risks, but with companions like the books mentioned here, one feels the wind is supportive beneath one's wings and one may set sail without too much trepidation.

DEEPTI MEHROTRA

*School without Fear: Dialogues with Teachers and Parents* (2016)

J Krishnamurti  
Krishnamurti Foundation India

This book, if judiciously read, will prove extremely useful for teachers, and teacher educators. It comprises 26 dialogues between Krishnamurti and teachers as well as parents of the Rajghat Besant School, Varanasi. The dialogues were held between December 1954 and January 1955. Though

it might surprise some, the thoughts and ideas, discussed some six decades ago, remain tremendously relevant today.

Krishnamurti tried, all his life, to 'educate the educator', encouraging the teachers first to ask fundamental questions, shake off set patterns, and participate actively in the building of a better world. This book helps bring the effort alive for readers today. It is accessible, each chapter a lamp which we may use, if we will, to help find our way ahead, as we work with children and young people. The teacher—or parent—who encourages students to ask fundamental questions, often opens up for them the doors to further understanding, and they embark upon journeys into the unknown. They may ask better questions, evolve as creative beings, and begin to reinvent society, remake the world.

Each dialogue is short and intense, with the dramatic feel of a live exchange between people who care deeply for humanity as a whole. Different dialogues take up core issues in education and trace inter-connections with processes of teaching, learning as well as practicalities of running an educational institution. Dialogue headings indicate the wide range and scope of issues discussed. These include: *Imparting knowledge without competition; The teacher's burden of anxiety and frustration; The intention to uncondition the child; The spirit first and then the details; Why does the mind refuse to face a fact? Teachers outside society; Protecting the child or transmitting your fears?; Are parents willing to educate themselves? and School without fear.*

Here is a flavour of three such dialogues.

### **Protecting the child or transmitting your fears?**

Teachers, and parents, are always saying they want to protect the child from harm. Krishnamurti asks us to enquire deeper into our motivations. Often, we are simply transmitting our fears to the child, whereas it may be far better to let the child explore and discover for himself or herself. We curb children and young people, trying to shape them according to our own image, limiting their lives and thinking, all the while asserting that it is for their own good. Adults try to place young people into set patterns and categories, in terms of nationality, caste, creed, class, livelihood, their daily routines, and so on. This stifles the possibility of change, change which humanity is in dire need of.

### **School without fear**

It is widely accepted today that children should feel no fear of schooling, yet we do not seem to know how to go about this, how to put this freedom

from fear into practice. In my own work as a teacher educator, I have found that teachers themselves live with many fears, and seldom realize that it might be possible to shed these. What could it mean to be free of fear? Krishnamurti takes us gently yet firmly by the hand, to a place from which we can begin to explore what it may mean to be free, unafraid, human beings.

He asks, “How are we going to bring about a school in which there is no fear? ...Can I, as a teacher, be without fear? .... I am afraid of various things—of losing my job, my security, my wife, husband or neighbour—and somehow I am unable to be free of fear. How can I help the boy or girl to be free of it?” He is practical in his approach, and deeply compassionate, for while he would like us to work with our fears, question and dissolve them, he realizes it may not happen, or at least not all at once. So he asks us, adults, to acknowledge our fears and limitations, and see to it that we do not contaminate the young. He asks, “...shall I talk to the boy, awaken his intelligence to spot fear in me and around him and investigate and be free of it?” In a sense this is extremely radical—it requires that the adult saves the child from his own self (that is, the adult’s fearful self). It may thus be possible to build a better society, for otherwise, if the child is contaminated by adult fears, then “he will build a society like the present one”. (pp. 29, 30, 31)

### **Teachers outside society**

Teaching in schools is usually just transmission of information, from one person—the teacher—to a bunch of younger persons, who are supposed to listen, sit quietly and maintain decorum. Krishnamurti completely rejects this notion of teaching, and suggests what teaching ought to be, and what it might do. Rather than the teacher providing definitions of government, for instance, he suggests that students, “have to find out and begin to tackle it...you are not going to define, they are going to, and you help them break their definitions and go deeper.” The teacher would thus help them investigate this deeply. What the teacher usually does—it was so in the 1950s and perhaps even more so now—is to tell students what to think. By telling them, the teacher smothers the young people’s thought processes. Instead, if your intention is to help them to think, you will help them enquire for themselves, stay on the journey with them, question their definitions, probing further all the time. Whether it is history or science, literature or students’ future careers, if a teacher proceeds thus, rather than prescribing correct information and the right way of thinking, then, “gradually their minds penetrate into the problem, that is the real thing”. (p. 171)

Krishnamurti goes back in time and looks at teaching as Socratic dialogue. He suggests that the teacher too will grow, through such discussions, “... you are sharpening your mind all the time. It is like playing a game with them. You open the thing and let them open it out. And should not there be a group of people who are always thinking, and therefore are real people, the teachers outside society? This is what begins to happen—when you begin to think, you are outside society...” (p.174)

Speaking from my own recent experience of designing and teaching a course on *Philosophical Perspectives in Education*, teachers-to-be responded with enormous warmth and enjoyment to Krishnamurti’s thoughts.\* Some were moved beyond words, shaken to the core, stimulated. Some disagreed, even grew angry, and we had vibrant discussion in the classroom. They engaged with the text and appreciated the energy of the writing. For several students—most of whom had never heard of Krishnamurti earlier—it opened up a whole new world of reflections, a journey through multiple dimensions, which they continue to explore beyond the course.

I would recommend *School without Fear* to all teacher training institutions in the country. It is eminently readable. At the same time, there is profundity and passion which invigorates the mind, compels us to think beyond our set grooves and comfort zones. It is immensely refreshing to return to first principles, and investigate the roots of many of our problems. Indian education is in crisis, as we all know, and as has been said often enough. It has been reduced to an instrumental purpose, its aims narrowed to jobs and social mobility, rather than a wide-ranging, in-depth investigation of the human condition—oneself and the world.

Krishnamurti, however, will not rest until we see the light, and begin to discover for ourselves how we may lift ourselves out of the abyss into which we have fallen. His relentless search, and the ceaseless pushing so that teachers realize the true value of their work, is inspiring, and—if we but begin to dip into a book such as this—inescapable.

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\* This was at the teacher-training diploma course, titled ‘I Am a Teacher’, run within the Heritage School, Gurgaon, during 2015–16. I introduced the students to Krishnamurti’s writings through portions of *Education and the Significance of Life*, a text which a few of us had carefully prepared for such a purpose.

## Contributors

SIMON BOXLEY  
University of Winchester, UK

INDUS CHADHA  
The Valley School, KFI, Bengaluru, India

JAAI DEOLALKAR  
The Valley School, KFI, Bengaluru, India

AARTI KAWLRA  
Scholar and Educator, Chennai, India

MARY KELLEY  
Oak Grove School, KFA, Ojai, USA

ANAND MATHEW KURIEN  
NPS International, Chennai, India

SUNITHA MAHESH  
The Valley School, KFI, Bengaluru, India

KRISHNA MENON  
Rishi Valley School, Madanapalle, India

JAYASHREE NAMBIAR  
The School, KFI, Chennai, India

VENKATESH ONKAR  
Centre For Learning, Bengaluru, India

ASHWIN PRABHU  
The School, KFI, Chennai, India

PREMA RANGACHARI  
Vidya Vanam School, Anaikatti, India

ARVIND RANGANATHAN  
The School, KFI, Chennai, India

O R RAO  
Krishnamurti Foundation India, Chennai,  
India

MEREDY BENSON RICE  
Oak Grove School, KFA, Ojai, USA

BINA SHIVRAM  
The School, KFI, Chennai, India

GURVINDER SINGH  
Bangalore Education Centre, Bengaluru,  
India

CAROLE SYLVESTER-GRAY  
Oak Grove School, KFA, Ojai, USA

SANDILYA THEUERKAUF  
Centre For Learning, Bengaluru, India

GEETHA WATERS  
Krishnamurti Study Centre, Sydney,  
Australia

N VAISHNAVI  
The School, KFI, Chennai, India

WILLEM ZWART  
Oak Grove School, KFA, Ojai, USA

### Reviews

ANJALI KRISHNA  
Sahyadri School, KFI, Pune, India

DEEPTI MEHROTRA  
Independent Researcher and Writer, New  
Delhi, India

## Contacts

**Rishi Valley School**, Rishi Valley P. O.  
Madanapalle, Chittoor District 517 352  
Andhra Pradesh, India  
e-mail: office@rishivalley.org  
website: www.rishivalley.org

**Rajghat Besant School**  
Rajghat Fort, Varanasi 221 001  
Uttar Pradesh, India  
e-mail: rbskfi@gmail.com  
website: www.j-krishnamurti.org/  
RajBesSch.html

**Brockwood Park School**  
Bramdean, Hampshire SO24 OLQ, UK  
e-mail: admin@brockwood.org.uk  
website: www.brockwood.org.uk

**The School KFI**  
Damodar Gardens  
Besant Avenue, Adyar  
Chennai 600 020, Tamil Nadu, India  
e-mail: theschool.kfi.chennai@gmail.com  
website: www.theschoolkfi.org

**The Oak Grove School**  
P.O. Box 1560, Ojai  
California 93023, USA  
e-mail: office@oakgroveschool.com  
website: www.oakgroveschool.org

**The Valley School**  
'Haridvanam', Thatguni Post  
17th km, Kanakapura Main Road  
Bengaluru 560 062, Karnataka, India  
e-mail: office@thevalleyschool.info  
website: valleyschool.herokuapp.com

**Sahyadri School**  
Post Tiwai Hill  
Taluka Rajgurunagar  
District Pune 410 513  
Maharashtra, India  
e-mail: office@sahyadrischool.org  
website: www.sahyadrischool.org

**Pathashaala, The Palar Centre  
for Learning (KFI)**  
Pathasalai Street,  
Vallipuram, Thirukazhukundram Taluk,  
Kancheepuram District 603 405  
Tamil Nadu, India  
e-mail: pathashaala@pcf-kfi.org  
website: pathashaala.pcf-kfi.org

**Bal Anand (KFI)**  
Akash Deep, 28 Dongersey Road  
Malabar Hill, Mumbai 400 006  
Maharashtra, India

**Vasanta College for Women, KFI**  
Rajghat Fort, Varanasi 221 001  
Uttar Pradesh, India  
e-mail: vasantakfi@rediffmail.com  
website: <http://www.j-krishnamurti.org/VasColWomen.html>

**Centre For Learning**  
2, Good Earth Enclave, Uttarhalli Road,  
Kengeri, Bengaluru 560 060, India  
e-mail: [info@cfl.in](mailto:info@cfl.in)  
website: [www.cfl.in](http://www.cfl.in)

**Good Earth School**  
No. 83, Naduveerapattu-  
Manimangalam Road  
Naduveerapattu Village, Somangalam Post  
Sriperumbudur Taluk 600 069  
Tamil Nadu, India  
e-mail: [goodearth Schl@gmail.com](mailto:goodearth Schl@gmail.com)  
website: [www.goodearthschool.org](http://www.goodearthschool.org)

**Shibumi**  
Flat no. 18, Block 15  
Nandi Gardens Phase 2 Avalahalli  
Bengaluru 560 062, Karnataka, India  
e-mail: [shibumi.blr@gmail.com](mailto:shibumi.blr@gmail.com)  
website: [www.shibumi.org.in](http://www.shibumi.org.in)

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