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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.

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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

LEARNING IS DISCIPLINE

When you look around you, not so much in the human world as in nature, in the heavens, you see an extraordinary sense of order, balance and harmony. Every tree and flower has its own order, its own beauty; every hilltop and every valley has a sense of its own rhythm and stability. Though man tries to control the rivers and pollutes their waters, they have their own flow, their own far-reaching movement. Apart from man, in the seas, in the air and the vast expanse of the heavens, there is an extraordinary sense of purity and orderly existence. Though the fox kills the chicken, and the bigger animals live on the little animals, what appears to be cruelty is a design of order in this universe, except for man. When man doesn't interfere, there is great beauty of balance and harmony. This harmony can exist only in freedom, not in restriction and not in conflict.

Everything in nature has its season, its dying and rebirth. It is only man that lives in confusion, in conflict, in disorder. If you have watched in a wood, all the living things have their instinctual ways, their own pattern of life which is immemorial and endless. But man is shaped by his selfishness, and his so-called spontaneity is within the field of his self-interest. He is shaped and controlled by the culture, the environment in which he lives. Society tells him what to do; the elders try to shape the minds of the young to conform, to obey and to live in a very small space both outwardly and inwardly. Reform is the breaking of one pattern only to conform to another. We live a very short life, in conflict, in fear and sorrow. Only when we are very young do we seem to be utterly happy and unconcerned. All this soon fades, and then begins the weary conflict of existence.

In all this turmoil there is neither freedom nor the order of spontaneity, for freedom is a great sense of spontaneity. In society, in the family, in a school, if there is no order, there is no relationship. And yet we want a relationship which is really an attachment to another without an inward sense of harmony, wholeness, integrity. If you walk past a parade ground you see the poor soldier being drilled

day after day by the beat of the drum and the voice of the sergeant to obey, to conform and to follow. He is made into a machine to kill and to protect himself. In similar ways, from childhood we are drilled to protect ourselves by conforming to the old or to the new. This drilling goes on in the office, in the workshop, in the church, in the school. This is called order, and this is what concerns most parents. This has been going on for generation after generation, and the gap between two generations is only an interval in which a new pattern takes shape.

Is it not possible to have order without effort, without the strife between those who see that order is necessary and those who rebel against any form of compulsion? Is there an order without conformity? Is there an action that does not lead to routine and boredom? This is one of the problems in our world of relationship. Every intelligent person, whether old or young, sees that order is necessary—getting up, learning, playing, and so on. If you want to be a good golfer, you must swing the club in a certain way; if you want to be a good swimmer you must learn the strokes. Learning to be a good golfer or tennis player brings its own natural movement of control. This control is not imposed by anyone but the very movement of the hand and arm, of the body, is infinitely orderly and subtle. Each trade has its own discipline and learning is the discipline.

Discipline is an unfortunate word. In it are implied drill, practice, conformity, subjugation, restraint, and the conflict of indolence. The dictionary meaning of the word discipline is to learn—only to learn and nothing else. If you do not want to learn, then parents, the school, society force you to conform whether you like it or not. However new the society may be, it forces you to fit in. The religious have thrived on this through fear and reward. Either you learn through spontaneous interest or you are driven, compelled to learn. When you are compelled to learn, then your knowledge is mechanical and you use that knowledge mechanically. Then you complain that life has no meaning, and you try to escape through various illusions, through daydreaming or fanciful words.

Night-clubs, the weekend recreation, the holidays, are the trivia of escape. You have narrowed down your life to the family and the responsibility it brings, to endless work and to the inevitable.

Learning without reward or punishment is quite another matter. If you understand and see this very clearly, when you play football, cricket, or when you are studying a subject, you will find that learning frees the mind rather than shapes it. Knowledge by itself shapes the mind, and so the mind becomes old. The schools and universities are making minds old. They condition conformity, for knowledge has become all-important—not learning but acquiring knowledge. It is an old mind that conforms, not the mind that is always learning. In this learning there is freedom in which knowledge can be used when it is needed. There are encyclopaedias, there are computers, so do not make your mind merely the storehouse of the past. This is order.

From *The Whole Movement of Life is Learning,* Chapter 70

Contents

Editorial

As I look over the past several issues of the *Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools*, it strikes me anew that there is a very consistent set of issues that the pieces in this publication tackle. The widest theme—the interrogation of human existence itself that Krishnamurti pursued with fierce compassion over several decades. Then there are ruminations on individual spiritual or intellectual journeys in this context. Finally, many teachers write to us detailing specific experiences and insights in classrooms over the years.

Issue 24 contains many such valuable articles written by teachers, on both the structural as well as the personal nature of the learning moment. There are pieces on, for example, children learning about social contexts of extreme deprivation, questioning their own social location, and learning about the fragility and beauty of an ecosystem. There are detailed explorations into how students process their daily worlds of love, friendship and conflict, and the specific challenges some have to learn about. There are threads of curricular questions and expectations, probing at how to structure the learning experience as well as how to allow the student's creative energy to emerge. There are essays that challenge the educator about the fundamentals—for instance, the role of reward and punishment in a learning context or indeed, about this very role, or understanding, of being an educator itself.

It is striking to me how intensely all of these pieces touch the texture of the daily experience that is a state of actual learning. This touching or close textural contact is, of course, emotional, because learning is an emotional and visceral experience, not purely an 'intellectual' one (perhaps we ought to do away with these rather simplistic divisions in the first place!). It is also practical, born of close observation of children in various locations. The contact also often shows an awareness of structure, of the social context in which education happens and is also shaped. In other words, taken as a

whole, the reflections in this journal are minute examinations of what is most important at the very heart of education.

Though these pieces are largely pedagogical in nature, they often ride on some subtle philosophical threads. One such thread is characterised by one author in this journal issue as "facing the self and learning about it". The title of another essay captures another vital thread—'The Common Ground of Humanity', the enormous worlds of thought and emotion that we all simultaneously participate in and create, and which have such powerful consequences for all beings. These phrases, and the questions they point to, form the large and spacious background that frames the contributions for this issue.

I find I have learnt a great deal by reading the contributions to the *Journal of Krishnamurti Schools* over the years. The most valuable learning for me, being a teacher myself, has been the sheer variety of the contexts that teachers present their questions and observations from. We have had pieces from educators who work with Adivasi students, with middle- and upper-middle-class students from elite city schools, and everything in between. To get a glimpse into the heart and mind of a teacher in these contexts has been invaluable. And it has also been curiously enabling, and satisfying, to understand that in these very varied contexts, fundamental questions about the human psyche, about the learner, and about our communities, keep raising their heads. It seems that no location is so fundamentally alien to another that we cannot communicate with each other about the basic questions of life.

Before I leave you to this valuable issue, I should mention that we have been asking teachers to write brief pieces on a few specific themes for the *Journal*. This time, the themes chosen have been 'solitude', 'energy', 'balance' and we have had some poetic, insightful and even hard-hitting responses to this invitation.

Venkatesh Onkar

The Common Ground of All Humanity*

SHAILESH SHIRALI

You may be tall, you may have a different name … but psychologically, inwardly we are the same, similar to all other human beings … This is a fact. Therefore, you are not an individual. Now that will take a lot of investigation because we have been … programmed to believe that each one of us is an individual, separate, with his own particular soul … and this has been throughout history emphasised … by religion, through education, to maintain an illusion that you are a separate human being … But if you examine … carefully the psychological state of man, which is the inward process: the ambition, the envy, the cruelty, the self-centred activity, the suffering, … [you will see] the common ground of all human beings.

J Krishnamurti, 1st talk in Bombay, 24 January 1981

At the outset, we must be clear what the phrase 'common ground of all humanity' signifies. It could refer to many things—our *relationship with nature*, which goes back to our distant past; *rationality* (recall a statement made by David Bohm, "… in the past somebody like Aristotle might have said rationality is the common factor of man", but Krishnamurti disagreed with this!); to *human ingenuity and curiosity; or to self-centred activity, exploitation and suffering,* a tradition that has been with us for long (and this must be what Krishnamurti referred to in the above quote).

Rather than dwell on these, I will pick up another thread which runs through the whole of human history—the *problem-solving mind-set* which dates to the very dawn of consciousness. Thought is the common ground on which humanity stands, and the problem-solving mind-set is central to

*Article based on a talk given at KFI Public Gathering 2017.

thought. The essence of this mind-set is the ability to ruthlessly strip away inessential features, to go to the heart of a problem, to measure and compare as appropriate, and then to make use of the entire body of scientific and technological knowledge accumulated over time.

A crucial part of the problem-solving ability is *the ability to compute backward and forward in time*—the ability to project forward and anticipate consequences, and the ability to project backwards and work out causes for an effect seen in the present. The *ability to create symbols* and use them with precision in such computations is part of this ability. It lies at the root of the advances in science and technology made over the centuries.

Lying alongside the technological world is the world of art, which too has had such an enormous outpouring of creative energy—architecture, sculpture, music, poetry, drama, literature…. It is a tradition stretching far back in time. And there is language itself, with its extraordinary subtlety and nuance and reach. We note here a feature common to science and art—the ability to represent an object symbolically.

Lying alongside these is the world of commerce. Money—again a symbol—is another astonishing product of thought. Looking at the superstructure of industry which underpins modern society and seeing how it can be traced to the invention of capitalism and ultimately to the invention of money, we see another example of the power of thought.

To this list we may add another—the intricate world of *public governance*.

Yet another area where thought reveals its nature is the world of *competitive games*. Play is not an invention of human beings; anyone who has kept pets will know this. But what we have done is to codify and formalise the processes—the criteria for deciding who wins and who loses and what is permitted and what is not permitted; in short, the rules of the game.

Another creation of thought—*the notions of self and identity*. Thought has created complex symbols and shown us ways of identifying with these symbols.

Thought has also invented a vital component of social life—gossip!

This lengthy list serves to highlight the versatility and power of thought. It shows *the absolute centrality of thought* in our past and present.

By 'thought' we mean the action of the bundle of programs within us that have accumulated over the course of human history. These programs are part of the shared memory of all mankind. It is these programs which shape our world—our ideas, our words, our actions, our emotions and our

relationships; in short, our way of living—not just those of individuals but of entire communities.

Much as we learn to speak with the same accent as our parents, so also for beliefs and prejudices; they seep into us. These programs do not belong to any individual; they are part of the shared consciousness of mankind. The way we internalize them reveals their tenacity, their ability to survive intact, century after century; for they reside in the myths and legends passed down from generation to generation; they reside in our language itself. We begin to realise that the common ground of humanity is also time as memory. And we begin to appreciate the absurdity of thinking of ourselves as separate individuals.

It is one of the paradoxes of life that in our actions, we repeatedly end up with results that were not 'part of the package'. It is almost as though there is a demon within us which overpowers our good intentions. Examples are, unfortunately, easy to give. Recent examples would include Facebook and WhatsApp; both are now routinely used for purposes that were never intended—spreading fake news. Or consider nuclear or biological weapons; their origins lie in open-ended experimentation, driven by intense curiosity, not malice. How did such a phenomenon come about—curiosity being weaponised in such a deadly way? Is this an accident? It does not seem so. It seems, rather, that such phenomena are intrinsic to thought.

What is the nature of this strange entity, this bundle of programs which is the common ground of humanity, which has such immense power and fluidity, and at the same time the capacity to 'go rogue', namely, the capacity to create divisions and illusions and, alongside, the mind-set to assure us that the divisions and illusions are real? What sense are we to make of such behaviour?

In *On Dialogue*, David Bohm describes such behaviour as 'incoherent'; he writes, "Incoherence means that your intentions and your results do not agree. Your action is not in agreement with what you expect." This description matches what we see before us. It begins to appear, then, that incoherence is fundamentally part of the natural expression of thought.

One may rebel on hearing something so outrageous; and yet, it is not hard to see its truth. Observe, say, the phenomenon of greed; our desire to acquire more and still more. Now place this against the fact that our greed is destroying ecosystems across the Earth. Extreme examples of this are the happenings in the rainforests of Brazil and Indonesia. We know this, yet

our acquisitiveness remains undimmed. We are destroying the Earth and ourselves, yet we persist… Is this not incoherence?

Is mankind aware of this incoherence—not merely of the effects and symptoms, but of the fact that there is incoherence deep within us? He may be, but only dimly so. The awareness may have found occasional expression in art and literature, but it appears not to have had any significant impact on the course of history.

Over the past four centuries, science and commerce have replaced religion as our worldview. It is worth taking a closer look at this situation. There was a time, centuries back, when the world was essentially viewed in religious terms. It was a worldview which permitted man to give meaning to his life. The meaning may have been, at bottom, artificial; but still, it was there, and it brought a stability to life. But with the onset of the Scientific Revolution and the rising dominance of a paradigm in which evidence and reason are supreme, the older worldview has steadily lost force and credibility. Matthew Arnold captures this in 'Dover Beach' (and the lines are movingly quoted in Don Cupitt's BBC documentary 'The Sea of Faith'):

…The Sea of Faith
Was once full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar…

In the worldview that science gives rise to, analysis is supreme, and since analysis essentially consists of breaking up the whole and applying reason to the parts, it is the parts in turn that become supreme. Therefore, we may as well focus on the parts and forget about the whole. This is where the strength of this approach lies—apply the sophisticated methods of analysis to the parts, then create a composite picture. It is essentially this principle at work when we plan a mission to place a probe on some distant comet; or when we design an MRI machine. And there are a million more such applications. This worldview has an extremely impressive CV!

But such a shift of worldview comes at a price. For it is inherently fragmentary in its approach; it cannot *not* be so. Therefore, its consequences too are fragmented and incoherent. We see this incoherence playing out before our eyes. One of the most serious consequences of this is the mayhem

going on across the Earth—destruction of our natural habitat, mindless consumption… All this comes from viewing the Earth as a collection of bits and pieces and viewing ourselves as separate individuals; we take the part more seriously than the whole. (I recall hearing an interview with a lawyer who had represented a corporate entity against a representation [in a US court] by parents who had challenged the use of marketing aimed at young children. The lawyer was highly competent at his work and successfully held off the challenge. When the interviewer asked the lawyer why he had not been sympathetic to the parents, when they so obviously were in the right, he smiled and said, "Oh, but that wasn't my job, Congress should have seen to that!")

The same fragmentation lies underneath the world of commerce. One component of this fragmented worldview is that natural resources such as land and water bodies can be owned by individuals. Another component is time as the future—the notion that wealth can be made to grow in a deliberate manner. The idea seems simple, but its power can be seen in the industries that now cover the Earth.

But this worldview too comes with its price. In it, money is supreme. Anything and everything has its price—one only needs sufficiently deep pockets; everything is reduced to the language of the transaction. The notion of the sacred cannot exist in such a world; it is lost forever. In this cynical world, the loss would be put down as collateral damage or an incidental expense.

Here, then, are two worldviews of immense power which have replaced older worldviews. They form a deadly concoction, for they are inherently incoherent. And we see this incoherence playing out before our eyes.

When incoherence starts to threaten, a common response is fundamentalism; we shut ourselves within hard beliefs. Or we establish draconian laws and govern by force and the threat of severe punishment—exile, incarceration, torture, death. Or we turn to totalitarianism. All these effects are actually taking place at the present time.

Or we respond by going deeper into the world of entertainment—the world of glamour and speed and dazzle; anything that takes us away from the reality of our lives, from our inner poverty. We see this happening too. It is no coincidence that entertainment in its multiple forms now forms one of the major industries of the world.

It would appear that at some point in our past, thought created in us the feeling that there exists nothing else of any worth. Thought, which was once a tool, became the whole of us. It is difficult to say 'why' this happened. Perhaps its multipurpose capabilities created in us the impression that thought has the capacity to see the truth in all circumstances. (I am reminded of a line from a song in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "When you're rich, they think you really know!") In passing, one may note that this worshipful attitude is much evident in society today—in our worship of success, of power, of talent. This is another instance of how thought replicates its essential quality in all that it does.

Thought being so ubiquitous, we are led to ask—is there any activity which is not the result of that embedded program?

There is, surely. If one is listening to someone with the fullest extent of our faculties—which would mean listening without comparison, without judgement or condemnation, listening so that we are taking in fully what the person is trying to communicate—then, in such listening, the embedded programs are not active. And such listening is something we are all capable of; it is not a gift.

But it is also possible when we ask that question that we go off in another direction altogether. We may say to ourselves, there 'must' exist such a realm, logically speaking, and we then imagine for ourselves such a realm, in which action is totally different; we *invent* such a realm. Seeing the perishable and corruptible nature of all that lies around us, we hypothesise a state of being that is imperishable and incorruptible. (Recall that line from the beautiful hymn *Abide with Me*: "… Change and decay in all around I see / O thou who changest not, abide with me…") This may actually have happened. One can say this with some confidence because there is one phenomenon with which thought is unable to make any headway whatever—namely, death. There is evidence in archaeological records to indicate man's fascination with death even in very ancient times. For example, we find burials where flowers have clearly been placed with the body. The evidence indicates man's struggle with the phenomenon of death, his vague inkling that death cannot be the end, that there must be something which preserves. It seems likely that religion arose in some such manner, in a primitive form. But see the irony here—deep within, there lie the underpinnings of dissonance, a sense that our success as a species is masking a truer reality, a sense that we may be in the wrong lane. Now, having sensed this dissonance, thought tries to 'solve'

it the way that has worked so well in all other contexts—through symbolism, through imagination, through projection.

The wheel has turned full circle. We are again confronted by an emptiness within, reinforced by the discoveries of cosmology and biology, which seem to tell us that man does not count for much, that man is an accident both of chemistry and biology. (A well-known cosmologist once remarked, the more you study the universe, the more pointless it seems.) This emptiness is worse than any encountered earlier, for now we have discarded religion as well; it too is seen as empty. We are in a truly nihilistic situation.

I am reminded of a quote from Krishnamurti's *The Only Revolution*, "The sadness of Life is this—the emptiness that we try to fill with every conceivable trick of the mind. But that emptiness remains. Its sadness is the vain effort to possess" (this is part of a conversation with a visitor). "[You] could see from the books in the library that he had all the latest authors … He was a rich, successful man, and behind him was emptiness and the shallowness that can never be filled by books, by pictures.…" Perhaps this line could serve as a metaphor for mankind.

Over the centuries, we have lived with the belief that knowledge can solve our problems—the more rational and reasonable we are, the fewer problems we will create. But unless we understand ourselves, we lack even the basis for such rationality; the forces operating within are too strong, and they overpower our attempts at reasonableness.

Is it possible for us to see at depth that our problems arise from the very program itself?

We have the capacity to be extraordinarily reasonable within boundaries. Incredible advances have taken place because of this logical and imaginative capacity. Similarly, we have the capacity to be tremendously creative within the boundaries of art. The same theme repeats in the world of commerce and governance. We come across astonishing stories of entrepreneurship and organisational leadership; our ingenuity seems limitless. But this understanding of truth and beauty gets expressed only within a fragment; it never seems to spill over into the larger arena of life. Somehow, the chaos within gets in the way. It seems to be a law of life that the incoherence of the inner invariably overcomes the limited coherence of the outer.

How do we get to know the nature of this program within us, which has so strong an effect on the world and which leads to such disorder? When we explore the outer world, we have our senses to aid us. We see the world,

hear it, touch it, and taste it. With what sense, then, do we apprehend the program inside us? There is perhaps just one way we can do so—by the actions and reactions and thoughts and feelings it gives rise to. By way of analogy, we cannot see sound waves, but we can sense their existence by their effect. They move the eardrums, so we 'hear' the sound. Just so, it is our reactions which can reveal the details of this program. This, surely, is what Krishnamurti meant when he talked about looking into the mirror of relationship.

Earlier we asked—is there an activity which is not the result of that embedded program? But there is a possibility of our finding the answers only if we stop constantly calling upon the problem-solving mode.

It is said that it is only truth that can set us free, and not our attempts to free ourselves; for these attempts are in the problem-solving mode and perpetuate the fragmentation from which we are trying to free ourselves.

So, what will break the iron grip that thought has on us?

Does the answer lie in seeing the fundamental truth that thought is only a tool for dealing with our environment and has no greater significance?

In *Think on These Things*, a child asks Krishnamurti, "What is the work of man?" He replies:

> … What do you think it is? Is it … to pass examinations, get a job and do it for the rest of your life? Is it to go to the temple, to join groups, to launch various reforms? Is it man's work to kill animals for his own food? Is it man's work to build a bridge for the train to cross, to dig wells in a dry land, to find oil, to climb mountains, to conquer the earth and the air, to write poems, to paint, to love, to hate? Is all this the work of man? Building civilizations that come toppling down in a few centuries, bringing about wars, creating God in one's own image, killing people in the name of religion or the State, talking of peace and brotherhood while usurping power and being ruthless to others …? … And is this the true work of man? You can see that all this work leads to destruction and misery, to chaos and despair. Great luxuries exist side by side with extreme poverty, disease and starvation, with refrigerators and jet planes. All this is the work of man; and when you see it don't you ask yourself, 'Is that all? Is there not something else which is the true work of man?' If we can find out what is the true work of man, then jet planes, washing machines, bridges, hostels will all have an entirely different meaning; but without finding out what is the true work of man, merely to indulge in reforms, in reshaping what man has already done, will lead nowhere. So, what is the true work of man? Surely, the true work of man is to discover truth, God; it is to love and not to be caught in his own self-enclosing activities. In the very discovery of what is true there is love, and that love in man's relationship with man will create a different civilization, a new world.

Does the answer, then, lie in comprehending our true destiny? Surely, our destiny does not lie in the worship of thought. Surely, our responsibility is to see that thought is inherently limited and incoherent, to see that life is infinitely vaster than thought. Perhaps coming into contact with that vastness is what religion is all about, and perhaps that is our Dharma.

Some thoughts on

Solitude,

Energy

&

Balance

Radical Downtime

JODIE GRASS

I was lying in the shade on the Main House lawn looking up at the sky. The weather was warm, not hot. I could see the gentle breeze move through the trees. Nearby, other staff and faculty members were spread out around the lawn, gazebo, and pathways. Some were seated on rocks, others lay on benches, or sat upright facing the mountains. Together, but alone, we were engaged in 'radical downtime', something many of our teachers practice with our students throughout the school day.

This was during our weekly faculty meeting, and the amount of time was far too short. Radical downtime is not mindfulness or meditation. The idea is to be without external stimuli—books, electronics, paper, instrument, conversation—to be with oneself without a purpose. Daydreaming, thinking, not thinking, allowing the mind to wander, closing the eyes, napping is fine, if that is what is needed.

I remember reading once that for a person who gets the appropriate amount of sleep, it should take fifteen to twenty minutes to naturally fall asleep after closing one's eyes. The mind will cycle through the day's interactions, projects, forgotten to-dos, but once the mind slows down, sleep will prevail. I wonder how many people allow that amount of time to drift off. My own habit is to read until I realize I am dreaming with my eyes closed and the book has fallen out of my hand. That's when I turn off the lights and fall asleep within seconds.

Research around radical downtime suggests that people who practice this activity have improved memory, increased creativity, decreased stress, and experience fewer sleep disturbances. When we stop and do 'nothing', especially in this hyper-technological world full of distractions, we increase the possibility of becoming more aware of our emotions, noticing body sensations and what they may mean to us. For children, having time to process what is happening inside themselves and learning how to be content

with themselves without external provocation is an essential aspect of our purpose as a school.

> It is very important to go out alone, to sit under a tree—not with a book, not with a companion, but by yourself—and observe the falling of a leaf, hear the lapping of the water, the fisherman's song, watch the flight of a bird, and of your own thoughts as they chase each other across the space of your mind. If you are able to be alone and watch these things, then you will discover extraordinary riches which no government can tax, no human agency can corrupt, and which can never be destroyed.
>
> — Krishnamurti, *Think on These Things*

Speaking of Solitude

CHAITANYA NAGAR

God is absence. God is the solitude of man.

Jean-Paul Sartre[1]

According to an ancient legend, the institution of marriage originated from the fickle-minded nature of man, who was born alone, grew up and soon started feeling the pangs of loneliness. He went to God in search of a pleasant, lovable companion. He found what he wanted; but in no time started feeling fed up with companionship. He started whining, fuming and fretting about his partner and kept pestering God to emancipate him from this relationship. God granted his wish. But unable to endure his loneliness, he soon started troubling God frequently and begged for the same companion again. This happened a number of times till God was finally exasperated and told man to accept his condition uncomplainingly and not bother him again. According to the 'divine origin theory' of the institution of marriage, this is how marriages began.

Amusing as it may seem, the story does describe the human predicament very succinctly. We are born alone, get bored with ourselves, and create a society. Soon the society we create begins to get on our own nerves. We start searching for solitude.

Solitude and isolation

Personally, however, I feel that the need for solitude does not always arise out of one's inability to endure loneliness. Solitude is not a sigh of the lonely. It's not a shelter for one who has fallen "upon the thorns of life, and is bleeding",[2] who finds his 'thrownness'[3] into this hostile world too insufferable and therefore seeks the comforting refuge that solitude promises to offer. A person seeking solitude may not necessarily be wanting to hide behind thick walls of isolation.

The English word 'isolophilia' means a strong affection for being alone, for solitude. Solitude has its own fragrance and one who is completely drowned in the "ignoble strife" of "the madding crowd"[4] may not have any inkling as to what it is like. One doesn't seek solitude in reaction to a bitter experience that one may have had. When we use the word solitude here, it has a different implication altogether. It is devoid of any rancour or malice for oneself, for others, or the situation one is in.

Yet, it is very common for many of us to seek 'solitude' mainly because the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"[5] are too fierce and challenging to cope with. Isolation, in the garb of solitude, then becomes a false thing, a pretence. It is then like a smiling fiend with an abundance of bitterness, vindictiveness and animosity hidden up his sleeves. It seems like solitude, but is not.

Byron speaks about the real pleasures of pure, non-reactive solitude in one of his poems:

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar:
I love not man the less, but Nature more.
…
Lord Byron[6]

The Buddha exhorts his disciples to be alone, like the horn of a rhinoceros. *Khaggavisana Sutta* is a well-known Buddhist text in which the Buddha is believed to have exhorted his disciples to seek solitude, and go on a solitary walk and wander alone like a rhinoceros. The *sutta*, in the form of a long verse, begins with the following stanza:

Renouncing violence, for all living beings
harming not even one
you would not wish for offspring
so how a companion?
Wander alone
Like the horn of a rhinoceros.

Solitude is in fact a *sine qua non* for those who are creative or those who are on the religious path. Aldous Huxley uses the beautiful expression, "the

religion of solitude". He says, "The more powerful and original a mind, the more it will incline towards the religion of solitude". This is a solitude away from the noise of rituals, superstition, or beliefs and bigotry, which are often associated with organized religion.

Solitude then becomes the soil in which the flower of authentic self-exploration blossoms. It can also become a source for scientific and creative insights. William Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper' has immense beauty, which can be only savoured by those who have a deep respect for solitude. Time spent in solitude may nurture and lead to creative thinking and work. Solitude may thus be seen as a potentially beneficial form of withdrawal.

Solitude and unsociability

Could solitude be a double-edged weapon, which can feed both the good and the evil in us? Perhaps Aristotle was right when he said, "Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god."[7] Both the grim-visaged villain and a gentle-hearted poet may use solitude to suit their own purposes. A hedonist may need solitude to wallow ceaselessly in things that please him. But then a creative person may use it in ways that are beneficial—physically, mentally and spiritually. If your desire for solitude is truly driven, not by fear or avoidance, but by a desire to be in communion with your true self, there is absolutely no harm in it. Being in solitude isn't the same thing as being anti-social or unsociable. As Albert Camus rightly puts it, "Do not be afraid of spending quality time with yourself. Find time or don't find time, but 'steal' some time and give it freely and exclusively to your own self. Opt for privacy and solitude. That doesn't make you anti-social or cause you to reject the rest of the world. But you need to breathe. You need to be."[8]

Solitude and fear

A crucial factor that stops us from seeking solitude is the fear of being alone, or the fear of what others may say. Although our modern societies may value solitude as a living arrangement, a deeper kind of solitude is still undervalued and often scoffed at. There is a strong fear in many of us, as Marquez[9] says in his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "He really had been through death, but he had returned because he could not bear the solitude." The image of solitude that we have seems frightening, but its reality is not so. It is in facing up to our aloneness that, paradoxically, we come to recognize how essentially connected to others we truly are. Although we are essentially alone, we are also essentially related. The way out of loneliness or isolation, then, is to love

more deeply. It is in going beyond the ego that we also go beyond loneliness and isolation.

Krishnamurti on solitude

What does Krishnamurti have to say about solitude? Krishnamurti visited Kolkata in 1984 and on the day of his first talk there *The Telegraph* published a full-page interview. The interviewer Pritish Nandy quoted him as saying, "Truth can only be found in the brutal loneliness of one's own heart." These words are permanently etched in my memory. It would be very pertinent here to quote what he has to say further about the importance of being in solitude, of turning away, inwardly, from human society. For him to be alone is to be far away from misconceptions and illusions bred by society. What follows is an excerpt from *Krishnamurti's Notebook*:

> Keep far away but they are waiting for you, the educator and the businessman; one trains you for the others to conform to the demands of their society, which is a deadly thing; they have a thing called society and family: these two are their real gods, the net in which you will be entangled. They will make you into a scientist, into an engineer, into an expert of almost anything from cooking to architecture to philosophy. Keep far, far away; they are waiting for you, the politician and the reformer; the one drags you down into the gutter and then the other reforms you; they juggle with words and you will be lost in their wilderness. Keep far away; they are waiting for you, the experts in god and the bomb throwers: the one will convince you and the other [show you] how to kill; there are so many ways to find god and so many, many ways to kill. But besides all these, there are hordes of others to tell you what to do and what not to do; keep away from all of them, so far away that you cannot find yourself or any other. You too would like to play with all of them who are waiting for you but then the play becomes so complicated and entertaining that you will be lost. You should never be here too much, be so far away that even you cannot find yourself.[10]

I doubt if one can find anything more powerful and profound in favour of solitude.

Endnotes

1. Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre (1905–80) was a French philosopher, playwright, novelist and literary critic. He was one of the key figures in the philosophy of Existentialism.
2. 'Ode to the West Wind', PB Shelley (1792–1822)
3. 'Thrownness' (German: *Geworfenheit*) is a concept introduced by German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) to describe humans' individual existences as 'being thrown' (*geworfen*) into the world.
4. 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', Thomas Gray (1716–71)
5. *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I by William Shakespeare
6. 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', Lord Byron (1812–18), a British Romantic poet.
7. Francis Bacon (22 January 1561–9 April 1626) quotes Aristotle in his *Essays*, XXVII 'On Friendship'.
8. Albert Camus (1913–60), *Notebooks*, 1951–59
9. Considered one of the most significant authors of the twentieth century and one of the best in the Spanish language, Gabriel Garcia Marquez was awarded the 1972 Neustadt International Prize for Literature and the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature. His novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was first published in 1967.
10. From *Krishnamurti's Notebook*, 7 March 1962, Bombay

Energy

From science to silence

TOM POWERS

My good friend and physics teacher, the nearly twice Dr Richard Taylor (he never finished his first PhD on how light bends around black holes), in a moment of exhaustion during our formative years as young teachers in a large comprehensive school in southern England, once misspelt this on the board:

Wok done = energy transfud

He later recalled how this had been a step too far for his bemused students, grappling now not only with an exciting but often mysterious insight into the measurement of this thing called 'energy' but also with the diminishing spelling ability of an over-worked Dr Taylor. Richard told me this story to highlight his need for a holiday but, as is so often the case with the bizarre, I have since never forgotten how the measurement of work done can be calculated by measuring all the energy transferred in a closed system.

As a biologist, I loved to talk about energy with Richard. I would clumsily try and explain pyramids of energy, as we tried to integrate our understanding of ecosystems and were thrown back into the realms of entropy, enthalpy and the seemingly odd conclusions that these measurements led us to. At other times we would discuss the shadowy (to me anyway) world of quantum theory and the interrelationship between energy and matter itself. Inquiring into the concept of energy to this day reveals the extraordinary insights that scientific investigation challenges us with as we observe phenomena, from sub-atomic to the universal scales. In Biology, we track the very nuts and bolts, pulses and flows of the life process back to, for example, the subatomic interactions between photons and electrons and how this simple step essentially builds an entire forest. When we sit with our back to a tree, what part of that experience is **not** energy?

As I write this, there seems a vital and valid place for this line of enquiry and it is a joy to delve into it each year with Brockwood students, but the world of scientific investigation is also so clearly limited to the conscious realm. What is energy **before** it is measured? I remember hearing an old story about a group of people gathering together to sit quietly in a rented room in New York City. Next door was a fire station and, as they began to sit, an emergency call came through to the fire station, leading to the predictable cacophony that accompanies an emergency response. Later on, a discussion started up about how difficult it was to sit quietly next to the din of what had happened. Amongst the concerned nods of agreement, one member of the group stayed silent and when asked his opinion said, "When the noise came in it was just pure energy and the whole room and space and myself were just filled with, and just **were**, pure energy".

Looking at the world, it is painfully easy to see the consequences of division, inner and outer, so how do we live within the cacophony of this current emergency? How are we facing this? Are we swept away with the drama and the horror and the outrage or do we stubbornly stand rigid and try and force our views on others? What happens to energy in division? Krishnamurti once said that the essence of energy is meditation. We seem to be at a tipping point with a billion justifiable reasons to react in this way or that. What happens when we turn away from the effort to divide? I am struck at times at the immense energy that abounds in moments of silent stillness and here, inquiry can begin.

On Balance

DIBA SIDDIQI

In October 2001, I spent a month in Kutch. I was asked to photograph life nine months after the earthquake of 26 January. I planned forays in the districts of Anjar, Bhachhau and Bhuj. What I encountered left me shaken and numb. I could barely take any photographs. I spent my days going from home to home, listening to stories of survival and making many notes. I planned to write an account.

A few months later, in February 2002, another disaster struck—a human-made tragedy. A railway coach of the Sabarmati Express was set on fire in Godhra, Gujarat. Women, men and children were burnt alive. Atrocious killings across the state followed this gruesome act, weeks of targeted arson and decimation. Many people were forced to flee their destroyed homes and seek shelter in relief camps or move far away.

In times of disaster and collapse, a return to the seeming normal everyday feels like an illusion. Life is pushed to the brink—belongings scavenged, kitchens re-assembled. Gathering over a meal of dal and rice, sitting down together once again with those who remain, brings solace. The chance to reach for balance in adversity is to feel that you are not alone in what you must meet. There are others with you. You will help one another along as you return to the basics of every day. People meet what has come, and create the life they must.

Change and unsettlement permeate life. We meet changes, we live them. We are knocked down and we stand up. We sink and surface and stay afloat. Upheavals on a massive scale, tidal waves rushing in suddenly, seem to have a gravity of another order. And people emerge from these as well, with remarkable courage and endurance.

Recent tidal waves in the subcontinent have affected thousands.

In the Kashmir Valley, an entire generation of young adults, born at the cusp of the 1990s, have already lived through violent and uncertain times,

with a spirit of resolve and determination. The simmering calm is shattered. The valley is under siege. We hear that young people are being pulled out of their homes at night and detained. Mothers, sisters stand guard through the night. Those who are able, barricade their neighbourhoods and keep vigil, lest they be assaulted. Although schools have been declared open, children stay at home.

These are the glimpses of tenacity, just getting through one day at time as your world is in turmoil. Attending to the every day as best as you can, a reach for balance when all around, your world is shattered. You must hold onto and protect any semblance of safety for your children and for yourself.

Another valley is in the news.

The Valley of the Narmada River, one of India's holiest rivers. Pre-independence, plans to build dams on the Narmada River were under way. Construction began in 1961. Small, large and two mega dams were slated for the main river and many of its tributaries. Without clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests and flouting a Supreme Court stay on construction, dams have been built. The backwaters have submerged homes, fields, pasturelands and forests. Members of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, a movement to save the valley, have once again embraced *satyagraha* or non-violent adherence to their convictions, insisting that justice come to thousands of people whose homes and lands are under water, or under imminent threat of being submerged.

In mid-September 2019 the Sardar Sarovar Dam, built illegally on the Narmada, was filled to its fullest. A further 178 villages are in danger of being swallowed.

In both the Kashmir and the Narmada Valleys, an entire generation has grown up facing forces that speak for the greater common good even as they erase entire ways of life. In both valleys, strength born from sheer endurance keeps people going.

It is the seemingly small things that rest the mind, that allow you to continue when all around seems hostile. The pain that crushes your spirit may also be a wellspring of clarity and tenacity. You see the deeper and wider contexts of the situations that have arisen. Strength comes from seeing the wider picture. And strength to bear pain comes from standing together with others. You feel yourself to be part of a larger being. You are not alone as you face the tide, there are hands to hold, people to embrace. It seems that the strength to bear relentless pain comes from an ability to meet what is

before you; to be where you are even as you face horror. Endurance may help you meet the swollen tide; not to romanticize endurance and strength though. Innumerable people are crushed, in body and spirit, as they live in the madness. Entire generations are growing up in worlds of ceaseless turbulence.

In Dhamadka village in Anjar District in Kutch, I met Yaqub Bhai, a master block-printing artist. The day he invited me to an evening meal, his storehouse had burned down. It had survived the earthquake, but now an electrical spark had destroyed everything in the godown. The book, *Sindh Jo Ajrak*, by Noor Jehan Bilgrami, a history of Ajrakh printing, had survived the fire. He placed it in my hands, inviting me to look at many pages of exquisite Ajrakh block designs. I opened the book to find a *sura* from the Koran. It says:

He hath created man
He hath taught him the power of expression
The sun and the moon are made punctual
And the sky he hath uplifted
And he hath set the balance
That ye exceed not the balance
But observe it strictly, nor fall short thereof.

Quran Sura LV:The Beneficient

Perhaps this is a call for vigilance, a call to continuously watch the movements in our waking lives and worlds. And in that vigilant watching, to restore rest and order, even as we watch a world swing to a senseless extreme.

Nature and the Androgynous Mind

CHETANA GAVINI

What does it mean to see nature? When we look at nature, do we try to comprehend it or is it a voluntary and purposeful act of observation? How does one separate a truthful vision and immediate **experience** of nature from the mirage of our renewed expectations from nature, literary and otherwise?

Right from the times of Kalidasa and Edmund Spenser, there exists in the cognition of nature and its aspects, specific feminine and masculine spaces. Our response to nature is often a cultivated one and learned from literary and cultural influences. In a sense we perceive nature through our inner masculinity and femininity. And Nature itself has been culturally feminized. The narrative of 'Mother Nature' is necessarily guided by the masculine and thus casts nature in an oedipal or maternal light. A love for nature that comes from inner femininity is similarly hinged on an emotional currency that is distinctly feminine. The dynamic by which the inner feminine being responds to nature is implicitly different from the dynamic by which the inner masculine being responds to nature. Therefore, our mode of observing and communicating with nature operates on a projection of gender difference onto the natural world. Take these two examples from the Sangam Tamil text *Silappatikaram*:

May the flowers of your eyes
Be able to withstand the fire of mine.

We are from Puhar where the male sea ravishes the sandy castles that we girls construct…

Here by connecting to nature through a gendered perspective, the flowers are feminized while the 'male sea' and the potent fire is masculinized. Thus, our interpretation of the natural world is essentially a gendered one and hence holds no real balance; instead it swings like a pendulum to both polarities.

In order to truly observe nature, one must do so with an androgynous mind. Virginia Woolf writes, "the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided." Such a mind is truly open and is generous with its patience of perception. Woolf also talks of the soul balanced in its masculinity and femininity, "The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating." This does not mean a total absence of gendered perspectives but a spiritual coexistence of these perspectives in us. This 'spiritual co-operating' in the act of being with nature is an act of supreme and primal balance.

This degree of openness needed to read into nature and see it is therefore the product of a balanced mind. Krishnamurti writes, "Be in communion with nature, not verbally caught in the description of it." This communion with nature is perhaps an instinctual one—led not by the artistic or analytical or descriptive eye but rather the untutored inner eye; raw in its empathetic gleaning of the world around. There is often a conflation of the emotional observation of nature with a description of nature. One is an outward preconditioned act while the other is an instinctual inner action that allows one to experience solidity and stability through a sense of deep connect. I am reminded of Woolf's *Orlando* which seems to understand that, "Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces." It is in the act of description of nature that the desire to comprehend rather than observe nature arises. As such, this projects onto the stark vision of nature in front of us, an unnecessary expectation to conform to our inner being.

When we seek resonance with the natural world there is perhaps a degree of romanticism. We don't really try to reach an inner core of our being; instead we linger on in the margin, trying to affirm and validate our imitations of nature. So how can we reach the 'green in nature'? In a sense it is to feel the green rather than see the colour. There is also something universal and unifying in the phrase 'the green in nature'. There exists a deeper and more intricately connected whole beneath our singular and often limited perceptions, and in recognizing this we are truly connected to nature. I am reminded of another extract from *Orlando*, "He loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth's spine beneath him." In a sense I do believe that the truly meditative observation of nature lies in penetrating the 'summer transiency' to reach the permanent bedrock beneath. An

appreciation of nature, or the deliberate pause in our daily lives to go into nature, must be guided by something more than accommodative seasonal shifts; pleasant rains and warm winds. Krishnamurti writes, "A flower in the next garden may be ill-kept, crowded with weeds, but look at it, feel that you are part of all that, part of all living things. If you hurt nature, you are hurting yourself." A true resonance with nature means to see the beauty even in its ugliness. When you 'feel', rather than simply 'see' with the eyes and not the heart, you are reminded that there is an emotional clarity in the aesthetic ill-fitted appearance of the flower. The flower is connected to the weeds and it is the junction of that connection that makes it beautiful. It is indeed simultaneously a flower and not a flower, something much more than the flower. Acknowledging this allows us to get in touch with the spine of the earth. This reminds me of Woolf's thoughts in *Moments of Being*:

> *I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; 'That is the whole', I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower.*

In observing the vision of nature in front of us we are a part of it as much as it is a part of us. Krishnamurti also writes, "…be a part of it, be aware, feel that you belong to all that, be able to have love for all that, to admire a deer, the lizard on the wall, that broken branch lying on the ground." 'Belong' is special word. It is an evocative and powerful idea. In a sense, true observation is to dissolve the veil holding the observer separate from the object. However, this does not require an abject destruction of the self in order to belong and feel connected—as this is only a loss of one-self and identity; not a losing of oneself to a primal spine in the earth. It is when the observer loses herself to the object, and in doing so belongs to the object, that true observation takes place.

Returning to the 'Green in nature', one must understand that it is not a visual object or even a series of visual objects but rather it is the intricate spiderweb weaving throughout the natural world and through us. We are truly open to it and nothing separates us.

What Ails the Adyar?'

A Chennai river study

AARTI KAWLRA AND RAJIV VARADARAJAN

I was cleaning and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it…. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.

Leo Tolstoy's Diary, entry dated 29 February 1897

A class 11 sociology project

'What ails the Adyar?' was the title of the sociology project last year at The School, Chennai. The idea to use the river Adyar as an entry point for a group study on research methods came from environmental activist Nityanand Jayaraman, who has been collecting narratives of residents living along the banks of the river as part of the work of his collective called the Vettiver Koottamaippu or Vettiver Collective. We jointly decided that discovering and unpacking the layers of time written upon the Adyar river, listening to and observing the voices of those who live in its vicinity, would allow us to animate textbook concepts outside the classroom for our students. The river study project was a perfect opportunity for exposing students to the variety of data collection tools and research methods that could be deployed in a spatially defined micro-urban context.

The project's aim was to problematize an urban ecological space that was both familiar and unfamiliar to students and to understand the complexity of perceptions, relations and standpoints or 'web of life' engendered along the river. The exercise began with a walk along the river with Nityanand to observe, question and analyze the river's significance in the lives of the

people who live along its course in economically and socially disparate neighborhoods. We were to experience the neighborhoods first through simple observation—of sight, smell and sound. The early morning trip was intended not only to help define the scope of the study but to also offer the students a taste of 'field work', in the sense of providing them an opportunity to connect complex theoretical concepts in sociology to everyday situations and contexts. It was decided to organize subsequent trips in smaller groups to have focused group discussions in select locations taken up for the study.

Focusing on select locations along the river meant that we were reimagining the river for ourselves from the point of view of the different voices we encountered along its course. In one sense we wanted to not only geographically map or locate the river in the dense urban context of Chennai city, but also historicize the Adyar using our specific engagement with it. According to Nityanand, "The river is not necessarily only where the water is …", for its history is entangled with that of urban development and construction patterns. Through the apparently simple question 'What ails the Adyar?', our study sought to connect with its inhabitants and gain insights into the significance of the river in their daily life. A set of questions related to the river, both as a physical presence as well as a memory, guided our interaction with those living in the vicinity of the river.

- *What is the water body here? Where is it located?*
- *Have you personally used the water body at any point? Do you know of anyone who has?*
- *Do you remember this water body from the past? In what ways was it used?*
- *How were its surroundings then? In what aspects was it different?*
- *Can you recall how you felt then? What impressions of the river do you still hold?*

Such a field-based, experiential approach gave us the opportunity to search for information that was not easily available in print or web-based literature and invited students to look for alternative, primary sources of data for the study. In sociological parlance we were using qualitative research methods to gain insights into our research question 'What Ails the Adyar?' Instead of looking for answers in a single expert study, we were seeking ways of humanizing the river through the voices we heard along its course. It is for this reason we thought it important to help students draw upon information about the river from film songs, personal memories, life histories of residents,

photographs from family albums and the archives of the Theosophical Society, street signage and posters, newspaper reports, built structures as well as maps showing urban expansion in its vicinity since colonial times.

Students needed support in asking questions as well as in understanding the deeper messages being communicated to us. The somewhat non-intrusive and objective question, 'What ails the Adyar?', we soon realized, opened some uncomfortable situations and guarded or incomplete responses. Common perceptions of pollution, river hydrology and urban geography soon gave way to a Pandora's box of questions about the built structures that were easily visible and those that were hidden from plain view; what was on this side of the river and what was on the other side; who were the 'us' and who were the 'them'; who were presently living there, who had recently settled there and who had left; what was put in the river and what was taken out from it; who regarded the river with respect and who took it for granted.

Walking, seeing and listening along the river

We identified five locations that represented different categories of inhabitants along the river following the river walk with Nityanand. These included what are called fishing villages or kuppams, slum settlements and upscale apartment blocks, as well as institutions such as the Theosophical Society and the Madras Boat Club, that were built on the river during the colonial period.

We had prepared a set of questions in class for eliciting information, both verbal and visual, at the different sites we were to visit. The field trips, however, presented us with an array of lengthy and somewhat disconnected narratives, a bustling collage of people engaged in a variety of activities in small alleyways and vacant, seemingly uninhabited open spaces. It was confusing at first to identify and articulate what we were looking for. The scenes looked familiar and yet undistinguishable from the point of view of our central question pertaining to the river Adyar. We resorted to 'unstructured observation' by noting down whatever drew one's attention and took photographs whenever possible. As we continued our research, we found our observations becoming sharper and conversations more pointed. The students were now expanding inwardly, searching for insights or staying with the responses for further reflection.

Each group was encouraged to classify the information collected from their respective field site along some key focal points—the settlement pattern

of the neighbourhood and its landscape, environmental consciousness, caste and religion, livelihood, work practices and perceptions of the river. The introduction of these categories provided an internal structure to the study. It also encouraged students to fill in some information gaps through additional sources of information from photo-archives of the Theosophical Society and the Madras Boat Club, official and online maps both historic and contemporary, as well as the mind maps drawn from the walk along the river, online blog posts on the neighborhood written by Chennai city residents, post cards and visitor's books from the Olcott Bungalow of the Theosophical Society and at the Madras Boat Club and photographs taken by the students themselves during the course of the study.

It was fascinating to see how the pursuit of a single question enabled entry and contact with different communities and opened so many layers of inquiry regarding their relationship with the Adyar. The river became the lens through which we could gain insights into the complex realities of daily life along the river and helped students construct different 'points of view'. Excerpts from their field diaries offer a window into the kinds of observations, conversations and resources the students drew upon, while listening to the voices along the Adyar.

Urur Kuppam

Harshita Y Vaid and Harshini Arun

Urur Olcott Kuppam is an inland fishing settlement on the beach facing the Bay of Bengal. The people have been living in this fishing hamlet for more than three generations. "It's our ancestral village," a resident said. There were few people and few houses earlier. "If you looked west from Thazhangadu, you could see Rajaji Bhavan." In the south-east of the Kuppam, there was a sand dune and a dense screwpine forest. Apparently, the tall palm trees and screwpine shrubs protected the shoreline and the fishing hamlets from rough waves.

As the river gets more and more polluted, fisherman have to go farther into the sea for their catch, as there are virtually no fish at the mouth of the river. Certain fishing practices used to bring the community together. Earlier, there were four big nets for a hundred families, which were common to all. Fishing was carried out in large groups of eighty and the harvest was shared. Now, the fishermen find it more profitable and practical to work for individuals and groups who own modern nets and fibre boats and can venture deeper into the sea.

The beach and the open spaces are littered with garbage. The residents of the kuppam complained of the absence of sewage and sanitation systems as well as shrinking common spaces. But despite these problems, the streets we walked through were swept clean in the morning and were adorned with kolam patterns made from rice flour in front of each door. The plants, potted in recovered plastic cans, were watered and the aroma of fried onions wafted from the windows.

Malligaipoo Nagar

Alagammai, Sneha R and Lepakshi A Jaideep

Malligaipoo Nagar, is a resettlement locality that dates to the early 1950s on the river, inhabited by people eking out a meagre income through informal urban services in Chennai. A land registration document that belonged to one of the residents was dated 4 February 1953. Malligaipoo Nagar, is on the inland bank of the Adyar. Its residents came from different parts of Tamil Nadu in search of work opportunities during the urban expansion of Madras in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The men mostly work as construction labour and the women are domestic workers. One person recalled that wages for this kind of work used to be one rupee to a rupee and a half per day, and resettlement neighbourhoods such as this used to be known for their construction skill—Adyar for masonry and Teynampet for tiling work. Now the work has been taken over by migrants from Kerala, Andhra and north India.

Residents remember a time when Madras was a city of criss-crossing canals. Passing boats from Pondicherry on the Buckingham Canal, after crossing Marakkanam, would stop at Malligaipoo Nagar. An elderly person recounted the childhood pleasures of getting some jaggery for free from the boat's store filled with goods like palm sugar, plantain leaves, salt, logs and firewood.

People living near the banks of the river said that they were not affected by the December 2015 floods of Chennai because the height of the bank had been raised and a wall erected to prevent flooding. Few also said the river is an inconvenience. They would prefer that it is not there at all. Some even felt that others judge their social status by the area of residence. We noticed a prominently placed tap in the neighbourhood. It was provided after repeated petitioning from the inhabitants whose only source of drinking water until then had been the tap near the car park of the neighbouring Fortis Malar Hospital.

MRC Nagar

Sneha Sheejith and J Gayathri

MRC Nagar, a high-rise upper middle-class apartment building complex built in the early 2000s, is located on the northern bank of the Adyar river, which was once the southern boundary of Madras city till the year 1946. In what was essentially a salty lagoon, there were several islands, at least four in a map of 1798, the largest of them called Quibble Island.

The residents said that they do not face any issues with the river other than the smell of rotting fish and garbage that comes once in a while. The place was much quieter and there was no commercial activity until a school came up. One of the residents said, "We do not use the river directly for anything. We don't know why it is so dirty." Another resident remembered a playground where the apartment stands now. They said, they were doing their bit to keep the environment clean. They segregated waste and sent the kitchen waste to the compost pits in the neighbourhood. They were happy that their initiative had been recognized by the local authorities.

When we asked them about measures to save the Adyar, the residents said the issue was with the encroachment, of the many kuppams and slum re-settlements on the river. They were letting out their waste and sewage in the river, causing all the pollution. They do not have toilets at home and throw all the waste into the river. "Even throwing flowers for religious purposes must be avoided," said another. The government should take the initiative to make the kuppam residents more aware.

A reputed newspaper, dated January 2011, reported a government plan to create a fifteen-acre park in Srinivasapuram (a fishing hamlet close to MRC Nagar). The fishermen opposed the relocation of their tenements. "The fishermen of Srinivasapuram also raised apprehension about amalgamating various kuppams that have differing traditional fishing rights and practices into a single housing project," reported the daily.

Theosophical Society

B Kaushik Krishna and Tarini Srivastava

The Theosophical Society (TS), Adyar is the headquarters of an international organization where well-known Theosophists HS Olcott and Annie Besant, among others, established the present sprawling campus along the Adyar estuary in the late 1890s.

The wooded campus and buildings of the Theosophical Society has the river on the northern side and the sea to the east. The main office is built

on the banks of the river and there is a small pathway leading from there to the riverbank. The supervisor of the gardens, when asked as to how the land is taken care of, said, "If you don't disturb anything, it automatically gets conserved." We understood from our conversations with the staff of the TS that the emphasis on trees, shrubs and the river, and nature in general, is inspired by the Theosophical idea that "there is life in everything, and one needs to respect all forms of life."

Conserving nature and maintenance of buildings seem to have the same value for the residents and workers of the TS. They lamented that the river is now merely the receptable of the city's drainage and cannot be called a river anymore. It posed a serious threat to health especially on account of the mosquitoes. The boundaries of the buildings of the TS had to be defined and the fences had to be walled and lined with bushes and scrub. At present the river can only be seen through the very small openings. Very few buildings have come up in the recent years. The simultaneous disgust and protectiveness with reference to the Adyar river seemed odd to us. Perhaps the present perceptions of the river are coloured by memories of what the river was in the past. They are memories, both of personal experience of the officials and stories that have been passed on. "Migratory birds such as flamingos would congregate on the mud flats," recalled one of the officials. "One could play the coin game. Drop a coin in the water and dive in to collect it. I have spent many hours watching fishermen and the merchant boats from the islands."

An old photograph from the TS archive captures the entire breadth of the river as a person sitting on the slope of the TS gardens gazes at the space where the river meets the sea. A poem from the magazine 'The Theosophist' immortalizes the Adyar as a symbol of solitude and contemplation more than a century ago:

To look one with skies that shines o'erhead!
How heaven and Earth this rare tranquility
Share like Twin sisters, one in Nature's car!
And Adyar dreams that calm eternity
With her surrounding landscape like a star:
The night comes down: O Sunset! If it be,
Can the brilliant morning be waiting so far?

A.F. Khabardar ('The Theosophist', Vol 20, 1908)

Madras Boat Club
Pulari M Baskar and Sneha Suresh

The Madras Boat Club, located on the banks of the Adyar, was established in 1867 as a rowing club for colonial officers and the elite of Madras since the British period. It is approached from the upper-class residential colony named after the club near the Kotturpuram bridge. The neighbourhood is secluded and calm with very large independent bungalows. It has wide, well-kept roads (one does not see any trash) and a broad canopy of trees on either side.

Most of its members belong to higher-income groups and "wish to maintain their prestige," said the manager. He continued, "We were under eighteen feet of water during the 2015 floods and suffered quite a loss. But that didn't stop us from taking our boats out to help the people in the slums nearby. We revamped the club, bought a fleet of imported boats, helped clean up the Adyar and offered rowing experiences for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds."

Sharing their civic and environmental concerns with us, the management of the club believe that government intervention is needed in order to clean the river. "I feel there should be strict measures to clean up the Adyar river. It's high time we save the river and should stop encroachments," said the captain of the club. The sports enthusiasts of Chennai who learn to row in the Adyar, however, are immune to the river's decay. "We suffer from a kind of loss of vision when it comes to the Adyar. The love for sport is worth having to bear the smell. We have gotten used to it," said one of the young rowers.

The Adyar river as a lens of inquiry
The question 'What ails the Adyar?' elicited a range of responses from different communities and interest groups. It was interesting to see that similar responses conveyed different meanings when placed in the different neighbourhood contexts. "Clearly, what ails the river, and more importantly what constitutes a healthy river and how to get there depends on who is answering these questions," noted Nityanand. Therefore, one had to listen to the stories carefully and become aware of how the river inhabited the words that articulated its condition.

Words, like objects, tend to become so familiar that they only carry the meaning one is accustomed to knowing. We often fail to remember with clarity everyday activities, places or individuals we meet on a regular basis.

In driving frequently on a busy road, for instance, our vision sometimes transforms objects around us into vague moving silhouettes, leaving out many details from our perception. Reiterating the Adyar question at every field visit brought to light many unexpected facets of the question for the students. It led us to listen to the people whose lives are entangled with the river in a variety of different ways. We were observing things as though we were seeing them for the first time, free from familiar terms of naming and knowing. We were engaging in what Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 article on 'Art as Technique' observed about Tolstoy's way of observing and thinking, "Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts …".

In the final presentation of their sociology project, the class 11 students raised a set of questions and observations which they shared before a larger gathering at the school. Some of them are worth listing here as they reflect a renewed awareness of the urban environment of which they are a part:

> The garbage piles up in Urur Kuppam, whereas Besant Nagar always seems to wear a clean face; the restoration project focuses around the estuary, but what about the source? What is the meaning of the word 'slum'? What are 'common spaces' and who has the right to decide how they are to be used? Why is it that some neighborhoods have basic civic amenities and some barely have any? What can we learn from inquiring into the names of streets, buildings, neighborhoods and localities in our city? High-rise apartments built along the banks of the river advertise a sea view to attract aspiring residents. Settlements of slums are almost always situated on low-lying marshlands or flood plains. Both are ecologically vulnerable locations.

The group study of the different neighborhoods along the Adyar river revealed to us the interconnectivity of vastly disparate urban locations. Each of the sites we had visited was socially and geographically distinct; yet each was linked to the river, and to one another, through it. We are left with the thought that research has many facets and many voices. So long as we keep people at the center of our inquiry, there will always be something more to be added. Hence, the potential lies in the questions that remain with us have not found it yet. This article makes no attempt to offer answers that I have not found. Instead, its goal is simply to raise some question and explore some of the possibilities. No option is perfect, but we each must choose something, and considering the options with clear eyes is a worthwhile endeavour.

Structure and Spontaneity

A fine balancing act

RADHA GOPALAN

Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. Most people learn best by being 'with it'…

Ivan Illich

Designing learning experiences in the outdoors feels like a balancing act—a dance of boundaries between structure and spontaneity. How does one choreograph this dance? How much do you structure? Let the sense of wonder prevail, let them 'be with it' and facilitate 'unhampered participation' for learning but what does it all mean? These are some of the questions that I grappled with while preparing to facilitate a learning session with a group of twelve- to thirteen-year-olds in the summer of 2019. These were urban students from upper middle-class homes and, with a few exceptions, they had spent most of their time indoors in controlled environments—be it school, home or even the commute to and from school. In this article I share the experience and some insights that emerged around these questions.

Sensing the surroundings

The objectives of this session were, firstly, to bring attention to the senses of sight, smell, hearing and touch in experiencing and learning about one's surroundings and secondly, to understand the importance of observation with attention in shaping our responses to situations around us. There were three things to be done—a rambling forty-five-minute walk through an urban wooded space outside Bengaluru, spending about twenty to thirty minutes in front of a tree of the person's choice followed by a reflection on the morning's experience. No instructions were provided for the walk on why, what and how, except that we had to be silent and we could not bring anything back from the walk. At the end of forty-five minutes, children were asked to take about fifteen minutes to reflect on the walk and express it either as a drawing, in writing or in any other form that they wanted. Stationery in the form of paper, pencils and crayons was made available. Neither the children nor I were familiar with this space which allowed us to be open to the unexpected.

As we set forth, the children were not sure of what was happening; they were asked to amble and experience their surroundings. A slew of questions, some hurled in my direction and some whispered to each other—"What does this mean? Should we make notes of what we see, hear? What should we do? Why are we doing this? Where are we going? Is this a biology class? I think something bit me. Gosh there are spider-webs everywhere" and so on. My response, "Let's just experience this place, this is my first visit too, let's see what we find and then maybe we can sit down and share what we saw and felt." We wandered under tree canopies on spongy leaf-covered soil, water squelching under our feet, came upon a clearing and then more trees, bryophytes and mushrooms on fallen logs. The mumblings and questions slowly gave way to silence. We began to hear the calls of a few birds. Somebody spotted a tall termite hill near the fence that enclosed this space, and wanted to know what it was. We admired it, wondering how the termites built this, what was it like inside, why was it so tall. Facts gathered from National Geographic and Discovery Channel documentaries came tumbling out. We then continued silently on our amble till we came to a clearing where we settled down for the next phase of our session.

We reflected for about twenty minutes on our walk, sharing our experiences and observations—*the soil under the trees was so spongy and leafy but the ground on the paths is so hard; the air felt moist on the skin under the trees and now away from them it is warmer and feels drier somehow; why does wet earth smell so fresh and different? It was so quiet as we walked, interesting that many of us stopped talking after a while; what were those really noisy creatures? Maybe cicadas? Did they come out because it had rained last night? Wish we could have walked for longer; why don't we do this in school, stay quiet and just walk through a real forest? We should really have more forests in cities; all schools should have forests or be near forests.*

While some expressed themselves in conversation, others sketched the path from memory. One of the children reflected through a poem on how the walk brought stillness in her, while another wrote a haiku—*exciting nature, rivaled by the cicadas, and a flycatcher.* A young college graduate who supported the facilitation wrote—*my divine silence, urges the children to see, how trees speak to me.*

Ruminating on a tree

We paused our reflection as each child was asked to pick a tree and spend half an hour just looking at the tree. After the first five minutes, more specific instructions were provided—observe the tree trunk, touch and feel the texture of the bark,

observe the type, age, venation of leaves, presence of fruits or flowers, their colour, shape and any other aspect of the tree. At the end of the session they were required to make a rubbing of the tree bark using a white sheet of paper and crayons or a black pencil.

It was interesting to see how the children responded to this activity. There were a few who were restless and in five minutes declared that they were done! Additional instructions were then provided on what to observe, and they were asked to stay with the tree till the time was up. This insistence on staying with the tree and observing with attention led to some serious delving into the tree. Periodic shouts of wonder at spiders camouflaged in the bark of the tree, resins oozing from a cut end of a branch, ants crawling up fissures in the bark as if they were 'cruising along a highway' entertained the rest of us. A student admired the resin in which a spider was embedded and he thought that reminded him of amber and fossils. Some students sat very quietly in front of the tree drawing everything they observed, while others documented the tree from different vantage points. Most of the students were worried about what they should write, how much detail they should provide, that their drawing skills were really bad. Some were really bothered by tiny insects and spiders. But after the first ten minutes, when they realized there was no 'out' from this session, all of them settled in, and at the end of twenty minutes when they were asked to share their reflections, some of them requested for more time to 'be with their tree'; such a pleasant surprise, particularly when it came from two of the restless ones!

To share our reflections, everyone was asked to pick a favourite spot to sit on or stand, from where they would participate in the session. Most children picked a tree to sit on, a few sat on the ground while others clambered up a bamboo tree house that was built on one of the trees. There were diverse expressions of their experiences of the session—poems about silence and nature; detailed drawings of trees, leaves, fruit, insects on the barks of trees; writings on how it felt to be in nature, the feel of air on skin and how it differed with each location—under canopies and away from canopies; detailed record of observations (almost like a biology record); realizing that a tree that one person was observing was actually a younger tree of the same species that another was observing nearby. Myriad questions and responses emerged, "How do we know that the two trees are related?" Their flowers and leaves were 'identical' but the texture of the bark and the width of the trunk of one was rougher and wider than the other! Several of the children wondered why their classes in school couldn't be out in the open; why couldn't they sit on trees and listen to the teacher while watching insects and worms when you learn so much more and better? There was an overall sense that we really need to take the time to look around and listen and spend more time in the open with 'nature'. A closing comment of the session was, "If there is so much happening in this wooded area, imagine what it must be like in a 'real forest'".

More about trees

Continuing with the theme of trees and trying to understand them a little more, we moved inside a classroom to watch two films that were selected to trigger a wider discussion and explore more questions: Why are trees considered so important? Can you really bring water to a dry area by growing trees? Do trees communicate with each other? Is it important to understand this when we plant trees or when we are clearing an area of trees?

The first video was set on a farm in northern Burkina Faso in Africa. It was the story of how a farmer, Yacouba Sawadogo, single handedly revived the groundwater and improved crop yields in his farm. He did this by planting trees in an area which his family abandoned after the terrible droughts of the 1980s. During this period, a twenty per cent decline in annual rainfall slashed food production throughout the Sahel, turned vast stretches of savanna into desert, and caused millions of deaths by hunger. The trees not only harvested rainwater and held more water in the ground but also increased yields of millets while restoring soil fertility.

Yacouba also drew inspiration and support from termites. He opened abandoned termite mounds, under which there was a labyrinth of tunnels that the ants had created, to channel rain water. This allowed for water to be channeled and spread over a larger area supporting more vegetation. This section of the film provided several 'aha' moments for the students. The termite hills from the morning walk suddenly came alive and the 'engineering' skills of termites surprised and amazed all of us. This led to questions about termites, "Why do they make these tunnels and what happens in these tunnels?" I drew a schematic of the cross-section of a termite hill on the white board which allowed students to understand the structure of a termite hill—how termites and fungi live in symbiosis to degrade cellulose which provides food for both fungi and the termites. We also discussed the significance of this since the termite-fungi relationship is an important part of cellulose degradation in soil. If this process, together with the role played by other microorganisms is affected by human activity, then dead plant matter would accumulate in vast quantities! We had a short discussion on what this means for food webs, how it impacts nutrient cycling in nature and the crucial role played by microorganisms which we seem to ignore most of the time.

We then watched a seven-minute video that explained, using simple graphics, how trees communicate. This was based on research and field work done in the forests of British Columbia. The prominent role played by fungi in the form of mycorrhiza in facilitating communication between trees brought fungi back into our discussion. We learnt

that trees of the same species often form alliances with trees of other species, and that forest trees have evolved to live in cooperative, interdependent relationships, maintained by the communication channels created by these fungi—often called a 'wood-wide web'. Questions and comments tumbled out—*fungi are everywhere—inside termite hills, breaking down bread, and now helping trees communicate with each other. And symbiosis again: glucose from trees feeds the fungi which in turn mobilize nutrients for other trees and so on. What about the two similar trees that we saw—wonder how they communicate? Could they be related? What would happen if one of these trees was cut down?* To deepen the understanding of interconnections and relationships, the children were asked to think about what happens when we cut down trees in forests or clear them to expand a road or plant any tree anywhere. A big realization from this session—nature is full of symbiotic relationships; there are tree families which we could be destroying by felling trees!

At the end of the day, we reflected on our experiences and learnings. The children shared their experiences in smaller groups very creatively. One group sketched an interconnected web on a chart paper to show the relationships between all the activities and discussions. Their inspiration was the fungal network that helped trees communicate with each other. Another group presented a skit, while a third group composed and recited a poem. The group that presented a skit and composed and sang a song called 'Symbiosis' which became the anthem for the rest of our time together.

On the balancing act

Several threads emerged from the engagement with the children that I tried to weave together to make sense of this balancing act. By not structuring and providing instructions on the walk, it seemed like the children and I were able to truly sense our surroundings with curiosity and a sense of discovery. This allowed us to sense the differences in how the earth felt under our feet and the air touched our skin at various points on the walk. A serendipitous sighting of an anthill shaped our learning experience for the rest of the day. Ant hills were not a part of my lesson plan! However, because we delved a bit into the anthill in our conversation and later through a sketch of it in class, Yacouba's story took on a different meaning. Instead of just learning about how trees hold water and bring back life to soil and land, we also learned the significance of working with nature and taking advantage of the engineering marvels of termites to meet our needs. This made me wonder about the possible learning experience that might have unfolded if I had done a reconnaissance of the wood in preparation for the walk. Would I have picked specific spots and things for the children to see, listen to, touch? Would I have spotted the anthill and engineered the walk in that direction? Maybe I would have brought pictures and descriptions of the anthill and even prepared a few slides!! Our collective wonder at how a seemingly muddy mound that we chanced upon in the morning could bring life in an arid landscape as shown by Yacouba in the film, may not have been possible if I had 'engineered' this as part of a lesson plan. It seemed as if the freedom and lightness that I, as a facilitator, experienced through this 'unstructured' walk, transferred itself to the children, after the initial apprehensions. We became collective 'explorers'. As one of the children commented later, 'It was nice to explore together. You really did not know where we were going this morning? Cool.' I was not the teacher telling them what to do, what to experience, what to record, thereby limiting their imagination and creativity and ability to learn and know by just 'being with it'.

Scaffolding the learning process by bringing in a broad structure or rubric for exploration in the Tree Watch session allowed for focused observation. This was important to cultivate the ability to observe with attention which is crucial in building awareness. This emerged in the session when they shared not only what they had observed but also what emotions and sensations the surroundings evoked. It reinforced, for me, the need to understand when, where and how much to structure learning with the senses in the outdoors.

The discomfort and apprehension that the children experienced when asked to embark on the walk without instructions and not knowing what they are going to do, brought forth the deep conditioning and regimenting that our education system has entrenched in them. What was encouraging, however, was to see how they can shed some of that with some patience and persistence on the part of the facilitator. Positioning myself as a facilitator to create an enabling environment in which the children could 'just be', realize their potential, bring forth their creativity and sensitivity and learn by immersing themselves in the situation was an important learning: not a teacher or educator but a facilitator.

A final thought—there is no greater time than this in which to immerse children (young adults and for of us) in sensory experiences in nature and in reality, if we are to enable social and ecological justice.

A Trail of Learning

UMA SHANKARI

My intention in teaching the ISC Environmental Science course is that when these children assume influential, decision-making positions in their life—in whatever field they choose to work in—they would take decisions that are environmentally sound. Through this two-year course, we study several environmental issues from around the world. Often, students feel disturbed by the state of the world. It is in this context that the idea of giving them first-hand experience of ground realities of communities arose. This was to also show them some of the positive environmental initiatives that are happening.

We talk a great deal about traditional knowledge and practices of the tribal communities in the conservation of forests. We also talk about organic, natural and traditional farming techniques when we read about agriculture. They have to understand what these mean for those directly involved—the tribals and farmers, especially, the landless farm labourers. It is necessary for the students to draw a balance between the theoretical approaches and the practical difficulties. With this in mind, we planned an optional trip for the out-going class 12 students after their board examinations. Eight students accompanied by three teachers went to Gobichettipalayam, a small town in western Tamil Nadu.

Our first destination was the Bhavani Sagar dam, inaugurated in 1952. We had people from the district agricultural department, local farmers" association, and SPWD (State Public Works Department) accompanying us. The dam is one of the largest earthen structures, built from the soil dug from the reservoir and is still intact even after 60 years. Of the eight kilometre long dam, only the central sluice is built of cement and concrete. The students were spell-bound by the magnitude of the dam and the fact that such a huge dam could be constructed with just soil.

We then travelled along the path of the lower Bhavani Canal that carried water from the dam to the fields. We saw different levels of water distribution

from the main canal, through the distributary canals and finally to the small sluice gates from where it was channelized to the fields. This Canal irrigates 2.07 lakh hectares of land. Based on the availability of water, the state bodies and the farmers associations collectively decide on the distribution of water. This vast and complex network was another thing that impressed the students. It was a novel experience for them to understand the need for so many protocols and paths before water reaches the fields from the dams.

I could have explained this network through chalk and talk in the classroom, but the complexity of the process came fully alive on the field under the guidance of Murthy. Apart from agriculture, one other major economy of this area was dairy. There were co-operative milk societies in every village, which also served as the retail outlets for the local people's needs.

Murthy comes from a Dalit community. People from the Dalit community were not allowed to enter these societies to buy milk. Ten years ago, Murthy as a young lad of seventeen, was beaten up for daring to enter the society to buy milk, claiming that the society was a public place. Though this became a huge issue, little has changed since. After two years, Murthy attempted to go there once more only to be beaten up again. Now he does not go there. Hearing this, there was a sense of shock on the students' faces. They did not speak for a while. Then, one child asked in an apologetic tone, "You said you never go there anymore. Does that mean you are scared of being beaten up again? Don"t you want to fight it anymore? Have you accepted it as it is?"

Murthy answered with a broad smile, "Yes. I am scared. Because they not only beat me up and my family, but also others from my community. Any such incident disturbs the life of all the people in our community. On the other hand, my people are not yet ready to rise up against caste discrimination. So, my primary work is to educate them and give them the strength to protest. Only then can we fight together. Otherwise these actions by individuals will only be dramatic adventures. I am not interested in that anymore. I am looking for a more radical change in the long run."

"But where and how did you get the strength?"

"Education was the base. Then I got introduced to Dr Ambedkar's and Periyar's ideologies. They helped me understand the caste society and how to work from within."

With this Murthy took leave of us. But the discussion did not end there but continued on our way back and long after that. The students raised

several questions for which there were no satisfactory answers. Next day we went to Murthy's *cheri* (slum) to meet the people there. We were hoping to find answers to at least a few of our questions, but we were left with more questions. After hearing Murthy, the natural expectation was to meet more people like him, questioning the caste society. But the people we saw in the *cheri* were those who complied with the discrimination they were subject to, and even found some comfort and security in it. They said that being in bonded labour to a particular dominant caste family meant that they were at their service round the clock. But it also meant that the dominant caste family is bound to take care of their needs, including food, clothing and health care. Education was obviously not part of it. Murthy had to nudge them to say what kind of food, clothing and health care they were given. This meant leftover food, used clothes and health care in government hospitals which anyway provided free healthcare. It was surprising to see that the people found security even under obvious discrimination.

Students raised several issues:

"Sending young children as bonded labour in return for money—Is it not like selling one's own child? It seems that they did not feel anything wrong about doing so."

"It seemed for them to be a matter born out of necessity."

"The inequity of caste system was almost invisible to them."

"They believed that there is a reason for their misfortunes."

"Now who is happier? These people or Murthy Anna?"

"It seems complying with the caste system is easier. Murthy Anna seems to be burdened."

"After realizing that caste in discriminatory, he is unable to bear with it but has to live with it. Is it not more a burden? What is the solution to this?"

"I think Murthy Anna had to choose between economic freedom and social freedom and he chose the latter."

"But is he socially free?"

"He is striving for it. One day he will."

"Will he?"

"Or may be his next generation."

I did not interrupt but left them to explore these questions by themselves. I have understood in this short span of my life as a teacher, that I need not answer all the questions that the students raise. Some may find answers through these conversations. Others may not. Staying with such questions is more important than trying to find readymade answers. These conversation spaces are a vital part of a learning experience. Without these conversations—listening to different viewpoints; questioning each other's understanding; trying to unravel what they saw and heard—the experience is not complete.

Next morning, we headed towards an NGO named SUDAR for children rescued from child labour in a tribal village called Kongadai in the Burgur hills. After the long journey, our immediate need was to use a toilet. The school had a toilet outside but without any water. Natraj who runs the NGO, gave us two *kudams* (pots), and asked us to fetch water from the hand pump on the main road leading to the village. The trail for water took us more than an hour—a hand pump with a long line of pots but no water; a walk to a nearby stream with no water; further down to another line but no water; finally, to water oozing from between two rocks where a woman was collecting water in a small mug to pour into her pot which was covered with a thin cloth filter. It would take at least half an hour to fill one pot and there were already pots waiting. We considered peeing behind the bushes when one woman called us and let us cut the line. We quickly decided to take only half pot of water. It took almost half an hour to fill half a pot. We took turns carrying the pot uphill. We decided to use the water frugally, after all the nine of us had used the toilets. Here are some responses:

"Akka. All my romantic ideas of living in the hills have disappeared."

"Yes Akka. Living in the hills is beautiful only when all our needs are taken care of and that is what we have seen when we go on vacation to hills."

"Akka, when we entered the village, I saw that every house in this village had a toilet but I could see that they are left unused. I was surprised and even upset about that. Now I know why people defecate in open places."

This was not a part of the trip plan, but it just happened. This experience is sure to stay with all of us for long. We often think, "Open defecation is not good for their health. We should raise awareness and stop it". Similarly, we question infrastructural development without satisfying the basic needs. This experience gave us an insight into these issues.

On our way back, we stopped by a dry stream. VP Gunasekaran, a veteran tribal rights activist in this area, took us to the stream bed for a rich discussion on tribal rights and welfare, conservation, environmental degradation. The trip helped the children carry back a number of questions. As children entering into a new phase of life, these questions could help students from understanding the reality of many social and environmental problems.

I could not ask more as a teacher.

Meeting Life at Eighteen

Some experiences at an undergraduate program

ARJUN JAYADEV

Every May I interview about forty college applicants to Azim Premji University's undergraduate program. My colleagues do the same. The students I meet come from all parts of the country and from different socio-economic backgrounds. They have passed an academic baseline test and during the interview, my colleagues and I spend time trying to assess their understanding of a subject. But, just as importantly, we try to assess their sense of themselves and their suitability for our programme.

It's hard to explain how delicate those thirty minutes can often be, and how instructive they are for me. This moment in their lives is a liminal stage and often one in which you get to see, however briefly, the first point at which students are really trying to 'meet life'. For the last decade or so of their lives they have been busy getting a schooling. More recently they have also been experiencing the first inchoate glimpses of selfhood that sets in during adolescence. And when they come to the interview it is often the first time they are presenting themselves, as best as they can, to complete strangers.

Some are more prepared, have thought about themselves a little, and are more self-aware. While this doesn't always correlate with socio-economic backgrounds, it is nevertheless true that the educational system that is more urban, more western-focused, more upper class, is also one that prepares students to think about themselves as autonomous subjects. They present themselves as people whose opinions, thoughts and inner impulses are to be valued. By contrast, those from less privileged backgrounds, when asked questions about themselves that are 'outside the syllabus', by and large speak less as individuals and more broadly about family or about socio-economic issues. Additionally, it is often the case that their lives are more circumscribed, effortlessly more brutal, and the interview, therefore, much more consequential for their life chances.

A great deal of the time the answers from everyone, whatever their situation, are relatively formulaic. There is often this moment, which is both touching and somewhat filled with pathos, when students reach into their bags to show us their certificates (Model UN, Art class, Kung Fu, Drawing competition and so on), as evidence of some sort of well roundedness. I'm always somewhat torn at that point. At one level, it is completely irrelevant to me and to the process of selecting the candidates. It is also mildly dispiriting to feel that there is a 'burden of proof' in this certification. But at the same time, it is also something that students cling to as validation of their efforts to be noticed outside the system. So, I'm not sure whether to take them and murmur my appreciation, or to simply ask them to put it back.

I've tried to see if those who are from alternative school backgrounds are different. The answer is, I suppose, somewhat. While some of the students who come to us from these places are truly exceptional in their sense of self-reflectiveness, a majority are much like the products of any other elite schooling—capable, articulate, confident, but also cocksure, self-involved as well as sheltered. The most common answer, when asked about their schooling, is that it 'didn't involve competition', but not much more.

Given that I too have had a similar background and schooling experience, I sometimes think back to myself at seventeen and eighteen and wonder how I would do in these interviews. It's hard to know. What would I have answered to the question I sometimes ask, "Tell me about yourself". What do I remember of myself at that stage? Nothing too endearing—a morass of self-importance and a certain turgidity, coming from a combination of social and psychological signals that were all received in a haze. The release and desire and promise of just post-liberalization India overlaid with the self-restraint and austerity of the adults around me. A difficulty in being non-reactive. A lack of kindness towards the world. A need to be liked. Also, I suppose, some confidence, much curiosity, boundless enthusiasm for learning, a sense of affection for people. How might I have been able to express anything of that sort in thirty minutes? Not well, I would guess.

So where does this leave me now, being at the other end of the process? It makes me profoundly aware that the process of education doesn't somehow change in university. Eighteen, at least in the Indian context, is still adolescence. College is a bridge, not just a destination that one comes to fully formed. The idea that college is about freedom and self-discovery—understood as an unfolding of identity in an environment without a formal structure and hierarchy—is profoundly false. This is not to patronize, but to

recognize that if one is serious about the process of education, one cannot assume that somehow, magically, that the step to college will mean a phase-shift. If anything, it brings new challenges for the student that are just as hard to deal with as the adolescent years in school.

I think about those students who have already joined college and whose lives I've learned about in greater detail. I realize that there is truth to the notion that young people have it much harder these days. By the time they are eighteen, or certainly soon after, they are expected to have a much more developed sense of self, a certain urbane sensibility, a set of 'positions' about the world. Much of this is driven by social media and I've seen first-hand how Twitter, for example, makes people perform their self-hood on a 24/7 basis. And given how mercilessly this sense of self is created and torn apart when one is young, it is often a torture for all. In addition, with an ever-present media dramatizing events, heightening anxieties and creating a cycle of addiction to sensation, the unmitigated horror of our world is too much with them. It is inescapable.

Later, on entering college, students are forced to be in a milieu that is both intellectually and emotionally demanding. At a residential university, students are forced to confront the process of living together with people very different from themselves, with a variety of socio-political backgrounds, interests, impulses and instincts that can be quite alien. It is for many a disconcerting experience. Some of this occurs from the raw fact of socio-economic distance—students from disadvantaged backgrounds feel intimidated, and more privileged students lack understanding. In some other ways the tensions are to do with a young person's own identity as a 'good student', facing a set of academic challenges that they have not had to in the past. A third set of challenges is in the fact of having to relate beyond the classroom—the rough and tumble of a life of new friendships and interests. This often leads to continued anxiety and sometimes even breakdowns.

The challenge for us as educators of college-going students is therefore complex. We are committed to a different sort of education that aims at generating a particular sensibility of the world and themselves. While we recognize that this is a time to allow young people to learn and grow and experience in their own way, at the same time the journey, especially at this stage, can be fraught, self-destructive and cruel. Designing curricula and engagements with students is therefore a continuous and dialectic process.

The academic component is often the easier part, although this too has to be carefully designed. The much harder challenge is to get a group of young people, struggling to find ways to settle their raging impulses and anxieties, to work with others with very different backgrounds within a common, self-directed space. At the same time, to ensure that their education will allow students to develop some sensitivity to the world and evoke the desire to engage with it in a way that facilitates meaningful change.

As far as academics go, a few things have turned out to be important. The first is to have a group of people who are jointly committed to the engagement of students. One of the fortunes of being at a place in which there is such a commitment is that there is a willingness to think of the project as a collective endeavour. This is very different from an environment in which one is primarily compelled as an academic to first do one's research at a high level and second to ensure that their subject is taught well to students. In an environment that we are intending to create, the success or failure of a student is seen, I believe correctly, as a joint process across faculty within a discipline, across disciplines and among non-teaching faculty as well.

At the outset, the challenge is to set up a curriculum that is relevant, challenging, coherent and rigorous, while being broad enough to speak to all the varied backgrounds in the classroom. This is easier said than done, and much attention is paid to doing so. As part of the process, we have discovered, at least in the Economics curriculum, that it requires constant discussion and tweaking between different courses to really have synergies that work. It also requires recognition of different motivations and capacities of students, and working with each on a more personalized level. This is often realized through a system of committed mentorship. What we have found is that this constant and continuous updating of strategies is essential to handling student difficulties.

In an environment of rigorous and demanding training, student distress takes on many forms—a sense of academic inadequacy, a fear of failure, a profound loss of motivation, an inability also perhaps to let go of habitual patterns of learning and being a student, an inability to learn differently. An eighteen-year-old comes with and builds on prior experiences of adolescence—the rewards and punishments of earlier forms of being and learning, as well as the expectations in the new environment. It can be quite daunting. Those who succeed better often have more initial resilience, a little less self-involvement, a willingness to be empathetic with others and a

little more sense of their own role in the learning experience. We can in fact design curricula that inculcate some of these strengths and do so. Whether this is through field work, group work, or work that builds different skills than they have been used to deploying, such as perseverance. Much of the Economics curriculum, with which I am most closely acquainted, places a premium on rigour and real-world knowledge, which students come to appreciate over time.

But this is by far the easier part of curriculum design. The harder part is to plan and handle what might be thought of as the process of engagement with the emotional and psycho-social needs of students. At Azim Premji University we designed our undergraduate programs as compulsorily residential. This was deliberate as we wished to have a place where we could introduce students to, and support them in experiencing, just and caring relationships across traditional social barriers such as caste, religion and gender. The experience has been very difficult and charged. I can do no better than to quote one of my colleagues who has thought hard about the challenges in this context. He writes, in a longish email:

> Since inception, some of us ... have argued that experiencing our curriculum in such a social context is a necessary condition for our programmes to contribute to social change. However, the pursuit of activity to create such an environment makes challenging psychological-emotional demands on both staff and students. Speaking from my own experiences, it requires sustained and self-reflexive, psychological-spiritual work—work for which I have needed both mentoring, and professional mental health support. This work on myself and my varied engagements with students have allowed me to understand that this is very challenging. We do not acknowledge this enough, in these terms. The social-political-educational work involved in building community on campus (indeed, any work to change society) requires all of us to face our deep-rooted vulnerabilities, fears, and grief. I am fairly certain that this reality lies at the heart of the 'psychological disorders', peer pressure, bullying, substance abuse, sexual harassment, feelings of exclusion, and experiences of betrayal that we encounter on campus. We need to acknowledge this more in these terms, and consciously work on it…. I wonder whether these need to be explicitly framed as necessary psychological-emotional work for social-political transformation (in addition to being talked about as issues of individual well-being, and organizational improvement).

The combination of these factors means that 'meeting life' at eighteen has many of the same features for all involved—both students and the faculty—who are part of the process at their own stages of life. Even with good planning and the best of intentions, students' lives are demanding—'always on' peer interactions, coping with academic expectations, issues of identity and its attendant anxieties, the first intimacies (both sexual and otherwise) and the challenges they inspire, the dysfunction of families (parental pressure) are all strongly present. Moreover, it is the last hurrah after which they are expected to fully enter the working world.

Can school education prepare students for this? Obviously, the experience at Azim Premji University will be different from other places where a much greater premium is placed on academic preparedness. But I'm increasingly convinced that the much greater challenges faced by young people have as much or more do with psycho-social factors as with academic ability. In fact, it is very hard to separate these in the course of a student's life in college.

If an alternative education can do anything, perhaps it can work more deeply on these psycho-social factors as well. Maybe it is not just about 'no competition'. Maybe it is not about certificates and extra curriculars. Maybe, it is in fact about facing the self and learning about it, being kind and empathetic to others and oneself as well as working hard at mastering learning. Maybe, it is about the ability to remain focused and resilient in the face of the swirling uncertainty of the world around oneself, and the ability to not take (relative) failure as the end of the road. And even if students cannot express all of this at eighteen, it is my hope that in their next meeting, in the next stage of their lives, they are well aware of these.

The Hundred Languages of Children

How little children make sense of the world

SUMANYA RAMAN

The hundred is there.
The child is made of one hundred.
The child has a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
…

Loris Malaguzzi (translated by Lella Gandini)

Recently I stumbled upon Ria, a six-year-old, playing with sticks and stones outside the class by the trees. She said how she would come to school every day, even on weekends if only she was allowed to just climb trees, play and run around in the outdoors. She may not have been very articulate with words to describe her feelings, but her face was expressive. She was obviously overjoyed to be outdoors—a sight I can never forget. This made me think—what is it about nature and the outdoors that make children so happy? We do not have to sweet-talk, compel, prompt, nudge or do any of those things to make a child relate to nature for they seem to do it naturally. While each child's way of relating to nature might be different, one cannot deny that there is something intuitively present there for children. This becomes more and more obvious once we start observing it.

First brush with bereavement

Janani, a six-year-old from my class, came to me the other day carefully holding a folded leaf in her hand. She described how she had found a mosquito lying on the ground which needed a safe shelter. She had picked it up using the leaf. For Janani, the need to rescue the mosquito seemed to have been felt spontaneously. How did she think of doing this? Where did she learn to show this kind of sensitivity towards an

insect? A few children gathered around it as Janani found a place for it and comments were passed on the mosquito being motionless. To this, one child responded quirkily, "It is not moving because the mosquito is pregnant, da!" Yet another spellbinding moment for me where I couldn't help but marvel at their ability to feel so tenderly towards a tiny insect which we adults detest! It was heart-warming to listen to their theories. A few days went by after which Janani and her friend picked up the same mosquito which they had placed carefully in one corner under a tree (yes, it was still there!) and said, "Akka, the mosquito is not able to give birth!" For them, the mosquito had not flown off and was in the same place because it was pregnant and in pain. There was no doubting that. I asked them what was the solution now? They talked with each other for a few minutes after which they exclaimed, and I quote them here, "We need to create a puddle so she can give birth in water!" They walked off busily. I did not have the heart to tell them that the mosquito was dead all this time and left it for them to figure out. Eventually, that's exactly what happened. They came back and said, "The mosquito is dead, Akka." "The head and body came apart. It's dead, Akka." While they were expressing this, a furrow formed in their brows, eyes downcast and their lips curled. They looked sad. Then, they quietly walked away feeling heavy at the loss of the mosquito that they had so dearly cared for.

One would usually look at such an episode jokingly and laugh at the ludicrousness of it by remarking how cute or funny children are. But I would like to emphasize the profoundness of what had transpired. An incident as uncomplicated as this had me introspecting on whether we, as adults, are actually looking and thinking more carefully about the meaning of what children do? Witnessing this whole episode, it was certain that there was a whole lot of heart in there, something deep had been unearthed. On one level, children can be rough while playing, throwing things, pushing, taunting each other and all of that which easily gets noticed, but the moment they see someone in real pain, someone hurt, be it an adult or their friend or in this case, a mosquito, they are tremendously sensitive, empathetic and have such a great extent of compassion. Sadly, this compassion becomes much harder to sustain in adulthood.

Little architects

Evidence of how creatively children respond to the world around them comes out when they set out to build insect homes. In this act, one cannot overlook the skills involved. All the skills that I am about to describe are self-learned; there is nothing directed or initiated by any adult.

Children use all kinds of materials to construct these homes. They find use for rocks, stones, coconut shells, threads, leaves, twigs, sticks the list goes on. Materials, which as adults, we would easily discard without a second thought. There is no ownership of these homes. They jump with joy when an ant crosses through the homes they have designed and built. Just like the bees and wasps, children are born architects! Whether it is with Lego blocks, Jenga blocks, sticks and stones, they are constructors at heart. Styles of architecture are never the same, two insect homes do not look the same. Each group does it differently. One of the ant homes has several elements in it—a bedroom, a resort space which is made using a coconut and a stick drilled into it to make it look like an umbrella; a waste water system amongst others. The ideas keep evolving as new additions get made to it, like that of a boat using dried up leaves for ants to go sailing! A piece of orange was discovered and placed in the ant house as feed. Chalk pieces of different colours were powdered and placed on one side to, "make it beautiful", as one child said. One cannot fathom the degree of care they take while building these homes. It is really wondrous to think—how do such little children know that all these materials can be used for building an insect home! Where does an idea like building a home for an insect come from? How are so many children attracted by this idea? It appears that their minds have subconsciously assimilated information through observation gathered from various places which they then contextualize and make it work for them whenever needed.

Something interesting happened a few days later. Small trees were being planted on campus and the ant house which the children had built had to go. Feeling sorry for them as they had spent time and energy building it, I asked Kartik, a six-year-old from my class how he was feeling about it. He did not seem fazed by it at all. On the contrary, he was quite casual about it and said that there were still some rocks left and that they would build a new ant house in a different spot, further away from the tree. And so they did! The highlight was that despite the deep involvement and attention to detail they had shown, when it had to be destroyed, they did not exhibit any signs of overt attachment, handling it with ease, almost with an 'it's all part of life' attitude.

Looking at child art

During most art and clay classes for six-year-olds, they like to be left to their own devices without adult intervention. With crayons, pencils, clay, paints, etc., in hand they remain lost in their own little worlds. A remarkable thing to note here is the way art aids children to connect with their inner selves. Once we get past the initial pandemonium, one cannot help but admire the pensive mood that they slip into, bringing their innermost thoughts to the foreground in their artwork.

When a child creates art, there are many elements in it that would easily escape the adult eye. Many a time, contortion of lines in a child's drawing would have precise meanings known only to them, as they like to depict their work with a great sense of detail. If we miss it, we have missed out on the deeper significance hidden inside the

art. But if we are careful enough to notice and ask them for explanations, we would get to hear some incredible narratives. I had the good fortune to listen to one such, recently.

During an art session held recently, the children were asked to draw on the theme 'Our new school campus'. Archit chose to draw the junior school building, the assembly hall and the path leading up to the dining hall. He drew his lines with gay abandon, used bold colours and made a composition that expressed exactly what he wanted to say. I asked him to explain the many dotted lines, the wavy portions, the patches of colour, and the crayon smudges, which I could not comprehend. To my surprise, he was able to convincingly give proper explanations in minute detail. The crayon smudges represented the ground, the irregular dotted lines were the pathways, and the wavy portion was the curved wall near the art room. Proportion-wise, he drew the junior school building much taller than the rest of the school. This was perhaps an insight into how he perceived the overall space—the junior school building was more significant for him than the rest of the school and hence, the biggest. Understanding how Archit's creative mind worked was a miraculous moment for me.

As Picasso rightly said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." Art does come naturally to a child. It is intuitively present in them.

Justice in the eyes of children

Kavin, an eight-year-old boy was in a serious mood when he told me, "In the olden days, they used to say bad words like dumbo, fool, etc., to children." As I probed, I gathered that his grandfather told him how this was common in the previous generations. He continued, "Nowadays we don't talk to children like that; we sit down and advise them." He further added, that the reason elders these days do not use bad words to children was because they would get caught by the police. "The police would fine them." My interest and curiosity were piqued and I asked him how he thought the police would come to know about it. He replied, "The children would tell it to their parents and they would come to know and the police will catch them and fine them." I asked him, "What about the kids who don't tell their parents?" He then said, "That would be very bad. They should tell because the grown-up should get punished for what he has done."

Kavin's strong feelings about this matter took me by genuine surprise. It left me pondering over the emotional range of children and how often we underestimate them.

Concluding thoughts

Looking at children and making these observations, was beyond doubt, one of the most self-renewing experiences for me. I came to discover the several possibilities that are there and areas for further exploration when we, as adults, start to see the world the way children do. Amidst all the questions and learning I carry with me, one simple yet critical learning was that listening respectfully to what children have to say is of immense significance and it is the first step forward in understanding them better. That said, for children to sustain their sense of wonderment and spirit of learning and questioning, it becomes imperative that we truly acknowledge the host of extraordinary things that they do as real moments of learning.

Heartful Attention

One Child at a Time

KALPANA SHARMA AND NIGHAT GANDHI

ME
When no one believed me,
I believed myself.
When no one respected me,
I respected myself.
When no one talks to me
I talk to myself.
Siddhant, Class 7.

This is the story of Kabir (name changed), who was referred by his teachers to the school counsellor for not coping well academically and for frequent outbursts of anger. Kabir was repeatedly injuring himself and crying in his room afterwards. He was also not sleeping well. He was a socially withdrawn child, didn't have any close friends, and didn't blend in well with his classmates or hostel mates. He was slow at writing and completing his school work. Most of his teachers had come to believe he was lazy, unwilling to work hard, irresponsible and stubborn. He was exhibiting many of the behaviours typical of children who are unpopular with their classmates. They generally tend to be withdrawn, anxious, fearful, moody and likely to be emotionally disturbed. They may be impulsive and have poor emotional control. They appear to lack empathy and sensitivity towards others. And they are often plagued by low self-esteem.

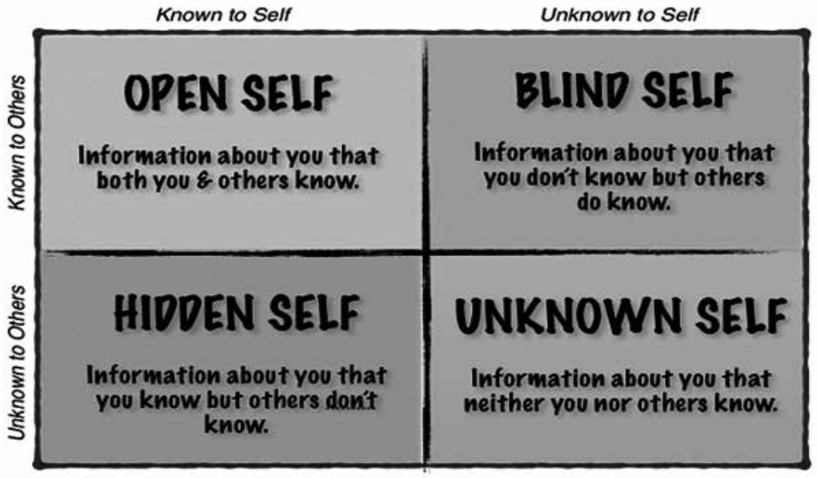
Initially in counselling, Kabir appeared timid, had very poor eye contact, and made stiff and guarded replies to most of the questions asked. When asked about his anger, he confessed that he often felt very angry when others criticized him unfairly. He said teachers often scolded him for not

completing his work. He felt miserable because no one understood how much effort he had put in to complete his assignments. He often mentioned how he wished his teachers knew that he had SEVEN subjects to handle and not just ONE. There were some subjects he didn't find interesting and, therefore, did not feel motivated to complete those subject assignments. He felt that most people around him didn't understand him. He felt it was best not to trust anyone, especially after one of his old friends had betrayed his trust. His self-esteem and self-confidence seemed very low. He also didn't seem emotionally close to his parents. During vacations, he said he spent a lot of time playing games on the mobile phone. His parents often scolded him for being distracted and not paying enough attention to his studies.

When asked about his hobbies, it turned out that Kabir was an avid reader of adventure fiction. He brightened up when asked to talk about books. He went into great detail about his favourite author. We discovered that he also liked to sing and play the tabla, but he had never sung in public. In sports, he enjoyed football.

We would like to refer to a diagrammatic representation of the Johari Window, which we used as a framework to work with Kabir to help him and his teachers discover his known and unknown strengths.

The Johari Window



During subsequent meetings with Kabir, it became clear that there were many strengths that lay beneath this child's withdrawn and angry exterior that he needed to discover. There were some strengths that he was aware, but unsure of (for example, his love of books), and some strengths that he knew about but his peers and teachers weren't aware of at all (for example, singing). And then there were strengths that neither he nor his peers and teachers were aware of. Though outwardly timid, he gradually gathered the courage to raise his voice for the right reasons. He was honest and genuine in his speech. It was a delight to see this intelligent and thinking person blossom. With increasing self-confidence, his stiff, incoherent speech disappeared and he began articulating his thoughts very clearly. As he came to know himself better, we came to know him better.

In his journey of self-discovery, two goals had to go hand in hand—first, helping him discover his unknown strengths, which was the ultimate booster of his self-confidence and second, bolstering a sense of achievement as far as his academic performance and his teachers were concerned. This was accomplished through a collaborative involvement of house parents, teachers, counsellors and Kabir's parents.

Teachers and house parents were made to understand that Kabir has a learning difference and they need to deal with him more patiently. Over a few sessions, teachers were given suggestions on how to give constructive feedback to children. The need for keeping feedback short and simple was stressed. It should also focus on a particular behaviour, and not be a sweeping judgment on the child's personality. The feedback should never be used to dump the teacher's negative feelings on a child, especially with children who are seen as being 'difficult' or 'different'. It's always a good idea to start with positive feedback, and make the feedback balanced. Focusing on what the student does, rather than acting on assumptions of what he/she is like, and making 'I' statements (rather than 'you' statements) to share your feelings, helps build better communication and trust.

Academic Interventions

Academically, Kabir was helped outside of regular school hours with extra classes. Over the years due to prolonged neglect, negative labelling and his increasing lack of interest in studies, a significant learning lag had developed. He needed someone to help him navigate the world around him. The journey began by helping him learn to prioritize his tasks and chalk out a plan of action for the day. He was given tips on time management, for example, on

how to prioritize his list of hostel chores and academic tasks. The second thread was to work upon his attention span. Due to his unstructured routines in the past, he was not able to sit for even thirty minutes initially. Gradually, with music therapy, his restlessness subsided. With a forty-five-minute sitting followed by a ten-minute break, Kabir learnt to sit through two hours of self-study sessions. He was also asked to use cotton balls to block out external noises which distracted him. The third intervention was to bridge his writing lag. Written expression is an important part of life inside and outside the classroom. This lag was acting as a huge barrier for him. Kabir felt helpless when not able to express his thoughts in writing. He was helped with his writing skills by incorporating these five steps:

- Assessment of current level
- Enhancing writing speed
- Working on spelling and sentence construction
- Building narrative writing skills
- Pausing to reflect on his work upon completion

Kabir's present writing and communication repertoires were determined through feedback from teachers, parents, as well as current and previous work. This gave clarity in chalking out a writing programme for him. Exercises were planned to help him enhance his writing speed. This included time-bound exercises of copying text from a particular ongoing chapter in class. Paragraph dictations also helped him build his listening skills. The 'Look, Cover, Write, Check' method helped him improve his spellings. Instructional activities were carefully planned using classroom content to make him comfortable with narrative writing. This was one of the main thrust areas. Kabir needed a different strategy here. He responded well to visual supports such as graphic organizers, video clips and flash cards. As his narrative writing skills improved, he was able to articulate his thoughts better and became more confident day by day. Simultaneously, some of the teachers also began to 'look forward' classes with him. These classes helped him to become familiar with new concepts before a teacher began a new chapter in class, and in this way, he felt more confident answering questions in class. It took time, but his teachers changed their opinion about him because he started responding in class.

Extra-Curricular / Non-Academic Interventions

It came as a surprise to most of his peers and teachers that Kabir loved singing and playing the tabla. At a cultural event organized in the hostel, he sang for

the first time before an audience. He hadn't known until that day that he was a wonderful singer and neither did anybody else. He was also given an opportunity to speak the 'thought for the day' in the morning assembly. He was given a leadership opportunity when he was asked to anchor a quiz for his juniors. He also gave a book talk to his classmates on his favourite book.

His parents were counselled to have a more patient and empathetic approach in dealing with him. Instead of scolding him, his mother was asked to spend more time with him, and also set reasonable limits on his use of mobile phone to play video games.

Today, Kabir is on his way to becoming more independent, and is handling many things on his own. It is beautiful to see him smile, laugh, play, spend quality time with his friends, articulate his thoughts confidently in class, and become responsible for his learning.

Although we have described the interventions made with one child, we have worked with many such children who were condemned as 'lost causes'. A little bit of heartful attention, coordination, and collaborative efforts between teachers, parents, school counselors and house parents could lead to very positive outcomes with such children's emotional well-being and academic performance. We include here recent feedback from Kabir's teachers:

> Kabir was a reserved and laid-back child. He seldom participated in class, and often appeared distracted. However, over last term he has become more forthcoming and contributes to class discussions, clarifies his doubts and even engages in dialogue on topics of interest to him. He often surprises with original and unique answers. It is a delight to see him articulate his thoughts so well. The scaffolding provided post school hours has enabled his written work to improve vastly. This has helped him improve his performance in class tests. It has also made him more confident in his outlook. However, his group work skills need improvement and he also needs to become more accommodating of different people and perspectives.

We are writing this article after almost a year's worth of sustained work has been done with Kabir, and this is a continuing effort. Rajghat Besant School, being a residential school, makes it easier to carry out many of these interventions after school. This level of coordinated interventions would not have been possible if Kabir was a day scholar. Getting his teachers, parents, and house parents to see the child in his unique context took time.

Krishnamurti has rightly said that it's much easier to condemn a child than to understand a child. Understanding takes time, effort, patience and sustained, heartful attention. Condemnation is quick and conditioned. Without the multiple initiatives taken with Kabir to uncover the reasons behind his anger, isolation, apparent laziness and disinterestedness, we would have lost him and he would have remained lost to himself. We were fortunate that Kabir's anger and disenchantment with everything was what finally awakened the attention of his teachers, and led to the series of interventions that brought out the unique individual in him: a differently-abled learner who did not necessarily fit into the patterns of our conditioned expectations of a 'successful' student. To see him in his totality, and not in a fragmented manner, has been a transformative educational experience for all of us.

> To understand a child, we have to watch him at play, study him in his different moods; we cannot project upon him our own prejudices, hopes and fears, or mould him to fit the pattern of our desires. If we are constantly judging the child according to our personal likes and dislikes, we are bound to create barriers and hindrances in our relationship with him and in his relationships with the world.
>
> Krishnamurti, *Education and the Significance of Life*

On Reward and Punishment

SUMANYA RAMAN

"No, no! I can't do that, I'll get a consequence," exclaimed the young child of not more than ten to his friend at breakfast in the school dining hall. The teacher, an accidental listener, while no doubt amused, could read absolutely no trace of sarcasm in this unorthodox usage of the word 'consequence' by the boy. Rather, the statement appeared to have come from a location of disarming honesty and innocence.

This little anecdote serves to illustrate the occasionally unpredictable and surprising imprint of our interaction with children in our schools. For many or all of us—educators in Krishnamurti schools—it is no doubt an article of faith that punishment of any kind has no place in the educational process. We believe that both 'reward' and 'punishment' are extrinsic levers, often used by society to bring about a certain desirable behaviour. Any such conditioning or modification of the child's mind takes us further away from our educational intent.

Yet, here was this child who had internalized a new and sensitive vocabulary by simply equating it with an old and conventional approach. Did the child see 'consequence' as different from 'punishment' at all, regardless of how the educator viewed it? The 'consequence' which the child was referring to in his remark to his friend could definitely not have been punitive or retributory in nature, but did it not still end up causing the same behavioural modification in him which we would like to be so mindful of?

This article dwells on the rather involved theme of 'reward and punishment' by articulating a few such difficult and sometimes testing questions. Without resorting to the formulation of a central thesis of any sort, its intent is to underscore the complex and challenging terrain we navigate in our daily lives as teachers. In the asking of these questions, can there be renewed dialogue amongst us, and from this, can there be fresh clarity and understanding for each one of us who has embarked on this learning journey which goes beyond mere faith or change in vocabulary?

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In the educational environment we seek to create for children in our schools, we consciously strive to ensure that there are neither external motivators like ranks, medals or prizes; nor deterrents like punishments, fines or penalties. Nevertheless, when one sees unthinking, hurtful or unsafe behaviour from a child, one needs to respond firmly and decisively. Such behaviour oftentimes necessitates a conversation between the teacher and the student, which is non-judgmental and non-intimidating, and could in turn lead to some reflection from the child on his action. As educators, we are quite clear of our intent in having these conversations and the need for the child to reflect quietly and deeply on his behaviour. At the same time, are we fully cognizant of and sensitive to how children are interpreting and internalizing these conversations, which are quite clearly consequences of undesirable behaviour?

In this regard it may be useful to remind ourselves that, to a child, 'punishment' does not always only mean an overt disciplinary measure. The denying of a certain enjoyable experience can also be construed as punishment. Conversations with children about unpleasant incidents or actions can be time consuming as the teacher waits for the child to open up and share his thoughts and feelings. On some occasions, these conversations could very well happen during games classes, causing the child to feel that it is a loss of precious playtime. In such instances, as teachers, have we not seen children quickly doing and saying all the 'right' things in order to avoid that dreaded, long conversation with the teacher and thereby, to ensure that the much-loved games period is not lost fully? In this context, we also observe that children can be very perceptive in understanding organizational structures, human relationships and hierarchies. A simple request to have a chat with a senior teacher can very well be perceived by the child as an unwanted brush with 'authority', which could induce fear and the triggering of a certain modified behaviour in the child. So, even in the absence of any punishment, explicit or otherwise, are children impelled to adapt and modify their personalities and responses so as to guard their self-interests? Regardless of the vocabulary we use then, are both 'punishments' and 'consequences' bringing about the same second-hand response in our children which Krishnamurti warned about? How can one work with these deeply conditioned responses, which are invoked in such situations?

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The points raised so far are—the need to go beyond a mere shift in vocabulary; and the insight that we are pliable to our environments and capable of modifying our responses to suit our self-interests. While very relevant in the educational context we work in, these also pertain to the larger sphere of living and learning. Let us look now at a more closely defined area, that of academic learning.

For us educators in the Krishnamurti schools, academic learning through intrinsic motivation without any resort to external motivators is desirable, wholesome and the right way to learn. However, has our daily experience of working with children shown us that this model of academic learning is possible for all? Or do we see that this quality of self-motivated learning in schools is more the exception than the rule? There's no gainsaying that, at its heart, in the process of academic learning one has to routinely encounter failure, frustration and disappointment. It is essential for every academic learner to find the inner strength to face this struggle, accept it, and persist with it, in order to make progress. The cultivation of this resilient attitude to academic learning is perhaps more integral to one's education than the quantum of learning itself.

In this regard, what has our first-hand experience been as teachers in schools? We certainly do come across students who have a curious mindset, a bright spark, and a clear and innate ability to pursue learning in an academic sense. On the other hand, we also encounter, quite routinely, many students who struggle to find the inner resourcefulness and strength needed to negotiate this path. It appears that while a handful of students seem temperamentally suited to learn sans any external motivation or fear, the majority do struggle with the process, and consequently resign themselves to a minimum standard of learning. What have our responses as teachers been in these situations? How can we help academic learners not give up too quickly, or too often, in their individual learning journeys? What can help children build the initial grit required to get started on the academic learning process after which they may be better placed to find joy and motivation in their own intrinsic abilities?

Weigh this along with the fact that regardless of the presence or absence of an orchestrated external system of motivators and deterrents, one also notices that for both children and adults, the very outcomes of their skill-based learning efforts, serve as either a boost to confidence and further toil, or a dampener to do more. When a child tastes 'success' while solving a mathematical puzzle or while trying a new skill on the basketball court, does that 'success' itself perform the role of a 'reward' and an incentive to do more? And when the learning outcome is not a positive one, does it serve as a deterrent to further effort?

Do learning outcomes therefore have in-built motivators and disappointments, and if yes, can there be no learning environment free of 'reward' and 'punishment'? Is it possible then to function in this world without being influenced at all by these learning outcomes, which perhaps work quite akin to the system of rewards and punishments? What is the distinction between the inner world of 'outcome-based drivers and deterrents' in the learner's mind and the external world of 'result-based praise and penalties' in the learning environment? How do we as teachers attempt to understand these nuances and how do we manifest that wisdom in our work with children?

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As teachers and educators, we would have no doubt often seen that when a reasonable, yet firm and consistent demand is placed on children, they rise to the demand and meet it. In fact, our experience may have also shown that this demand is not just desirable, but necessary in the educational process, because it brings about a certain thrust of effort, a sharpness and a definite focus in the respondent. It is essential of course to ensure that the demand we place on children is not one of coercion or threat, or accompanied by any promise of gratification. Still, even while this demand is shorn of any reward or punishment, is it not true that there is some expectation of a certain quality of response which is getting communicated from the teacher to the student? How does the student interpret and assess this expectation? Does the expectation of the teacher willy-nilly become the determinant of the student's quality of response and quantum of effort? While it may not be possible to de-link learning environments and allied expectations from each other, surely the teacher should be in control of how he holds himself and acts when encountering the child's eventual response. An unthoughtful or impatient statement from the teacher, along with the set of expectations he holds, can easily lead to situations where children will feel compelled to alter their behaviour and response similar to what they would do in an environment which sanctifies reward and punishment. Can we as educators be acutely aware of this and watch ourselves carefully when we place demands on the children we work with?

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In conclusion, the tenor of this article has been not so much to critique established approaches and belief systems in our schools but to ask whether we are fully satisfied with how much we have tilled this ground of motivation, expectation, fear and disappointment, in the context of Krishnamurti's teachings. How do we find the means to push ourselves and the children we work with to critically examine our responses to situations and see in them our own deep-seated conditioning? How do we persevere and go beyond language, norms and philosophy in our bid to discern the complex human condition which forms the substratum of the work we do?

Learning to be a Teacher, a Parent, and a Family

WILL HORNBLOWER

Seven and a half years ago, I started my first day of teaching at Oak Grove School. I had spent the summer planning lessons and figuring out how to adjust from teaching forty students a class to teaching twelve to sixteen. As 8:00 am approached, I put on my game face, ready to show the students that I was a force that should not be trifled with.

As the students filed in, I said in my most stentorian voice, "My name is Mister… umm … Will, and I am going to start with my expectations for the class, which are EXTENSIVE." I began rattling off my policies on tardiness, food in the classroom, punctuality, ad nauseam. Had I looked up from my notes, I might have noticed a bemused expression on the students' faces. However, my lecture was interrupted by a student who burst through the door with a haggard expression on his face. He announced, "I am so sorry. I ran over a squirrel on my way to school and I had to stop and think about that for a while."

Awakening intelligence

This stopped me in my tracks. I paused to consider how to proceed. My professional instincts and training urged me to continue with my lecture, knowing that one can only fit so much curriculum into my 181 days of instruction. However, another part of my brain started prodding me in another direction. This inquiring, curious part of my brain had atrophied in recent years, and it begged for some exercise. So, I turned to the student. A small smile started to crack the facade of my game face and I asked, "So after you hit that squirrel, what did you think about?"

So, we spent the first day of US history class, engaged in a free-ranging discussion on death, random chance, moral agency, and ethics.

Krishnamurti writes, "Education in our schools is not only the acquisition of knowledge, but what is far more important, the awakening of intelligence, which will then utilize knowledge. It is never the other way around."

Something awakened in me that day. I suppose I could call it intelligence, and it profoundly changed the way I approach teaching and my relationship with my students. The culture of this school has a way of changing those who come into its orbit, and this change is not limited to students alone. While our focus remains on the students, the magical thing about this place is its ability to awaken intelligence and to promote a culture of self-inquiry in the community of teachers, parents, alumni, and community members.

So, I wish to challenge you with this question—How has this school, this wonderful institution of learning, led you to consider and question your own ways of thinking?

To that end, I wish to recount a few events that have occurred during the years that I have taught and been a parent here at the school. Each caused me to reflect on Krishnamurti's words when he founded this institution. In the 'Intent of Oak Grove School', he writes:

> Academic excellence is absolutely necessary, but a school includes much more than that. It is a place where both the teacher and the taught explore not only the outer world, the world of knowledge, but also their own thinking, their own behavior.

Learning without authority

I'll start a few hundred miles east of Ojai, on the rim of the Grand Canyon. Each year, I have the privilege of taking the junior class on a ten-day tour of the southwestern United States. We visit parks and wild spaces across Utah, Nevada, and Arizona, learning about the natural and human history of the region, and soaking up the spectacular scenery. For the students, the trip is framed around building group cohesion, resilience, and leadership. They have ten days to disconnect with the electronic world and the pressures of their academic life, and instead focus on building relationships within their class. For me, the trip is a chance to return to the many years I spent as an outdoor educator and to reconnect with the natural world. However, it is also ten days apart from my family and the comforting routines of domestic life.

On this particular trip, we had been challenged by unseasonably cold weather and rain. I had announced the night before that I would be leading an early morning run to the canyon rim to watch the sunrise. However, when I reached for my shoes outside of my tent in the morning, they were covered by a few inches of fresh snow. Nonetheless, I persevered and slipped

on my freezing shoes to keep my promise to the students. One student made it out of the warmth of her sleeping bag to accompany me on my run. As we ran through the forest path on the way to the rim, we experienced the wonderful stillness of a world covered by fresh snow. The reveal of the canyon at the end of the path caused us both to stop and marvel. The snow had stopped but the clouds were still roiling with stormy energy. The sunrise was piercing the clouds and casting long shadows on cliffs and spires below us. We had arrived in the dark the previous evening, so this was the first time the student had seen the Grand Canyon and I could tell it was having a profound effect on her.

At that moment, I felt that adult urge to explain the scene to her. Use the teachable moment. Isn't this what we are told to do as parents and teachers? I wanted to make some sort of comment like, "Can you believe it's a mile to the bottom!" or "You are seeing a billion years of geology in cross-section." But then I paused and reflected on why I wanted to interrupt the moment with an explanation. I wanted to be the authority in this moment. I wanted her to know that I knew more than her. I wanted to be the teacher in this moment. But I didn't open my mouth. We simply stood there in silence, shivering as we watched the changing shadows in the canyon. We stood together as equals before the majesty of nature.

A place for leisure

Five years after I started teaching at Oak Grove, my perspective on students shifted when my daughter Maybelle started in kindergarten and my son Jack in preschool. At the time, I taught a class that started at 8:00 am, and I would arrive at my classroom with my kids in tow. They would wait in my classroom as I got the high schoolers started with the day, and then I would run them across the hall to drop them off at their classrooms. Once we settled into this routine, my kids soon claimed their own desks in my classroom and would tell me all about their high school friends. They would get out sheets of paper and get to the work of coloring and drawing as they watched the older children busy themselves with their work. They would whisper and joke with the high schoolers despite my stern admonitions for silence. A few of the high schoolers even got invited to some playdates and a birthday party.

In seeing my own children sitting together with the high school students in the morning, I came to another realization as well. A high school student is no different than a preschool student. They are both children who are

internally wired to learn, but they are also full of a playful energy that is not always suited to an academic classroom. High schoolers also need to play, explore, and have moments of downtime in their life. They need the occasional spontaneous dance party or walk through the meadow. They need to climb trees and build forts, to read for pleasure, and have a nourishing snack. They even need to rest and close their eyes every once in a while.

Krishnamurti writes about the best conditions for the 'flowering of the mind'. This flowering will never come about without, "the cultivation of the body, the right kind of food, and proper exercise." He writes, "When the mind, the heart, and the body are in complete harmony, the flowering comes naturally, easily, and in excellence. This is our job, our responsibility as educators."

Krishnamurti's advice applies to all the children at this school. It is tempting as an educator to fill the students' day with academic enrichment, to question any moment where the students are off-task, and to see certain activities as not relevant to a quality education. Krishnamurti's advice also resonates when I consider my professional and parental responsibilities. I too need rest, exercise, and play for my own mind to flower. Krishnamurti also writes about the concept of leisure. He writes, "School is a place of leisure. It is only when you have leisure that you can learn." So, I remind myself to build leisure into the lives of my students and my family.

I leave you with this question—How has this school, this wonderful institution of learning, led you to consider and question your own ways of thinking?

School as family

In my Human Rights class, we introduced the year with a discussion on culture. To help them understand the concept, I asked the students to create documentary films about the culture of Oak Grove School. This is a good way for new students to learn about the school and for returning students to attempt to synthesize the key elements of the culture of the school into a short film. In the course of creating the project, one of the student groups decided to go around campus and ask students, teachers, and staff to describe the school in a single word. However, they came to me with a problem:

"Will, everyone keeps on saying the same word."

The word was 'family'.

When asked to elaborate, here were some responses they heard:

"Family—people look after each other."

"Family—occasionally dysfunctional, but full of love and kindness."

"Family—we know our teachers and classmates REALLY well."

During this exchange, I started reflecting on another quote by Krishnamurti from the founding of the school. He writes:

> This school is entirely different from the other schools in India and England. Here the parents are involved in it, which is a new kind of experiment, because if the children are going to be different then parents must also be different, otherwise there is a contradiction between the child and the parents, and there will be conflict between them. So, to avoid all that we thought it would be right that the parents as well as the teachers and the students work together as a family unit.

A family unit—do we as parents, educators, and students work together as a family unit? And to what extent is it a functional family unit? I began to ponder these questions two years ago in our discussions on ways to improve the school. As a teacher, I am constantly in communication with the parents of my students. However, those communications are focused on the well-being of students and can occasionally be fraught with conflict. The shift to email in teacher-parent communication is a boon for making contact easy, but it is also a vehicle for misunderstanding. Even face-to-face interactions can become heated and adversarial when discussing student well-being.

We started looking at ways to build a relationship and connection between staff and parents. One initiative has been our parent education program. An intent of the program is to create opportunities for teachers and parents to come together as learners. It is awe-inspiring to attend a workshop and see a group of adults collaborating and strategizing about the world or child development and parenting. And in designing the workshops, we have attempted to create activities and mechanisms for the adults in this community to build stronger relationships that can endure when conflict arises.

I often facilitate the parent education workshops, and I typically start by making clear that I am a parent and an educator but I am definitely not a parent-educator. We are familiar with this type of individual; this is the person who confidently tells you that your family's problems will be solved if you simply adopt this technique, do this four-step program, or read this book. I am a great consumer of parenting books and media, and I always

appreciate the wisdom and experience of these parenting gurus, but I can never envision becoming such an eminence.

But I have to admit that we are all comforted by the presence of someone who knows all the answers. And as a teacher, parent, or an authority figure, it is often easier to feign this type of confidence than admit that you are simply a fellow learner. What would a 'family unit' look like when there is no authority, no patriarch or matriarch to tell the family the proper way to live and learn? This is the challenge that we face when trying to bring the parents, students, and staff into the vision that Krishnamurti articulated.

Finally, I leave you with this question—How has this school, this wonderful institution of learning, led you to consider and question your own ways of thinking?

An (Extra)Ordinary Life

SREELAKSHMI S.

When I was younger, a question that I was often asked was about what I wanted to become when I grew up. As was the case with most children, I remember my answer changing fairly often with every phase that I went through. Some of the responses I remember giving included 'veterinarian', 'journalist', 'psychologist', 'novelist'. There were even 'rock star' and 'international tennis player' on the list at some point, though the words tasted of audacity to me even then and they fast faded away. No matter what profession I named, however, something that I distinctly remember is how each dream, each possibility was constructed over a rock-solid belief that my life would unfold a certain way—that I would be successful, that I would be rich, that my life and career would be extraordinary.

Upon finishing school at The Valley at few years ago—at which point, my response to 'the question' was firmly parked in 'psychologist' territory—I made a choice seemingly contrary to this lifelong belief and aspiration. I started college in a local university in Bengaluru. It was a university that wasn't particularly highly ranked, nor particularly terrible either. But it was the only one that I had applied to, and this decision was one that received a large amount of flak, from friends, family, and teachers alike. I had received an exceptionally good result in the class XII exams, and having always been an ambitious, driven, self-motivated student, many felt that I was compromising or 'settling' by choosing an easy option. I responded to the many, many questions that came my way with the truth—that, having been in boarding school, away from family and a home for so long, I wanted to stay back, for a while, in a city that I knew, with people whom I loved and found comfort with, instead of having to start over again in a new place. While my conviction about my choice eventually silenced the questioners, I was sure that many of them were left puzzled about the startling ordinariness of my reasons. To be completely honest, so was I.

Nevertheless, I finished three years of an undergraduate course in psychology —right on track with the plan that I had started out with—thoroughly disillusioned with the Indian higher education system, but also completely in love with this city and the independence that this life afforded me. The dream still burnt strong—of a successful, rich, extraordinary life. The dissatisfaction that I had experienced with the low level of academic rigour in my college, had me setting my eyes upon universities abroad. I wanted to fly; I wanted to thrive; and yes, a part of me wanted to prove to all of my questioners that I was not compromising, I was not settling, I was not dissolving into the ordinary.

And so, I arrived back at The Valley, hoping to spend some time working there while I simultaneously prepared for the various exams and processes required for colleges abroad. I had loved the few years that I had spent at the school, and hoped that I would be able to do some meaningful work here—give back, in some sense—while I prepared to ultimately leave the country, hopefully to never return. In my mind, I was clear about the fact that The Valley was a rest stop— albeit an engaging and satisfying one—on my way to finally arriving at my extraordinary life.

Now, I have always been a planner. All my life, I have relied on the dependability of well-thought out plans. There were colourful little post-its stuck in neat, precise patterns on the wall of my hostel room, as I had planned and prepped for my board exams when still in school. There were notebooks filled with scribbled notes in different coloured ink, written and rewritten with edits and details as I researched foreign university programmes throughout college. And now, there were spreadsheets on my laptop with colour-coded cells and formulae as I compared financials and expenses and other details of what my life abroad would look like, once I finally got there. Up until that point in my life, I had firmly believed that if I was able to do just the right amount of research, just the right amount of preparation, then moving from what I dreamed of, to its actual, tangible manifestation, would just be a series of simple, straightforward steps. Extraordinary was not only possible, it was inevitable.

It was as I was thus diverted—my focus on my spreadsheets and post-its and notebooks with endless scribbles—too busy (or too naive, perhaps) to even contemplate the possibility of anything else, that it snuck up on me, taking firm root, building, growing, until I had no choice but to eventually sit back and face the reality that stared me in my face. Six, seven months into teaching at The Valley—this engaging and satisfying rest stop on the way to my extraordinary life—I realised, suddenly, that I didn't actually want to leave.

I loved teaching. I loved the inimitable balance of structure and spontaneity that teaching allowed. I loved waking up every morning, secure in the fact that I knew what was planned for the day, and simultaneously excited by the myriad possibilities in which it could actually unfold. I loved walking into a classroom prepared with notes and lesson plans, and

walking out inspired by the responses I received from my students. And it wasn't just the teaching—I found that I loved teaching in The Valley, specifically, in a space that allowed you to seamlessly transition what you do for work into how you live your life. I loved beginning my day with music; dining with a community of teachers and students; going for walks and breathing in fresh air and birdsong; setting aside time to reflect on and talk about questions larger than myself; feeling intellectually, creatively, spiritually stimulated and satisfied every single day. I loved it all—everything that this life had to offer, the heartbreak and the healing in equal measure. This, this love, I had not planned for at all.

Three years I stayed put. Two whole years more than I had planned to, I stayed on in The Valley, delaying applications and exams as much as I could. I moved onto the campus; took up house-parent responsibilities for one of the senior girls' hostels; enmeshed myself further and further in this life, contrary to all plans. Despite it all, I could feel a voice, some sort of unresolved anxiety, grating on my nerves from the inside out—I had to leave, I had to at least try to leave, because had I not promised myself, and so many others around me, much more? Had I not promised everyone an extraordinary life?

And so, in my third year of teaching, I finally gave in and registered myself for the exams; spent tedious months labouring over college applications; spent a few more nerve-wracking ones waking up in the middle of the night, anxious and sweating and jittery, refreshing application announcement portals over and over again. My heart was breaking, and I could not decide what was causing it more—the pain of leaving behind a home and a life that I was becoming more and more convinced of every day was what I really, truly wanted; or the worry and impending shame that I believed would accompany the possibility of not getting accepted into any of the universities that I was applying to. Here I had found family, community, passion, meaning; there, I would finally forge for myself that life that I had always dreamt of, the successful one, the rich one, the one that would prove to myself and everyone else that, yes, I was worthy of the extraordinary.

The universe, it seemed, had other plans. Come June 2018, I had been rejected from every single university that I had applied to. I had also left The Valley and had started work elsewhere, at a start-up co-founded by two dear friends of mine. I was, in no uncertain terms, distraught—everything that I had planned for, that I had hoped and dreamed and worked for, was disappearing in front of my eyes. I spent months going to work, coming home, and crying my heart out, imagining all the possibilities and lives that had now been shut to me. I didn't pick up a pen for almost a year (my answer to 'the question' had evolved into 'writer' by that point, and I had applied to and been rejected by universities for

Creative Writing programs). There was no question in my mind—at this point, my life had, firmly and definitively, dissolved into the ordinary.

A couple of months before the commencement of the new academic year, not even a whole twelve months since I had left The Valley, I received a phone call—they were in need of teachers, and they would like to have me back. And so, in May 2019, I returned—nervous, and excited, and somehow far more settled than I remember having ever felt before. Staying on so long the first time had not been part of the plan; returning so soon after leaving had not been part of it, either. Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling a sense of deep satisfaction, deep contentment, in coming back. There was no more running, no more chasing, no more planning to be done anymore—I was home.

For anyone looking in from the outside, my life is ordinary—I am twenty-five years old; I married young, and to my high school sweetheart; I teach middle-schoolers, while simultaneously pursuing a masters in Literature through correspondence. I work a job with fixed hours, one that offers no bonuses or promotions or other similar tangible benefits. I come home and do household chores; argue a little about expenses with my husband; usually fall into bed exhausted at the end of the day on weekdays, and try and catch up with friends and family over lunches and dinners on the weekends.

To me, though, every day I live is sprinkled with a little magic. I wake up secure in what I have planned for the day—a poem; a handout; a module on the Mesopotamian Civilisation—and excited about all the myriad possibilities in which it could unfold (beautiful pastiches; conversations about the state of the world today through the eyes of an eleven-year-old; a mini replica of a city-state emerging underneath a tamarind tree). My day begins with music or poetry, or theatre, or just silence sometimes, but always, always something special. I dine with a community of teachers and students, where I walk in to the most fascinating conversations—from politics and current news, to the latest fight between two of my students—and walk out to the most fascinating sights—sandals in the shoe-racks outside the dining hall filled with freshly-fallen akash mallige, awaiting their respective owners. I go for walks and breathe in fresh air and birdsong; stop by the paddy fields to admire the big, blooming sunflowers; stop by the bund to take in the sounds of rushing water after the rains; and stop by the games field to admire the spectacular sunsets that paint the skies here in the evenings. I spend time reflecting on and talking about questions larger than myself, and I feel intellectually, creatively, spiritually stimulated and satisfied every single day. I love it all—everything that this life has to offer—and I am grateful, every day, for this (extra)ordinary life that has finally found me.

You Are the World
How is the world you?

SUMITRA M GAUTAMA

Framework and aims of 'Global Perspectives'

Global Perspectives [GP] is offered as a subject by Cambridge across Primary to A Level. At present, Pathashaala makes GP compulsory for grades 9 and 10, and offers it as a subject at A Level. The curriculum offers many opportunities for children of all ages to learn, in ways that are not only multi-disciplinary but also cross-cultural. Perhaps the deepest contribution of the curricula to Pathashaala is the scope it provides to build a learning frame where the outer world meets the inner reality of each learner and interacts with it directly and autonomously. The process of this interaction is anchored in reasoning and demands reliability of information and lack of bias in perspective. It also evolves an evaluative process that collects primary data and uses awareness and observation to sensitively construct proactive and sane outcomes to perceived global and local issues. This seems to happen in a variety of interesting ways, and always sets the stage for a transformative experience.

I am selecting and quoting here a few of the stated aims of the syllabus at IGCSE (Class 10) to validate this scope.[1] The aims are to enable learners to:

- Become independent and empowered to take their place in an ever-changing, information-heavy, interconnected world.
- Consider important issues from personal, local and/or national and global perspectives and understand the links between these.
- Critically assess the information available to them and support judgements with lines of reasoning.
- Communicate and empathise with the needs and rights of others.

I will be focusing here on the element of reflection built into the Team Project requirement of GP for Class 10. The requirement of the syllabus makes it imperative for the learner to work with oneself individually and collaboratively in a group, and this affords a rich scope for reflection, which is also mandated by the assessment framework. I copy here part of the requirement by Cambridge for this element for easy focus:

Team Project: Reflective Paper. At the end of the process each candidate will produce a written Reflective Paper (750–1000 words) focusing on:

- Their personal research for the project and their own work processes.
- The effectiveness of the outcome in achieving the project aim.
- What they have learned about different cultural perspectives of the issue.
- *What they have learned about teamwork overall and their own performance as a team member.*
- What they have learned overall from carrying out the project.

While this is a constructed frame and might be seen to curtail both spontaneity and agency, the topics around which issues may be researched and raised[2]—the scope and necessity of first evolving for oneself issues of personal concern; opening these out and finding collaborators; raising questions, discussing them, conducting primary and secondary research; finally, evolving a local concern that the group might then analyze and suggest a proactive outcome/resolution—takes around a year of work and discovery.

Learning from urban and rural communities

Transacting GP involves working with rural and urban communities. As someone who has so far anchored the scope and vision of this subject at Pathashaala, I have been keenly aware of how large the scope of learning is, and how important it becomes to include the world. Questions raised by the LEs (Learner-Educators) at Class 10 and AS Level have fuelled our outreach initiatives. The Eco-lab at Pathashaala has widened into inter-disciplinary studies around environmental projects such as the viability of biogas for rural and urban communities; closed-loop waste management; green building opportunities; building awareness of rural health schemes; urban awareness of millets; empowering women farmers, subsistence farming,

initiating and building home gardens in BPL (Below Poverty Line) rural homes and documenting indigenous knowledge of medicinal herbs. There have been deep and meaningful projects initiated around the death of a language; the right to a fair market; mediated conversations as an answer to conflict in a community and the right to pursue one's passion into the world of work. LEs have explored prevention of child sexual abuse and domestic violence by evolving study-based models for empowering battered women and submerged child-survivors.

Learning from working together

Team projects builds resilience. We find individual group members shirking work in the team; being critical in assessing their own and others' contributions; getting embroiled in inner conflagrations that throw up strong words and glitches in the project. As the poet Wordsworth said, "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers...". When nothing seems to work, the self and its role in conflictual situations needs to be examined. As Krishnamurti says, "Who but yourself can tell you if you are beautiful or ugly within? Who but yourself can tell you if you are incorruptible?" Often it is this question which is expressed in different words that throws us into deepest reflections.

The dawning consciousness that there are no external arbiters, that one is truly and materially responsible for one's thoughts, words, actions and reflections, often creates a meditative frame that sometimes transforms individual LEs. Some of the impasses occasionally lead to deep and painful questions that an LE might grapple with, and not find easy solutions. "There is not one person in class or in school or at home with whom I have a relationship that energises me...". How would one then find the inner agency and let go of the fear of the unknown? Krishnamurti says, "I desire those, who seek to understand me, to be...free from all fears—from the fear of religion, from the fear of salvation, from the fear of spirituality, from the fear of love, from the fear of death, from the fear of life itself." The journey that the facilitating EL (Educator-Learner) takes with the LE seems fraught with many possibilities which can be resolved only by uncompromising self-questioning.

Mili and her three teammates chose to work on water, food and agriculture. As often happens, one of the first roadblocks was that of assigning roles, which often becomes a source of heartburn and conflict amongst group members. Mili wrote in her reflective paper:

> I always make a detailed plan and follow it, so that no confusions exist. Though this was a strength, I found that it made people feel pressurised and driven which made them resentful. Initially, I felt very angry and sad but I learnt to relax more and take in everyone's views and work with everyone's style. I also learnt to validate what I was bringing. Sometimes, things didn't go according to my plan, but I feel the result was better.

Her group mate had a different view:

> Often Mili had to do many things. This happened repeatedly and I don't know exactly why? But I know it wasn't fair to her. On my part, I think one reason for this could be because I did not do much work outside the class unless it was asked for.

A third member actually brought an initiative which went unacknowledged in her group, which she recounted in her paper, but could not share with her group:

> Communicating was a big problem for me, as I was not able to express my views clearly. For example, in the very beginning, we had decided that our aim would be organic farming as a solution for unsafe food. Personally, I had an unclear picture of it, so I suggested that we should start again. At the time my suggestion was rejected, but later when we went to the project coordinator, she told us to start from scratch! This is what I had said, and so I did not understand why it was not considered when I said it. Sometimes I have wondered if it was because of my poor language skills, or because I did not think it out clearly for myself first.

Another teammate, who was absent for a long period of time and only engaged peripherally with the process despite many invitations from within the group and from the facilitator, had this to say, "When I think of my contribution in this group, I realised that I sometimes felt jealous of some contributions. But after some time, I realised I could validate my own contributions like bringing people back on track in a discussion or help making slides for the presentation ...."

A group of two, who were united by a common interest, were at loggerheads over many issues that had nothing to do with the project. This left them both critical of each other.

Ameena said:

> My key learning was that, building a working relationship and sticking to it was hard because sometimes I found myself really wanting to make a

comment that was disadvantageous to my teammate and making it. I was later able to reflect on whether this was necessary at all. I learnt to build self-control through this challenge.

Her teammate Jaspreet had this to say:

> My teammate and I found that our previous personal differences set us apart, and we were unwilling to engage with each other. Therefore, we decided to develop a function-based working relationship, since both of us were interested in this topic. Due to the nature of our team, one of the benefits was that I developed the skill of adhering to a functional relationship and the boundaries that were evidently set by it. As time passed I found that our communication was not staying within those boundaries. I reacted to how my team member was engaging with me by cutting myself out of the process and not engaging. During the discussions that followed, I realised that I was focussing only on the specific actions of my team-mate that I felt were not necessary, and I learnt that I was not thinking of my reaction, contributing to the already existing problem.

Resolutions of their personal conflicts through mediated conversations found resonance in their interaction with a neighbouring village where young people were fighting with each other over many perceived cultural differences. Neither of the LEs spoke Tamil, but their questions were translated and discussed in small groups in their presence. The *patti manram* (a form of debating tradition in Tamil Nadu) they organized was very popular. This was one good example of mediation in conflict resolution.

On the other hand, a team of two who were reasonably in harmony with each other seemed divided through the process of the collaboration in unique ways. For example, after delivering a good project that seemed well-collaborated, Karthik shared:

> I could not put aside my problems from outside and inside the team project. Distractions from the outside also stopped me from concentrating on the work, and during those times I just let out my emotion sometimes through futile arguments, which affected the team's ability to work together. While I would be sitting without working, my teammate would work by putting aside the problems and I never appreciated her for that.

The journey in a school is unpredictable, but there is genuine reflection when there is a learning moment. Does this moment of reflection hamper performance? It does not. It focusses on holistic learning which seems to

go with the spirit of the course. Thus, there are many discoveries on the anvil, at Pathashaala. But what distinguishes the whole process is what Krishnamurti says:

"To be alone is to be related."

Endnotes

1. https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/Images/252230-2018-2020-syllabus.pdf
2. Conflict and peace, Disease and health, Human rights, Language and communication, Poverty and inequality, Sport and recreation, Tradition, culture and identity, Water, food and agriculture.

The Sun in Class

GEETHA VARADAN

The following piece was used over two successive year in a 'club', a learning-space with just a few people: one enthusiastic adult, two patient and polite children, in one instance, two boys, and in the other, two girls, between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. The 'Sun' was the centre around which our interactions in the club revolved. Many themes were introduced, and some questions raised.

THE MESSAGE

The Sun lets me see
Many things.
By day.
And almost every night, too,
It helps me see
Through its mirror
Which never leaves my side.

But the message that the Sun sent –
Again and again,
Through every Sunbeam
And Moonbeam –
I never received.
Perhaps because I did not want to accept
A dangerous Truth.

But an Eclipse,
Totally
Of the Sun's light
By the Earth's faithful companion
Drove my Darkness,
My careless acceptance
Of Miracles,
My careful rejection of Truth
Away,
And revealed the message that
Every ray of Light
Coming to me across vast space
Brings
Not just to me
But to countless others,
And not just today but
Throughout the ages.

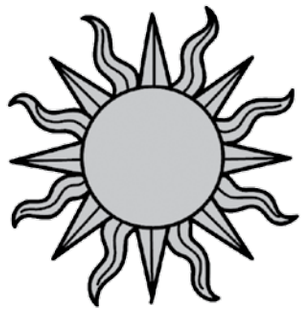
That message now haunts me.
It makes me wonder.

It makes me wonder:
If the hearts of two hydrogen atoms,
Each positively repellent to the other
Inimicable to the extreme,
Can surmount a formidable barrier
And fuse
(In the presence of a multitude of others just like them)
To make –
After a two- or three-step dance –
Helium
And Heat
And Energy
And Light,
And make possible all Life
Here on Earth,

Why can't I walk across a crowded room
To say, 'Hello',
To an obnoxious other
Whose great-grandfather
Refused to eat pretend-cake at my great-aunt's tea-party

Under a beautiful tree
On a sunny Tuesday afternoon
When they were,
Well, six?
Why can't I get together with those billion 'others'
To make something beautiful:
Like Laughter,
Like Love?

I wonder.



I wonder:
If the heart of a Hydrogen atom –
The simplest,
The lightest of things –
Can do the (seemingly) impossible,
Why can't my heart
Change, too?

I wonder
Why can't
My brain,
So evolved,
My brain
Which tells me that
I am
'Not different from Any-other'
Allow me to simply smile at another human
Who is …
Me?

The discussion started with what the children already knew from their science classes and, then, went on to relating it to our lives. I briefly describe here snippets from the themes and topics that were taken up, and multiple resources that we drew upon.

Two alike, similar, things repel. Two positives or two negatives repel each other because of the strong electro-magnetic force. The hydrogen atom is electrically neutral: the nucleus (the heart) of the hydrogen atom has a proton which is positive (+) and an electron which is negative (-). The hydrogen atom is 'stable' when relatively few hydrogen atoms around, that is, they remain 'stable' in low-density areas of the universe. But when the pressure mounts, when there are many, many, many hydrogen atoms together, all in the same space, then there is a strong repulsion: all atoms trying to keep some 'space' from each other. The heart of each hydrogen atom repels the other hydrogen nuclei. That is, the hydrogen atom becomes highly re-active in high-density states.

This scenario is similar to ours. When there is just me, or just me and you, or me and just a few yous, everything is civil, 'stable'—we exist together rather well. But when there is me with a large number of yous, the situation, or relationships become unstable, volatile, even explosive. We humans can be very cordial, on the surface, when we and our resources are not threatened. Each of us tries to preserve our self or ego when things get difficult. We try to preserve our identities, our status as individuals.

An experiment done in the 1960s with rats in two cages was considered. The cages were identical: with space in which the rats could move around, and water and food in containers on the ground. There was also a pole erected vertically in the middle of each cage to which sizable platforms at regular intervals were attached, and which had containers of food and water on each of the platforms. The difference was that in one cage the rat population was controlled, and in the other the population was not. In the cage with population-controlled rats, life was smooth. Rats rarely ventured up the pole; if they did, they came down to the ground, and did not drink the water or eat the food which were kept in containers on the platforms. In the other cage, where the population was not controlled, life was entirely different. The numbers were so large that the rats moved up the pole and settled on the platforms, and ate and drank and fought to stay on and to keep others away. The rats either killed each other; or began to indulge in self-mutilating activity; or showed signs of depression and withdrawal and

just sat huddled; or went to sleep; or just groomed themselves. There was a noticeable failure to nurture their young, even infant cannibalism, or else a failure to breed at all. The rats displayed abnormal sexual patterns; increased illnesses and increased mortality.

In our society today, 'society' being nothing more than many people living in a place, we need many rules and regulations to make our lives livable. 'Some things have to happen', so to speak, if not out of intelligence and understanding, at least out of necessity.

So also does something happen out of necessity when there are many hydrogen atoms together in a certain very small space, under extreme pressure and temperature, The stronger nuclear force, as different from the strong electro-magnetic force, kicks in. The 'heart' changes, enabling the atoms to come together, fuse, to merge, to become one. And this act of coming together through change is creative. It gives us helium, along with heat, energy and light. And this, of course, makes life here on earth possible.

So, some of the questions we asked were—Why can't we change? Why can't our hearts change, so that we can come together to create things that are wonderful, life-giving and life-supporting? Is it our brains, that are so evolved, which have given us all our philosophies, our scriptures, that prevent us from simple acts, such as acts of actual inclusion? What is necessary for us to change, to see the necessity and come together?

But there is the further extraordinary thing: after merging to become 'one' (two hydrogen atoms becoming helium), that is on changing their hearts, or giving up their 'egos', so to say, the new atom gets another one! The helium atom gets a nucleus.

So also do we. We come together to do something, giving up our little egos or identities and develop another ego: the family-ego or identity, the national-ego or identity, the NGO-ego or identity. And it goes on and on…

In 'The Message', "The Sun's mirror" stands for our Moon. It is, also, the Earth's faithful companion, and every moonbeam is, actually, a reflected sunbeam. This too is something the students know; but they need to 'see' again in order to see the extraordinary thing Nature is. It is an "Eclipse, totally of the Sun's light", that is necessary to, in a manner of speaking, "see". The absence of light, paradoxically, drives away the person's personal "darkness", a "careless acceptance of miracles … the careful rejection of Truth" and reveals "the message". We often realize the value of people, or things or situations, when they are no longer there.

In the poem, the message that was never received, perhaps out of the fear of accepting, "a dangerous Truth", stands for Truth, which can change the way we perceive and so live in the world. We are used to the mess, the turmoil, the unease of our existence, and fear change. So, Truth is 'dangerous' because it changes us and changes the situation in which we have become comfortable. Moreover, if we heard the Truth but did not act, it lies in the soil of the mind, our sub-conscious, and troubles us. It festers. Truth, according to Krishnamurti, is "a dangerous thing" because if we do not change after hearing or seeing the Truth, it acts as a poison.

> The fact is the truth. Our minds are generally incapable of looking at facts without distorting them, but the mind that can look at a fact without opinion, without judgment, without a conclusion, such a mind is free, and a free mind brings its own authority…. And if you listen to the truth but do not let it operate, it poisons you. Please follow this. If you listen and see the truth for yourself, yet do not give it freedom to operate, then that very perception breeds the poison of conflict which is going to destroy you. That is, if you see what is true and do something else, the contradiction is a poison which destroys all your energy. That is why it is much better not to come to these meetings, sirs, if you want to remain as you are. It is good to be without the affliction of conflict, contradiction, pain, suffering; but to have that goodness, that tranquility in which there is no conflict, you must allow the truth to operate, it must not be you who operate on the truth.[1]

'The Message' ends with the words, "a human who is me" because many philosophies (Advaita, in particular) speak of 'Non-difference'. There is, according to them, *not* 'one'—because 'one' implies 'two'—but 'not-two', which is an explanation that is negative, the negative being the closest that language will allow us to approach the Truth. So, it is not just all humans who are Me but it is actually the whole Universe itself that is Me—Non-difference being the Truth. In science, too, we now know that, "We are the representatives of the cosmos; we are an example of what hydrogen atoms can do, given 15 billion years of cosmic evolution."[2]

Also, all "humans are me", Krishnamurti points out. Theistic thought too speaks of all in the Universe standing on a common platform: creatures, or the created, as distinct from the Creator-Intelligence. For J Krishnamurti, all consciousness is shared consciousness; physical differences exist, but at the bed-rock we are the same.

We had a discussion on:

Is it memory—individual and collective (of family, nation, religion)—and tradition (one's own or that of one's family, society, nation, class), and conditioning that prevent me from doing a simple act—like, of walking 'across a crowded room to say, "Hello",' to someone whose ancestor did the 'unforgivable' to an ancestor of mine? It was also argued that the 'obnoxious other's great-grandfather' might just have been using common sense or prudence in refusing to eat 'pretend-cake' that might have been made up of mud, play-dough or plasticine!

On the side, we learned that:

1. The element 'Hydrogen' was named in 1787 by G. de Morveau, Antoine Lavoisier, Berthollet, and Fourcroy. In French the word is *hydrogèn* and means 'Water-maker'. It comes from the Greek word, *hydr,* 'water', and the French *gène*, for 'generating' or 'producing'. It was first recognized as a distinct substance in 1776 by Henry Cavendish and called 'inflammable air'.
2. The word for the element 'Helium' was coined in 1868 from the Greek word *helios* (sun), and because it was assumed, before 1895—when it was actually obtained—to be an alkali metal, the ending '–ium' was given.

We listened to:

1. 'Here Comes the Sun', by George Harrison and The Beatles. This piece is a modern-day celebration of the Sun's 'reappearance' after a cold winter, making things 'alright' once again. Rites leading up to the Winter solstice—when the sun seems to be appeased and halt its retreat—were also looked at.
2. 'That Lucky Old Sun', music, Beasley Smith, lyrics, Haven Gillespie. This is an anthropomorphic look at the Heavens; its lyrics contrast the intense hardship of a normal human-life with the 'apparent' ease of the natural world. Similar to the African-American spirituals, the task master is no longer the white man but one's own responsibility to earn a living, to put bread on the table; its 'a job', 'my woman', 'my kids' that keeps a human being in chains. As in the spirituals, the singer longs for release or death and addresses the "Good Lord up above". It says, "Can't you know I'm pining/Tears all in my eyes/ Send down that cloud with a silver lining/Lift me to Paradise/Show

me that river/Take me across/And wash all my troubles away/Like that lucky old sun, give me nothing to do/But roll around Heaven all day."

3. 'On the Nature of Daylight', Max Richter. Unlike some other compositions which have the word 'sun' or 'ay' in them, and which seem dramatically affirmative, this piece is different. Like a light reveals all the hidden nooks and corners, this piece reveals all the pain, despair, the seeming futility of existence. Especially in the portion entitled 'Entropy', the shadows are there and it conveys daylight's inseparable connection with darkness. Since this piece was used in Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* and in the emotional sci-fi drama, *Arrival*, the importance of music to film was, also, considered.
4. The first movement, 'Sunrise', of Richard Strauss' work, 'Thus Spake Zarathustra', brilliantly used by Stanley Kubrick in his *2001 Space Odyssey*. This was a contrast with Max Richter's work. In Strauss' work, the sun gradually rises, but when it does, the shadows disappear: there is only Light. When Truth comes, falsity vanishes.
5. Thinkers and scientists who speak about the 'Living nature of the Universe' for example, Rupert Sheldrake. He speaks in one of his talks about the, "fields of consciousness" and asks, "What does the Sun think? Does it speak to, communicate with, other Suns?" Is it our human ignorance (or arrogance) that makes us state that many things do not exist? Because we do not or cannot know them?

We looked at examples of depictions of the Sun in the art of various cultures. Some of these were:

1. The many and varied pre-historic petroglyphs of the Sun
2. Sun symbols and depictions in every-day objects—utensils, clothing, jewellery, wall and floor decorations, games (the ignited, Sun-ball, in Polo played during Akbar's reign)
3. The Sun in Indian, Japanese, Chinese, South American, European Religious and Secular Art
4. *Woman Before the Rising Sun* by Caspar David Friedrich (1818—20)
5. *Reaper with Wheat Field and Sun* by Van Gogh (1889)
6. *Sunrise* by Georgia O'Keefe (1916)

7. *The Weather Project*: Olafur Eliasson (2003)
8. *Eclipse of the Sun* by George Grosz (1926)
9. *Lover's Deception* by Raphael (1518 or 1519)
10. *Portrait of Ramón Gómez de la Serna* by Diego Rivera (1915)

We searched for and read about:

Sun-myths from various cultures, some which see the Sun as male and some as female; we saw similarities in, and differences between them. The Sun (whether seen as male or female) was a positive force in almost all cultures. It was only in the myths of Africa that there was a sense of ambivalence; this, perhaps, is because while the Sun's presence is seen as necessary, it is almost always experienced in Africa as unforgiving, harsh, the taker-away of life.

We read poems such as:

1. 'Hymns to Surya', *Rig Veda*, trans., TH Griffith, L; CXV
2. 'Great Hymn to the Aten, (the Sun-god)', Pharaoh Akhenaten, trans., John A Wilson
3. 'I'll tell you how the Sun Rose', Emily Dickinson
4. 'The Sunlight on the Garden', Louis MacNeice
5. 'Solar', Philip Larkin
6. 'The Sun Underfoot Among the Sundews', Amy Clampitt

* * *

By the end of going through this 'lesson-unfoldment' of 'The Sun in Class', the reader could perhaps get the impression that the unit was undertaken in order to facilitate the discovery of the Sun in Art, Music, Literature and Myth. In the unfolding of the Unit, however, the children and I saw how different we humans are from much of Nature (of which we are a part). As humans we know the importance of the Sun to and for all life as we know it; so, we worship the Sun in and through hymns, rituals, bodily postures (of dance and yoga), art, architecture, music, literature, stories. But all this remains within the domain of thought. Very few humans take the knowledge in the 'Message' and translate it into the realm of behavior or conduct. Knowing that the Sun is the result of a transformative and, so, a giving, act (hydrogen changes into helium) does not transform us. We get the 'Message' daily and every night, too, from the Moon and the Stars—which are but countless

suns in the Universe. Yet we remain as we are: unable or unwilling to give up ourselves in order to create, together, something glorious.

Nevertheless, many fascinating discoveries were made because I took another 'road' (so to speak): the road that took me (and, so, the children) away from the 'Message' per se. Travelling down this road revealed the outer realm, the realm of Thought's expression (Science and Technology and the Arts). It was the easier path, the path made broad by thousands of years of usage by the Human race. The road that the 'Message' pointed to was travelled down briefly, perhaps out of a human habit of 'retaining' things and the past (one's story), and out of the innate fear of 'letting-go'. The journey in the inner realm – the realm of the self, of Thought itself – showed the veracity of J Krishnamurti's statement (made many times, both to adults and to children) that we spend enormous energy in our exploration and understanding of the 'outer', but that we rarely and, if at all, very briefly, look at, listen to and, so, understand the 'inner', viz., ourselves.

Teaching this unit did make the children and me pause; unfortunately, silence was fleeting. The children, and especially one boy who is not in school anymore, have subsequently begun looking anew at Art and Dance, listening to Music and Words, and have learned about, and wondered at, Humans-in-relationship-to Nature.

Endnotes

1. J Krishnamurti, Bombay, 20 February, 1955
2. Carl Sagan

From the Abstract to the Concrete

Creating a connect between the outer and the inner world

KOMAL PRAJAPATI

One may live through many experiences every day, but it is reflecting upon these experiences which brings learning to life. Such reflection requires a deep and conscious level of inward journeying and an ability to express one's perceptions in a viable, fearless manner. As Krishnamurti says, "A man who has no fear of any kind is really a free, a peaceful man".

To create such a space where the learners not only articulated their thoughts and feelings, but also challenged themselves to re-define—in their own terms—the implication of their ideas and thoughts, I designed an 'active reflection' for a group of learners-educators (students) of class 9. These classes provided space for them to become aware of their own thoughts and feelings; to give expression to them through presentation and sharing, through body movements and using other materials; and most importantly, attempting to build a trusting and considerate relationship with their peer group. On the one hand, they could introspect upon themselves, while on the other, they could give encouraging feedback to their classmates, which created a meaningful mutual learning experience.

We embarked on this journey with an activity of drawing self-portraits. We could see how drawing an object or another person's portrait was relatively easier than drawing oneself. It was not just the skill of drawing facial features but the way one sees oneself. Art can be an effective medium which allows an individual to express oneself. Learners held paint brushes and used water colours to let their emotions flow. Reflecting on a recent happy and sad experience, they let their brushes choose the colour and move freely on a sheet of paper. They learnt to their surprise that art could give form to their emotions in this manner.

Next, they used clay to give shape to their own dreams. Created by their own hands, the learners could see their imagination turning into a concrete shape. For example, equality for women could be imagined in the form of a girl standing on a stage with straight shoulders—this concreteness may perhaps help them to

visualise the dream more graphically. Guided meditation was another such activity which provided space for learners to pause in their daily activities and be more aware of the thoughts running in their minds.

The above activities allowed learners to introspect at an individual level. The space was equally important in building trust and allowing space for reflection within the peer group. In the beginning of the 'trust-fall' activity, it seemed an easy task to follow the instructions given by the group. However, when one stood with closed eyes in the centre of the circle, it was challenging to trust the group members and allow oneself to freely fall, though one was familiar with everyone in the group.

In yet another exercise, learners sat in pairs with their backs facing each other—one partner gave instructions without naming the subject, and the other drew a figure following the instructions. It was interesting to see how a fish could turn out to be a funny figure or a star-with-a-dot-inside could be understood as a triangle-with-a-bigger-circle-inside. It made them reflect on the use of words and the need to be precise in one's communication with others, as there can be varied interpretations of the spoken word. Seeing it vividly in the form of a drawing was evidence of this. In a different activity on communication, a pair of learners explored their responses to situations and people based on their needs and their relationship with the other. Taking on the imaginary role, say of a politician, one answered the questions of the audience in a formal manner, while the other person standing behind was giving words to what perhaps went on in the character's mind. It opened the space for everyone to discuss about the nature of interpersonal relations.

Stories are an important communication tool in many societies and cultures. Human beings as social creatures are attracted to stories, be it in daily life or in spreading ideas. In our story telling sessions, we shared stories from our lives that had left a significant impact on us. We also shared experiences which we had found difficult to engage with, but the other members pointed out the positive elements in that story by sharing their views. Reading one story from different perspectives helped us to consider various possibilities in a situation and empathize with different characters. It helped to connect with real life contexts and see different people responding to situations differently.

Articulating one's ideas and feelings by writing in a co-learning environment and giving feedback to others was an important part of these classes. At an individual level, they responded to writing prompts such as how they are as a person; important people in their lives; a compliment received recently; any new skill they had learned lately; things that make one happy, sad, angry, afraid and what one does to feel better in times of difficulty. This helped them to share their own experiences, articulate the difficulties they faced and reflect on a similar situation which could be met differently in future. The peer feedback was a significant part of these reflective sessions. Apart from building a cooperative learning environment, it helped the members of the group to know about each other more deeply in this journey of learning and growing together.

In Krishnamurti's words, "The more you know yourself, the more clarity there is. Self-knowledge has no end—you don't come to an achievement; you don't come to a conclusion. It is an endless river." Our schools certainly are committed to creating a space for a child to grow holistically. These classes were a small step in that direction. As an Educator-Learner (teacher), it was delightful to facilitate these reflective sessions through various activities. At the same time, it was a good learning experience to create a classroom environment without judgement. A common element in the feedback was an increased awareness of their emotions; confidence to speak for the right causes; to build trust among members of the class and thereby enable them to speak openly without fear!

Book Review

VENKATESH ONKAR

What Did You Ask at School Today? A Handbook of Child Learning, Book 2 (2019)

Kamala V Mukunda

Harper Collins

The great twentieth century physicist, Richard Feynman, in an interview, pointed out how some of us are wary of looking too deeply into the structure of a discipline or a process, as we fear this might diminish the beauty inherent in it:

> I have a friend who's an artist and has sometimes taken a view which I don't agree with very well. He'll hold up a flower and say, 'Look how beautiful it is,' and I'll agree. Then he says, 'I as an artist can see how beautiful this is but you as a scientist take this all apart and it becomes a dull thing,' and I think that he's kind of nutty...I can appreciate the beauty of a flower. At the same time, I see much more about the flower than he sees. I could imagine the cells in there, the complicated actions inside, which also have a beauty. I mean it's not just beauty at this dimension, at one centimeter; there's also beauty at smaller dimensions, the inner structure, also the processes...
>
> Richard Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*

It may seem odd to be discussing *beauty* in the context of a book on educational psychology. This latest book by Kamala Mukunda, *What Did You Ask at School Today? A Handbook of Child Learning, Book 2*, explores many complex questions in the realm of learning and education. It peels aside several layers in this very vast question—layers to do with brain development, with social biases, with the goals of a good education—with a voice of both reason and compassion. In the process, the fundamental complexity of the

big question, *how do children learn*, reveals itself. The book has a flavour of deep tentativeness in addressing this question, without bias or prejudice. It looks carefully at the studies and the science as well as the actual day-to-day processes that happen in schools (and homes) across the world, in order to find some real answers. This patient and subtle exploration conveys to us the beauty behind the study of how learning might take place.

The introduction presents some definitive statements that we (as educators, parents and just ordinary folk) habitually make regarding learning. The author points out our human tendency to try to definitively 'answer' the really big questions by these short-cut statements, instead of acknowledging the complexity involved! She suggests that, for example, instead of saying as a proposition, "Every child learns in a different way," (I have heard this countless times from teachers and we also read it in newspaper articles so often!) we could ask, "Are there actually different styles of learning? Is it really possible to classify each child according to a learning style?" In listing eight 'definite answers' and in then looking to explore them as questions rather than as statements, the author lays out the structure of the book itself.

The book begins with a chapter on how the human brain develops and learns from infancy. It 'peers into the brain', using insights from great scientific studies of the past as well as from modern technology, to explain neurogenesis and learning. Next, the author focuses on the learning of reading and arithmetic. How does this happen, exactly, from the perspective of neuroscience? Then we move on to the all-important problem of attention and behaviour, and this chapter explores what impacts children's capacities for attention and self-regulation. A later chapter takes up the concerns of the last two by examining reading, arithmetic and attentional difficulties. This fascinating section takes us through, for example, an analysis of how difficulties in breaking down streams of sound into their phonic components could be at the heart of reading difficulties. A very important question that receives detailed treatment is the question of whether there are different "learning styles," and how the claims that individuals and companies make in this context (that they have "discovered" how to help children learn) can be evaluated. A chapter of particular practical interest to teachers is one on how we can teach for understanding rather than for certification and examinations. And finally, there are two chapters of tremendous topical interest. One addresses the large gap between men and women in the STEM subjects and explores possible reasons for the gap as well as what we can do

to address it. The other concerns the impact that the increased presence of digital software and technology has in the classroom.

I would like to go into one chapter in some detail in order to give you a flavour of the book as a whole. Chapter 3 is devoted to *attention* and *behaviour*. The core concept here is that of *executive function*—the capacity of the brain to stay on track on a task, to inhibit distraction and impulsive behaviour and to self-regulate risk taking. Full executive function (both in a 'hot' and 'cool flavour') takes about two decades to develop in a human being, but are schools, in their expectations of children, in tune with this developmental path? Or do we merely label children as noisy and disruptive? Can educators change some of these attitudes and view students more constructively? Some children may have a good capacity to regulate their behaviour and others may not be very good. There is a moderate correlation between executive function and school performance and indeed life beyond school, such as health and financial status at the age of thirty (this is accounting for class and economic background as hidden variables). Can we improve executive function? It would be magical if we can improve a child's capacity for attention and self-regulation. The author addresses, at the end of the chapter, two possible interventions in depth—computer-based and curricular interventions. I will not spoil your reading pleasure by giving away the conclusions! Rest assured that it will require great subtlety and insight on the part of schools and parents for there to be any positive outcome in this realm; there are no easy magic pills.

Woven into this central theme of this chapter are several other threads, for example, an exploration into mind-wandering. Since this is such a prevalent feature of human consciousness, might mind-wandering serve some evolutionary purpose such as problem solving? Or should we be concerned when our students daydream, as it might be a failure of executive function? Might mind wandering be a reflection of negative moods? All these avenues are considered, patiently, and in a skeptical, non-judgmental and frequently, humourous tone.

Who should read this book? Everyone, really; but *What Did You Ask at School Today?* is particularly addictive reading for teachers, administrators in education and parents. Each chapter is a serious consideration of the way we bring up our young. Can there be a more crucial question? We need to think about students and learning outside the box of our own assumptions,

opinions and myths. This is the great strength of the book. It shows us what exactly we can understand from a rational standpoint, what is currently unknown, and how we can move forward in gaining insight at many levels.

This moving forward, the author shows us, can happen in the smallest ways, in practices and shifting perceptions in our classrooms and homes, as well as in larger structural shifts. As a society of parents, educators and interested lay-people, we need to be completely involved, intellectually and emotionally, in understanding our children much better in various contexts. This is the only way in which positive changes in the ways our children learn can take place. This work has the potential to spark a deep conversation, a conversation that can happen not only in the context of education but also in the widest spheres of our social lives.

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