

**Journal of the  
Krishnamurti Schools**

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Krishnamurti Foundation India  
No 18, 2014

JOURNAL  
OF THE  
KRISHNAMURTI  
SCHOOLS



# JOURNAL OF THE KRISHNAMURTI SCHOOLS

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## **An Educational Journal**

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

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Dear Reader,

Kindly share this Journal, after your perusal, with a school nearby, or a teacher who you feel will benefit from this, so that it reaches a greater number of educators.

Many thanks  
The Editors

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## Letters to Schools

Volume One - 15 December 1978

In one of the past letters we said that total responsibility is love. This responsibility is not for a particular nation or a particular group, community, or for a particular deity, or some form of political programme or for your own guru, but for all mankind. This must be deeply understood and felt and this is the responsibility of the educator.

Almost all of us feel responsible for our family, children and so on, but do not have the feeling of being wholly concerned and committed to the environment around us, to nature, or totally responsible for our actions. This absolute care is love. Without this love there can be no change in society. The idealists, though they may love their ideal or their concept, have not brought about a radically different society. The revolutionaries, the terrorists, have in no way fundamentally changed the pattern of our societies. The physically violent revolutionaries have talked about freedom for all men, forming a new society, but all the jargons and slogans have further tortured the spirit and existence. They have twisted words to suit their own limited outlook. No form of violence has changed society in its most fundamental sense. Great rulers through the authority of a few have brought about some kind of order in society. Even the totalitarians have superficially established through violence and torture a semblance of order. We are not talking about such an order in society.

We are saying very definitely and most emphatically that it is only the total responsibility for all mankind—which is love—that can basically transform the present state of society. Whatever the existing system may be in various parts of the world, it is corrupt, degenerate and wholly immoral. You have only to look around you to see this fact. Millions upon millions are spent on armaments throughout the world and all the politicians talk about peace while preparing for war. Religions have declared over and over again the sanctity of peace, but they have encouraged wars and subtle kinds of violence and torture. There are innumerable divisions and sects with their rituals and all the nonsense that goes on in the name of god and religion. Where there is division there must be disorder, struggle, conflict—whether religious, political, economic. Our modern society is based on greed, envy and power.

When you consider all this as it actually is—this overpowering commercialism—all this indicates degeneration and basic immorality. To radically change the pattern of our life, which is the basis of all society, is the educator's responsibility.

Education is not merely the teaching of various academic subjects, but the cultivation of total responsibility in the student. One does not realize as an educator that one is bringing into being a new generation. Most schools are only concerned with imparting



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knowledge. They are not at all concerned with the transformation of man and his daily life, and you—the educator in these schools—need to have this deep concern and the care of this total responsibility.

In what manner then can you help the student to feel this quality of love with all its excellence? If you do not feel this yourself profoundly, talking about responsibility is meaningless. Can you as an educator feel the truth of this? Seeing the truth of it will bring about naturally this love and total responsibility. You have to ponder it, observe it daily in your life, in your relations with your wife, your friends, your students. And in your relationship with the students you will talk about this from your heart, not pursue mere verbal clarity. The feeling for this reality is the greatest gift that man can have and once it is burning in you, you will find the right word, right action and correct behaviour. When you consider the student you will see that he comes to you totally unprepared for all this. He comes to you frightened, nervous, anxious to please or on the defensive, conditioned by his parents and the society in which he has lived his few years. You have to see his background, you have to be concerned with what he actually is and not impose on him your own opinions, conclusions and judgements. In considering what he is, it will reveal what you are, and so you will find the student is you.

And now can you in the teaching of mathematics, physics, and so on—which he must know for that is the way of earning a livelihood—convey to the student that he is responsible for the whole of mankind? Though he may be working for his own career, his own way of life, it will not make his mind narrow. He will see the danger of specialization with all its limitations and strange brutality. You have to help him to see all this. The flowering of goodness does not lie in knowing mathematics and biology or in passing examinations and having a successful career. It exists outside these and when there is this flowering, career and other necessary activities are touched by its beauty. Now we lay emphasis on one and disregard the flowering entirely.

In these schools we are trying to bring these two together, not artificially, not as a principle or pattern you are following, but because you see the absolute truth that these two must flow together for the regeneration of man. Can you do this? Not because you all agree to do it after discussing and coming to a conclusion, but rather see with an inward eye the extraordinary gravity of this: see for yourself. Then what you say will have significance. Then you become a centre of light not lit by another. As you are all of humanity—which is an actuality, not a verbal statement—you are utterly responsible for the future of man.

Please do not consider this as a burden. If you do, that burden is a bundle of words without any reality. It is an illusion. This responsibility has its own gaiety, its own humour, its own movement without the weight of thought.

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## Editorial



A year ago, in November 2012, the Journal editorial team was sitting around in Ahalyaji's room, wrapping things up for the seventeenth issue. As we worked and chatted, Ahalyaji sat on her cushioned sofa with her two phones at her fingertips. From time to time, she would pick up either the black or the white receiver, and accomplish something easily and efficiently. In between, she kept reminding us of a variety of matters: should the list of contributors include their email ids? After the manuscript is paginated, will you check it again before printing? Can we all brainstorm about ways to increase the readership of our Journal? How can we help teachers with report writing in a different spirit altogether? What will be the dates of our next meeting, in April? Did everyone have a special ginger biscuit from the tin?

As we sit here in Vasanta Vihar in her room exactly a year later, she is no more and we are acutely aware of her absence. Although it seemed impossible to imagine working on the Journal without her, we are doing so. Maybe it is no coincidence that this is the Journal's eighteenth year, an age when we feel a young person is ready to live away from parents. Ahalyaji has nurtured this Journal, and each of us on the editorial team, for seventeen years. So today when we feel confident of continuing the work of bringing out a quality publication every year, it is with profound gratitude to her.

Ahalyaji's very special feeling for teachers has always been at the core of the *Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools*. This feeling goes back to the time when she joined the Central Institute of Education in Delhi in 1952, and underwent, as she called it, a transformation.

She began to see education as a craft and a passion, and her picture of the teacher was formed then; in a personal conversation about her life and work some years ago, she said, "I learnt that when you train a teacher, she is not a technician to teach forty lessons a week. It is a much larger vision, the role of a teacher: how does she counsel children, meet parents, keep records, correct work, organize projects and excursions, come out with a newsletter?" This feeling only grew over the years she spent with students and teachers in the Krishnamurti schools in India.

Having been in close contact with these schools for decades, she had a deep trust that something significant was happening here and that teachers were at the heart of it.

Teachers' accounts of their work, when shared by them, have a singular inspirational quality, and Ahalyaji decided these stories needed to be shared. When she thought of launching a new publication, a journal, for this purpose, the first question she was often asked was: but will teachers really write, and will they read each others' writing? Year after year, Ahalyaji's answer to the question has been a jubilant 'Yes!', as the publication of nearly twenty first-rate articles by teachers in each and every issue of the Journal has shown.

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This eighteenth issue offers several different kinds of articles. Some are about rethinking classroom practices, with ideas for how to teach particular subjects (literature, writing, philosophy and Sanskrit) in more reflective ways. Two pieces describe how scheduling time for dialogue or awareness exercises can open the door for children and adults to learn about themselves and about life. Both lay stress on the value of open-ended exploration without seeking immediate answers, especially when it comes to the subtle nature of awareness and self-understanding. A kind of umbrella article for these two is the one on the necessity of 'culture spaces' in schools, as a way to keep our educational intent alive and central to our work. We have an affectionate piece describing the unique developmental stage of the middle school child and a comprehensive one describing the elements that go into creating meaningful school excursions. In the area of environmental education and our relationship with nature, we have two complementary articles. One explores the increasing tendency for older students to 'remain indoors, huddled together', rather than spend time 'daydreaming under the shade of a tree, enjoying the cool breeze or watching the clouds drift by'. Another offers a critique of environmental education curricula that ignore the need to nurture our 'innate affinity' for the natural world. Two articles are of a philosophical nature. One is a thorough exploration of the construction of selfhood and another is on deconstructing our perceptions of the world. The Journal ends with an extract of a recorded discussion between Krishnamurti and others in Brockwood Park School in the UK in 1983, with brief comments by one of the participants.

Before we get into the Journal proper, however, we have a special section on our dear chief editor. She never allowed us to call her that, insisting she was simply a part of the editorial team; yet there was never any doubt in our minds that she was our chief! Ahalyaji was so inspiring as an educator because she had her own search, was alive to questions, and was always genuinely interested in the other person. Our first three authors bring out these qualities vividly in their pieces.

KAMALA MUKUNDA

Ahalya Chari 1921-2013

Chief Editor, Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools  
1996-2013

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## An Impersonal Responsibility

RAJESH DALAL



*H*ow does one write about someone who, to begin with, was a total stranger and who, in less than a month, became more than a mother to you, and remained so, all her life?

The year was 1975. I had just graduated and joined the Rajghat Education Centre run along the revolutionary vision of education and life expounded by J. Krishnamurti. Ms. Ahalya Chari, affectionately called Ahalyaji or Chariji by all who knew her, was the Director of the Centre. A well-known educator, with a distinguished record of service, she had been Principal of the Regional College of Education, Mysore, and Commissioner, All India Central Schools. She had been drawn to Krishnamurti's teachings and had left other prestigious posts in order to explore this vision. Aware of the limitation of schooling, she was discontented with mere attempts at educational reform.

I was young, just twenty-two years old, impatient to bring about a radical change in the world, and she was a wise woman, in her mid-fifties, aware of the complexities of running a school, leave alone bringing fundamental changes in its functioning. To her credit, I must say that she respected me for my passion and never curbed my enthusiasm for innovation and radical change. In fact she provided me with a rare experience of thinking and working together.

It was then that something more than a mother-son relationship began to flower and I could not have asked for anything better. Together, we began to envisage a different kind of school. We spent hours together, thinking about the nature of the child's mind and its needs. We set about altering the day's schedule, the curriculum, teaching methods, ways of evaluating, reporting and so on, to suit the growing child. More important was the spirit with which we functioned. Between us there was intimacy and sensitivity, and

also objectivity and the freedom to criticize. The sense of impersonal responsibility had pushed out differences of age and experience, where it mattered. Over and above this was the administrative challenge to take other teachers along with us, although some did not share our intensity or concerns!

Later, I saw that grooming youth with care was natural to her and had become integral to whatever responsibilities she undertook. So was the meticulous eye, the painstaking care for detail and the diligent attempts at perfection. Even in her later years, when she was past 80, the way she looked after her room and belongings was an aesthetic treat to observe. She loved the good things of life, enjoyed music, good food, elegant clothes and good company, and yet there was a sense of austerity about her.

Till the very end, she remained warmly committed to whoever she knew: family, friends, students, colleagues and countless individuals who sought her friendly guidance. Since retiring was alien to her nature, one saw her pushing herself all the time. Her sense of responsibility never waned. Untiringly, she groomed the right people and handed over the baton of several responsibilities at the Krishnamurti Foundation that she had so ably directed. The work mattered and she was not one to hang on to it for her own sake.

To the best of her ability, she tried to live the teachings, which were so close to her heart. She never stopped learning. A few months before she passed away, she was discussing with me how she could have delved deeper into the teachings and whether being too emotional prevented that! I feel Ahalyaji's was a rich and full life in which introspection and action were evenly matched, along with a warm concern for the individuals who were indeed fortunate to have been with her.

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## Ahalya Chari As I Knew Her

C SESHADRI



Ahalya Chari was Principal of the Regional College of Education (now called Regional Institute of Education, Mysore, RIEM) in its early years when I joined the institution as a lecturer. That was in 1967. It was under her tutelage and guidance that I grew as a student of education and a teacher-educator. Under her charismatic leadership, the college emerged as a leading teacher-education institution in the country. Her professionalism, eminence as an educationist and celebrity status enhanced the stature of the college and its sphere of influence among educational thinkers and practitioners.

Chari's identification with the RIEM was total: even after she left the college to assume higher responsibilities in the Union Ministry and even with her post-retirement engagement with the affairs of the Krishnamurti Foundation India, she never missed an opportunity to visit the college and meet the staff, students, employees and well-wishers. Developments in the college—staff movements, programmes, student and alumni affairs— were always on her radar.

Starting from the date of my initiation into the profession, my association with Chari continued over the years. What brought me closer to Chari was our shared love of philosophy and engagement with basic issues in education: meaning, aims, and processes of education, the distortion of knowledge aims in schools, the danger of virtual reality replacing learning from nature in the euphoria of information technology, the relationship between human beings and nature, and the way society seems to have forgotten that childhood is an intrinsically valuable stage. We also shared our distress at the neglect of the philosophy of education as a knowledge field, and particularly the overlooking of J. Krishnamurti's educational ideas in teacher-education programmes.

Ahalya Chari's understanding of education, both as a discipline and as a practical undertaking, was deep and profound. Her love of Krishnamurti's educational philosophy was infectious and it was not long before I came under its spell. I enjoyed the 'tasks' she set for me: a journal article *Placing Krishnamurti in the Philosophy of Education*, a critical review of *Partial and Total Insight: Constructivism and K's Pedagogy* by Lionel Claris. The *Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools*, which was her brainchild, is a treasure-house of quality readings on a host of educational issues—both theoretical and concerning school practice—from the Krishnamurti perspective. In my reviews of the field for the *Surveys of Research in Education*, I hailed the *Journal* as a significant contribution to the starving field of philosophy of education. She organized a seminar on John Dewey (her favourite philosopher) at Valley School, providing a lively platform for philosophers of education, with me presenting a lead paper on Dewey. As regards 'value education', the buzz word of the times, she was critical of the manner in which the issue was being discussed (she rightly felt uncomfortable with the very formulation 'value education'). She proposed a creative approach to engage children in value thinking and decision making, avoiding didactic approaches. Her *Thinking Together* (published by NCERT), a collection of episodes built around the day-to-day lives of children, stands out as a very original piece of writing on the theme.

Ahalya Chari was looked upon as a mentor in the Krishnamurti schools. It was her desire that I associate with them as much as possible. She involved me in scouting talent for them. She wanted me to visit the schools and spend time there as often as possible. I enjoyed my visits to some of the schools and interacting with the students and teachers. She used to share with me her vision and plans for the future of the schools and I had expressed my desire to be in touch with developments therein.

Although as principal she was burdened with administrative tasks, at heart Ahalya Chari remained a teacher; she longed to spend more of her time with students and teachers, talking to them, teaching them and working with them. For us, the initiates, she took on the role of mentor, inviting us to her teaching sessions and special talks. It was a great learning experience, listening to her on varied educational themes. She was a captivating speaker. I still remember sitting enthralled listening to her lectures on *Knowledge and the Disciplines*. Her lectures stood out for their meticulous preparation,

scholarly exposition, analysis of ideas and smooth and pleasing delivery. They ranked as virtuoso performances.

The restructuring and reformation of teacher education programmes was a passion with Ahalya Chari. The Regional Institutes of Education had been set up to demonstrate a model of integrated teacher education, spread over four years in a multi-disciplinary set-up, and Chari worked tirelessly towards wider adoption of the model. She wanted to develop an innovative teacher-education programme tailored to the special features and needs of the KFI schools. It was my privilege to work with her on this project.

Ahalya Chari was a great teacher and a philosopher of education. She was a mentor and guide to me all through my life. Her abiding engagement, till her last breath, with concerns of school education and teacher education has inspired me (and my likes) to keep the fight alive without giving up. She was deeply distressed at the commodification and commercialization of education. Evolving a new design of teacher preparation, addressing the implications of the Right to Education Act, promoting the Regional College of Education-type integrated programmes—these were some of the ‘projects’ with which she continued to wrestle till the end.

Ahalya Chari exuded humaneness and culture in all her dealings in life, college administration and governance, teaching and relationships. She loved life and lived it the Platonic way, seeing life steadily and seeing it whole. Her passing away has created a gaping void in the academic world of educational thinkers. I feel intensely the absence of a great teacher and a great person from our midst.

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## A Light Unto Oneself

DEEPTI MEHROTRA



Memories of Ahalya Di remain fresh, crisp. Just a few days before she passed away, I spent a precious week with her. Though physically frail, mentally and emotionally she was as strong as ever. I see her in my mind's eye, using a walker. 'We could arrange for a wheelchair,' I suggested, 'You could sit in the front verandah in the evenings.' For years, she'd greatly enjoyed an hour or two out in front, amid Vasanta Vihar's sweeping expanse of green, colourful flowering bushes, tall trees and open skies. She enjoyed the idea, but then with a quick shake of the head, said, 'No! This is not a geriatric ward, this is the Krishnamurti Foundation of India!' I joined in with her bubbling laughter.

She had this incredible sense of balance, discretion and dignity. Living at the nerve-centre of the KFI, she harmonized with it, while preserving her own rhythms. Intensely aware of the significance of her location, she was completely at home. She chose to stay in her gracious room, with the dining hall a small walk away and the beautiful library above, unto the very end—a considered choice.

On 19 March 2013, she spoke to teachers from The School-KFI about education as freedom from the self. During this time, her blood pressure was abnormally high, and immediately afterwards oxygen had to be administered to her. The people around her looked after their beloved Akka over the next few days, while doctors and nurses came and went.

Ahalya Di, meanwhile, would grope for her iPad, listen to the news, and discuss the Sri Lanka situation with her doctor when he came by to measure her pulse! Finding that the news disturbed her, I suggested we listen to music: she accepted cheerfully. We listened to soulful Sufi and Kabir *bhajans*. Then her close colleague in editing Krishnamurti's works over the years came by

and played a new recording of selected passages; Ahalya Di made astute comments, to help finalize this work.

She was looking forward to the Editorial Board meeting in April. She had also planned a trip to Varanasi, another to Delhi, and would have flown to her niece's wedding in Kerala if she possibly could. She planned to visit friends in Mysore in May. Yet at the same time, she was aware—choicelessly aware—of the inevitability, and the imminence, of death.

Late in the evening, she was quiet and she asked for a healing massage. Then she asked me to read out from *This Light in Oneself: True Meditations*. She listened, was silent, and slept. I slipped away to my room, next to hers, leaving the connecting door half-open.

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Ahalya Di figured in my life from the start. She taught in the 1950s at the Central Institute of Education, Delhi University, where she met my parents. She taught them, and then they were colleagues. They struck up a life-long friendship: my father still fondly recalls their visits to Ahalya Di's home in Shakti Nagar, where her mother fed them delicious south Indian meals. Ahalya Di lived in Shakti Nagar at the time, with her parents and younger siblings, a stone's throw from the university.

By all accounts, she was a brilliant teacher. Already, she had been through much: after a carefree childhood in Rangoon, and enjoyable years studying at the University of Rangoon, she'd confronted the trauma of war. Her family walked the hard road towards north Burma; she lost a younger sister on the way. They reached Calcutta as refugees. Her father, who had headed the Theosophical School in Rangoon, soon found employment tutoring the daughters of a prosperous business family in Ara, Bihar. Ahalya Di completed her Master's at Banaras Hindu University, and began teaching at the age of 22, at the Vasanta College for Women.

When I was a child, I knew none of this. No air of gloom or depression hung about her graceful figure. She was phenomenally good-natured, and even-tempered. She was my 'Ahalya Aunty'—who loved me, with whom I could talk, share stories and have fun. She was light-hearted, and at the same time there was an extraordinary sensitivity, and a deep concern for our well-being.

She indulged us: I have this image of her gliding down the steps of an Air India flight from England, doll in hand; a little later my elder sister Ritu, Bella

and I stood in line, in descending order of height! As I grew taller Bella, the doll, remained small and sturdy. When she lay down and closed her blue eyes, I imagined she slept. When she sat up, I could coax her little feet into shoes, with buckles I could fasten.

Ahalya Di gifted books to us, including our favourite tiny little Ant and Bee books. She and my mother joined the newly founded NCERT, and were involved in preparing the country's first early literacy primers, the *Chalo Paatthshala Chalein—Rani Madan Amar* series. These were gorgeous ladies, lovely in their silk saris, colourful cottons in summer, *bindis*, and perhaps a touch of lipstick. They glowed with energy and purpose, were enthusiastic and devoted to their vocation, educating teachers who would in turn teach children. They loved children, breathed ideas, enjoyed the simple things of life, and were the modern professional women of a new, vibrant, young nation.

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In the early 1970s, Ahalya Di lived right next to us, in south Delhi. A white Ambassador took her to work every day, for she was then Commissioner of the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan. Her youngest brother lived with her still. Her sister visited often, with her husband and children.

In 1973 Ahalya Di left Delhi to join the KFI. In summer of 1974, my mother, sister and I visited her in Varanasi. She lived in a sprawling cottage overlooking the banks of the river Ganga. I hardly realized she was the Director of the Rajghat Educational Centre. She never pulled rank, never forgot to smile warmly and hug affectionately. She treated us to home-made mango ice-cream, the fluffiest and tastiest ever, and sent us for a magical boat ride across the river. There were fat lizards in the house, but Ahalya Di was friends even with them!

Over the next years, I looked forward immensely to her visits to Delhi. We still had fun playing dumb charades. It was from her that I first heard about computers: certainly she kept pace with the times. We went for Krishnamurti's talks, when he spoke in Delhi. In Ahalya Di's presence, our household relaxed, for possibly she was guide, friend and philosopher, to each of us. Much later, after I set up home and my parents left Delhi, she often stayed with me, when here.

I began visiting Ahalya Di independently in 1987, in Chennai. She lived splendidly, in an old-style bungalow in the Theosophical Society grounds, cool

verandahs running all around, overlooking a little forest of chikku and cashew trees. We took a trip to Mahabalipuram, talked about life. I was questioning, rebellious in those days, caught in a whirl of activism, which she appreciated—up to a point. Despite our differences, I felt with her a warm sense of belonging, caring and deep interest. I'd begun research for my PhD, and recently visited the Chipko areas. Ahalya Di got me to talk on the Chipko movement at The School-KFI in Chennai.

In the early 1990s we visited as a family—my mother, my two-year-old daughter and I. It was the most soothing trip ever—lively, energizing. For Ahalya Di, my mother was like a beloved younger sister. I will not forget how she wept when, in 2007, I called to tell her that Ma passed away early that morning. A few months later, we visited Ahalya Di—a trio composed this time of my father, my daughter, and I. As a family, she was the one we repaired to in times of sorrow, for solace and wisdom.

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Our relationship ripened, over time. As I grew increasingly interested in Krishnamurti, we often read together, reflected on the self and consciousness, education and teaching. I visited Krishnamurti schools. She felt I 'belonged' here, and it is true that I do feel a very special kinship. She gently nudged me to join one of the schools, and while I was frequently tempted, I never grew fully convinced about the wisdom of relinquishing my independent, quite interesting and in its own way, quite meaningful, life. She must have observed this, for one day she said, 'I was thinking of what the place needs. . . . But it's far more important to think of the person—what do *you* need?' I promptly replied that I need to be quiet and reflective, to read, and write more. Thereafter, she changed tack, and we often discussed possible Krishnamurti-inspired themes that I'd like to write on. She took a detailed interest in my varied work commitments, and laughed uproariously at my hair-raising stories of the 'world-out-there'. She suggested I write a piece for the *Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools*, thoughts on teaching at university—which I did and found meaningful to do. It was tremendously educative to see how open and receptive she was, although forty years my senior, flexible and adaptive, respecting a different way of being, with its own rhythms.

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*March 19 to 25, 2013:* She makes sure I come and spend this week with her. I almost call it off at the last minute, with conflicting priorities tugging at me; the quiet insistence in her voice draws me to Vasanta Vihar.

She nibbles delightedly at a *gujia*, for she loves north Indian sweets, and grumbles, ‘You said you’d come for ten days, but you’re here for just five!’

‘Six,’ I say, so both of us feel better. She agrees I should keep up my commitment at Rishi Valley, helping design a new course: ‘It’s good work’. Then she reminisces, ‘Once at Rajghat, I asked Krishnamurti for advice on curriculum. He remarked, “Curriculum is chaff!”’

Continuing a long-time conversation between us, Ahalya Di says, ‘You must write about the uniqueness of Krishnamurti as an educator. He spoke of education as freedom from the self...’ We talk about this, quite a bit, and I take down extensive notes.

A team from Lucknow and the United States had come recently to interview and video-record her, as a ‘woman leader’. Ahalya Di chuckles as she relates, ‘I’m neither woman, nor leader! I’m a human being. Why should I lead anybody? Why should anybody follow anybody?’ She was indignant too about being put on video, but then, since the persons were so sincere, she had allowed a small documentation.

She tries to ply me with gifts: saris, *mysore pak*, organic millet porridge, *murukku*, new clothes, new books, money (‘The government has increased my pension: I’ve never had so much money in my life!’)—all of which I decline. I accept some music and books, though, from her collection—MS Subbalakshmi and Bombay Jayashri; and a little gem of a book, *A Tale of Three Cities*, by Bane Sarkar. The first part, about Bane’s youth in Rangoon up to the 1941 bombing, prominently features ‘Ahalya, my life-long friend’. It weaves charming accounts of their excellent teachers, and college theatre, with Ahalya performing the roles of Mirabai, Annie Besant, and Tagore’s heroines! It describes the Japanese bombing in 1941, Bane’s family’s departure for Calcutta, and later, the Chari family arriving at their doorstep as refugees. She proudly mentions Ahalya Chari receiving a Padmashree years later and Ahalya’s help in getting in touch with old Rangoon families settled in south India.

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One day Ahalya Di recalls: ‘Krishnaji would say, “Don’t throw in roots anywhere, but make the place your grave.” He meant, give your life to the teachings.’

I sit by her, holding her frail hand. The oxygen cylinder has been used a little while ago. In the Hall the weekend retreat is carrying on, unimpeded. I watch a video and participate in a dialogue at the retreat. She listens with interest to my account of the dialogue, on ‘don’t make a problem of anything’.

More than once this week she has said, ‘My time is running out’. Somehow it never comes across as a problem: simply a statement of incontrovertible fact.

*25th morning:* At night she coughs often, and I go across, rub her back. I feel hesitant about leaving, yet early in the morning she is up, waiting with our tea. We chat gently. When she asks whether I will come to Chennai on the way back to Delhi, I reply, ‘No, not this time’ and leave with a lump in my throat.

Five days later she passes away: quietly, naturally, post-breakfast, after a short coma.

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*Early May 2013. KFI Retreat, Uttarkashi.*

One reason I come to the Uttarkashi retreat is to reflect on death... I feel Ahalya Di’s presence, gentle, blessing, the spirit strong. At this retreat I feel it all the more, for she was deeply concerned with nurturing such spaces, this whole earth with all its vibrant beauty.

Late one morning, sitting in the verandah of the library cottage, amid pine and jacaranda trees, the Ganga flowing way down, I hear a number of birds—mynas, parakeets, jungle babblers, a brain-fever bird—shrilly scolding. Something is amiss... Suddenly I see what it is: a long yellow snake ripples down the pine tree closest to the verandah, baby bird in mouth. Settling at the foot of the tree, it masticates and swallows, oblivious to the birds’ swooping and scolding. It devours its prey and ripples away, scales glinting in the morning sun. So death comes—in many guises!

I am just so grateful, at the end, for those precious moments, down the years.



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## A Practice of Mindfulness Within Childhood Education

ANDY GILMAN



*Is not the stilling of the mind a prerequisite for the solution of a problem? The mind is not a few layers of superficial consciousness. Consciousness is not just the dull actions of the mind. When a problem is created by the superficial mind, the superficial layers have to become quiet in order to understand it.*

— J. Krishnamurti, *Reflections on the Self*

The importance of self-knowledge is mentioned in many school mission statements, and this is not surprising. The benefits of even a small measure of self-knowledge are described in cultural heritages throughout the world. Routine school activities, when planned and executed thoughtfully, can become meaningful opportunities for students and teachers to learn about themselves. A discussion of great literature can naturally lead to an exploration of the human condition, or a chemistry class seminar on the Periodic Table can inspire questions of epistemology, method, and habits of mind. Often missing from class schedules, though, are explicit opportunities to be still, to listen intently, and to pay attention to the body and the mind's activities... to be aware of awareness and to know oneself in the present moment. Scheduled time for mindfulness has become a regular part of the curriculum for Oak Grove students, from kindergarten through high school, and what the students and teachers say about the exercises speaks for the benefits of the initiative.

*'I didn't realize how fast things moved, until I slowed down.'*

*'I hardly ever think about my heart beating, until I stop and listen.'*

— Grade 7 students

Jeanette Stampfil-Berkovitz, Oak Grove's Aftercare and Summer Programme Director, has been engaged in a formal meditation practice for over twenty-five years, and has trained in presenting mindfulness to children. Jeanette works with each grade level once a week. She describes the classes as, 'the practice of being aware of the present, here and now, through focusing the mind on one thing at a time'. Based on her experience, Jeanette believes it is never too early to begin working on mindfulness. 'These are skills we can all cultivate, and the earlier in life we start, the easier it is.'

Classes can take many forms, tailoring the modality to the particular characteristics of each group of students on a given day. In kindergarten, for example, the students sometimes lie on the floor with a rock placed on their stomachs. Jeanette then gently guides the class to notice what they are experiencing while they focus on the rock moving up and down with each breath. Occasionally, a student might want to wiggle, and Jeanette opens an opportunity for awareness: 'You might want to move around, but you can *choose* to wiggle or not to wiggle'.

In Grade 6, the class sits comfortably and are given a fig bar to hold in their hands. Of course, the first impulse is to eat the bar, but the students are asked to wait. They notice the colour and scent, they feel the texture of the bar. They are asked to attend to what is happening with their bodies, especially with their mouths. They sit for moments, and then take a first intentional bite. They smell and taste the fig bar, some reporting that they never stopped to notice their eating before. They take a second bite and swallow, experiencing what is actually happening when they eat. Some students report that time seems to come to a near standstill during these classes, and that they never realized there was so much to notice. The more they looked, the more there was to see.

Grade 4 might listen to a Tibetan bowl being rung, and stay focused on the sound until it is too faint to hear. The ring of the bowl carries on much longer than the students realize it would. Similarly, the middle school students walk through the oak grove at a slow careful pace, listening to what is there. They are excited about what they hear: the hawks, the sound of the wind flowing through the trees, the far-off notes of their friends in music class. Sometimes, the students say they have a hard time staying calm. Jeanette says that the focus is not to stay calm; it is to pay attention to what is happening.

The release from expectation, externally or internally, is one of the benefits of the activity.

Sometimes the class ends with an exercise in standing firmly but comfortably, imagining roots growing down from the feet and into the soil. Jeanette then speaks softly: ‘Often it’s not the storm from the weather that sends us adrift, it’s the storm of our feelings. That’s when you can plant your feet firmly in the earth and find strength and patience.’

In response to these exercises, students describe the following:

*‘I feel lots of energy when we finish.’*

*‘I feel heavy.’*

*‘I feel light.’*

*‘My mind buzzes a lot, from idea to idea.’*

*‘When I pay attention, things taste better.’*

*‘I didn’t realize there were so many sounds going on around me!’*

*‘I like being able to think about one thing at a time.’*

A typical homework assignment for students is to find a time to focus only on their breath, a place where the mind and body can quickly meet. Further, if a time arises at home or in class, where the students are inclined to react quickly and hotly to a friend or family member, they are encouraged to pause and go to their breath—even just for a moment—and then respond if necessary. Krista Swanner, Oak Grove School’s Grade 4 teacher, believes that the mindfulness classes offer a valuable opportunity for students to be aware of the present and provide a shared language for the class in general. ‘When we are working on a lesson and a student’s attention is drawn away, I can say “come back”, and the phrase has a new meaning. It invites the student to return to the present, to what is happening right now. But equally important, the way students can listen to each other and build their relationships is so critical for their entire experience, including how they grow to understand themselves. This has always been a focus of the school, and the mindfulness class supports sustained activity in this area.’

Mindfulness is not only for the students, but also for teachers, staff, and parents. Teachers accompany their students to the mindfulness classes and Jeanette has worked with staff during faculty development days. In the Oak Grove Parent-Student Handbook, within the section on Communication and Conflict Resolution, the concept of *P.A. W.S.S* is introduced—when conflicts

arise *Put Attention Within for Sixty Seconds* before responding. This applies to conflicts and struggles among students as much as it applies to the Oak Grove staff. The intention of the community is to learn to be mindful together, and as Krishnamurti's quote below mentions, self-knowledge is uncovered in relationship. To that end, mindfulness classes are also being offered to Oak Grove parents, beginning in November. As we all strive to be present, to be compassionate, and to understand *what is*, we naturally become supports and reflections for each other.

*When we are aware of ourselves, is not the whole movement of living a way of uncovering the 'me', the ego, the self? The self is a very complex process which can be uncovered only in relationship, in our daily activities, in the way we talk, the way we judge, calculate, the way we condemn others and ourselves. All that reveals the conditioned state of our own thinking, and is it not important to be aware of this whole process? It is only through awareness of what is true from moment to moment that there is discovery of the timeless, the eternal. Without self-knowledge, the eternal cannot be.*

— J. Krishnamurti, *The Book of Life*

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## Endearing and Trying: They Are Only Twelve-Year-Olds

D ANANTHA JYOTHI



In the literature class we were studying *Lord of the Flies*—a novel about a group of pre-adolescent school boys who crash land on a lonely island and fend for themselves in the absence of any adults. Two of the older boys try to organize the others so that they can meet their basic needs and work towards their rescue. Attempts of governance bring out their baser, aggressive instincts and gradually the boys descend to savagery and murder. Finally, they are rescued by a naval officer and one dreads to think what would have happened if he had not arrived at the scene. It is a dystopic novel at the end of which the chief protagonist, Ralph, mourns: ‘... the end of innocence and darkness of man's heart.’ It was a novel which the students were totally engaged with.

The literature group animatedly discussed various characters in the book. It was both interesting and disturbing to note that they were initially tending to make quick judgements. The main protagonists of the novel were classified as being ‘good’, ‘evil’ or ‘saintly’. However, when their attention was drawn to the fact that the oldest among these boys were only twelve

to fourteen years old—an age which many of the students had passed through themselves less than two to four years ago—they began to perceive them with a little more understanding. This tendency among us to respond quickly to someone's behaviour, and form instantaneous judgements, is something that has intrigued me, and I wondered how we can guard ourselves against it; more so, since this also occurs with us as teachers and is clearly detrimental to our role as educators.

I have also been closely associated with middle school students for several years now. Endearing as the children of that age group are, they can also be quite trying at times. At such times, as adults we are prone to forget that middle schoolers are still very young, and at a rapidly changing stage.

*I distinctly recall the words of an anguished mother, ‘They speak of him as though he were a terrorist. He is only in the seventh class.’ Well, the boy in question was no saint. He wielded a lot of influence on his classmates, especially boys. Students did not dare to offend him in any manner. In the playground, he had an*

*exalted stature. At one time he even took it upon himself to keep up the 'morals' of the class. Sometimes, in the evenings, he would line up the boys and check their pockets to see if they were carrying any 'love' notes. If they did, he would warn them and sometimes punish them by isolating them. He was not without charm. When he was in charge of class duties, the class would almost sparkle. When he was asked to make paper bags (for the hospital), he would finish his lot in a jiffy and help by supplementing others' quota.*

Adults dealing with middle schoolers for the first time are quite often baffled by their behaviour and might find themselves tending to quickly jump to conclusions that so and so is a 'bully', a 'charmer', a 'thoughtless person' or 'very selfish'. But when one observes them year after year, it is quite fascinating to see how their minds work, how they show many sides, and how they change. A closer look at the middle school students shows how this age is the beginning of a transition in the truest sense. They generally outgrow some of the traits they show during these years and yet, this is also the age when some strong personality traits can begin to take root. This is a topic of wide interest to the educators and has been well researched. This article outlines some of the key findings and its implications for teachers and other adults dealing with this age group.

*Recently, a few girls from the seventh class were walking past the Arts and Crafts section in the school when they chanced upon a cushion which was left outside to dry because it had a*

*damp patch. Finding this unclaimed object, they picked it up, tore it open and played with the stuffing inside. The first reaction of most adults was, 'How can they be so mindless? What is wrong with them?' It is rather difficult to understand such impulses. What adults see as an act of violation could be just instinctive fun for these youngsters. When they realized that the cushion actually belonged to somebody they were contrite about their behaviour and spent some precious weekend hours labouring over a beautiful batik piece which they gifted to the cushion owner.*

What constitutes 'fun' for these youngsters is something adults find difficult to comprehend. What 'fun' can there be in going on a class walk just before the assembly in pristine clothes and squelching their feet in a marshy dark brown puddle, which caked on their feet and would take at least an hour to scrub off? What 'fun' can there be in stepping by accident on cow dung and instead of warning others, waiting aside and laughing loudly every time some one else stepped on it? Such an idea of 'fun' encompasses what adults may perceive as teasing, bullying, and intimidating. We ask, 'Why did you do it?' Pat comes the reply, '... for fun'. And our stock response is, 'Well, it is not funny!'

Are we living in two different worlds? Do we have different value systems? Perhaps not. Just as a gooey cake mixture smells of flour and raw eggs and yet can fill a room with mouth-watering aroma when baked, these youngsters, who seem so animalistic and instinctive/impulsive in their behaviour, are maturing in ways not

so apparent. Many students are also sensitive, unsure of themselves, and have a strong need for support and nurturing from the adult community in this transition stage of their life. It is a phase which moulds them in many important ways. At the risk of repetition it may be said that it is at this age, when they seem to be moving away from adult expectations, that adult understanding and support is most necessary.

Adults dealing with this age group perhaps need to acquaint themselves with the developmental trajectory of these students which may roughly be mapped out in the following manner. Of all the changes that this age group is undergoing, their physical development is the one that is most apparent.

They experience rapid, irregular physical growth. They are acutely aware of awkward, uncoordinated movements. They are concerned with bodily changes that accompany sexual maturation. They do not want to draw attention to themselves. It is thus extremely unbecoming of an adult to make comments such as: 'Is your voice cracking?' or 'You are growing taller.' They are also beginning to be drawn to the opposite sex. One needs to actively provide opportunities such as mixed group activities and games where they can freely mix with one another, without necessarily competing against each other. One should thus opt for a mixed group activity instead of a 'girls' team or a 'boys' team. Another trait distinct in this age group is their need

to release energy, often resulting in sudden, apparently meaningless outbursts of activity. This could explain why they indulge in what adults think of as mindless activities, that is, why they jump into a puddle or try to ignite things in the backyard or tear a cushion apart. Drama workshops, social games, nature walks, treks and hikes, apart from the regular sports activities, seem to be an easy outlet for these energies.

Socially, they have a strong need to belong to a group, with peer approval becoming more important even as adult approval decreases in importance. This is the time they begin to think in terms of 'us vs them.' It is all the more important that adults hold the students at this stage, that is, stay in touch with them, draw boundaries where necessary, but also sympathetically engage with their urges and impulses. To get back to the novel, *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph is initially very happy that there are no adults on the island. But through the rest of the novel he strives to be rescued from the island and yearns for the security that an adult presence would bring.

*Recently, I was surprised when a student told me that he thought that I hated him. 'Why would I hate you?' I asked him.*

*'I've done many things that you don't like.'*

Middle school students may not be alone in perceiving things differently from what they really are. However, there seems to be a scientific basis for why it may be

especially so in their case. Research suggests that pre-teenagers and adolescents easily misread adult expressions and see ‘meanness’ or ‘anger’ where none was intended. This is because their ‘emotional brains’ are still developing. When they are told something sternly they think they are being scolded (in our school, they would use the term ‘bombed’). In one research study, MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scans were used to monitor how adults and adolescent brains respond to a series of pictures reflecting emotions. Researchers discovered that adults were able to label the picture representing ‘fear’ with 100% accuracy. However, fifty per cent of adolescents labelled the picture as ‘anger’ or ‘confusion’. Adults used their frontal lobes during this activity, whereas the adolescents used anterior regions of their brain. It is said that the anterior region relies on ‘gut responses’ as opposed to reasoned judgement.

In terms of their intellectual development, adolescents are in a transition period from concrete thinking to abstract thinking. So, while they are beginning to enjoy art and poetry more subtly, in the sciences they prefer active, hands-on experience over passive learning experiences. In subjects like English literature, they are beginning to understand the nuances of a character, plot or an image. At the same time, in the sciences, they are beginning to see the concepts beyond the facts. In mathematics, they are beginning to see the connections across concepts and applications. It is a

good time for teachers to start questioning them deeply in their subjects. Apart from academics, at this stage they are not only inquisitive about the adult world, but are perceptive too. They can sometimes ask very incisive questions which may range from the trivial to the profound:

*‘Why is so-and-so teacher not married?’*

*‘Does this person hate us?’*

*‘Why do people speaking a certain kind of English gain more respect than others who may be better persons?’*

This inquisitiveness could be tapped in many interesting ways, and brought up in dialogues with students.

The most fascinating but challenging change in their growth trajectory is their moral development. They are now moving from acceptance of adult moral judgments to the development of their own personal values; nevertheless, they tend to embrace values which are close to their own parents’ judgements. So quite often when their parents have environmental concerns it becomes important to them too. If their parents use profane language at home, they may find nothing objectionable in using it themselves. Further, it is not a moral failing in them, when they see flaws in others but are slow to acknowledge their own faults (it is very important for adults to understand this fact). They often complain about their fellow students regarding things which they themselves are guilty of. When this is pointed out to them they are frankly astonished. It is interesting to see

how as they grow, they are now able to assess moral matters in shades of grey as opposed to viewing them in black-and-white terms characteristic of junior school children. This explains how older students in the literature class, mentioned at the beginning of this article, were eventually able to assess a character in *Lord of the Flies* with more depth. At this age, they are typically able to perceive two or more sides of an issue. Hence this would be the right time to introduce them to debate clubs and group discussions.

‘Strike while the iron is hot’ seems to be a traditional dictum handed down to teachers. However, this would be a crude method of dealing with the growing changes in middle school students. Since the molten metal will readily take the impressions on it, one would want to deliberate more and be more thoughtful about the designs one imprints on their minds. This analogy is not to say that we alone are responsible for how our middle

school students grow up. It is just about being more aware and thoughtful about the impressions we create on them, as we now know from research that some of our actions may have long-term effects on them as individuals. The relationships that students have with adults at the middle school level are important because they can serve as a buffer to the pressures they may face as they grow into young adults. If our students feel valued and nurtured at this stage, they are more likely to grow up with confidence in themselves. Conversely, if a student feels rejected by the adult community at this stage, the feeling of inadequacy can haunt him or her for a very long time. Similarly, any talent or passion nurtured at this age may become a defining force in their lives. The adults could perhaps see the middle school years as a time to forge a special kind of bond with them, a bond which recognizes their growing independence but also understands the need to be there for them.

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## Writing as a Way into the World: A Record of One Year Spent in Rishi Valley

AZLAN SMITH



In the summer before I started teaching, I sought out one of my own childhood teachers and asked, ‘What is teaching? How do I support children in learning? What is it that I am trying to do?’ She answered, ‘At the heart, help children find experiences of wonder.’ That does not mean that teachers don’t share information; they do. At the same time, understanding and able engagement (and, not incidentally, joy) usually come after we realize the fullness of what is before us. A mathematician enters into the infinite variety and elegance of his symbolic language. A painter begins to see the possibilities in his paints. Perhaps wonder is both the response to vivid existence and the perspective that allows us to see the fullness of our world. Still, these abstract descriptions carry us only thus far. Even if what I’ve said is true, how do you help students discover the world? I’m not sure. I write this article to share how this seed of an idea grew when I planted it in the ground of Rishi Valley, and my students came happily to help care for it, believe in it, and play in the shade that it quickly gave back to us.

The course in question happened in the spring of 2012, when I was asked to create a writing programme for classes 7 and 8 in Rishi Valley School. The programme was meant to support students who were less familiar with writing in English, while allowing all students to explore writing more freely, though with no less focus. A lot of our work was technical: we discussed paragraph structure, organization, and how many exclamation points belong at the end of a sentence. (‘One,’ I insisted; eventually I managed to get them to leave off four of five, which only left one or two.) At the same time, as we worked together week by week, the students taught me what I had known when I was a child—that writing is not just a way to create, through fiction, different worlds, and to communicate, formulate and solidify what we know. It is a way into the world.

My students taught by taking the ideas I suggested and building with them: by showing what was powerful and useful in each exercise, and revealing what could be changed. I knew from my own childhood that teachers can teach by taking students

out in the valley and the forest, by looking with them at growing things, by pointing out the water they can drink and the earth they can dig their toes into. Now I learnt that students teach too, by growing in ways we have hoped and in ways we have never imagined.

### **Creating a world**

In the early part of our classes, we played sense perception games involving movement, as an active body can help create an active mind. In one of my favourite games, each of the students put on a blindfold and silently explored, alone, a patch of forest. I watched one young boy picking his way through the forest, and instead of being blind, he was 'seeing': I could tell by the careful, conscious movements of his hands and his feet that he was in a forest. It was not the forest I saw, because he couldn't see, and there lies the importance of fantasy and imagination. Most of the time, by summarily seeing and feeling only 'what is there,' my students and I could walk through a beautiful forest and never feel the trees bending in a wind that was almost too soft to hear. But this boy felt the trees and listened to the wind, and if he could not see the birds above him, he could hear them. As I watched, he turned his ear toward a crow's cry, and then listened, with a smile, to the beating of its wings. He could feel (he told me later) the difference between a soft, pliable green leaf, and the light, brittle, sharp edges of a brown one. Another student wrote while reflecting on this exercise: 'When I had eyes, I could

only see the world. But now I can feel the world, smell the world, listen to the world, get the wonderful tastes of the world on my tongue.'

I still wonder what the first child 'saw' through his fingers, through his ears and his nose. When he described it later in his writing, he said it was a forest of magic: a forest where there might be mythic creatures and where, when he reached out his hands, he could feel the sap pulled up through the tree trunks behind the rough bark. Did he keep this world, and was the world he saw when he opened his eyes again deeper because of the time he had spent blindfolded? I can't be certain. I hope so.

The wonder and the fullness of feeling, the rich texture of the forest, the strong motion of the sap brought up behind the bark, and the grace with which a bird unfolds its feathers and beats its wings through the air—the students went out into the forest to discover all this. And they wrote it to understand it a little more, to explore the thought, create it with their attention, and remember it. Another time, we played a listening game. All together, we sat silently, and heard everything we could. I gave them a few directions: listen to things as far away as possible. Now listen to things as close as possible. Afterwards, as we shared what we had heard, I asked questions to draw out their experience: if they had heard footsteps, were the footsteps coming or going? Were they the steps of a child or an adult? One student

raised her hand: she had heard the leaves on the trees in the wind, and she had also heard the separate sound of the fallen, dry leaves on the ground as the wind grazed over them. She added, 'When we started listening, there was nothing to hear and I was bored. But the more I listened the more there was to listen to, and by the end I wanted to hear it.' With their attention they created the world.

After these games, in the second part of our class we would read and we would write. In the first months, most of the students' ink went into descriptions. Descriptions of forests, of oceans; of the sun, the stars, a rock; a beloved pet, or a dog that frightened them; a storm, and the changes in the valley when the wind slowly washes through. I would often pull writing cues from imagined stories. We would close our eyes and imagine a mean-looking wizard: his nose, staff, hair and clothes. What did his castle look like? Their pens would dance across their notebooks as they described it. I saw this as an imaginative analogue to sense perception games—instead of exploring with our hands and our ears, we explored a world that we made inside.

### **Going beyond descriptions**

I began with descriptive exercises because description is the art of 'seeing' and showing someone else your world. The students showed me that description is much more than that: it is easy to conceive of a 'mean wizard,' but once you start to describe him, there are more questions.

'How is he mean?' one student asked. 'Is he an evil wizard, or just a mean one?' asked another. 'Can he look mean but not actually be that mean?' wondered a third. 'Can he be nice to his pets?' 'Or to his daughter?' What are we saying when we say, 'He's mean'? Many of my students had their own experiences of being mean, and most of them said that sometimes (though they said it shouldn't be) being mean is fun. What kind of enjoyment do we get from it? Can we understand the part of ourselves that wants to be mean, or at least responds meanly; can we take a close look at the part that enjoys it? The purpose of all these questions is not to answer them. I never did, and really, in their writing, the students didn't either. Instead they began to look at them: the fact that there was a question showed that there was something to think about. The task of describing, of imagining one way life might be, made them ask what was possible.

Out of environment flowed emotion. All landscapes had character: every storm, field and hill—seen well enough to describe and written well enough to show—pulled out some individual response. I think this contact between the outside and the inside world was important and useful, though I'm still not completely clear why. Perhaps it is because the hills stopped just being hills: they became rolling, silent forests with the quiet drip of moisture and the thunder of a far-off waterfall, or else baking dunes where the sand was almost in flames. As the hills became something

nuanced and multi-faceted, the students did too, and they started to go into the tenderness and variety of their own inner lives. For example, when I first asked students to write about courage, almost all of them wrote about being an unbeatable warrior (or soldier) killing the other bad warriors. (Many of my students played Grand Theft Auto, read Percy Jackson, and went home over the holidays to watch movies about spies and guns.) But when I asked them, after helping them walk their words over a mountain and through tall trees, if what they had earlier described was really courage, almost every one of them said, 'No.' They said there was something missing, and they started wondering what that was. That opened a space for rethinking, editing, and rewriting, which gave the opportunity to push farther, to build upon what had already been done and to follow the glimmers of what might be possible.

In our reading and writing, we would also often draw from novels, poems, and other stories that we read aloud together in class. In one series of classes, we read three interlocking Norse myths, looked at pictures of the mountains in which these myths were made, heard the creation of another world, and talked about what we

heard. Then each student continued the story we had read: he took a peripheral character and wrote his own version of who that character was, and some of the adventures he had experienced. In another week we read the first few chapters of a novel aloud, and then each wrote a continuation of the story before going on to hear what the author had written.

In the last part of our class, students were given the chance to share parts of what they had written. They were often excited to read aloud from their writing. At its worst, this part of the class involved one engaged student sharing while the others drifted away. At its best, the students went happily into one another's adventures, tasting the fruits of far away forests and sitting down next to rivers that had never been part of their world, but might be, from now on. Many students were proud of what they had written. Some wanted their friends to write more, so that they could hear more of the story. There was plenty of ink on their pages, but in the end, their writing was only in part about putting words on the page; it was also about an imaginative, involved, perceptive relationship to the world, and about sharing the joys, insights and uncertainties of that relationship with those around them.

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# Nature as Teacher: Extending the Learning Community

GARY PRIMROSE



Author's note: This article was inspired by an educational conference at Brockwood Park School in August 2013, titled 'When is Teaching'. The lead speaker was Eleanor Duckworth, a recently retired Professor of Education at Harvard University. She is described in Wikipedia as 'a cognitive psychologist, educational theorist and constructivist educator'. She was a student of Jean Piaget. My favourite quote of hers is: 'Knowing the right answer requires no decisions, carries no overall risks and makes no demands. It is automatic. It is thoughtless'.

*'What we have loved, others will love and we may teach them how.'*

William Wordsworth

Environmental education is an ideal forum to put into practice some of the Educational insights of Eleanor Duckworth (see note at the end of the article). Her discoveries, such as putting the student into direct contact with the subject matter so that it becomes the authority rather than the teacher, proposing dilemmas to create imaginative thinking and her 'democratization of ideas', all have important implications for environmental education [EE]. I would like to focus in this essay on the subject matter as the authority, in particular, the educational potential of 'nature as teacher'. But first I will introduce you to my interest in the subject and then go on to give a critique of current practice, finishing with some proposals for filling in what I feel may be gaps in the teaching and practice of EE.

Having been brought up on a farm but educated in my local town's public school in Canada, I felt intuitively that there must be more to education than

preparation for the job market. I don't think Canada is alone in this. I watched my fellow students graduating with so-called 'good' degrees, going out into the world ecologically illiterate while orchestrating the investment and legislation that is ruining the planet. I began to feel that a 'good' education in the conventional sense was no guarantee of wisdom or prudence when it came to looking after our local landscapes, let alone the planet. Looking elsewhere for guidance, I read Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry and Krishnamurti. I sensed from them that there was an alternative to the present disconnect our education system has with the natural world, and that there may be a way to live in it without destroying it. Much time in my teens and twenties was spent in the wilds of rural Canada, gleaning what nature could teach me about living, about how I belong in the world and not how much of it belongs to me. Fifteen years were spent at Brockwood Park School in the UK, learning to garden and experimenting with teaching different forms of EE. For the last twenty years, I have been mostly gardening and restoring ecologically degraded land, and that has made me think that EE, more than ever, should have a central part to play in the modern curriculum.

Still, EE has come a long way since the Rio Summit in 1992. Before then, the subject was a fringe one or a tag-on to biology and largely based along the lines of environmental science. Outdoor education, with its emphasis on recreational and adrenalin sports, was a separate, after-school activity. Third-world development was usually incorporated into geography. After Rio, the United Nations came up with Agenda 21, a prototype for sustainability that was to be practised at the local level and in education. Remember its catch phrase, 'Think globally act locally'? Thus an all-embracing idea under the banner of 'sustainability' inspired pedagogues to merge the disparate subjects of environmental science, development (within socio-economic and political contexts), outdoor education and conservation. EE had morphed into Environmental Education for Sustainability [EEFS] which is how it is taught in schools today. Quite a step forward, really.

Although now more holistic in its approach, EEFS has its critics, myself included. Much of this criticism is levelled at teachers as well as environmentalists in general. We are, for example, often seen by neo-liberalists as moralists and judges restricting their freedom to live as they wish. We seem to only have bleak messages about the future. Our opinions are often rooted in anger, frustration and despair, thus turning some people off environmental

issues and values. Teaching environmental education in politically influenced education systems such as here in the UK, where politicians of all the main parties insist that nature cannot be allowed to get in the way of economic growth, is a considerable challenge in itself.

Some of the questions I have regarding the teaching of EEFS echo these sentiments. For example, although there is broad agreement about the aims of sustainability, there is much dispute about the paths to it, depending on one's ideological and political value system. Are we teachers politically literate and balanced enough to bring awareness to the student about these different paths, and in so doing, avoid indoctrination? Do we confront, and go beyond, our own despair and guilt that accompanies the planet's ecological decline, rather than just bury our heads in the sand or blame others? Can teachers stray out of their own particular disciplines and embrace an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating EE into their own curricula, even without the confidence of knowing other subjects very well? Why does EEFS still remain largely issue-based, focusing on economic, political and technological solutions to our planetary crisis and neglecting the real battle which is over hearts and minds? Although each of these questions could warrant an essay in their own right, it is this last criticism I would like to focus on in this paper and where I think Duckworth's insights into education can be of value in EEFS. Put another way, students are taught to learn environmental issues in the classroom and comprehend our planet's plight intellectually, but shouldn't we, as their teachers, also find positive experiential ways of encouraging them to feel, to engage their emotions, by immersing themselves in the natural world, to be drawn in and experience affection and wonder for a place?

### **Nature as teacher**

The metaphor 'nature as teacher' uses Duckworth's notion of putting the students directly in contact with the subject matter. Nature becomes the authority, and not the teacher's ideas about nature. The awareness that comes from a student's real experience outdoors, with gentle guidance and support from the teacher, will most often lead to that virtuous learning circle—direct observation, leading to seeking knowledge on the subject, to understanding the wider implications, to concern and a sense of responsibility and then on to action. The outcomes of that action will lead back to further observation and the learning circle begins again. Real knowledge grounded in observation unleashes the joy of learning and is thus self-sustaining.

An example to illustrate this could be to send students outside individually (since being alone activates the senses) to different parts of the campus or locality and record in a journal what they see, think and feel about what is around them. Ask them to bring back some natural materials to construct a small installation in the classroom that sums up and helps communicate their experience, whether positive, negative or ambiguous, to the rest of the class. In these sessions, comments that often arise are: 'I became more aware of my senses, especially listening', 'My thoughts distracted me from what was going on around me', 'I thought I would be bored, but for some reason I wasn't'. When listening to their own, and their fellow students', questions in a forum such as this, a learning community becomes established that is inclusive of the local wildlife.

Feeling at home in the outdoors with plants, insects, animals and beautiful places ought to become a normal part of students' daily experience and their affections. Beautiful places and their ecologies inspire feelings of love, awe, wonder, curiosity and a healthy concern and attachment to a place. All this in spite of their having to face some of their peers who think that nature is for geeks and softies!

I would like to add another example to illustrate how a subject matter can be absorbing in itself, integrating so many aspects of experiential environmental education. I am referring to the practice of gardening. By engaging with plants first-hand—planting seeds, nurturing growth and working the soil—students feel they are taking part in creation, in something larger than themselves. Gardening has its own discipline, which improves both the land and the student. It teaches a student patience, as it takes time between planting and harvest; it teaches humility, as it is a collaboration with nature and therefore a check on our hubris; it insists on the student being present (when slugs eat their lettuces they must face the garden as it is and not how they imagined it); it encourages care and openheartedness, making space for other species to thrive (although not usually slugs!); it acquaints them with the necessity of death and decay and the recycling of nutrients. A garden is sometimes our most immediate contact with nature, especially in an urban setting. It is where a student's relationship with the natural world becomes real and not an abstraction.

The natural world has its own stories, often merged with ours over centuries. It is a shame that in our education system today the story-telling

species (*Homo sapiens*) is neglecting to take full advantage of the possible narratives that can be found in a marriage between nature and human culture. Up to now, the mark of an educated person was to be a good citizen and to be successful in our economic system. It is not enough today, if it ever was. Our education from here onwards must stress that there is no civic or economic competence without ecological competence and a sense of responsibility to our localities and native landscapes. We think knowledge is power, but this explosion of knowledge in a digital age has produced a planet in crisis. Surely a central aim of education, the root of which comes from the Latin *educare* ('to draw out'), is to reveal to ourselves as teachers, and to our students, our innate affinity for life. All forms of life. We just need a catalyst. Nature teaches us what is important—the interconnectivity of everything and what our needs really are. They are beauty, wonder, passion and love. Sadly these words are still missing in the aims and objectives of most Environmental Education for Sustainability curricula.

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## Decline of Outdoor Activities Among Children: Why Should it Concern Us?

V SANTHARAM



*One of the greatest causes of the ecological crisis is the state of personal alienation from nature in which many people live. We lack a widespread sense of intimacy with the living world.*

Robert Michael Pyle, *The Extinction of Experience*  
(from *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland.*)

‘*W*hat happened to all the children? I did not find anyone on my way here,’ enquired my guest, who was visiting Rishi Valley after a gap of several years.

‘Why? They are very much around,’ I replied, somewhat puzzled.

‘Well, ten years ago when I used to visit Rishi Valley, the kids would be all over the place, climbing trees and exploring the hills. It was a tough task to contain them indoors. What have you done to them now? Why is no one outdoors?’

Frankly, I too did not have any answer to this question. This was something I have been trying to understand over the past few years. From my observations, I notice two trends that may or may not be related to each other, but are worthy of closer attention: one is a sudden, marked shift in interests as they grow older and the other an overall drop in outdoor activities across the various age groups. Both these trends are of concern; I feel that the first need not worry us too much since the children who have had some exposure to nature and outdoors at an early age could be expected to recall these experiences at a later date.

When I joined Rishi Valley fifteen years ago, I felt that the location of the school amidst the wilderness and its rugged beauty would stimulate several

students (and adults) to take to outdoor activities naturally and that I would get several opportunities to interact with budding naturalists and nature enthusiasts. But over the years my belief was belied and I noticed that while there was a spontaneous interest in outdoor activities among the younger children, this suddenly vanished after they moved to higher classes and especially after class 7 or 8. I could see this clearly among the group of birdwatchers who were so eager and were up early on Sunday mornings even when they had stayed up late the previous night watching the week-end film. Any one associated with the junior school would know how children love outdoor activities and use all the available opportunities to explore their surroundings.

The attendance on Sunday morning bird-watching sessions too has been dropping over the years and, of late, there have been days when no one turns up. Most of those who come for this activity are from junior classes and rarely a senior (above class 8) turns up. Even those who come do not persist beyond a few weeks. Until a few years ago, the Himalayan trekking programme in the summer vacation had students from the senior school participating, but currently it appears to be a 'class trek' of students of class 8 going to 9!

I have been noticing over the years an increased tendency among the senior students to remain indoors, huddled together playing board games, listening to music, having a chat or just lazing in bed for extended periods of time when they could have spent useful time outdoors observing nature or just daydreaming under the shade of a tree, enjoying the cool breeze or watching the clouds drift by.

What is the reason for this indifference to our natural surroundings? Why is it manifesting itself with the onset of adolescence? While peer groups and socializing activities are important for children at this age, could it also be that the various rules and restrictions—all well-meaning, no doubt—stop students from being out and about the campus?

What we observe here in our school may not be unique. Recent studies in the USA and UK have also reported a drop in the outdoor recreational activities by 18 to 25%. Several reasons are being attributed to this decline. 'Videophilia', which is doing things in front of a computer screen or any other electronic gadget, is believed to be the prime reason. Many of the children could be spending several hours on the internet or video games at home. Very often parents do not have time for outdoor activities such as visits to parks or

wildlife sanctuaries or treks. Growing up in crowded urban areas where the 'outdoors' are unsafe and full of strangers who could be potentially harmful, children are forced to remain indoors for a great part of their free time, completely unconnected with nature.

This could have several consequences. It has been said that early exposure of children to nature is strongly correlated with their attitude towards conservation and environmentally responsible behaviour as adults. It is known that in the absence of contact with nature at a relatively young age (before they are ten to twelve years old), the ability to connect with their surroundings could be lost. It is believed that a lack of engagement outdoors could bring about greater attention deficit disorders among children. It has been shown that children with a tendency to spend more time on computers are becoming weaker, less muscular and unable to do physical tasks such as sit-ups; they lack the ability to grip objects firmly that previous generations found simple (Denis Campbell in *The Guardian*). Increased obesity, loneliness, depression and lack of social skills are some of the other consequences attributed to children spending more time indoors with modern electronic gadgets.

In his very insightful article in *Orion* magazine, David Sobel suggests that apart from a wide variety of reasons such as 'urbanization, the changing social structure of families, ticks and mosquito-borne illnesses and the fear of stranger danger', environmental education as it is being imparted these days may be among the 'causes of children's alienation from nature'. He goes on to suggest that the reason for this is that very often environmental education tends to be quite structured where the children are not allowed to freely enjoy natural surroundings without being told 'not to touch' this or that. He suggests that children should be allowed to encounter the natural world on their own terms. For this to happen, they should be allowed to explore the outdoors without restrictions and adult supervision, allowed to climb trees or hills, catch things, get wet, go off the paths and trails.

He suggests that 'environmental educators need to allow children to be "untutored savages" for a while' and in the process enjoy their outdoor experiences. Secondly, there should be more hands-on experience and less formal, structured teaching. He believes that by learning to do a lot of hands-on work, children would be able to build up systematic knowledge. He suggests that for children between the years of six and twelve, being with nature is more important than learning about nature.

The Krishnamurti schools are all located in nature-rich locations and connecting with nature is one of the major thrusts in our schools. Are we using our beautiful surroundings adequately for hikes and outdoor camps? As adults, how we look at nature? Do we ourselves enjoy being outdoors or are we content spending time indoors, having no connection with our surroundings? Are we also unwittingly falling into this trap of treating nature as fragile and framing rules with the safety of the students in mind, thereby preventing them from freely exploring their natural environs? Are we being too systematic in our approach to environmental education that we leave no unstructured time with nature for our students? We too, as adults, need to change our mindsets about the perception of danger and safety for children when they are outdoors. Perhaps it is more dangerous to cross a road in a city these days than exploring the countryside.

We urgently need to examine new ways in which we can bring back the lost connection with nature in our schools and also sustain it through a wide variety of activities. This is especially needed in residential schools where children spend a greater part of their time in school and many such opportunities are available. This could involve relooking at the school schedules to deliberately free up spaces for children to spend more time outdoors and ensuring that these are optimally and profitably utilized. There could be nature explorer clubs which could encourage children to look out for things in the wild, with activities such as Migrant Watch or Season Watch. They could be encouraged to do hands-on work like photographing, sketching, writing poems on nature or model-making. Alternatively, several nature games such as treasure hunts and exercises could be held from time to time. Week-end camping or hiking could become more regular features of our schools. Very often children tend to operate as a group and rarely do they seem to get time on their own to observe or reflect on what is going on around them. Small groups or individuals could be encouraged to do specific activities like landscaping their immediate neighbourhood, working in the agricultural fields/gardens, visiting villages and learning about their life and working with farm animals.

More classes, especially those that readily lend themselves to the outdoors such as biology, social studies, art, and environmental science, should be held outdoors where students get a chance to explore nature on their own. I feel plant and animal diversity and morphology, ecology, soils,

weather, geology, map-reading, landscape and nature study in art easily lend themselves to outdoor studies. With a little imagination and planning, many subjects could be better understood through fieldwork and observation.

In conclusion, there can be no substitute for outdoor activities and first-hand experience of nature in an unstructured way. Virtual engagement with nature (if it can be so termed) such as videos or the internet will not fully help develop the connection with nature since this tends to focus only on the visual and auditory senses. But once you move outdoors, you tend to sense nature in all aspects—through all the senses—smell, sounds, touch, taste and sight. The tendency to sensationalize nature in some of the electronic media, or projecting nature as dangerous, creates misunderstanding about the true picture of what it is to be outdoors. The immense benefits that arise from a direct contact with nature—both physical and psychological—can never be obtained by virtual means.

‘Catch them young’ is the most effective way of developing a deep interest in nature in children.

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# Building Up and Coming Down

ANANDA WOOD



*Editors' Note: Ananda Wood writes about Indian philosophy, particularly on the themes of language, knowledge and consciousness. The following essay is taken from a collection titled 'Questioning Back In' available on the internet. We include it here because it opens up the question of how we understand perceptions of the world, as well as selfhood in that world, in a direct and intriguing manner. As educators, some of these questions are at the heart of our work.*

## Two ways of knowing

In the course of our lives, we seem to know things in two, rather different ways.

- At first it seems that we know things in pictures, which are made up from smaller pieces of perception. The problem here is that our senses and minds are partial. They see things only in bits and pieces. Our pictures put these bits and pieces together, so as to represent what has been seen.
- However, our pictures can be misleading. What they show us is sometimes proved wrong. Then it becomes evident that our pictures are not real knowledge, but only a superficial show. So we look for a second way of knowing things, beneath the show.

Of these two ways of knowledge, the first is habitual. It is our way of knowing as we *get on* with things and *get ahead* with our

lives. For then we use our pictures of the world to show us how to get the things we want. These pictures get built up in the course of long habit, as we go after our various limited objectives. So the pictures get limited and biased, by the limitations and the bias of our chosen objectives.

While attention is turned towards *getting on* and *getting ahead*, we take for granted our underlying beliefs and assumptions. But it is on the basis of these beliefs and assumptions that our objectives are chosen and our pictures are built. In the course of long habit, our beliefs and assumptions get more and more ingrained; so we become more and more ignorant of the hidden role they play in our pictures. We come to ignore the fact that our pictures are only a superficial show, built up for purposes of outward display, upon the basis of make-believe.

We thus confuse our surface pictures with real knowledge. The result of this confusion is the first, apparent way of knowing. The ancient Greek philosopher, Parmenides, called it the 'way of belief'. The original Greek word for 'belief' is 'doxa'. From it come English words like 'doctrine', 'dogma', 'orthodox' and 'paradox'. As this derivation suggests, the first, apparent way of knowing includes all forms of constructed knowledge founded upon assumptions and beliefs. That would include all myth and ritual, all religion, art and science.

The second way of knowing requires an about-turn: from building up to coming down. It is not concerned with *getting on* or *getting ahead* or with *getting things done*. Instead, it is what we seek when we try *getting to the bottom of things*.

Then we turn our attention back to a thorough questioning of our beliefs and assumptions. And here we look for what is plainly and simply true, beneath all the complications that we build from make-believe. We are looking for a ground of pure knowledge, which does not depend upon any seeming picture or any assumed belief.

This second approach to knowing is reflective. It reflects back from surface appearances, towards the underlying ground. Parmenides called it the 'way of truth'. All forms of constructed knowledge depend on it, whenever they question their foundations and come up with new pictures and

ideas. And it is the essence of philosophical investigation, which questions all pictures and ideas.

### **Making holes**

Our knowledge of the world is like a building with many floors. The top of the building is our superficial picture of the world. It is the apparent surface, where our usual life and our usual activities appear.

As we seem to live in this superficial picture, it obscures the building and the ground below. At the top of the building, as we look around us, we seem surrounded by the picture, and the appearances that it shows. So our perception is incomplete. We do not see what lies beneath the picture. We cannot tell what the picture is founded on, and we do not know quite what it means.

How can we look down, into the foundations of our constructed picture? Our usual way of trying this is to construct a little further. We build some further form of constructed knowledge, some further branch of religion or mysticism or art or science, which functions as an apparatus for digging or drilling down. And then we use this apparatus to make holes in the building of our constructed knowledge, so that we can look down into the lower floors and bring things up from below.

But making holes is a very limited way of examining the foundations of our picture. As we peep down through such holes, we

see very little of what lies beneath. As we look deeper, the darker things seem. However deep we look, there seem to be deeper foundations, lost in obscurity. We can of course use our digging or drilling apparatus to bring things up; but how much can we bring to the surface? As we bring up more and more from below, the picture on top gets more and more complicated, and more and more confused. There seems no end to the complication, as long as the foundations of knowledge are investigated in this way. It thus seems that philosophy is an impossibly difficult subject, and that the foundations of knowledge must always remain shrouded in darkness and mystery.

But such darkness and mystery are only apparent problems, which make a show at the surface. They only appear when one remains at the surface, while trying to investigate what is below. When one makes holes but doesn't go down oneself, then all one can do is to bring things up from below. Looking down from above can do nothing more than bringing up some bits and pieces of previously hidden information. And all bringing up only changes the surface. It is only a reconstruction, while the foundations remain below. As long as one doesn't go down oneself, the foundations must seem dark and mysterious.

### **Asking down**

How does one go down oneself, beneath one's picture of the world? For this to

happen, one's own self-image must come into question, along with the rest of the apparent world. If this self-image is left out of the investigation, then one stays at the surface of the picture, and what one sees is only superficial. As part of anyone's picture of the world, there is an image of the self that knows the picture. It is through this self-image that the pictured world is seen. For we do not see the world directly. We see it only through what we think we are, through the images we have of ourselves.

When the picture is in question, so too are our self-images, which are contained in it. Through such questioning, we go down beneath our self-images and see beneath the picture. As we go down, we are returning towards our home ground, from which our self-images have been built up. It is only thus, by returning homewards, that we see what underlies our pictures of the world.

As one thus returns, towards home ground, there is no need to change one's picture of the world. The picture is simply left behind, at the surface, while deeper pictures appear and disappear, on the way down. Finally, at the ground itself, there is no picture at all, for all construction has been left above.

It is only our pictures that change from moment to moment, and vary from person to person. They change because they keep being built and rebuilt, in everyone's experience. They vary because they are differently constructed, in different cultures

and in the differing experiences of different people. But, beneath all this change and variation in our pictures of the world, the underlying ground is always the same: anywhere, any time, and for everyone. It is

our home ground, the real self beneath all our differing self-images.

And it is all that's ever known—the ground of all reality, beneath all pictures and appearances.

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## Dialogue Through the Ages

NAGINI PRASAD



‘What do you think dialogue is all about?’

‘We think of all the bad things we have done and we share it!’ comes a quick reply from a junior school child. ‘It is about confessing,’ offers another generously, much to the amusement of the adults who may have a fleeting comical vision of themselves sitting at the receiving end in a confessional box! These children are not entirely incorrect; sometimes the discussions are about actual incidents or ‘wrongdoings’. However, they don’t stop at the discussion of the incident and those involved. Be it young children, teenagers or young adults, the incidents may vary, but the themes that emerge are remarkably the same. Of course, these themes are relevant for us as adults as well.

The question, ‘Why do we talk behind other people’s backs?’, raised by a middle school child, is as relevant for a nine-year-old as it is for a nineteen or a ninety-year-old. For the nine-year-old it may be grounded in a particular incident, with particular people. Finger pointing could be the starting point of the discussion. ‘He did!’ or ‘She did!’ Often, in the course of

discussion this moves to reflection, at least for that moment, to ‘I did too’ or ‘I also do’. For some children, that moment doesn’t last very long, but for others, even at this age, it becomes a part of their way of processing the world. They may be able to look at their own role or emotions in a conflict. Sometimes, the comments can get quite philosophical! For instance, in a discussion about a peer who often got easily upset, an eight-year-old questions, ‘How can you say you have made up your mind not to get upset when it is the same mind that is making you upset?’

As we move on to twelve to thirteen-year-olds, it is remarkable that they are able to start turning the questions around to themselves on their own, in ways that the adults present may never have done at their age. There is the possibility of moving away from a particular incident to a more general inquiry with many questions: ‘How does it make me feel when I gossip and why?’, ‘Why do I feel anger, jealousy, insecurity or a sense of division and what does it do to me?’, ‘Why am I restless or bored?’, or ‘Why do certain things make

me feel happy and what does this do to me?' They sometimes share experiences candidly from their own lives, both personal and at school. At times, when questions like, 'Why do we have to keep asking why?' or 'Do we have to talk about fear again?' arise, the half-joking response by the adult may be, 'Well, if you have solved the issue of fear and aren't scared of anything anymore, we needn't talk about it!' The children roll their eyes in mock irritation and we move on—either to continue talking about fear, or to their (momentary) relief, to bring in a new theme of anyone's choice.

The senior school students may engage in a discussion on the link between their ways of thinking and the crises of the world, how their relationships operate from the images (positive or negative) they have of each other, whether they can be sceptical of the absolute truth of their feelings or emotions, and so on. Again, a frank sharing by both adults and students, an ability to look inward and an interest in carrying the discussion forward are essential.

Sometimes a student will ask, 'You have been doing this for twenty years and haven't come to any answers. Most others who are not interested in all this seem to be living just fine. So why must we ask all this of ourselves?' It is not always easy to respond to this. Firstly, the assumption that the 'others' they refer to are 'fine' is not apparent at all. Further, asking such questions of oneself and each other does not guarantee arriving at a state of

happiness. We ask these questions because they seem important, shake us out of our comfort zone and hopefully inform our approach to life.

Discussions amongst the adult teacher group may continue along similar themes: Why and how are we creating divisions between ourselves and others? Even in very amicable relationships, our thoughts can be divisive and make us feel separate. It is not only when we feel threatened that this happens, but perhaps one leads to the other, sometimes in a vicious cycle. A sense of threat (to my ideas, job, family, values, beliefs—the list goes on) gives rise to divisive thoughts, placing myself 'against' another. This further feeds into that sense of threat. Perhaps it is the other way and we begin with divisive thoughts which then give rise to a sense of threat and lack of security, and so on. Do we recognize all this in ourselves? Sometimes it is very subtle. Is it only when we reach a moment of actual conflict with another that we reflect and realize this, or can we be aware of these thoughts as they appear?

Why am I focusing largely on what may be termed 'negative' emotions? After all, our lives also feature happiness, joy, elation and other 'positive' emotions or highs. And of course there are the moments of neutrality, of being neither high nor low. Personally, though I may at times wonder about the nature of happiness or what causes such feelings in me, I am not in any hurry to get rid of them! I want to cling to

them, to compare them to my moments of sorrow or hurt, realizing how much more pleasurable these highs or times of neutrality are, and I don't want to let go. Considering all this, we revisit the point of how we process the world around us; can we see that the problems are not just 'out there' and separate from us? Do we acknowledge our role, our state of mind, our thoughts and emotions as part of the picture? How sceptical are we of our emotions and perceptions of the world around us, no matter where they lie on this spectrum of positive to negative?

Back to the school setting and after much discussion, sharing and some moments of insight, we often catch the children and ourselves indulging in behaviours and patterns which we may have just put under the scanner! And back to the drawing board we go! But there seems to be some learning in the process—the eight year-old-boy, who at the beginning of the year had thought dialogue was all about sharing the 'bad things' we do, now says, 'It is about what is on our mind.' Well, one hopes this is not limited to the 'bad things' we do!

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## The Art of Inquiry in the Literature Classroom: Musings from an Ex-English Teacher

MEREDY BENSON RICE



*There is no Frigate like a Book  
To take us Lands away,  
Nor any Coursers like a Page  
Of prancing Poetry.*

*This Traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of Toll;  
How frugal is the Chariot  
That bears a Human soul!*

So wrote Emily Dickinson almost 200 years ago; for me, these words still hold true and are dear to my heart. I have always loved literature, largely because of the sentiments expressed in Dickinson's poem. A great story, an engaging novel, or a beautifully metered poem give me affordable access to foreign lands, intriguing eras of the past or predictions of the future, insightful observations about human behaviour and consciousness and most importantly, unexpected revelations about the deepest levels of my 'self'.

Unfortunately, as a literature major in college, I frequently found myself loving literature less, not more, because the level of analysis was so abstractly intellectual. Those questions that interested me the most—what am I learning about history or culture, what am I learning about the human condition, and what am I learning about myself—were relegated to the basement while we tackled such papers as *The Role of the Fool in Shakespeare* or *Metaphor and Agency in the Work of James Joyce*. Don't get me wrong—there is plenty of great learning happening through in-depth literary analysis, but I wanted that learning to connect to my life and my choices as to how I might live it. That need largely went unmet.

These were the memories I pondered intently when I began teaching high school English at Oak Grove School. I wanted the students to love our study of literature, and I wanted them to feel its relevance to their lives. After much trial and error developing ‘essential questions’ for my units of study, one day I had an ‘aha’ moment—why not utilize those three simple questions I had asked myself when I first developed a passion for literature? The result was rich, deep, and for the most part engaging and enjoyable for the students.

### **What am I learning about history and/or culture?**

Depending on the text, this question can be the most straightforward of the three. Students can take note of the historical or cultural information related or inferred via the text. Students note observations in their reading logs as information comes to them, documenting textual evidence to support their observations. For example, in a text like *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, students would note observations about the historical period and place, including cultural norms around patriarchy, marriage, motherhood, woman’s independence, gender relationships, hierarchies of power and class issues. In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, students would record observations about racial injustice, issues of class, gender roles, and attitudes towards innocence in the American South of the mid-20th century.

Some texts allow for more complex observations about history and culture. For example, Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, which utilizes a previous time in history (the Salem witch trials) as an allegory about a contemporary issue (McCarthyism), provides an opportunity to learn both about early American colonial life and the mid-20th century McCarthy era. Likewise, a dystopian novel such as *1984* by George Orwell provides an opportunity to learn about the historical period around when the novel was written and what forces were at work to compel the author to write this book. It also allows the reader to look backwards from the present time and consider a work about “the future” from the point of view of a future beyond.

All sorts of sub-sets to the question of historical/cultural learning also arise: How do we know if this depiction is historically accurate? From whose point of view are we seeing history? What voices might be missing? How is the cultural perspective of the author possibly influencing the writing?

### **What am I learning about the human condition?**

Within the context of a Krishnamurti school, this question initiates deep and interesting discussion. The students begin with clarifying what we mean by

the human condition. For high school students this is most simply explained as human behaviour that appears to trap the individual into outcomes that they don't necessarily anticipate or want, but at some level cannot help because of their 'humanness'. It gives the students an opportunity to take a close look at human behaviour, the underlying motivation of that behaviour, and/or the unconscious manifestation of behaviour, without any sense of fear or exposure from their own lives or the lives around them. Consideration of the human condition includes human nature, human society and the fundamental issues of human existence.

In some ways, a piece of literature that tries to describe and engage with this 'human condition' is exactly why we call it literature as opposed to pulp fiction. Literature that thematically explores and asks the reader to consider such questions as how we live our lives, deal with death, experience love, fear, loss, alienation or relationship is worthy of study and stands the test of time. Likewise, literature that questions whether we are inherently good or evil, whether we are determined by genetics or environment, or whether we are controlled by destiny or free will, is rich material for the high school classroom. And finally, if a piece of literature asks us to consider our relationship to each other, our sense of equity and social justice, or our relationship to nature and the environment, the impact on high school students will be noteworthy.

As an example, while studying a novel such as *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, we suggest that students consider what they observe about 'the human condition' while they read. Do they think humans by nature are driven to be 'civilized'—following rules and behaving morally—or are humans by nature driven to seek power over others, act selfishly and indulge in gratuitous violence? Where, on the scale of human behaviour, would individual students see themselves in Golding's novel and why? What are the roots of anger, violence, or the need to dominate another? Is it possible to free ourselves from these inclinations? These lead seamlessly into the questions Krishnamurti was so keen to have us explore.

### **What am I learning about myself?**

This can be the most challenging question for high school students; it can also be the best access point to a piece of literature when the teacher is having trouble getting the students to go beyond 'I liked (or didn't like) this book'. When there is either a positive or negative response to a text, it is interesting

to probe into the root of the student response. Just as in life, it is easier for the student or teacher to either wax lyrical or be critical about a particular character, scene, or dialogue than to ask what it is in themselves that is reacting in this particular way and why.

I first discovered the power of this question when I taught the book *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe to my 10th grade students. The class unanimously responded to the reading with 'I hate this book!' and I was struggling to know how to move forward. Before even tackling the questions of what we could learn about history and culture or what we could learn about the human condition, I needed a way to get the students over their extreme negative reaction. What better way than to ask: What is it in you that is reacting so strongly and why?

After much discussion, the students and I began to make a connection between the struggles they were feeling as teenagers and the struggle of Okonkwo. At some unconscious level, the students were reacting to Okonkwo as a character representative of their own closely felt dilemmas regarding parental pressure, peer pressure, and societal pressure to 'measure up'. The students often, like Okonkwo, felt one way and acted another in order to keep up appearances and expectations. Once these associations were explored and discussed, the students were able to have a more empathetic relationship to Okonkwo's character and we were ready to proceed with analysis of the text, looking at what we were learning about history and culture and the human condition.

Through this article I have attempted to share some reflections on using three simple questions to explore the 'frugal Chariot that bears the Human soul!' I don't teach high school English anymore, but in retrospect I realize how fortunate I was to teach in a Krishnamurti school environment, one that fosters inquiry at the most profound levels. As Krishnamurti says in *Education and the Significance of Life*, 'To understand life is to understand ourselves, and is both the beginning and the end of education.' I'm confident that my students learnt the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and I hope that those skills continue to serve them well; but more importantly I know that our literature classroom provided a place to explore our understanding of the world, ourselves and life as a whole.

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## In A Faraway Land: The Thinking Behind a School Excursion

THEJASWI SHIVANAND



*Everything's mine but just on loan,  
nothing for the memory to hold,  
though mine as long as I look.*

*Inexhaustible, unembracable,  
but particular to the smallest fibre,  
grain of sand, drop of water—  
landscapes.*

*I won't retain one blade of grass  
as it's truly seen.*

- Wislawa Szymborska,  
*Travel Elegy* (from *Salt*, 1962)

'Where are we going for excursions this year?' is invariably one of the early questions we face as the children return to begin a new year at Centre For Learning. A few months down the line, after a series of meetings, much negotiation and planning, the mad rush to buy precious sleeper class train tickets, making lists of instructions, packing and the frenzied run to catch the train, we are off to different corners of India. Excursions are memorable events and a storehouse of tales retold and embellished. New friendships

are made and old ones renewed. Places and experiences are eagerly devoured. While fun-filled excursions give us these indelible memories, the trips themselves perhaps serve a purpose beyond seeing the sights.

### **In search of the global mind**

Daily routines are a part of our school life: meals at certain times, time-tabled classes, quiet time, bath time, study time. We often tend to be busy people, revelling in routine. Routines seem to extend to relationship, where images and emotional patterns rule the inner landscape. For us, the question is

whether a pause is possible in this relentless image-making. We attempt to create opportunities for these pauses, from one-minute silences to longer sessions of quiet time, 'non-days', spontaneous breaks in the routine, dialogues, nature walks and excursions. What happens in an excursion that may be different from daily routine? After all, it is the same people travelling together, with the same images and the same emotional patterns.

Any amount of knowledge accumulated through reading and instruction might not allow for an insight into the human condition, the source of misery around the world. On the other hand, will any first-hand sensory experience of the varied ramifications and scales of constructive and destructive human action, differences and divides bring about any fundamental change in our inner lives? Is it possible to acquire a 'global mind', beyond narrow images and identities, through specific experiences? I do not know.

Perhaps, at the broadest and most accessible level, we can look at excursions as a space away from daily school routines, giving us an opportunity to explore the human condition. I'm under no illusions, however. Excursions give rise to tenuous, fragmentary, self-referential memories which, as Szyborska suggests in her poem, will be used to buttress the very identities that we would like to question deeply.

An excursion should challenge the mind and the body in many ways. It is

perhaps in these challenges that we will be able to step out of our comfort zones and look at ourselves differently. Will physical challenges like treks and cycling, travel by walk and public transport, simple accommodation and food, looking at sights beyond the tourist circuit and listening to people living on the edge wake us up from our somnambulant states? We attempt such ambitious excursions at CFL.

There are two essential aspects of excursions as we plan them at CFL. The first is a broad consensus on 'excursion axioms' arrived at after many years of experience and discussion, and this merits some elaboration. The second concerns the role of the adults involved in the excursion, and experience has indicated that this plays as key a role in shaping and holding the excursion experience.

### **Excursion axioms**

The first axiom is that every child must be a part of every excursion experience. I guess that since we are rather keen on fundamentally transforming minds, perhaps we would rather not let anyone miss a shot at *nirvana*! The second axiom is that excursions for different groups are fixed based on several years of experimentally determined durations, in an age-appropriate manner. The younger groups go for about a week to ten days, and the older ones for two to three weeks. The third axiom is that we use public transport wherever possible (railway sleeper classes and bumpy buses are the staple) and stay in basic accommo-

dation (a large room and a clean loo usually does the trick!). Songs and snacks usually make these otherwise challenging trips possible. The fourth axiom is related to group size. Experience has indicated that excursion groups of ten to eighteen students with two or three adults work well, and this might mean having vertical groups going together.

A more recent, and much discussed axiom, is one of mixing teachers normally not in contact with the children with those who do, in accompanying them on excursions—senior school teachers going with younger groups and vice versa. This perhaps allows the children to establish relationships with other adults in their lives and give a break from closely relating to a smaller group of adults back in school.

Most excursions of the junior school include physically challenging activities (short treks, swimming) in or near forested areas. Middle school excursions include similar experiences, perhaps in combination with visits to historic locations. The group often stays with people and organizations working in the area visited. A group of ten-year-olds might visit a shipyard in coastal Maharashtra, trek in the Radhanagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, visit old churches and stay with a person who works with books and children in Goa.

Students thirteen years and older routinely go on excursions at least two weeks long across India. They often stay with organizations that work with the

marginalized sections of society, for instance with tribes in various parts of central India, or with people displaced by mining or dams. These experiences can have a significant impact on our students and on ourselves. They challenge our secure lives on one hand and, on the other, bring home the timeless recursive quality of human conditioning. Vanastree near Sirsi in Karnataka, and the Mozda Collective in southern Gujarat, are community-based organizations we visit with the oldest students, and they have a special place in the hearts and minds of every child and adult. Older students also make repeated trips to a botanical sanctuary at the edge of the rainforest in Wyanad, Kerala. Students have taken part in the life of the community there, and have gained valuable insights into the place of rivers, forests, forest people, orchids and elephants in their own lives! The Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary has been a key inspiration for the continuing focus on nature education at CFL. Our students deeply appreciate these special places as pockets where a different kind of living is being attempted, with people connecting to their landscape in a holistic way. These visits are also opportunities to ask ourselves questions regarding global, anthropogenic, social and environmental disasters, and possibly relate these to the divisive movements in the mind's emotional landscape.

Senior excursions also include historical and cultural visits. In an excursion

with a group of fifteen and sixteen year olds to Kutch, we visited various villages exploring craft traditions of the region and stayed with organizations assisting revival of traditional crafts after the 2001 earthquake. We also explored the mediaeval town of Bhuj, the Dholavira ruins of the Indus Valley vintage and a shipyard in Mandvi, which builds giant wooden ships that were the mainstay in trade in the Arabian Sea until the last century. After watching flamingos on the coast and rare desert wildlife in the Rann of Kutch, we finally ended the eighteen-day excursion with a visit to the Marine National Park near Jamnagar to observe human impact (the opening of a new port and the dredging of the Gulf of Kutch) on shallow marine life.

Senior school children also go on a Himalaya trek. These treks push the physical and psychological limits in a manner that is possible only by the sheer vertical presence of the Himalayas. Many children have highlighted the Himalayan excursions as the most memorable in the spectrum of excursions they experience through their CFL years. The rapid changes in plant and animal life in response to altitude, the incredible diversity of micro-climates and habitats, the remarkable resilience of the people, the dramatic shifts in the simultaneously ephemeral and permanent mountain landscape make such treks a humbling experience in the face of one's own little private troubles. There is an indescribable quality to the challenge the

living mountains pose to our conditioning, such that in their presence, any psychological movement away from our self-image is a revelation. Perhaps it is sheer joy in experiencing an unfathomable vastness that can be compared only to the ocean or outer space.

### **Adults: facilitators, observers, or both?**

While the most memorable moments in an excursion happen spontaneously, a certain degree of planning is necessary for the rest of the trip! Taking care of itineraries, stay, food and ticket booking are all possible beforehand. In younger groups, the adults plan the excursion experience keeping in mind the abilities of the children, but with the aim of challenging them as well. The role of the adult for older children can be more in the nature of holding the experience, in shaping outlines, indicating points of interest and assisting in coalescing understanding in the process. The senior students can be involved in planning the excursions to different degrees. There can be opportunities for students to be by themselves for periods of time, solo quiet time for instance, or short exploratory trips in small groups.

Younger children are emotionally dependent on the adults in unfamiliar terrain and company. So the teacher has to respond to emotional demands and deal with emergencies, judging the levels of emotional distress, if any. With older ones, the adults have the delicate task of judging

the nature of the group and deciding on the right degree of 'holding'. If the group is held too tightly, tensions might build up and lead to confrontations. If the group is held in a very relaxed manner, then chaos can rule! Regular feedback sessions can help sort out matters. In this matter, watching one's own emotional states is also crucial.

What are some of the other responsibilities teachers hold during excursions? Rarely do they become responsible for the very lives of the children, as teachers taking a group of children to Uttarkashi discovered when the earthquake struck during their excursion to Uttarakhand in northern India in 1991! They all emerged from the incident safely, without bruises, but shaken and incommunicado for a day or two—those were the days before the mobile phone networks. I can imagine the panic of the parents, but I can also admire the relatively calm teachers as they extricated

themselves and the students through landslides and a near impossible transport situation! More routinely, there is the responsibility for money carried and keeping accounts and bills.

A good excursion can be a rewarding experience for children and adults in many ways. The memories generated are recollected without attempt at fidelity, and whether challenged or otherwise, can become points of coming together. However, there can be other points of coming together that may not involve memory, a non-verbal space of shared quiet and reflection, which may strike at the very roots of our identity. Every excursion leaves me with an unanswered, perhaps futile, question: what is the meaning of human existence? But every excursion also contributes to the question through the experiences and the children that I travel with, and the question gains very personal, present and future, meanings.

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# The Buddha, Rodin's Thinker and a Pair of Birds: An Exploration into the Nature of Human Consciousness

○ R RAO



*Two birds, inseparable companions, cling to the self-same tree. Of these, one eats the sweet fruit and the other looks on without eating<sup>1</sup>.*

When we contemplate the mystery of the origin, existence and ultimate destiny of the universe, we ask the perennial questions, ‘What is a human being in this universe, and what is the meaning of human life in it?’ These naïve, child-like questions are ever with us in the background of our minds as brooding presences, whether we choose to be aware of them consciously or not. Most of the time we do not articulate them consciously, plunged as we are in the midst of the affairs of our lives, planning and nurturing our hopes, fears, desires and ideals, trying to be in control of our destinies, or more modestly, of our destinations.

## **Radical incompleteness**

Perhaps this state of being immersed is inevitable. We are plunged into the centre of the medley called life, in which there is always a sense of incompleteness. We sense that we are on the point of turning a corner—a turning that will bring about a sense of completeness and wholeness in our being. Yet we never seem to turn that elusive corner. There are always unsolved problems of practical import, unresolved issues of relationships, fears of what the future has in store for us. A sense of a radical incompleteness haunts us. We hope to improve, make efforts and even perhaps succeed in some measure in improving our relationships and in settling practical matters. We even feel that with growing experience, our understanding of life has improved. We pay attention to our fears and in some measure, come to terms with them. But still, we feel that even these better states of mind are only a

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<sup>1</sup>The Mundaka and Svetesvatara Upanishads.

mask for a deeper unease that pervades our being. A sense of incompleteness, a residue, remains. And in the meanwhile,

And the days are not full enough  
And the nights are not full enough  
And life slips by like a field mouse  
Not shaking the grass.<sup>2</sup>

‘But surely,’ you might be tempted to protest, ‘all this is an exaggeration. Millions of people do lead very full and fulfilling lives. Parents all over the world overcome all kinds of hardships to bring up their children, educate them and help them secure a good foothold in society. Millions world-wide find fulfilment in building honourable careers, and in marriage and family life. Many dedicate their lives to working for worthy causes to help those who are in dire need of help. All this effort involves the exercise of our full human faculties, and does give a real sense of meaning to life. There are also the exceptional people who are specially gifted in the fields of art, science, music and literature, whose achievements are honoured by society. Hence, to say that the lives of the generality of human beings are pervaded by a sense of futility and meaninglessness would be a gross exaggeration.’

Yet, even admitting all this, who among us is a total stranger to the ‘blank misgivings of a creature moving about in worlds not realized’?<sup>3</sup> ‘Hope springs eternal in the human breast,’<sup>4</sup> and what is hope if not a sign of incompleteness? We are incomplete beings yearning to be made whole, dogged by a sense of unease and restlessness.

Even scientific truth, under whose aegis we live in the modern world because of the technological success that it delivers, can give us only representations and explanations of phenomena, but explanations cannot appease our hunger for meaning. Explanations and representations give us conceptual truth, which is the coherence of our concepts with what we call ‘reality’, but we are asking for the coherence of the whole of being with the whole of that reality. What we ask for is existential living truth, and not merely the explanatory truth of concepts. Scientific explanatory theories give us life-

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<sup>2</sup> Ezra Pound.

<sup>3</sup> William Wordsworth: *Ode On the Intimations of Immortality*

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Pope: *Essay on Man*

saving therapies and techniques, for which we are grateful. But what we are asking for are the life-giving waters.

When we take these thoughts sufficiently to heart, and when we begin to doubt the efficacy of our ideals, life experiences and systems of knowledge to give us the meaning and wholeness we seek, we may begin to look in a different direction, and our eyes may happen to alight upon the beautiful metaphor from the Upanishads quoted at the beginning of this article.

In this metaphor, the two birds symbolize the two primordial aspects of our being, the one which is immersed in Nature and in Society, and the other aspect which stands apart, not engaged in any activity but only watching. It is the silent Witness of all that is going on.

The first bird, which eats the sweet and bitter fruit, has much in common with us. Like us, she not only eats the sweet and bitter fruits of life, but she also 'knows' many things. She or he knows how to build a nest expertly (witness the skill of the tailor bird which can build nests that can withstand the severest storms). She knows when and whom to select as a mate after the courtship display, how to brood over the eggs, how to feed the chicks and how to teach her fledglings to fly. As we go up in the ascending scale of evolution, we find a corresponding ascending scale of consciousness and 'knowledge' in the higher animals, as for instance in dogs which save their masters from dangerous situations, and chimpanzees which can use sticks as tools for some purposes.

### **Self-awareness**

While we find this gradually ascending scale of consciousness and 'knowledge' in the process of evolution, we also find, when we come to the human being in this process, that there is an abrupt break in the gradual ascension. The bird and dog 'know' many things, but we alone know that we know, are conscious that we are conscious. It is our self-awareness, our knowledge that we know, that makes the crucial difference between human beings and all other sentient beings.

We are amphibious beings who are part of Nature; but we have, unlike other sentient beings, no given fixed nature. The other beings, though they 'know' many things, know only as per the modes of knowing given to them by Nature. They act, not by choice, but mostly according to the instincts of 'flight or fight'.

But with the appearance of the human being on the scene, there arises a consciousness of time, of a time which has passed and a time which is to arrive, or of time which is passing and arriving at the same time! There appears also the notion of choice of action, that of a freedom to act in one way or another. And with the sense of time passing comes also the consciousness of a death in which all life has to end. With this development, a new entity not found in the rest of the animal kingdom, that of a self-aware being, has entered the world.

We see here the nature of the break between the self-aware human being and other sentient beings. While all other beings have their fixed, given and defined natures according to which they act, the self-aware consciousness is open and free; it has no defined structure. It is not an object among other objects. On the other hand, only through awareness are objects known at all. In our pair of birds, the one which calmly looks on, without getting involved in any action, is the symbol of this awareness.

It is from such a consciousness that we claim that we are separate from whatever we are conscious of. I as a knower am separate from what I know, and also from what I think, for thinking and thoughts are also objects in my consciousness. I am the knower of things and the thinker of thoughts. I can deploy my thoughts to know the nature of things. Thus, I as a thinker am in full bloom as a being separate from my thought which I can use, control, deploy. It is through this ability to deploy thought for human purposes and to store knowledge in human collective memory that human cultures and civilizations have grown and flourished.

### **The self as fiction?**

However, it is here that Krishnamurti proves to be the stumbling-block in our path. He challenges the very notion that such a self separate from its thoughts, desires, ideals and so on, exists. (By 'thought' Krishnamurti means that complex movement of thoughts, desires and volitional impulses which are active in us). In fact, he asserts that such a self is a fiction, there is no self which is separate from its contents. 'The thinker is the thought'. Neither can this so-called 'thinker' control the thoughts it has. The situation is reversed. 'The controller is the controlled'. It is the thoughts which control the putative controlling self.

When we hear the assertion 'the thinker is the thought' for the first time, our immediate reaction may be to reject its claim. We may say, 'How can this

be true? My thoughts may delude or mislead me, but surely, even then, how can it be denied that I who am deluded am separate from the thoughts which delude me?’

I may say this with greater or lesser vehemence depending on my involvement in this issue, but while I am responding or reacting in this manner, something else has happened, unnoticed by me. In denying the truth of Krishnamurti’s assertion, *I have become the denier of that assertion*. An image of myself—a self-image—has arisen in me as the denier of the assertion. In fact, I have become that image. This self-image has usurped the place of that self-aware consciousness in me, which is the mark of humanness. I have become ‘occupied territory,’ occupied by the thoughts of assertion and denial. Instead of my deploying and being in control of my thoughts, these thoughts and the self-image engendered by them are now controlling my being and what happens in it. ‘The controller is the controlled’.

‘Why and how does this happen?’ The simple answer is that I am not grounded strongly enough to maintain myself in that open, free awareness which is the distinguishing mark of humanity. ‘Human kind cannot bear very much reality’<sup>5</sup>—the reality of openness and freedom which self-awareness brings. And because I am too weak to maintain myself in openness, which is a free undefined state, I rush to define myself, to give myself an identity. In this self-definition I find safety from freedom and openness. Between two aspects of my being, of being involved in thoughts, emotions and actions versus being fully aware of what is going on, I have opted for the former alone, and forgotten the latter.

Krishnamurti’s statement about the identity of Thinker and Thought has thus given us a deep insight into our habitual way of functioning in the world. In meeting life, it is not we as conscious free agents who are doing so, but the thought-feeling-volition complex which is doing it. Both in dealing with practical issues and in responding in human relationship, it is the self-image which is active. It is our first line of defence (or attack, if it comes to that) and herein lies the seed of all the conflicts which are endemic in society. Given that the self-image is a custom-built, highly personalized structure carrying all the memories, experiences, thoughts and impulses with all the accumulated energies that these elements carry, conflict in the nexus of all these highly

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<sup>5</sup> T S Eliot: *Burnt Norton*

differentiated and individualized self-images which we call society, is guaranteed. And when individual images coalesce into the collective images of nation, community, race, colour, ideology or religion, as they inevitably do (as a collective self-image provides an even stronger source of identity than an individual image can), we understand what Krishnamurti means when he says 'War is the spectacular outward projection of our inner conflict.'

When we scrutinize this whole process closely, paying attention to its structure and formation—both at the individual and collective levels—and see it in all its details, we see through its deceptive nature also. We see that the self-image, both individual and collective, which has obscured the clarity of our self-awareness, is a thought-fabricated entity. A feeling of great relief comes over us; a weight has rolled off our chests and we breathe more freely. Why? By seeing through the nature of the self-image, we have regained the clarity of the original human self-awareness. We have returned to the other essential aspect of our being, namely, of clear, silent awareness, which marks humanness uniquely. In the light of this self-awareness, we have had the insight that the obscuring self-image, which prevents us from seeing clearly, is not such a substantial entity after all. We are now aware that thoughts form only a part of our being (even if we include in the term 'thought' all the feelings and volitional impulses which invariably go with it). Our being is not exhausted by the 'thought-feeling-volition' complex which is active within it. We are clearly aware of the existence of the complex in the field of our consciousness, as part of the contents of our being. The part cannot usurp the place of the whole being. This part has now been seen for what it is. As such it no longer has the power to hold us in thrall. We can look through it and past it.

### **The art of living**

Now we feel that we have stepped out of a stale, conflict-ridden atmosphere into a purer air and clearer light. Spiritually we breathe more freely in an open, bracing atmosphere. As we look around we look at the world and at life with fresh eyes, from which the dust, or at least some of it, has been wiped. Every element in our experience—Nature, people, our relationships, and the thought-feeling complex itself (for it is still there, though with a reduced potency)—is now seen and felt with a keener sensibility. These elements, which are contained within our conscious being, stand out in clearer outline and more vibrantly. This is no rosy prospect; conflicts and disharmonies continue to exist. But because some clarity has been gained, we have more

energy to face them. Our energies flow out towards all the elements in life more freely and spontaneously. In short, we feel more alive.

We appreciate Nature's beauty more vividly, and we are also aware of its impersonal 'ruthless aspect,' such as life feeding on life, and the pains our own bodies have to undergo. In our relationships with people we do not claim to be free of the self-image—far from it. But because we have had some insight into its genesis and nature, it has somewhat less of a hold over us. Since we know that our point of view in any given situation is bound to be a relative one, and so are the points of view of others, our relationships have an open quality which they lacked earlier. Even in situations in which we confront closed, self-image driven views, we try to remain open. The determination to remain open has the potential to change the quality of the relationship. In fact, we are aware that the self-image is a permanent presence in us that cannot be completely done away with. But in this very awareness lies our strength.

Krishnamurti was sometimes questioned about what the social efficacy of a few persons engaging in self-inquiry of this sort could be, but those were wrong questions. The issue is not one of utility or efficacy. This is simply what we do and 'this' is the 'art of living'. Art is not 'for' any consequential outcome, but something practised for its own sake, for the meaning which is intrinsic to it. And this answers our original question about the meaning and purpose of life. These, we now realize, cannot be sought in the realm of explanations, or in any type of consequence-based activity. Meaning and purpose can only come unsought as we fully exercise the self-aware consciousness which is the original mark of humanity.

When we do this, the art of living becomes real for us. The medium in which this art works is the whole field of relationship, which is life. Two major themes in this art are those of peace and harmony. Now we realize that peace and harmony can only come as spontaneous expressions of this art, and not through external moral prescriptions and exhortations.

But what of that second bird on the tree? Have we forgotten her? No, for it is only through her 'actionless-action' of silent Witnessing of all that goes on in Nature, Mind and Society that we have been able to understand their structure. This whole analysis has been enabled only by her silent witnessing. She is the symbol of our essential nature, that of a fully aware consciousness. This, we venture to say, is what Krishnamurti meant by the term 'Observerless observation'. We are under no illusion that such a pure observing state is a

goal that can be attained once and for all—far from it. Rather, it is the never-to-be reached zero point, the spiritual analogue of the notion of the ‘limit’ in the differential calculus which is forever being approached but is never reached. We are aware that such an observation has to be maintained again and again against the pull of our unconscious thoughts, feelings and urges.

We need to forestall also one possible misunderstanding which could arise as a result of undertaking this inward journey—the misunderstanding that this inquiry amounts to a radical devaluation of the role of thinking in the life of humanity. Of course no such simple-minded conclusion is intended. Here we are making an important distinction between thought and thinking. The former is the thought complex building the self-image out of our past experiences and obscuring our awareness. The latter is an activity undertaken in the light of full awareness in the present, responding to whatever is present. This distinction is clear in Krishnamurti’s teachings. It is the human capacity for unbiased thinking about the structure of the world and of our experience in it that has given us the great scientific and technological, artistic and cultural achievements of which we are the beneficiaries. It is thinking that is unbiased yet passionate, detached yet involved, and open yet critical, which has given us these achievements.

Having started with one striking metaphor involving a pair of figures, we may fairly end with another pair, that of Rodin’s thinker and of the meditating Buddha. Rodin’s thinker symbolizes thinking at its best—unbiased and impersonal—and to him we owe all the benefits of culture, art and science. The meditating Buddha symbolizes pure Witnessing, the actionless-action of self-aware consciousness. And we may venture to assert that unless Rodin’s thinker sits at the feet of the Buddha, there will not be an end to conflict in the human world.

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# The Mirror of the Text: Teaching Philosophy Through Knowing and Not-Knowing

VALENTIN GERLIER



## Introduction

When teaching academic philosophy, one never ceases to be amazed at how little a subject once termed ‘the love of wisdom’ has to do with ‘wisdom’, let alone ‘love’. Studying philosophy in an academic context has come to mean studying the *history* of philosophy, whether historically as a continuum of theories dependent on cultural context, or ahistorically as a series of logical problems. Academic philosophy has moved away from the contemplative sense alluded to above, and is too often limited to the critical study of rational thought. Such limits can cause difficulties to an honest and passionate truth-seeker such as many of our students, since the academic pursuit of philosophy seems to offer everything except the possibility to actually *do* philosophy. At best, students are expected to summarize and comment on how others may have done it.

My contention in this article is that it is possible to remain true to this spirit of passionate interest whilst not necessarily bypassing an engagement with the body of work now called philosophy. Teaching philosophy at Brockwood Park has led me to explore ways in which this relationship between a freedom of inquiry that is authentic to the students and the insights and concerns developed in the philosophical tradition could be maintained and nourished. Thus, the philosophy classes at Brockwood have moved away from being lecture-based (the staple diet of much traditional education) or teacher-based to being *text-based*. It is my sense, in fact, that far more than being a lifeless preventive for true inquiry, a philosophical text can turn into a surprising ally in our quest for wisdom. This, however, means that the text must change status—from being a structured written piece closed in on itself, which students must learn to decode, analyse and comment on,

it must become an *open mirror*, a reflective participant in our journey into self-understanding.

### **The text as mirror**

But how is this to be done? To be sure, studying a text can be one of the most deeply unrewarding of school activities. In fact, a text—whether a book, a poem, or a short extract—is often presented to students as already imprisoned in a sort of cultural and curricular straightjacket: a straightjacket made up of facts surrounding the author, of cultural background, of socio-political ‘context’, of exam requirements, and of layers and layers of minutiae-based academic analysis. The text, destined to a death by a thousand contextual qualifications, has no room to breathe; and neither, therefore, has the student. And to add to this general sorry state of affairs, the student of philosophy will often be presented with philosophical writings *always already with the assumption* that what is before them is to be understood as a written record of rational theories and doctrines about things, a body of dry logical arguments to be analysed and understood, with no existential, ‘lived’ dimension. To give an example, philosophy textbooks are likely to propose that ‘Plato believed this’ or ‘held so and so to be true’ without ever taking into account that the dialogues of Plato are precisely that—*dialogues*. As such, they are written in the mode of question and answer, where the various characters of the dialogue consider fundamental questions together, examining and exposing assumptions, and deepening various modes of coming at the questions. And of course, most of these questions have no answers. ‘Answers’ in Plato fall away, for a dialogue tells the story of a way of understanding rooted in inspired *questioning*, a questioning which ultimately seeks to move beyond strictly rational knowledge and the limits of the human mind, precisely because it is primarily motivated by what is beyond those limits. As such the Platonic ‘dialectic’ lets the truth appear *through* speech (*dia-logos*) and not *within it*. What is true becomes manifest as a result of this careful, attentive journey into inquiry, and is not limited to any particular verbalization within the inquiry itself.

Philosophy, for Plato, is a fundamental attitude of being, a way of seeing things that involves an openness and caring dedication to the beholding of wisdom. In Plato this wisdom is always a *seeing*, a beholding of what things are, as they are, and can never be reduced or limited to a mere theoretical grasping. Thus wisdom cannot be ‘taught’—as Socrates shows again and again by

refuting the leading sophists of his day—as it can never be at the disposal of the human mind, which would reduce it to a technique or method. Seeing the truth—*Noesis*—implies a movement of the mind through and beyond its rational structures. I stress *through*, because this is how, specifically, philosophical inquiry comes into play. ‘Going beyond’ theoretical grasping cannot be equated to simply ‘bypassing’. For Plato, philosophical thinking is, in essence, ‘a dialogue of the soul with itself’.<sup>1</sup>

The whole structure of questioning reflection, of inquiry, of staying with profound questions, comes to light through our mindful engagement with the world and happens in dialogue with it, and not by simply forcefully silencing it or switching it off. This also expresses itself through our mind’s engagement and an insightful understanding of the mind will not take place if the concern is to bypass it on account of its supposed ‘negative’ influence. Thus philosophical questions are about things that ultimately concern *us*. They spring from the relationship with our life as a whole, from our response to the world, from our encounter with others, from the things we hold to be ultimately meaningful. We are now a long way from textbooks and their ‘Plato believed this’ and ‘held this to be true’!

Of course, translating this lofty pursuit to the situation of the classroom can be tricky, especially if one’s starting point is the somewhat artificial situation of being a ‘teacher’, having to impart some kind of knowledge, knowledge about an author or a school of thought. But as we have seen, ‘knowledge about’ is not the aim of a true philosophical dialogue—the Socratic ‘knowing that one does not know’<sup>2</sup>, far more than an elegant and somewhat tautological platitude, indicates that the truest knowledge happens when knowing and not knowing are engaged together, for only in this way can the structures of knowing be exploded by the luminous insight that is not-knowing.

This may all be very well, but how does this knowing-not-knowing work with regards to a text? Is not a text the opposite to this movement, a statement of ‘the known’, a gathering of information, the reflection of the author’s views and theories, something that, in fact, can only and ever be ‘known about’? It is

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<sup>1</sup> *Sophist*, 264a. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Although intimated in the *Apology*, the *Meno* and other Platonic works, the phrase, as a truism-like motto, actually appears nowhere in Plato, a fact which certainly accounts for its genuine spirit, rather than as expressing a simplistic ‘method’ to be relied upon.

here that a reappraisal of the text as a springboard for philosophical reflection is required. Academically, much helpful work has been done by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, whose textual hermeneutics seek to show that the encounter with the text is ultimately an exercise in self-understanding.<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur's work is primarily motivated by a concern to move beyond contextual and structural studies of texts, in which an encounter with written work is motivated with what may have been *behind* the text (contextual factors) or *within* the text (structural factors) to what is *in front of the text*—the world of the reader, which comes to light, Ricoeur ventures, through a careful engagement with the world of the text. In Ricoeur's hermeneutics, this encounter between text and reader is a mutual dialogue between two worlds, a dialogue which, if attended to, yields a new possibility of self-understanding. By *co-relating* the world of the text to the situation of the reader, the text is liberated and becomes alive again, for it is engaged in a living conversation based on real concerns and questions. For Ricoeur, then, the text is not a record of 'mere' knowledge or conditioning for, when correlated to the present situation, to the living concerns, thoughts and feelings of the students, the text comes to life. Hence, a crucial stage of being with the text, too often bypassed in classrooms, is to *stay with* what is being said—simply, to *listen* carefully, without analysing, seeking meanings or translating into what is already known and thought.

Working with the text in philosophy class is inspired by the path of knowing-not-knowing. The classes are not lecture-style, very little knowledge is being 'imparted', and not much 'knowing-about' is being done. Rather, we sit together and consider the text, reading out loud together, noticing words and phrases that strike us as perplexing, illuminating—even infuriating!—and staying patiently with what is *actually* written rather than jumping to translating it into our own words and thoughts. This initial perplexity at the unknown is, in my view, profoundly fruitful to the philosophical approach, for it allows students to dwell with words, meanings and phrases *without* the burden of the body of academic pre-interpretation. Here an initial co-relation of text and situation can take place, for the questions that naturally arise from this initial 'blind' reading often end up consuming us for the whole class.

Patience seems to be an essential ingredient of this letting-be, the allowing of things to reveal themselves: the questions of the students as well as

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action* and *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols.

those raised in the text. This event of co-relating, furthermore, does not happen according to a fixed, established method, but springs out of its own accord, often unknowingly. Thus, with surprising regularity, the text comes to our help at a later stage in the class, offering a particular insight or way of looking at exactly what we had been pursuing; here the impression that we had been getting away from the text into our own worlds gets turned on its head, for the text now participates in our discussion, offering insight *in its own way and in its own voice*. Of course, to clarify this voice, contextual and structural approaches may be required, but the point here is that their previously undisputed claim to academic primacy, to 'knowledge', has been relinquished. 'To know', in philosophy class, can never merely be 'to know about'. And knowing must always be in direct participation with that which seems to be its opposite but is, in fact, its twin partner: 'not-knowing'.

### **Student and teacher as mirrors**

The text, having become a surprising third partner in our classroom inquiry, also redescribes the roles of the other two characters in the dialogue: the teacher and the student. Liberated from the expectation of having to impart knowledge, the teacher here is engaged in a kind of 'Socratic midwifery': the role becomes to enable the students reveal, articulate and engage with their own pre-understandings and thoughts about things. These articulations and revelations happen by themselves and must not be forced, but they can be helped. For this work as midwife, helping thoughts and insights come to birth, the teacher must have in himself a deep and patient connection to the text and questions at play within it—the teacher truly becomes the student. Thus the teacher will be able to call upon the text as a partner in the classroom inquiry when connections may have been missed, or its voice not properly heard, or too easily dismissed. Yet in fact, this attitude of caring perplexity, of hermeneutic generosity, is extended to the students who are, in some sense, the principal characters in the dialogue. The teacher too listens, ponders and is perplexed. In this sense, the work of midwife enables insight to come to light, but also lets students become what they already are, that is 'co-teachers'. This blurring of roles does not create an artificial sense of equality, but rather fosters a sense of companionship in our 'love of wisdom'.

Yet in a school like Brockwood—one might ask—where a culture of inquiry is strongly encouraged, what might be the place of this philosophical approach? It should be noted that the advantage of working with texts is that

they provide a new way of coming at things, through different expression and language, making different connections with a different vocabulary. Often a Brockwood ‘inquiry’, so much a part of the *ethos* of the place, might end up gravitating towards pre-established lines of questioning, a vocabulary that can sound too familiar, and questions that seem to return once too often. I would suggest that a philosophical text provides a new ‘world’ through which to move towards essential concerns, which are of course ultimately the same that move inquiry at Brockwood. But this encounter with an unfamiliar horizon can help students to liberate their imagination and seriousness, and consider these questions anew without the burden of an ethos.

In essence, teaching philosophy with the text as mirror displaces philosophical writing from the world of information, imparted knowledge and the ‘known about’ to a partner in our ‘knowing-not-knowing’ approach. This approach, in my view, also transforms the traditional roles of ‘students’ and ‘teachers’ to that of characters in a dialogue, a careful and inspired conversation whose movement of inquiry opens up a space where insight might take place.

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## On Sustaining ‘Culture Spaces’ in Schools

ALOK MATHUR



We wake at dawn to the trilling calls of unfamiliar birds, go for a walk amidst the tea-bushes stretching row upon row on the steep slopes, bordered on the higher ridges by dense shola forests—an entirely new landscape! One may chance upon a barking deer, shyly moving about in the bushes, or suddenly come face to face with a majestic Gaur. There are seventeen of us at Devashola Estate, near Coonoor: five teacher-principals from the KFI schools, one ex-principal from a like-minded school, two senior KFI educators, half a dozen experienced teachers, a young man who takes on organizational tasks, as well as three children accompanying their parents. We are here in ‘retreat’ to explore the ‘culture’ of our schools, and what makes for a renewal of ‘culture spaces’. We need to generate amongst ourselves, over the five days that we are together, a spirit of communication, sharing, and inquiry. Being in a new place, away from daily pressures and habitual routines, aids our own renewal and readiness to enter into this inquiry. Having a facilitator who brings intensity of purpose and yet allows for structure to emerge organically makes it

possible for each of us, including the children, to connect with the occasion and add their own flavours to the retreat.

### School culture

What is meant by ‘culture’ of a school? All schools have a character that is not easy to define, a certain quality of relationships and value orientations that one may sense or experience in the school environment. This suggests that a school culture emerges from the way the collective concerns of the school community are held by individuals—administrators, teachers, students and others—and what they bring to their relationships. This culture expresses itself in the norms, values, beliefs, practices, and curriculum that get developed over time. More than the visible and articulated curriculum, the overall culture of the school perhaps leaves deeper, long-lasting impressions on its participants—students and teachers. School cultures are not static. They are constantly being reconstructed and given shape through interactions among participants, shifts in their orientations and emphasis, and through reflections on life, education and the world in general. They

remain in a dynamic state through the questions that we ask, the inquiries we engage in and the initiatives we take.

So here we are, looking at our own deeper concerns and how these might express in the context of our schools that share a common underlying philosophy. Some early questions that set the tone are: What authentic, 'uneducated' questions do we hold about life? Do we see schools as a place of learning for adults as much as for children? Alongside and apart from curricular learning, what else do we learn about? And how do we support this learning? A direct challenge to the principals is: How would you meet a new teacher? How would you invite him or her into the school space? How would you communicate your expectations of him or her? As we engage with these questions, we realize that they are not just for principals. We focus on the importance of relationships in the school community, the complex tendencies that come up in adult-adult relationships; we look at issues of hierarchy, of territoriality, of barriers in communication, of our individual responsibility in working through these and participating in creating a living community. For this to happen there is a need to be clear in oneself, about one's own purposes as well as the intent of the schools. The retreat itself is a 'microcosm' of what we intend in the 'macrocosm' of each school, across all of the schools, and also beyond them, within our various spheres of influence. The ex-principal from

the school that shares our concerns has agreed to document the discussions.

### **Culture classes**

'Culture classes' in the school time-table are meant to be one expression of the deeper concerns of the schools. There are questions that converge around this: How do we see 'culture classes'? How are they related to the 'culture' of the schools? In what ways do we engage with students of different ages in these classes? What are some challenges and limitations of these classes? We recognize that this space in the time-table, which every school provides for in different ways, is intended to bring in a wide range of issues and topics which children, young people and adults are interested in, need to engage with, and which do not find a direct place in the academic curriculum. These issues range from those which are close to us, near-at-hand—our behaviour, reasons behind school norms, understanding ourselves, conflicts and opportunities in our relationships, making life decisions—to those that are seemingly at a remove—understanding the basis of violence and corruption, biases and prejudices, poverty and privilege; re-examining influential ideas in myth, history, and contemporary media, responses to environmental concerns, wars and terrorism, becoming aware of the fragmentation of life and consciousness, and the possibilities of wholeness. Culture classes are also intended to foster the ability to discuss, to have a dialogue, to begin to learn to 'see

oneself' as part of every human situation, and as part of nature, rather than as being apart from it.

We admit that there are difficult challenges and serious limitations with regard to 'culture classes'. If it is boxed in between, say a math and a language period, and it lasts only forty minutes, there is hardly the scope to set the tone and have an extended discussion that involves the students. Since there is no set curriculum, do teachers begin with some issue which students bring up or should one have a theme planned beforehand? Should our approach be didactic or experiential and exploratory? It is not easy to know how to animate such a class, and few teachers may have the ability to initiate and lead a discussion. Very few among us may end up taking the culture classes. Or else when the periods are simply distributed among many teachers, the classes could end up being seen as light, 'free' periods for telling stories and showing films. Unless more among us teachers are able to take on the intent of culture classes and are supported in this, these classes could lose their value in the school's overall concerns.

### **Culture spaces**

We pause and consider: surely it is not only 'culture classes' that represent or express these concerns and values in our schools? Here we affirm that in fact there are multiple forums and practices that each school has evolved. There is a special quality to the *morning assemblies* or the

evening gathering at *astachal*, which nurtures quietness and attention. There are nature walks for junior school students, and engagement with activities, projects or field trips that allow for contact with diverse natural and social phenomena. For older students, there is a general studies programme with an imaginative curriculum that varies from year to year; or a journalism club that engages students in discussions and debates. Talks and discussions with visiting thinkers, practitioners and performers from different fields widen their minds. School structures include *circle time, open forum, class teacher periods* and *house contact*, each allowing for different forms of communication between adults and students. Adults in school too have opportunities to engage on wider topics, in the beginning-of-the-year *orientation meetings, weekly staff meetings, reading and discussion groups, dialogue sessions, parent-teacher meetings* and so on. There are also the interstitial times for spontaneous conversations to arise among students and teachers. We recognize that all of these go into creating our school cultures, and we ought to view them all as 'culture spaces'. Thus is born a new term, 'culture spaces', of which 'culture classes' are seen as but one instance.

Some things immediately follow: without losing the potency inherent in the idea of 'culture classes', we are freed to visualize various features of the schools which constitute its 'culture spaces', and which contribute to generating that

‘steady, persistent hum’ that lends to the school culture its specific character. Our questions now shift to the following: How do we sustain these ‘culture spaces’? Can the school itself remain centred in its ‘culture spaces’, rather than be pushed (by parents, examination boards, social and economic forces, and our own unexamined assumptions or default modes of functioning) towards accommodation with narrower conceptions of school education? How do we deepen and widen the reach of these ‘culture spaces’? Are there new ways of going about this? Can they become a space for the germination of a ‘new mind’? How might this have a wider reach, both within and beyond our schools? Implicit in the last question is: how is the intent of these schools and their ‘culture spaces’ related to the ‘culture’ of the world beyond?

### **Ways of construing ‘culture spaces’**

Two kinds of approaches are shared: one from a larger, more structured school, and one from a small teacher-and-parent led educational initiative, both from outside the KFI fold.

The first approach: ‘In our school—located in a small town—we see to it that students directly engage with the community around us and learn to contribute to it in as many ways as we can. In class 4, students visit a nearby *anganwadi*, tell stories, chant and make posters for the younger children; in class 6 they may visit an old people’s home and entertain them with a play or songs; in class 7, students visited a colony

to run an active campaign about garbage collection and management; in class 8, they studied—through interviews—the situation of domestic helpers and made a presentation to sensitize upper class parents about their plight; in class 9 they took up the cause of maintaining public parks with the local municipality; in class 10 they planned awareness-raising campaigns on issues such as child nutrition, eye-donation and forest fire prevention. On another occasion, our class 8 students exchanged places with students from the local government high school, so that they could both experience a different culture and educational setting. So one of our aims is to make students more aware and feel a sense of responsibility towards the community and the local area. Apart from this, we also have a once-a-week ‘philosophy for children’ class, which is a block of two periods, and which may include silent nature walks, a topic for discussion, reflective writing about an incident, or free choice for children to suggest ideas. Every month, on the last Saturday, we have a teacher training workshop, where some of these ideas are also discussed.’

The second approach: ‘In our school, dialogue among adults—teachers and parents—as well as with children, is central to its origin and continued-functioning. We explore different ways of engaging students in understanding themselves, the world and their relationship to it and to life. For instance, we recently took

children (who are used to travelling by car!) in mixed age groups, on a public bus ride to different parts of the city that they might never have seen. Without trying to draw out any specific lessons from these experiences, they were invited to have conversations about what they had observed, what they felt, what made them curious. They produced a magazine in which they made drawings, shared incidents, imagined ‘one day in the life of’ some of the people they had seen. This sort of non-directive, non-analytic approach enables children to become sensitive, to observe more freely, and allows questions to emerge that may unfold deeply. Another thing we have attempted is to relocate the whole school for a period of time to a distant natural setting—in the mountains or by the ocean. Facing a new natural and social environment, living simply and learning in the midst of elemental forces of nature, has had its own impact on the maturing of students. This approach perhaps has its own discipline built into it, and does not rely on direct moral instruction for students to become more sensitive, aware and thoughtful.’

### **Dilemmas**

Several other initiatives are shared by principals and teachers from each of the schools, and the discussions are animated. We touch the pulse of something that is vitalizing, that matters deeply to each of us, which perhaps brought us into the field of education in the first place. But we also

share our dilemmas, the creative tensions that arise. While we need to sustain a structured curriculum, a time-table and a coherence of purpose in the school, can we also sustain the live quality of ‘culture spaces’ which emerge from specific issues or interests of students and teachers, and which have a spontaneous dimension, a depth of engagement? Should we work towards putting down some sort of a common curriculum for ‘culture classes’, perhaps in the form of critical conversations and thematic modules that all students would experience across the age groups? Or should we rely more on a wider sharing and seeding of ideas for each other, suggesting resources and approaches, and allow for each school to develop the nature of its ‘culture spaces’ in the context of its location and each teacher to handle ‘culture classes’ according to their concerns? Should our educational approach with ourselves and our students have the quality of a ‘walk in the woods’, listening, observing and wondering? Or should it have an intensity of purpose, an uncompromising asking of difficult questions? These are clearly not ‘either/or’ questions and we need to play with different kinds of possibilities.

### **A new mind**

We sit at night by a bonfire, silently watching the dancing flames, watching ourselves. What is the quality of the ‘new mind’ that is to be nurtured in and through these ‘culture spaces’? What is the

significance of this in a world becoming more and more disordered, fragmented and violent? This is unknown territory, and it is uncertain whether we can consciously do anything about this. Within our limitations, however, we evoke glimpses of what is demanded. There is need of a mind, a way of being, that is non-divisive, that inquires in depth into the 'science of life', and explores in active engagement, the 'art of living'. There is need for an

awareness of the human drama, of fear, conflict, sorrow and the fragmentation of human consciousness, along with a feeling for wholeness, for the source of initiative and creative action. It is such a mind that may heal itself, others and nature.

In Devashola, at the boundaries of forest and tea-garden, we sense the living potential of the 'natural' and the 'cultural' in our human lives.

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## Charms and Challenges of an Ancient Language: Teaching Sanskrit in Middle School

RAJANI ARJUN SHANKAR



‘Why do we need to learn a *dead* language?’ ‘Where shall we ever use it?’ ‘Is Sanskrit relevant to today’s world?’ These are some frank questions that eleven to thirteen year-old students in our mixed-age middle school classroom raise at the beginning of every academic year. As someone who had found Sanskrit delightful from the word go, I used to find these questions very challenging. I engage with these questions in class, revisiting them through the year.

I speak about learning other languages—European or Indian—becoming easier when you know Sanskrit, and about how, like history, it helps us understand our past. Students are fascinated by the Indo-European language family and sometimes we even get into words (such as ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘daughter’, ‘brother’ or the numerals) which are comparable across English, Latin, French and Sanskrit. Sanskrit words are also strewn about liberally in Tamil and Hindi, which they learn at school. We discover them regularly as we cover more ground and students never cease to be surprised at coming upon them. ‘Wow, it’s the same in Hindi (or in Tamil), *Akka*,’ is an exclamation I hear often (a small list of these ‘discoveries’ is given in the box).

Since it is the language of rituals and chants, Sanskrit is often linked to, and even equated with, religion by many people. This is possibly why it often evokes strong feelings in any group. Amazingly, these young students, most of whom hardly follow politics or news, pick this up and it translates into a sense of discomfort regarding Sanskrit. I have found it useful to unearth this association and talk around it. I tell them that there are many books in Sanskrit on astronomy, mathematics, architecture, yoga, politics, music, dance, theatre, history, biography, logic, grammar, medicine and plants. Then there are the lovely works of poetry by Kalidasa and others, not to mention the

captivating stories of Vikramaditya. Knowing Sanskrit would also help in the study of epigraphy or numismatics. Would it not be wonderful if any of these youngsters, who went on to study or research any of these various subjects, were able to read the Sanskrit treatises to enrich their work? I also recall that we particularly relished the *shloka* (epigrammatic verse) presented by one guest lecturer who addressed the middle school. It looked and sounded like any other invocatory verse, but was in fact a version of the Pythagorean theorem!

Poetry lends itself naturally to a mixed-age context. We have a variety of works in Sanskrit to choose from. The didactic verses, *subhashitams*, are easiest to start with, since they are simple and direct, as well as stand-alone. Over the year, students learn longer sets of verses for recitation at assemblies. Many of them rise to the challenge of memorizing these fully.

This brings us to one of the quandaries in teaching a language like Sanskrit, which traditionally places a huge emphasis on committing verses, grammar tables and almost everything else to memory. The issue is how much memorization should one demand. It is true that learning one's noun and verb tables by heart enables one to construct and decode text very easily, but it can often become mechanical and the uses of memorization are not immediately evident. However, when it comes to verses, children love the cadence that comes with a metre and, after some initial encouragement, they need little convincing to learn the verses by heart. The sonorous nature of *shlokas* makes for intense listening pleasure when there is a group reciting them with gusto.

But in this age of instant information, why does one need to memorize? Students enjoy it as an act of muscle-flexing, as a challenge, but are unwilling to accept that you do not really know something unless you can recall it at will. One *subhashitam* says 'the learning that remains in books (without committing to memory) is similar to your money lent to someone, in that, at the time of need, it does not help.'

*pustaka-stha tu yaa vidyaa, parahastam gatam dhanam I*

*kaarya-kaale samutpanne na saa vidyaa na tad dhanam II*

Students are bemused by this idea.

There have been interesting conversations around many other topics that come up during these classes. *Subhashitams*, which have an element of moral instruction, invite debates. One verse states that 'without wealth one would

be friendless’—*adhanasya kuto mitram*. The students were up in arms against this. ‘Friends are not made with money,’ they insisted. They also questioned: Why would a son or daughter get a name based on a parent’s name, like Partha (son of Pritha, another name for Kunti) or Janaki (daughter of Janak)? Why does the plural form of a mixed group of girls and boys have to be masculine? Their questions span changing social values, rigid stances regarding right or wrong, generalizations and gender biases. These discussions are humbling in that these young children are so quick to pick up dissonances in messages they receive and so fearless in raising them as questions.

One of the other challenges in teaching Sanskrit is that unlike English, Hindi or Tamil, students do not get opportunities to listen to it either at home, in the media or in the streets. So their level of familiarity is limited to what is acquired in class, and of course, what is reinforced by homework. (There are a few children who, however, do hear grandparents or others reading or reciting Sanskrit verses.) Moreover, enrichment activities like field trips, watching a play or picking up a simple storybook to read—these simply do not exist and would require a lot of work by the teacher. The effect of this can be felt especially after the term breaks, when there is a general slide in fluency and understanding.

In this context, the Sanskrit play staged by class 8 students in the third term is a precious opportunity. It provides a rich and real experience of *using* the language for all the students, those putting it up and those watching. The plays are selected carefully, sometimes adapted to suit the needs of a class of thirteen year-olds.

I see the primary role of a teacher of a third language as opening the eyes and minds of the students to what the language has to offer and enabling an appreciation of its idiom and beauty. I find it possible to do this in many little ways. While discussing grammar, we stumble upon interesting comparisons and differences among languages, mainly with English. Being vast and robust, Sanskrit grammar provides a definitive framework in which to understand other languages they know. Topics that come up for discussion include: subject-verb agreement, transitive verbs and numbers (singular, *dual* and plural in Sanskrit). The use of case endings instead of prepositions leads to a discussion on inflectional and non-inflectional languages, and on word order in sentences being rigid or flexible. Understanding how words change when they move from one language to another interests some of them (*kshetram*

becoming *khet*, *ratri* becoming *raat* or *iravu*, for example). Basics of phonetics, such as when we discuss the 'place of articulation' of alphabet sounds, classifying them as 'gutturals', 'palatals', 'labials' and the like, intrigue them and whet interest levels.

Students also love understanding the common metres of Sanskrit poetry. There is a lot of syllable counting that accompanies the learning of verses, when they learn about *anushtubh* (8 syllables per quarter), *trishtubh* (11 syllables per quarter) and a few others. Sometimes, with volunteers, more intricate prosody is taken up, like alternating light (L) and heavy (H) syllables in special arrangements like in *bhujanga-prayata* (LHH-LHH) or *totaka* (LLH-LLH) metres. Such verses are great fun to learn and chant.

In such ways, looking at an ancient language through the eyes of young students has been an invigorating journey of renewal and exploration.

An indicative list of Sanskrit words with the same or similar words in other languages:

<i>vaakyam</i>	<i>shabda</i>	<i>aksharam</i>
<i>putra,putri</i>	<i>baalakah</i>	<i>baalika</i>
<i>phalam</i>	<i>dhanam</i>	<i>janam</i>
<i>pustakam</i>	<i>bhojanaalaya</i>	<i>bhaasha</i>
<i>manas</i>	<i>sarpah</i>	<i>dugdham</i>
<i>kokila</i>	<i>varthaka</i>	<i>namaste</i>
<i>paada</i>	<i>kaaryam</i>	<i>yudham</i>
<i>vriksha</i>	<i>gaja</i>	<i>mrigaa</i>
<i>chaayaa</i>	<i>kaala</i>	<i>raatri</i>

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## Process Behind a Pageant: An Interview with Akhila Seshadri

ARVIND RANGANATHAN



After the middle school MAG (Mixed Age Group) Day at The School-KFI, I spoke with my colleague Akhila Seshadri about what went into the production of a pageant presented by students of her class on that occasion. Over the years, the middle school presentations have become an inevitable part of the school calendar. What began as presentations during an extended afternoon assembly has come to provide a significant learning opportunity for middle school students.

The conversation revealed a vital process by which the children learnt as much about themselves as they did about Greek gods. This article is an attempt to capture some of the salient points of our conversation about the educational process that gave birth to the pageant.

### **How did the class decide on the theme of Greek gods for this year's presentation?**

The entire process began a month earlier. To help the children take charge, we discussed what a middle school presentation should be like and what criteria we should evolve for ourselves. Some criteria expressed by the children were:

- Whatever we present must have something to say to the adult and senior school audience. (The children who presented were ten to twelve year-olds.)
- There must be an element of humour.
- There must be nothing violent or offensive.
- There must be something to think about in the end.

These points were displayed on our soft board and formed the framework for the conversations to follow.

Ideas poured in, some from the students and some from me. Some were imitative of ideas that the other two groups were tossing around. I was keen to ensure authenticity, and we spoke of resisting the temptation to copy from the other groups. We discussed the more promising proposals, slept over them and tried to narrow our options to any three themes, presentations or stories.

Finally, one of the students proposed: Why not have the Greek gods come to our classroom—Mahanadi? Another child built on the idea: Why don't we think of different gods and then decide who we want to be?

*When you look into yourself, you do uncover what is there . . . at times it surprises you and at times you smile as if you knew it all along. When we look at the ancient gods as we did, when we tossed around an idea for today based on Mahanadi and the Greek gods, we found some amazing things . . .*

**How did each student select a god they identified with? Why did you select the pageant as the form of presentation?**

*I am quiet, shy and quite the opposite of Athena. But I admire her for her wisdom, her creation of the useful arts. When I sit by myself and make small things in the arts and crafts class, I see myself as Athena. I do not need to be loud to be brave, do I?*

I wanted to ensure two things: authenticity and a good presentation. The children were simply voicing the first thoughts that came to their minds and not all of them seemed to have a sense of how to make this work.

I decided to set them a task. I wanted them to work really hard on this task and to think it out individually, for themselves. The task I set was: Read up on the Greek gods and the myths associated with them. Understand them and then think about yourself. What kind of person are you? If you were to be a Greek god, who would you identify with?

I did not think that they would take to the task seriously, but they did. They responded remarkably. This was the moment when I felt absolutely confident about working with this theme alongside the children.

*Yes. I am Prometheus. I have the gift of forethought and that gets me frustrated. But nothing cheers me more than teaching my creation, the humans. I worry always about the consequences of my actions and I love to teach and explain. I don't think I am terribly smart, but I try my best. Prometheus is inventive and helpful and though my classmates ask me doubts that I earnestly explain, they lose patience and wander off! It does not matter. I have my place.*

At this time, the word *pageant* had not yet entered the conversation. We were still wondering how to knit all the ideas into a story. I shared the children's work with a colleague. I remember telling her that there was remarkable material about the gods and the children. I asked her what kind of a story we could come up with. Should the gods be symbolic, perhaps? She just said: Don't try to make a storyline out of it. Let it be a pageant.

There was only one thing left to be done: the children had to see this effort as primarily about themselves and not about the gods.

*Zeus, the King of Gods, has a well-kept secret: he is afraid of heights! To meet his fear head-on, he sets himself the task of climbing Mount Olympus. With grit (and some cheering from the other gods), he accomplishes his mission. Sitting atop Mount Olympus, brandishing his tennis racquet, he thunders: 'I boast; I like to be the head of whatever I do. I like to take charge. If someone doesn't listen to me, I get angry.'*

**The dialogues seemed to connect the students' lives with the personality of the god they had selected. How did these dialogues evolve?**

*I see myself as Hades, god of the underworld, son of Cronus. I can stand up to any challenge before me and I do not give up. And . . . and NOBODY can beat me in football because of my power and my strength. I feel brave when I play people older than me and once I scored a double hat trick and won a game we were almost losing. Football makes me Hades.*

The task that we set them was to visualize the god they were representing and to also think about what they would like to depict and speak on stage. They had to draw the god, think of props if there were to be any. Each child knew what his or her character needed and set about making the props.

Additions and embellishments were for the sake of drama. One of the girls, for instance, held her mother as her role model, and that was brought into the words she spoke:

Is my mother there in the audience? Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, goddess of spring, summer and rebirth. I relate to her for I am adaptable, like her. I love spring for it makes me feel free and I love the fragrance. And my love for my mother is like spring.

### **What was your learning as a teacher?**

*I think I am very similar to Artemis, goddess of the hunt and archery. Like me, she prefers keeping thoughts to herself. I am a strong, independent person who cannot hunt, however. She prefers the country to the city and I also share some of her faults like the fact that I refuse to change even when things around me do and the fact that I talk mostly only to girls.*

The pleasure of having an idea come alive as a presentation was very real. When the children were the busiest and the demands were strong, I found that they could rise to the occasion.

There were a few difficult situations. Once four children were busy with their own play and were not ready for the dress rehearsal. We did the rehearsal without them. When we came back to class, they had—in a fit of contrition—cleaned up the class and were sitting demurely! I was upset enough to decide that they would not be part of the presentation. But all of us converted this into reminding ourselves about norms and responsibilities.

The entire month was one of many dialogues and deep conversations. There were several instances of children being utterly honest and vulnerable. And each of those interactions was a moment of learning for me. I watched students articulate who they thought they were and, in that articulation, discover facets of themselves they perhaps were not aware of or did not give much importance to.

*I see myself as Poseidon because every time I see the sea, I see . . . Every time I see the sea, I see it . . . (nice line, isn't it?). Anyway, the sea is sometimes dull and sometimes a bright blue, sometimes choppy and sometimes calm. And I see no stops to my moodiness. I get angry very fast. So it is the god of seas, and earthquakes I relate to.*

For instance, one boy said—very honestly and with great perception—that he was greedy, like Poseidon. I asked him to give examples to help him see situations where this was true. The boy was also generous and loved being in the limelight. I attempted to highlight this aspect in his dialogues as well. I felt it was important that while he could acknowledge that he was sometimes greedy, he should not see himself as being just that. For another girl, knowing what she was did not please her. She did not want that side of herself to be presented. Yet she did not know what to present. Also, she had difficulty in doing the reference work. She just chose a character randomly. I spent some time asking her to think further about herself, to question why she did not feel like depicting the aspect of herself as a helpful person who liked things to be orderly. Somehow, she felt this was not adequate. Some further lines were added, whereby she came through as someone who is not appreciated much.

*Hi. I don't share Atlanta's sad story of being born to parents who wanted a boy. But I see myself as an independent and adventurous person. She is not a god, but a mortal. I chose to be her because her life is full of adventures and I feel the fierce independence that I see in her. And there is an urge in me to compete and win.*

Another instance was the thrill of watching a bud opening. One of the girls rarely smiled, and spoke barely above a whisper. Through the entire process, there was a remarkable transformation in her. Her participation in class grew, and so too did her confidence. During every circle time, we heard her speak, share and respond. It was an utter joy to behold.

*Looking inside, I found that I am a caring person. Shy and yet practical. I like things to be my way. On Mount Olympus, I am Hebe, the cup bearer, the goddess of youth. I love helping people.*

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# A Master Class in Inquiry: Questioning Authority and the Awakening of Intelligence

EXCERPTS WITH COMMENTS BY STEVE SMITH



*J. Krishnamurti in Dialogue with Staff and Students: Brockwood Park, 16 October 1983*

In this edited extract we find Krishnamurti opening up one of his favourite topics: authority. At the same time, the topic itself is linked to another: the awakening of intelligence. As we follow the progress of the dialogue, we come to appreciate not only the incisiveness of Krishnamurti's perception—the freshness of his insight is actually quite stunning—but how seemingly disparate topics such as these can be distinctly articulated, and then 'enfolded', in one another. This opens the door to ... Now read on.

*K : What shall we talk about?*

*Questioner: I think during the last talks we have talked about the question of intelligence, and how to bring intelligence to our life so that somehow intelligence operates in our life. And I wonder if we could pursue that.*

*K: Right. Any other questions?*

*Q: How do you know when you are becoming intelligent?*

*K: How do you know what intelligence is?*

*Q: No, in yourself, when you start to become more intelligent.*

*Q: How can you tell you are becoming intelligent?*

*K: We will find out presently. We were driving the other day, nearly two weeks ago, along the Pacific coast of California. It was a lovely morning. It had rained, and generally in California it doesn't rain that part of the year, and it was a really lovely morning. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. And the Pacific was blue, light blue, so calm, like a great lake. It was not the same dark blue of the Mediterranean but it was a light blue, and the sun was just touching it, making a great light on the sea. And in front of our car there was another car, and on the bumper there was a sticker; the*

*sticker said, 'Question Authority'. So we are going to question authority this morning. And in questioning authority, in the understanding of the very complex problem of authority, we'll begin to see for ourselves 'what is intelligence': why we follow, why we accept, why we obey; and whether authority and the acceptance of authority leads to intelligence. We are going to talk it over together.*

The 'speaker' fields questions from the audience, but obviously he himself has a topic in mind. The two lines of inquiry are, however, not construed as being in opposition to one another; rather, they acquire a common focus so that *questioning authority* becomes part and parcel of the *awakening of intelligence*.

*K: Do you question authority? You know what that word means?... There are various kinds of authority: the authority of the government, however rotten, the authority of totalitarian regimes, the authority of the policeman, the authority of a lawyer, the authority of a judge, the authority of the pope, the authority of a priest. All those are outside, outside the skin. But inwardly, inside the skin, there is the authority of one's own experience, one's own convictions. Are you following all this? Authority of one's own opinions, authority of one's own convictions. I am convinced I am a great man—that becomes the authority. I am convinced I am a good poet... So experience and knowledge become one of the sources of authority. Are you following? Because we are examining a very complex problem, the problem of authority. The authority of the parents, the authority of tradition, the authority of the majority of the voters. Right? The authority of the specialist, the authority of the scientist... the authority of the Bible and the Koran and the Indian so-called sacred books ...*

*Now, when you question authority, what are you questioning? The authority of rules, the authority of educators who tell you, inform you? Now, please discuss this with me because, in inquiring very carefully step by step and going deeper and deeper into this question, you will yourself begin to awaken your own intelligence: how to look at things intelligently, without authority.*

Here Krishnamurti makes the link more explicit and expands on the complex nature of authority. Also, by implication, he states that the various forms of authority we have absorbed are themselves a block to the operation of that intelligence which can function only once the former have

been seen for what they are. The distinction is made between *thinking* and *seeing*.

*K: We are going to question, not say it is right or wrong, but inquire, question, doubt, ask. Now let's begin. The authority of the policeman. Do you question that?*

*Q: Isn't it necessary?*

*K: But question it first. Don't accept, don't say it is necessary. You see, you have already accepted authority!*

*Q: Yes, but there's not very much we can do about it.*

*K: No, you can't do anything about it.*

*Q: We don't want that kind of authority. You can't ...*

*K: You don't want that kind of authority? Suppose I have been driving in France on the right-hand side of the road, and I come here; I am used to driving a car on the right-hand side of the road in France, in Austria and so on; I come here and I keep to that side. There will be accidents. Right? The policeman says, 'Hey, go over to the left.' But if I insist on keeping to the right he will give me a ticket. So I accept the authority of a policeman who tells me, 'You are driving in the wrong lane, kindly go to the left' because that is the custom, that is the law in this country.*

*Q: That's quite sensible.*

*K: That's quite sensible—it is!*

Starting very simply, Krishnamurti is swift to point out that a blanket 'anti-authority' attitude ignores the fact that certain laws and customs are necessary for the smooth running of society: they have no psychological value-content. It is also implied that such an attitude actually prevents one from understanding authority as it is based on reaction and, therefore, is not free.

*K: Now, the authority of governments. This is much more complex. The government says you must become a soldier. In Europe you have to become a soldier for two years—fortunately, not for women. In Switzerland, in France, in all the European countries you have to be a soldier for two years. Do you accept that authority?*

*Q: If you don't, is there anything ...?*

*K: No, just think it out, look at it carefully. They say, 'We have to protect our country.' In case of war we are prepared to fight the enemy. So, find out. The government says—all governments, the most inefficient government also says—'You must fight for your country.' There is a tremendous authority. What's your response to that?*

*Q: If I was in that situation and I was, say, a Swiss citizen and I was asked to join the army, I wouldn't do it.*

*K: Then you would go to prison.*

*Q: No, I'd go to another country.*

*K: [Laughing] They won't let you.*

*Q: Well, there are ways.*

*K: Oh, yes. But you can never go back to your country again. I know several people who have done this. But they can never go back to their own country. Is that the answer? Question, question what you are saying.*

*Q: Perhaps to some degree it is.*

*K: I said question, sir; question what you will do when the governments says you must join the army. That is supreme authority. Do you question that?...*

*Q: Yes, but what can you do about it?*

*K: We are going to find out. But, first, question. Is that what you will do when the government asks you to become a soldier? This is a very complex problem, this, I don't know if you can go into it. They say, 'We must protect our country.' Right? So you have to question: what is our country?*

Interesting to note here is how quickly the mind moves into the 'what-to-do' mode, without first understanding the basis of its action. The sub-text is that we are already primed to act in certain ways which stem from our conditioning and that, unless the sub-text is read and understood, we will merely add to the existing confusion. At the same time, we will fail to connect with the deeper issues underlying the problem.

*Q: It's all that we know around us, our language ...*

*K: Which means what?*

*Q: That which we are familiar with.*

Q: *The country that you were born in is supposed to be your country.*

K: *Where you were born.*

Q: *Yes, that's supposed to be your country.*

K: *That is supposed to be your country. Why do I say, it's my country?*

Q: *Because you've lived there and ...*

K: *Yes, you say it's your country. And I say it's my country. Why do we say this? Why do grown-up people say this, and the young people say it, and it has been the tradition of thousands of years: it's my country, I am going to protect it; it's your country, you are going to protect it. Let's kill each other!*

Q: *Because they want to possess it, and if that possession is threatened by another country who feel possessive to their country, then you obviously are going to try to fight to possess your country.*

K: *I know. So you are willing to kill for your ...*

Q: *No.*

K: *You are not following step by step into this. What is my country? Why has the world, the earth, been divided into my country, your country—why?*

Q: *It's always like that: my book, not your book.*

K: *Go on, question all this, sir. Why? Why have human beings for thousands of years said, this is my country and that's your country?*

Q: *Is it not a natural response to want to possess something?*

K: *Yes, that's a natural response. Where does it begin, when does it begin? Careful! Question, question! Don't accept anything and say, 'It's natural' and stick to it. Question why it is natural.*

Q: *I don't think a baby ...*

K: *That's it, begin with the baby [Laughter]; begin with the small baby. You give him a toy and he holds it. Right? And the other baby says ... and he pulls it away. Haven't you seen this? So, there it begins—mine and yours—and we build this up.*

Q: *It makes you feel safe, you feel threatened when other people want it, so you're going to...*

K: *That's right. So I am saying we build this up gradually as we grow older: this is mine and that is yours. And I am going to hold to mine and you hold to yours. So,*

what does it all mean? I say it is my country and you say it's your country. Question why people say that.

Q: Well, perhaps through repetition and through education, you see, one has ...

K: Of course, through education, through history, through propaganda—everything—you come to the point where you are so conditioned you say, 'It's my country and your country.'

By tracing it back to infancy, Krishnamurti makes it plain how much, psychologically, is rooted in the brain and its earliest, primitive mechanisms. We do not see through, but build on, these until they acquire immense significance; they are then glorified as nationalism and patriotism. One could also add that these primitive mechanisms have their roots in the 'animal brain' since animals also have territories and fight over them.

Q: Is it not a matter of security?

K: Security. Now, do you understand what the questioner said? It is a matter of security. I feel secure with my family—my father, my brother, my sister, my aunts; I feel they will protect me, they are part of me—the family. Then, increase it; move it still further: I identify myself first with the family, then with the community, with the society, then the nation: 'I am British.' That means I feel secure. Right? We agree to that? I feel secure when I say I am British, and the Frenchman says, 'I am French.' He is completely secure: the language, the customs, the tradition, the intellectual approach and so on. French and English, and the German says the same. That is, they all want security—all of them. Agree? You are questioning—they all want security.

Q: And they are willing to kill for that.

K: That's it. So each person says, this is my security and that's your security. So we are going to fight. Which means what?

Q: But then your life is threatened, so ...

K: Yes. So there is no security. Right? Look at it carefully first.

Q: Then your security has been completely ... psychological security.

K: That's it. That's it.

Q: Having nothing to do with actually what's happening.

*K: That's right. So, now, haven't you learnt something? Haven't you become intelligent? You see something, that is, I seek security in my nation and you seek security in your nation, and we are going to fight each other to be secure. And the governments exploit us, people exploit us for that reason. So, there is no security as long as there are nationalities.*

*Q: What can we do about it?*

*K: Darling, wait.*

*Q: But we insist that there is security in the nation.*

*K: No, first see that by questioning we have come to this point: when I try to seek security in the family, in the community and in the nation, and you also seek it in your own way, in the nation, and we quarrel and fight and kill each other, security is denied to both of us. So, in nationalities there is no security.*

*Q: But, how do we actually see it?—that there is no security in ...*

*K: It is obvious.*

*Q: Nothing can be done if everybody thinks like that.*

*K: The vast majority, 99.9%, say, 'Yes, we must kill each other to be secure.'*

*Q: But that's just ...*

*Q: Could I just say something? You know, if it's so obvious, why don't we actually change? I've talked to students and staff after these talks and they are just as confused as ever. If it really is obvious that there is no security in my belief, my country and so on ...*

*K: Wait a minute. My country—it's an illusion, isn't it?*

*Q: You mean, it's not real.*

*K: No. It doesn't exist. I want security and you want security. I say security lies in my nation and you say security lies in your nation, and we are killing each other. The United Nations is like that. So, there is no security in nationalities.*

*Q: We see that but it doesn't change; it is the same after the talk— it's my country. I see it is not a security but it is still here.*

*K: What?*

*Q: He says it doesn't change after you know it's your ...*

*K: You change—don't bother about the rest—you become intelligent. We are talking*

*about intelligence. When you see for yourself there is no security in nationalities, that very perception is intelligence.*

*Q: But he is saying that he has only partially seen it, so when he goes out he is still going on with it.*

*K: Then you haven't seen it. Be as simple as that. If you don't see it, don't say it's partial. It's like a lot of blind people examining an elephant.*

*Q: Why do we all say we do see it?*

*K: Then don't be a nationalist. That's intelligence. Right?*

Krishnamurti not only catches 'the ball thrown at him'—the question of security—he traces it through to the very end. We all seek, and need, security but, by investing our security in an illusion, such as nationhood, we vastly increase the chances of war and, even at the 'local' level of family and society, we sow the seeds of isolation that grow into conflict. Is not the *nation* the *ego*, the *self*, writ large? Thus seeking of security creates insecurity. This paradoxical state of our existence is replicated in daily newspapers and on television screens throughout the world. The fact that we see it 'only partially' is at the same time our blindness and our challenge. 'You change,' says Krishnamurti. This is not a group activity, but the task of each person to see it for himself. In that lie the seeds of intelligence.

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