

Notes from a Small School

Articles from CFL Newsletters

2005 - 2014

CfL

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This is a small collection of lead articles from CFL newsletters over the past ten years, brought out on the occasion of our 25th year. Most of the news in our newsletters tends to be specifically about what happened in school during that past year. However, we have always included at least one serious piece on some aspect of schooling that the community has grappled with and discussed. These pieces, we believe, are of interest to anyone involved with education. We have put them together in this slim booklet, in the hope that they will be of use to friends and colleagues in other schools and settings.

Community and relationship

There are so many different aspects of community life at CFL, and they all vary depending on where we place ourselves in the group. The very young ones relate strongly to places and nature—the tyre-swing just outside the library, the pond where a fish has just died, the spider-web in the branches of the rain tree. As children grow older, peer interaction becomes sharper as a way of defining the sense of community. Of course this process occurs among the young ones too. The opinions of peers and seniors become more important not only in how self-perception occurs, but also in defining groups. Later still, there is perhaps a critical awareness that questions these movements of classification and of defining boundaries. As adults, we try to keep all these potential currents in mind, as well as challenging ourselves about how to keep a balanced yet energetic outlook towards the question of what being a community actually means to us.

Given the fact that there are so many different levels of identification and perception among us, what does belonging to a community mean? To a large extent, of course, this involves trying to see the needs of the community as a whole. Inevitably there is conflict between what the individual wants to do and what the need of the moment is, and this happens to everybody. The “need” of the community might be a simple one: everyone eats meals at the same time. It might be far more complex question: how are we to be responsible about junk food? Garbage disposal? How much plastic do we bring into the school? What are our consumption patterns? We try to bring a participatory spirit to bigger issues such as these, and we try to see together into the implications of the question. We are not aiming at a final resolution of a question, for that realistically never seems to happen; instead, we hope that there can be some learning about patterns and expectations in this process of expressing ourselves and listening to each other.

We don't really consider the questions and issues of the school as ends in themselves. We try to approach them as facts of life that young people will encounter in the world once they leave us. There is really no distinction between the school and the world; the one is not an idealistic bubble of escape from the other. Questioning the problems that arise in the school, with passion and energy, is a skill that we can all learn to bring to bear upon the wider world "outside." *Community* is perhaps a word to be used in its widest possible sense.

Perhaps the process of relating is the most basic aspect in analyzing the life of a community. The verb *to relate* is in danger of encompassing so many levels of meaning as to lose all precision in a kind of slush of goodwill; hence the need to try to be specific about its definition. One important dimension is perhaps the ability to be open and light with our perceptions of one another. Judgement, prejudice, bias: these are the stuff of everyday life and relationship, but a sense of community does seem to demand that we hold these with a light hand and relinquish them as soon as possible. A sense of humour, affection and irony; the ability to not take our own ideologies (or those of others) with life-threatening seriousness; basically a sense of lightness, well-being, care; a glint in the eye while pondering issues of depth and seriousness: all of these seem implied in relating in a community.

The question then inevitably arises as to whether CFL as a community identifies too closely with its own methods of inquiry. In other words, are we too caught up in our own definitions of ourselves and our ideologies? Are we too pushing a particular agenda, a particular point of view? This is a complex question. At many levels, it would certainly seem that the self-definition of the community is inevitable. We hold certain values dear, and children are quick to pick up the unspoken rules of the game: rules associated with clothing, food, culture generally. From all these aspects, the self-definition of a community inevitably takes shape. Even the questions we choose to explore condition our identity and force us, albeit gently, down avenues of identity and definition.

Given that these processes occur, Krishnamurti's questioning of the identification with a group and an ideal, however benign and well-meaning the latter are, acquires a poignant relevance. Are we talking about merely conditioning children and adults to be somewhat concerned, caring, but still retaining a strong sense of identity, both psychological and socio-political? Do we sense that something beyond this is possible? Somehow we, as a community of concerned individuals, enquiring into the subtleties of the human condition, must continue to learn to deepen and sustain both our awareness of our own psychological movements as well as our communication with each other in dialogue, verbal and non-verbal. Otherwise there is always the danger of crystallization, a sense of complacency that arises from an identification with a set of ideals. There is always that great danger looming over us: the assumption that *we are different* or that *we have understood*. Enquiry and learning can only come with the investment of a tremendous amount of energy and initiative, psychologically speaking. Are we as a community, teachers, parents and children, up to the challenge that faces us?

2005

Our children and the real world

Is CFL an idealistic utopian bubble isolated from the values that the real world holds dear? Are our children too protected from harsh realities? This is not a merely rhetorical question (asked by some hypothetical “anxious parent”); one of the key concerns of the adults in the place, both parents and teachers, is to question and challenge the terms of our engagement with the world, with social processes and with individuals. This questioning is one of the ways of assessing our own sense of responsibility for our environment and the social and political events that go on around us.

The posing of the question itself contains some problems. One of the problems we encounter is of course the term the “real world”. Which real world do we mean? Primarily, perhaps, the real world of middle class Indian education, competition and achievement, the professional world that represents, to most of us, security, order, meaning. Or maybe it is the real (some might say real-er) world of poverty, deprivation, suffering that afflicts most of humanity today. Or we might mean the real world of our own emotions and their imperatives. Can we expect our children to engage deeply with all of these complex and clashing realities? Or do we only want them to cope, take care of themselves and their interest while muddling through life the best they can?

Of course our children are protected – from brutality, from crushing judgment, from the vagaries of arbitrarily exercised power, from the extremes of the physical environment. Such a basic sense of “protection” is obviously the starting point of an education that has meaning for the child as well as ourselves as adults. This of course is not to deny the efforts of those who wish to secure the well-being of the child at a much more basic level – that of everyday sustenance and health. But the scope of our visions and questions is very different, and address the most naked and powerful drives that the human

psyche throws up—the drive of pleasure, pain, insecurity and fear. From these there is ultimately no protection.

With regard to the “real” world of professional achievements, it is clear that this represents a very small fraction of human experience and expectation. To get caught up in fulfilling the dreams and the visions of this reality seems, ultimately, somewhat narcissistic and self-indulgent. Our children need to acquire skills and an education appropriate to their interests and abilities, and no doubt these are conditioned by social background and expectations. However, we feel it is wise not to enter and feed this loop of achievement and success. We would like our children to be skeptical about the imperatives of this drive and the glittering careers and the security it seems to promise—a glitter which is also tantalizingly out of reach and difficult to achieve.

It is perhaps more meaningful to engage with the second tier of what I had defined as possible “real” worlds: that of the apparent physical and social suffering around us. By no means do we want our community to be one of do-gooders. Rather, we would like our children to learn to look at the nature of human crisis in a compassionate yet practical and clear way, while at the same time questioning their (and our) own lifestyles, assumptions about the material world, about consumption, about social structures and the environment. This kind of awareness and involvement comes naturally when we experience different lifestyles and challenges than the ones we are familiar with. This is one of the purposes of the long excursions that the children go on every year. It has also been the drive behind the senior school programme, with a view towards a socially driven learning.

In the midst of the planning and structuring, however, we do not lose sight of the fact that the most basic learning that can happen is regarding ourselves, our conditioning, the conflicts in our mind and the social expression they have, the nature of our hopes, desires, ambitions and frustration, and about what it means to live a funda-

mentally deep and peaceful life. Learning, in other words, about our own emotional imperative.

In a recent dialogue class, a child asked, with some frustrations, what is this learning and why should I do it? This of course is the problem; learning about oneself cannot be defined, for as subjects of our own enquiry we are forever in flux, and there is no end to learning. The other difficulty is that such learning, by its nature, cannot have a goal. The movement we point ourselves towards a goal, we are no longer interested in this mysterious self-enquiry, but rather in what we can achieve and become.

It is important to recognize that if such a process of what we call “learning” is initiated, the question of protection from the real world assumes a different significance. The question becomes: how can I respond to situations in an intelligent manner? The situation may be one of intense hostility or conflict, corruption or dilemma, but can I respond to it with integrity while learning about my own imperative, the way I take sides, the assumptions that I make, the stereotypes and emotions that fill my brain? If this kind of learning can take place, then we are perhaps learning to meet the real challenges of life rather than defining our boundaries vis-a-vis “real” and “protected” environments.

2006

Dialogue in education

Each one of us has a certain perception regarding a situation. Clearly, one person's perception and expression may or may not make sense to another. The attempt to communicate and understand others, setting aside our own images, ideas and preconceptions and listening without a barrier, may be termed a dialogue.

The process of dialogue is not merely an external, verbal one. A vital part of dialogue is to learn and understand our own conditioning and the workings of our own minds. Since society and the individual are reflections of each other, it is essential to begin to understand the workings of our own psyche and the patterns of our own emotions if we are to begin to explore social issues and problems. This open ended enquiry is essential for a dialogue to have real meaning; otherwise, communication becomes simply a matter of trading opinions and ideas without moving together. In the realm of education, dialogue becomes a powerful tool at several levels.

A meaningful dialogue between individuals rests primarily on the conditions under which it takes place. The ability to listen to another person and a recognition of the rights of others to participate are important factors that can affect a dialogue. Even more important are an atmosphere of trust and a lack of fear between individuals. To be meaningful, the atmosphere must be one of critical enquiry that is at the same time non-judgemental. This necessarily also demands transparency between individuals. Structurally, it requires a non-hierarchical democratic setting that is sceptical of traditional systems of power and authority.

Such a process of enquiry and dialogue can play an immense role in a child's life. Today's world, with its diverse and enormously powerful forces, can easily overwhelm a growing child. Only an open atmosphere based on trust can provide a setting where a young person can

not only question rooted beliefs handed down through generations, but can also develop the ability to look inwards and question herself. An openness and freedom to question and express one's perceptions without fear creates room for a healthy relationship to grow between individuals regardless of age or status.

There are many challenges facing an educator who wishes to facilitate dialogue. She needs enormous patience to listen to the emerging viewpoints. She also needs a deep commitment to engage with both questions and personalities. All traditional roles, teacher/student, old/young, mature/immature, need to be abandoned if the dialogue is to proceed in an atmosphere of affection and trust. The educator must learn the art of holding her perceptions and images of young people lightly and not jumping to conclusions.

Dialogue is a difficult process and can break down for several reasons. Often our emotional responses to situations are so overwhelming that we find it impossible to communicate in a free and open manner. To be able to hold an emotional response lightly and yet engage with a question intelligently is demanding. Remaining wholly engaged with the issue at hand requires tenacity and commitment.

It is important to recognise that dialogue is not a technique to achieve a particular end. We cannot have a dialogue with a motive or an end result in sight, whether it is correcting student behaviour or promoting a kind of moral education. Dialogue is not about transferring simple messages and codes of conduct. Rather, it holds out the possibility of a profound scepticism that encompasses all aspects of our social and personal lives and that, ultimately, questions our selfhood and private emotions in the strongest manner possible.

2007

Teachers, learners

I am a school teacher. My workplace is a twenty four acre campus outside Bangalore. I have no boss, no minions; instead, my colleagues and I work on an equal footing. This is not as easy as it sounds; even without a structural hierarchy, the dynamics of power and dependency often take hold. It takes a great investment of energy to keep this a truly cooperative workplace. My current clients include young adults grappling with their potential identities, budding adolescents with a whole new range of interests and precocious nine-year-olds who are good at looking innocent. I enjoy conveying my passion for my subjects to my energetic students. I don't indulge in comparative evaluation, and I don't punish them (though I am often sorely tempted!). They challenge me daily about my habits, intellect and appearance. In turn, I encourage them to make the school their own, creating an atmosphere of responsibility alongside playfulness. This is a space that allows, even demands, scepticism, a questioning of external systems and structures as well as one's own beliefs and identities.

How did I get here? When I completed my graduate studies, I naturally had several options. One was to live the life of an academic: financially secure, moving up the ladder, seeking recognition from society at large. Or I could find a job that marketed my skills the best. But I had always been interested in learning about the 'meta' questions of life: the nature of conflict and of the self, the shifting nature of consciousness, the relationship between individual and society. I wondered if my chosen vocation would have a connection to my questions, or whether these latter would slowly become peripheral to my life. The most burning questions become 'youthful idealism' as we grow older. I realized then that I wanted to work with these issues concretely, in real situations, making them a part of my life and work.

A creative school environment does offer this potential learning to a teacher. Such a setting can focus on the emotional and social self

in sharp and unrelenting relief. Adults are willing to play by the unwritten rules of safe relationship- “let’s not rock the boat”- but children are not. They are frank and unpredictable, and do not fit into convenient roles. They force you to re-examine your rusty rules and your safe conventions. However, traditional schools are so tightly structured that they allow too little chaos to spill over and learn from. The school I would join would have to be one that paid close attention to the balance between freedom and discipline for students and teachers.

I could describe myself as working at a small, English medium school catering to urban middle class children, for less than a market salary! So why am I here, instead of at a school for the underprivileged, or at a school that would pay me handsomely for educating the super-elite? One important answer is that I want to be part of broader definition of education, not one that merely guarantees a ‘well-rounded individual’, but one that brings in my ‘meta’ questions in such a way that I can grow and the students in my care will benefit.

The school, as most readers might know, is run by a group of twelve to fifteen individuals who make all decisions collectively. Without the spurious comfort of a headmaster or management committee to lean on, there is no sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, there is no one to complain to or about. In my areas of responsibility (teaching, mentoring and administration) I enjoy a great deal of autonomy; at the same time, I am naturally answerable to my colleagues. This is an area that can generate powerful forces of conflict as well as cooperation. The idea is not to overcome others’ point of view by argument and persuasion, but to listen to each other until a common decision emerges—or we drop from exhaustion. This is the process of dialogue that carries us in unpredictable yet meaningful directions and feeds the activity of the school.

The curriculum at CFL includes of course an emphasis on the outdoors, on hands-on activity, intimacy with nature and a process- and

skill-based approach to learning. In this way we are superficially similar to many progressive schools. But there is a crucial difference. Our curriculum is not an end in itself; rather it is a patient examination of all aspects of our lives that we encounter. If that sounds too grand a statement, let me give an example. When a student here studies mathematics and learns to appreciate the beauty of the subject, she is also learning about fear, motivation, resistance, pride, disappointment and the entire spectrum of possible human responses to any situation. She is learning the difference between confusion and clarity, and also how her images of herself and others influence her perceptions. These complexities are usually pushed under the carpet in order that children may single-mindedly pursue the narrow goals that we as adults set for them. But these very complexities are the stuff of our daily lives, whether we recognize it or not, and cannot be ignored; in fact this patient investigation is vital, we feel, for the well-being of the individual and the wider group.

If this sounds so far like an idyll, it is most emphatically not. There are, of course, inner (and outer) struggles and doubts. When I look around at my peers, I see them achieving success and recognition, and I am not immune to the feelings of envy and insecurity. This, actually, is the whole point; I don't believe that mere external circumstances, the daily familiar structure of work and relationship, in an enquiring environment or otherwise, can shield us from pain and everyday *angst*.

So: what is life like here in the present? Given the challenges of the enterprise, it is difficult to sum everything up in a simple package. Life here is as life everywhere: by turn unpredictable, gut-churning, simple, exhilarating. With the vital difference that here is the possibility to turn the movement of living on its own head and question its own patterns, both individual and social, in a deep way. To those contemplating such a journey, I would simply say: come on in. The water is fine.

Parent teacher meetings

CFL has always perceived itself as a cooperative venture between adults (parents and teachers) with common questions and concerns, looking at the problems of life in an investigative and sceptical spirit. All the participants in this process create and maintain the ethos and ambience of the school. We are, therefore, very far from being a “service” provided by professionals to a group of consumers who can take what they like and lobby to change the rest. Since we are all in the same boat, it is incumbent on us, parents and teachers alike, to take as much care and responsibility as possible in order to make this venture a meaningful one.

One of the important vehicles for a fresh, imaginative and (importantly) ongoing recreation and revision of the community is the monthly meeting with parents and teachers. We meet on the last Sunday of the month, about nine times a year for a morning, in order to bring up questions that concern us, sometimes obsess us. We enjoy bouncing these questions off other concerned and interested individuals, to see different viewpoints, observe our own reactions and emotions and find out whether we can ultimately think together regarding the pressing problems facing us and our children today.

The themes we consider are broad ones. Our own lifestyles and life choices is a theme that has often cropped up. Given the atmosphere of unbridled consumption that reigns, what is a responsible lifestyle, one that is compatible with caring for the earth and its resources? Children watch us and learn their codes of material life from us. What are responsible messages to be giving them?

Another important preoccupation is the media and its ability to suck up all our energy and attention. The media—tv, computers, games, a whole spectrum of “virtual reality” competing for our attention—provides both adults and children with powerful social messages. How

can we process these, critique these, in meaningful ways? Are children losing their ability to connect with the “real” world in the face of conveniently packaged virtual ones? Are we as adults complicit in this process?

Adolescent sexuality and its expression in the context of a semi-residential campus is a major question we discuss frequently. Given the fact that this is such a new and strong force in the lives of young adults, what are responsible and creative responses to it? How can we effectively engage our children in dialogue on this most private yet significant force in their lives?

Perhaps the broadest (and, in the context of the intent of the school, the most important) set of questions we engage with have to do, of course, with learning about ourselves, our emotional imperatives and conditioning, and whether an approach to living is possible that does not succumb to the restless itch of our consciousnesses. What do emotional balance and stability mean? Various contemplative traditions and individuals, including Krishnamurti, have pointed to the possibility of going beyond the conflicts and privations of individual selfhood to a more holistic understanding of our private emotional life on the one hand and the relationship between self and society on the other. A lot of our questioning involves bringing this perspective to bear on the contours of everyday life.

One major aim of the Sunday meetings is to encourage a sense of communication at the same time as fostering an atmosphere of “creation.” To this end we employ variety of formats: large group meetings, small group meetings, presentations by parents and teachers on a wide variety of themes. We have also thought of having multi-lingual meetings to facilitate participation. Hopefully all our tinkering with formats does indeed bring about a greater sense of cohesion within a larger group. However, it is our firm conviction that it is only a burning sense of interest in these large questions that can bring a group like this together in meaningful ways.

Our greatest challenges have been those of any group attempting to think together: to maintain threads of meaning, to pursue questions doggedly without getting sidetracked by anecdotal “evidence,” to be detached and critical about ourselves and the worlds we participate in. Obviously there is no final destination of clarity that we hope to reach once and for all. At the same time, we hope, the journey itself has been infused with enough meaning, energy and sparkle to make it an ongoing and very real process for each and every one of us.

2009

Wednesday meetings

A compulsive need to dialogue characterizes our life at CFL! This applies particularly to the realm of the relationship between adults and students. On the one hand, the students (I am thinking mainly of the seniors, though this applies across all age groups) live in an intense world of their own, with many concerns. Questions of identity, peer interaction, self esteem and self image, sexuality and the role of the media all play a deep role in their lives. On the other hand, adults have their own conceptions of what the children's world is and (perhaps) what it ought to be! Often these two worlds, two sets of expectations, don't really meet. There can be friction, misunderstanding, strong reactions on both sides of the age divide. Together, we decided that we needed a forum where adults and senior students could really communicate regarding the basics of our lives together, and we have been meeting once a week on Wednesdays (hence the name!) for more than a year.

We already have a forum for intense discussion: dialogue or "culture" classes. In these, we discuss questions that can appear quite abstract: questions regarding selfhood, our emotions and thought patterns, conditioning and the whole map of our inner lives. While these go on with a lot of intensity, since they are in a sense more impersonal discussions, a lot of the emotions associated with the practical details of life together, the norms and values that inform our campus lives, might get brushed under the carpet. Hence the need we felt for a forum where we can discuss these more practical issues that are nevertheless closely woven into our lives.

The basic question we have asked in these meetings is: can a group of adults and young people come together to create the norms of a community? Create them not in the sense of rules to be obeyed, but in the spirit of understanding the reasons behind the norms as well as our (frequent!) emotional urges to break them.

At a simple level, norms we wanted to come up with together included those on listening to music on campus, campus safety, dress codes, our conditioning to food and all our particular likes and dislikes. We were able to explore these questions collectively and to see each others' point of view.

A more serious question we spent a lot of energy on was regarding relationships between young adults, potentially physical relationships. In an open campus like ours, this question becomes particularly relevant. While we can't (of course) say that we reached any final conclusion, it has been very interesting to watch the interplay of ideas and assumptions across the generation gaps, with many different and unexpected perspectives emerging. It has also been a challenging question for us as adults: can we claim that any learning has taken place during such dialogues? Is it all merely at a verbal level? Can dialogues go beyond the verbal to strike us at the very emotional core of our being? And can adolescents grasp the 'big picture', the connections between their everyday issues and larger ones of living in this world?

Of course, even seemingly simple or practical questions lead us into the tangled thickets of the mind. Frequently we would hear a reproach from the students: "Hey, this has become a culture class!!" (Culture class is an in-house name for the weekly dialogue classes, in which students and adults together address more fundamental and general aspects of being in the world). As we went on, it became increasingly clear to all of us that we cannot draw the line between the abstract and the concrete very easily! These two categories blended into each other, often in bewildering yet also curiously revealing ways.

There was some frustration among the seniors that we were not "getting anywhere" with our discussions. However, we were able to get to the point where we could see that "getting somewhere" was not really the goal; it was more valuable to see ourselves as we are and the emotional knots we bring to a situation than to improve a situation

in any way. It also became slowly and painfully evident that, given the complexity and strength of our emotional lives, it would be naïve to imagine that we could “get anywhere” in order to fix the problem!

One very definite outcome of these meetings has been to bridge, to some extent, the “divide” between the groups. The students are remarkably frank and open. There is definitely a greater sense of patience and understanding with each others’ worldviews and emotional patterns than before. However, it would be wrong to load too many expectations on the meetings, for that might spoil a light heartedness that is at their core. Perhaps continuing to call them Wednesday meetings, rather than any more elevated title, is just fine!

2009

Take me to your leader

At the end of each academic year, in the heat of the summer, the teachers meet to discuss various issues to do with the running of the school. Many of these topics are quite specific, concerned with academic curricula or the division of responsibilities for the coming year. But often, one of us will raise a different, more fundamental kind of question. Then we lean back and settle in for a comfortable four-hour discussion.

This April, we opened our meetings with the question: “What does it mean to be a teacher-run school?” You might be forgiven for thinking that, after twenty years, we should not have to ask this question at all! Actually, we find that it takes constant reflection and hard work to keep this aspect of our working relationships going.

We all have platitudes to describe a non-hierarchical structure. “Everyone has an equal voice.” “We are all equally responsible.” “There is collective ownership.” However, behind these innocuous sentiments, there is a wealth of contradictions, assumptions and, often, muddle-headed thinking! Further, on the ground, none of these admirable principles is easily attained, as our emotions, reactions and anxieties conspire to muddy our own intent. Accordingly, in our discussion, we tried to be unsparingly self-critical in order to see our challenges realistically. We would like to share some strands of our thinking with you.

For many of us, the central meaning of being “teacher run” is that there is no sense of “they,” a group outside and above us that imposes decisions on the teacher body. This body is the one that enables actions, that has to think through problems and come up with intelligent responses. However, we cannot just assume that this state will automatically sustain itself: there is plenty of scope for a “them” to emerge, a perceived subgroup on which some will comfortably lean and of which others will feel resentful. Some of us have experienced

this kind of authority in other settings as leading to a sense of frustration and a lack of accountability.

Coming into this group, a new teacher will inevitably hear some voices louder and longer than others! He could fall into a groove of giving some individuals much greater weight and jump to the conclusion that “some people make all the decisions around here”. With time, however, it emerges that there is nothing in the system that validates some voices over others. What seems to be of value here is that hierarchy is neither legitimized nor sustained, though this fact may be obscured by the emotions of the moment and impulsive actions. The bottom line is that any individual can turn a decision around, and dominant personalities are as liable to be challenged as anyone else. Learning to use this space we have jointly created is a skill in itself, both for new and old teachers.

A question that often comes up is whether a sense of ownership for CFL comes immediately, or takes time to develop. Sometimes, a new teacher prefers to observe and learn quietly, respecting the accumulated experience of the others, before gradually volunteering opinions and ideas. Others don't seem to hesitate! They plunge in right away, and in such situations the group seems to give ownership readily. Either way, decision making in our meetings is a fascinating process: by turns fraught, lucid, stormy, smooth. It requires every single individual's strong involvement, a willingness to stick your neck out and take collective responsibility for the decision.

Given that CFL is currently in a generational transition, one thought is deeply felt: how can I take ownership for a place where everything is more or less in place? Where things are the way they are because over the years teachers have tested many ideas and experimented with structures and processes, weeding out the impractical and inessential? This is the double-edged sword of experience. Teachers who have been around for anything from two to twenty years can make statements that are intrinsically open and fresh, or that carry the weight of the past. How not to become static and rigid, while at

the same time cognizant of past learning, is a constant challenge. However, this is really only a problem of structures and processes; no one at CFL, old or new, has settled the fundamental inner questions of life and living once and for all. In this sense, ownership of CFL is not a knotty matter!

We have been lucky at CFL that the distribution of knowledge and skill among the fifteen to twenty adults has been fairly uneven. Imagine if we'd had to run the school with fifteen English teachers or fifteen finance wizards! We complement and are dependent on each other, but as a result several systems seem to be on auto-pilot for those not immediately involved. Is this way of functioning alright for a teacher-run school? Is there a way for each of us to think about and be involved in every aspect of the school? After all, every decision impacts the whole school, given that we are so small.

While we may not have proficiency in all domains to carry out tasks, we can certainly learn and become closely acquainted with the thinking behind different areas: financial and legal issues, campus management or pastoral care, just to give a few examples. The idea is not that we all become completely interchangeable when it comes to running the school, but rather that we are knowledgeable enough to support each other in decision making.

Several hours into the discussion, it is obvious to us that relationship is key to being a teacher-run school. The sense of contact is real; the questions around relating and giving feedback are vital to us all. In this pursuit, all conventional lines—between new and old, youth and age, work and home, my way and your way—must blur.

So: what *does* it mean to be a teacher-run school? In the abstract, the question appears impossible, but in our daily work, it seems we know enough to proceed!

2010

Mischief

In any community, closely knit or otherwise, norms and conventions seem to be what ultimately determine when a person crosses the line of “acceptable” behaviour and enters the dark side. Our internalization of these norms also seems to condition the depth of our emotional responses when we, as adults, perceive some kind of violation of custom. Following this thought, we can hypothesize some perfectly gentle and peaceful society with idealized norms—no murders or genocide, brutality or war—but where the failure to smile and greet an elder in the morning might be cause for tremendous moral outrage and negative emotions of all sorts!

We at CFL are perhaps lucky that the overall culture among the children tends to be quite humane. Either because of some innate tendencies, or because of behavioural precedent, or due to the vigilance of the adults, or some lucky combination of the above, we do not encounter extreme forms of action motivated by malice or the desire to inflict pain. This is not to say that children do not hurt each other and themselves, emotionally; it is merely to say that grievous pain does not seem to be built into or sustained by their overall patterns of relationship (at least from an adult’s perspective!)

Nevertheless, there are clear instances when adults identify “wrong” behaviours among students. These actions of course can come from any age group, the very young and the not-so-young! Among the junior school children, six to nine year olds, for example, it is considered *de rigueur* to fling the *chappals*, sandals or shoes of one’s fellow students into the bushes, secretly, often with the aid of an accomplice. This happens frequently enough to disrupt activities and cause general consternation (tears, too). Sometime such an action sparks off repercussions, and there are complex trade-offs and political negotiations, at which point adults often intervene to try to initiate dialogue when things get out of hand.

Now, from the adult's point of view, such an action—hiding the *chappals*—is obviously “wrong,” for a wide variety of reasons ranging from ownership, inconvenience and the invocation of the golden rule (“Do unto others...” etc). But what does this transgression signify from the child's point of view? We might, mentally or otherwise, label an act as a theft, for example. But at what age is a child's appropriating another's property to be labelled at all? In order to label it, we presuppose that the child has a conceptual framework within which to understand the concept of property. Or we presuppose that the child has a sufficient capacity for impulse control. Or that the child has a sophisticated sense of social identity, in terms of how others view her. Given the fact that, for young children at least, there may be no awareness of the social meaning of an action, how best can an adult—who has a keen, perhaps overly keen, sense of the nature of the transgression—respond? Ignoring the issue is obviously not right. Bringing the full force of our moral reasoning to the problem is also inappropriate. As with most issues, the answer seems to lie in walking the tightrope between a keen awareness of where the child is, in terms of “moral” understanding, and a constant communication, both verbal and non-verbal, of expectations and demands, as well as the need for introspection and self-reflection.

As an aside, when the *chappal* throwing reached a climax, several high-powered teachers sat down with the children and tried the power of moral reasoning on them. One little girl owned up on two separate occasions: from her own account, once because she was very sleepy and wanted to go to bed, and the second time because she was very hungry and wanted to eat her *dosas*. Logical and moral reasoning obviously have their limits. To this day, we don't know if she really did it!

And of course, such issues get immensely complex as we consider older and older children. Consider the twelve year old whose textbook or notebook or geometry set routinely go missing. Children often forget to bring their study material to school, and the simplest option is

often to quietly pinch your neighbour's and forget to tell him that you borrowed it. All right, "borrowing" a pencil is fine, but a textbook? A calculator? A snack that a child has brought from home? Are we treading on the dark side here? Again, the challenge for the adult is to see the action from the child's developing frameworks; not reacting through our perception of the implications of the act, but from where the child is. And if in our perception, the child has the capacity and maturity to control impulsive behavior or evaluate social meanings but is choosing not to, then of course whatever consequences are appropriate to that setting need to follow.

With the senior-most students, the line between the sense of the teachers as adults and the young people as children or students is held somewhat uneasily. Moral questions are more fraught, particularly since they mostly have to do with relationships and their many-layered complexity. Bringing these points into the open is often painful to the young adult, as this invites close scrutiny from peers and teachers. Other than dialogue, about norms on the one hand and about thought and emotion as the wellsprings of human action on the other, it is not clear what we as adults can "do" in a consciously non-punitive environment. The best we can hope for is that the capacity for insight into the deep causes of a problem can shift habitual patterns of behavior.

2010

Academia, nonacademia

A distinction many people draw in the field of learning is between “academic” and “non-academic” pursuits. In our past brochures and publications, we too have made such a distinction. It seems to be based on a simple classification scheme: subjects (such as history, math, language and science) are academic, and extra-curricular activities (such as carpentry, pottery, music and art) are non-academic. Following from this are some interesting frameworks: academic means verbal, intellectual, rational and analytical, whereas non-academic pursuits are non-verbal, creative and spontaneous, allowing for emotional expression. These distinctions are often justified as the “left brain right brain divide”.

Why the need for this division? The sense of concern around this question comes at various times from various quarters. For example, some students obviously face more difficulty than others in reading texts, listening in class, solving problems, answering questions and analyzing complex arguments. Educators and parents may feel that traditional ‘academic’ curricula burden such students unfairly. There must be alternatives such as art, music or sport which allow them opportunities for enjoyment and excellence.

Another educational imperative is to come upon some true proportion or a balance that schools must achieve between a variety of experiences and activities. Maybe it is a balance between the hands, the head and the heart. Or a balance among the ‘multiple intelligences’. Certainly it’s fair to say that there is an imbalance in mainstream schooling today: too much desk-bound, text-based, paper-and-pen work, sharpening only a narrow skill set.

A slightly different concern is not on behalf of the child so much as a questioning of the social order in the realm of work and the economy. This argument goes: education merely feeds current power structures

such as capitalism, the military and the state. There is also an equation between intellectual school-based ability and status and power in society. So tilting toward 'nonacademic' subjects is a form of activism that redresses this imbalance.

Obviously these points are important and true. But from here to the polarization between academic and nonacademic, and their respective characterizations, is a jump, and one we are uncomfortable with. Without deeper examination, we end up wrangling over how many periods for academic versus nonacademic pursuits in the timetable, and this is a no-win situation. It is a distinction that certainly bears more careful scrutiny, and so this year we began to try looking at it from different angles. In this article, we will share the questions that came up among us, and develop on them a little.

Physics and pottery, it seems, could not be more different from each other. At least in the popular perception, one is abstract, intellectual, text-based and formula-filled. The other is relaxed, hands-on, and develops an aesthetic sensibility. But pottery as a serious pursuit also requires abstraction, conceptualization, a heavy knowledge and experience base, an experimental approach, planning and execution. A skilled potter is enriched by an understanding of the history, human practices and culture surrounding her craft. Meanwhile, learning school level physics well demands an experimental, hands-on approach, observation of natural phenomena such as light and sound and making intuitive connections between concepts, theory and practice. At an older age formulae and abstract explanations will come in, and none of this learning is possible without creative leaps and insights.

In these descriptions, nowhere is it implied that physics should be dull, dry and desk-bound. Nor that pottery will be a source of continual joy and creation. Drill and repetition are a crucial part of excellence in any learning process. And, in any case, it is difficult to compare the creative process involved in making a pot and solving a problem in

physics, and to say that one kind of creativity is superior to the other.

Here we should share what, in our conception, is possible in an 'academic' class. A typical classroom scenario at CFL, for example, involves plenty of conversing and discussion around every point of learning: pauses, listening, rumination, sharing and re-telling. Particularly up to age 14 but even beyond, children explore outside the walls of their classroom, work with objects, and in pairs or small groups. Analytical thinking at any age, far from being dry and unemotional, is intense, heated, active, inclusive, exciting. There is nothing 'merely' verbal about it! When an academic class is approached in this way, the polarizations with which we began this article lose their power. Any child, even one who has difficulties with typical 'schoolwork', can enjoy the participative processes of learning concepts in different subject areas.

Apart from enjoyment, do we feel that in some sense they *need* to engage with analytical thinking? The emphasis on analysis is important as a life skill in understanding society, human impulses and livelihood. We want our students to be intelligent people with the capacity to sift through the various social meanings being thrown at them, and to recognize the limited nature of *all* ideology. This takes deep discrimination, which can be taught and honed in a vibrant, sceptical classroom environment. We'd just like to add a caution, however. Critical thinking for its own sake can lead to judgment and a sense of division or superiority. A very smart person can take delight in tearing apart other people's arguments, mocking their folly. But this is not how we would like to characterize intelligence. A discriminatory capacity should be leavened with humility and empathy. Thus at CFL academics, in the sense of abstract and analytical thinking, is not about being that clever kid in the front row whose hand is always in the air. It is as much about listening to others, being patient, and realizing that the quickest thinker does not always give us the most interesting insights. Time and again this has been true in CFL classrooms.

What about the concern that education has become little more than a feeder into prevailing ideology? One message we convey to our students is that meaning in work comes perhaps from questioning ideology rather than accepting it. As a consequence of this emphasis, our students may and do choose interesting careers in life. However, we as a school cannot hold certain career choices over others as our aim: that would be dangerous and narrow-minded. If as a school we endeavored to produce mainly artists, potters or carpenters, would we be fundamentally addressing the situation? In trying to compensate for a perceived imbalance in society, we cannot swing into a different imbalance in our curriculum. But the point remains that mathematics and the languages occupy a privileged place in our education right through the child's school years.

Realistically, the resources (teacher skill sets, time) of a school will determine the day to day curriculum. Hundreds of schools must be facing and solving this issue in their own ways. Every educational system settles on a solution for how to divide time, one aspect of which is the academic-nonacademic distinction. This can cause no end of angst to educators! But we must remember that finally, there may not be a correlation between the way the timetable was divided in school and what our students end up doing. We cannot be sure, say, that even the large proportion of our students who take up environmental work do so as a result of our curricular emphases. When we recently created a rough demographic chart of our alumni's occupations, artists and designers formed the majority, even though a casual look at our timetable would not have suggested this! So we like to think that what the students have gained is the ability to critically assess their own strengths and interests, and follow them through with courage.

Finally we remind ourselves that it is the same human brain approaching these various fields of learning. Does the emphasis on hands-on activities, or analytic reasoning, make for a better human being or a better society? This has not been shown to be the case either way. There are many interesting educational systems already in

place in pockets of India and abroad, with widely differing curricular emphases, yet the basic challenge of learning about self-interest remains. This is not to sweep careful thought about curricula under the carpet; it is to remind ourselves that the scope of the problem is not touched by our tinkering with the timetable!

2011

Small school

A working model is not something to be copied; it is to afford a demonstration of the feasibility of the principle, and of the methods which make it feasible...We want here to work out the problem of unity, the organization of the school system in itself, and to do this by relating it so intimately to life as to demonstrate the possibility and necessity of such organization for all education.

John Dewey, School and Society (1900)

There are many reasons why we would like CFL to be a small school. However, when people visit us or hear about us, they often raise doubts about the validity of the “small school” model. We have never dismissed these questions as irrelevant, and we have tried to engage with the various assumptions behind differing arguments for the “ideal” school size. We feel that now is a good opportunity to look at this question afresh.

A primary motive for remaining at about seventy students and fifteen full-time adults is to allow a rich sense of relatedness and community. Our intent is to render the structure of daily thought and emotion transparent. After all, only through understanding all the facets of human nature as reflected in our daily lives, we believe, can we intelligently address societal problems. Small numbers make this process almost unavoidable. We find that there is a possibility of being more than merely acquainted with every single individual in the school: colleagues, children, and, by extension, parents. We have to acknowledge and work with each others’ feelings, opinions and points of view. Our daily interactions are rarely superficial. They may be emotionally charged, positively or negatively, but they can’t be shallow. The human tendency, either subtly or obviously, is to build walls around ourselves and our chosen circle. In a small school, this is difficult to accomplish!

If we want to retain the quality of conversations and interactions in the community that we currently enjoy, but with a larger student population, we would have to increase teacher numbers. Our daily work is punctuated by numerous little “meetings,” bemoaned by all but invaluable to this education! Could we not keep this spirit going, but with, say, twenty-five adults? To be a non-hierarchical teacher-run school, it seems that we can’t have coherent weekly meetings with twenty-five people, all of whom have to dialogue and make decisions together.

Like any institution, we have certain expectations of ourselves. For us, these are less in the realm of performance and appearance and more to do with attitudes and intentions. For example, we value a sense of care, ownership and initiative when it comes to our immediate environment. If we were dealing with larger numbers, we would, understandably, have to settle for a scenario where some individuals rise to these expectations and some do not. Small numbers help us all hold each other to our responsibilities, with affection and integrity. The hope behind these processes is that the quality of care and attention given to the patterns of everyday life will persist when we meet the “world outside.”

Small numbers also make changes, large and small, easier to implement, like steering a scooter rather than a big truck. There are constant adjustments we make to respond to the challenges of running a school every day. Whether it is adjusting our cooking rotas because of an upcoming drama performance, or meeting each and every parent of the school one month regarding our fees and finances, we have found it easy to make important and meaningful decisions without being bogged down by our own weight.

You may have noticed that we have not mentioned “individual attention” as a reason for being a small school. Of course, being small implies that each child gets a great deal of attention (more perhaps than she wants!) from both adults and peers. We are more in touch

with the child's world than would be possible with larger numbers. However, when parents express a wish for individual attention for their child, it often means that they would like their child's *individuality* to be nurtured. In other words, to develop a personality with its strong preferences, opinions and habits. Though this may sound like a good thing to do, this kind of attention, in our perception, is actually detrimental to the well being of the child and community. We would rather give attention, not to indulge emotional patterns, but to try and understand them. We would rather learn together about carrying the self lightly.

Having made this choice to remain small, there are some difficulties we face. Peer group sizes can become too small, especially in the senior school. Students can sometimes find such classes stifling; there are no back benches to hide in, no anonymity, and same-age friends must be found from among a limited selection of peers.

At the level of the organization, the question of finances looms large. We don't want the cost of this education to spiral out of control (as it easily can). Therefore, we have to work with a relatively small budget: our costs and fees per student are lower than those of much larger schools, even though our teacher-student ratio is roughly 1:7! To keep costs down, we control expenses (including teacher salaries) tightly. We are fortunate to receive donations from friends around the world every year, but even these must be managed and spent carefully to keep ourselves financially stable.

The most disquieting question we face regarding being small goes something like this: how, in a country like India, can so many resources be poured into so few children?

To us, it seems that there are two ways in which to address the needs of any society. The first way is to try to reach and impact as many individuals as possible through one's initiative. In education, this could translate into transmitting basic education to very large num-

bers. Obviously, this is important and necessary. Equally validly, we could attempt in-depth investigations that could have ramifications on the way education might be conceived at all levels. In our case, this investigation depends on our staying small. It is nonetheless a saddening fact that only a few can have a CFL education. Our impulse has been to share our ideas and learning with a wider educational circle, and to give energy and time as adults to this endeavour. We write articles, conduct workshops, give presentations, and spend a lot of time through the year with numerous visitors and organizations doing educational work in India.

In our view, there is no satisfactory answer that any single school can give to the numbers question. There are upwards of 400 million children in government schools alone in India. What is a reasonable number of students for a school to take on to make a meaningful difference? We feel that society has severely underestimated the actual energy and resources necessary to intelligently bring up our children. We believe that radically different, richer models of schooling are possible, if only the current debates on education widen their scope.

2012

Dialogue through the ages

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 “wrongdoings.” However, we don’t stop at the discussion of the incident and those involved. Be it children in the age group 6-9 years, pre-teens, 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 adults as well.

The question *Why do we talk behind other peoples’ backs?*, raised by a middle schooler, is as relevant for a nine year old as it is for a nineteen, thirty-nine 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!”, “She did!” and so on. Often, in the course of discussion, this moves to a 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. For instance, in a discussion about a peer who often got easily upset, an eight-year old asked: *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?* This offers more food for thought.

As we move on to 12-13 year-olds, we notice that the students are able to start turning the questions around to themselves on their own in remarkable ways. There is the possibility to move away from a particular incident to a more general inquiry with questions such as: *How*

does it make me feel when I gossip and why? Why do I feel anger/jealousy/insecurity/a sense of division and what does it do to me? Why am I restless or bored? Why do certain things make me feel happy and what does this do to me? and so on. Students sometimes share 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 from 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, bring in a new theme of anyone’s choice.

The senior school students may engage in a discussion on the role of their consciousness in the crises of the world, how their relationships operate from images (positive or negative) they have of each other, whether they can be sceptical of the absolute “truth” of their feelings or emotions, about the nature and existence of the self, and so on. Again, a frank sharing by both adults and students, an ability to look inward and an interest to carry the discussion forward, are essential. Some students may argue, *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 will inform our approach to life. Submitting to a guru or religion doesn’t seem to work. We are left with the same questions, or perhaps more questions arise: what is the role of religion in creating feelings of division in society?

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 – to err is human after all! 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!

2012

Relating

Education and the processes of living, in our view, are inextricably linked. When we say living, we mainly mean relationships at work, at home and on the street. Relationships seem to constitute such a large chunk of our daily human experience. And their influence reaches further than just our own particular lives. Our search for security in relationship impacts the world at large. To us, it is obvious that education should aim at unravelling the subtleties and complexities of human relationship.

We often say that man is a social animal; we like to live in groups. Humans certainly need each other, and warm relationships are said to be one of the ingredients of a 'happy' life. We all experience supportive periods with close friends or family, times of great affection and reaching out. But this same companionship is also the source of much pain and distress, because there is a strong whiff of self-centredness in every relationship. Thus our lives are a strange mixture of the affectionate and the antagonistic, the lonely and the multiply connected.

Everyone has their own 'coping strategies' to meet the difficulties in relating: avoidance, aggression, submission or gossip. Some believe that relationships are strengthened by conflict, or at least that relationship is all about ups and downs ("Wouldn't life be boring if we always got along?") Yet these personally held theories never seem to set the mind at rest; it seems that we have always sought systemic guidance in this realm. Witness our complex kinship structures that have dictated rules for interaction over generations, and, for better or worse, still do so. More recently, we are seeing a proliferation of the therapy industry and of relationship gurus. In this new paradigm, emotional literacy and interpersonal intelligence have become trainable skills. These are all set to become categories of assessment for schoolchildren across the country! All this shows that there is a widespread need for something beyond the coping strategies we instinctively fall back on.

This skill-based approach, in our view, is terribly misleading. Is relating something to be 'good at'? Is it a skill to be mastered to achieve particular goals: a happier marriage or a better workplace? The complexity of relationship seems not to lie in the reason that it's just a difficult skill to master. In fact, making it a skill masks the roots of the problem. Learning how to negotiate and navigate our way in social situations doesn't address the bottom line: we find it very difficult to move away from viewing the world from a narrow perspective, our own.

When we observe ourselves, we encounter a very deep self-orientation through the day. It's all about me somehow. There is a fragility in here—a readiness to bristle, to disagree, to affirm one's own position. Paradoxically, we are always a little rattled when someone else displays the same behaviours! In this somewhat negotiated terrain, we use shortcuts that we hope will help us, such as forming quick reference directories of people, a code-book, a manual to deal with a variety of situations. In the long run, however, these techniques miss the mark. The code-books acquire a reality of their own, all the more powerful because of their invisibility. We are rarely aware of the way we prejudge people, anticipating their responses and formulating our own beforehand. We rarely see people and situations afresh, as they are.

But why is a school newsletter discussing this rather amorphous issue? To us, relationship has everything to do with education. These are the realities that get glossed over in daily living. They are not given explicit attention, yet they are the basis of every life situation. At CFL, we would say that we keep relationship at the heart of our curriculum. Not with the intent to 'improve' relationships, which is just tinkering at the edges of the problem. Rather, relationship, in the manner of a hologram, reveals everything about ourselves and our world. So in daily transactions, we give importance to this understanding over getting the job done, or making sure there is a profit, or getting the student a rank or a pass. Together with our students and

colleagues, we learn about the strong need to make finer and finer divisions between ourselves and others. It goes without saying that nothing about this approach easily guarantees peace and harmony!

Attention in the moment to the totality of our situation: can we ask this of ourselves? Absentminded, mechanical processing appears to be a deep habit, a default mode that precludes this attention. The most we can perhaps do is to caution each other—and ourselves—when we fall into predicting and explaining the world in the same old ways. Can we make a shift and see our emotional movies as mere movies? Not always as justified and inevitable as they seem, but simply projections of thought, desire and emotion.

We seem to have a choice in the way we perceive difficulty or complexity in relationship. Going down one path implies finding fault with everything outside 'me'. If we reject that path, what are we left with? Not self-blame certainly, but the possibility of clearly seeing the extent to which we are—very deeply and subtly—creating the problem. This is far from a cliché: we feel that some perceptions have the power to transform us, and this is one such. Our habitual thinking about our lives carries the primordial drive for security. We believe in a world of people out there whom we have to control to get what we want. What if we're wrong?

Our students are very much a part of this enquiry. Their brand of philosophy is not analytical or complicated, but they come to the heart of the matter swiftly and directly. In terms of relationship, they amaze us with their ability to drop their images and to try to live harmoniously with each other, overcoming conflict. In our complex social world, they offer a possibility of what it might mean to tread lightly in the realm of emotion and identity.

2013

Moral anchors

It seems so very trite to state that we humans approach our world with moral stances. Obviously, these stances, or rather nuggets of attitudes, moral tastes, make up the very core of our being. Philosophers have argued over the ages that they constitute the essence of what it means to be human. Yet our moral anchors are also deeply problematic. When my sense of what is right clashes with yours, in any realm, conflict ensues. Moral anchors can be interpreted as what may bind us together within communities, but also, and to a greater extent, what divides us as nations, religions, castes and ultimately as individuals.

Our moral anchors range from the very subtle to the most grossly obvious, and they also dominate our consciousness from a very young age. Young children argue fiercely about which superhero they prefer (is there any more potent symbol of moral strength than the masked men of steel of the 21st century?) and the qualities they represent. They will take sides in classroom conflicts, arguing the finer points of precedence, justice and fairness, as well as the negotiations leading to compromise and peace. They will also reach out and demand that the injured receive empathy and the space to recover from hurt. As children grow older, more and more of the world around is consciously brought within the ambit of the inner moral life. The school environment is a complex moral space, and the assumptions behind belief and action are what make the latter so rich in potential and at the same time so problematic.

However, this piece is about adults and our inner moral certainties. These play themselves out on almost a moment-to-moment basis, in all arenas of daily life. Food, for example; perhaps among the most contentious and emotional issues in daily living. We instinctively split food into two categories: “our” food (probably the best in the world!), and “theirs.” “Ours” seems easy to understand (even this category collapses under investigation), but “theirs” rapidly spirals

into incoherence. Are “they” the West? (American, British, English, French, Italian?) Or is “theirs” referring to north/south India? Food from religious communities other than ours? Veg or non-veg? Organic or pesticide ridden? Wholesome and “natural” or genetically modified? Onion-free? An intuitive anchoring in taste and identity then spills out into moral certainties: what is healthy and what is junk food, what kinds of food erode our cultural values (and, by implication, what kinds of food endorse them), what constitutes authenticity. A syncretic mix and match attitude tries to solve the problem but only plays with its surface. Bringing various closely-held moral positions together does not necessarily ease the tensions between them. Another seemingly trivial example: music. Is music meant for mere pleasure? Does it have political significance? Religious and spiritual dimensions? What is “our” music and what values does it uphold? Crucially, which of these meanings, for us, overrides the others? Every social and cultural realm contains, embedded within itself, the seed of moral certainty.

If such moral certainties lie beneath the surface of everyday activities, we can see the problems escalate in more abstract and overtly moral spheres such as religion, sexuality, education, the project of nation-building, political ideologies and the use of language. Few of us could claim that we do not hold strong moral certainties in these realms. These certainties are probably the outcome of our conditioning and upbringing rather than, as we might like to believe, choice and rational thought.

One problem is that most of our moral codes are abstractions. The philosopher Immanuel Kant apparently held that to lie is wrong, even to lie to a murderer as to the whereabouts of his intended victim. This is abstraction taken to its logical end. By abstraction I mean an unwillingness to consider the specifics of a situation, to see real people in real contexts. In the field of education this abstraction is evident. Two teachers may wish with all their hearts for the well-being of a child who has some particular difficulty, but both may have quite different diagnoses of the problem and its solutions. Let’s say a

child is unhappy in school due to her interactions with her peers. One teacher might locate the problem in bullying, while another might be equally convinced that the child is soft and needs to be tougher. These root orientations might lead them into quite different strategies and judgements. Even though at an intellectual level the two might try to accommodate each others' ideas, there is a strong emotional attachment to the original perception and evaluation, which springs from personality, conditioning, ideology. In this anchoring, the ability to see the "real" child, to listen deeply to her perceptions without either indulging or dismissing them, to bring the class together in a sensitive manner, without taking sides, is generally compromised. The abstraction looms larger than the reality, and the potential for healing is thus lost.

We will always face the following dichotomy: are moral stances worth it, for all the cohesiveness they seem to bring in society, or are they intrinsically divisive at all levels? How shall we resolve this dichotomy in daily living, in the face of moral choices we have to make? One way is to assert our values and try to organise our social, political, economic and emotional lives around their expression (to the extent that this is even possible). This assertion will perforce take place in the face of the deeply held values of others. At this point the argument is generally for tolerance, which means giving all groups an equal chance to create their own moral spaces in society. However, as our moral choices are at the very core of our being, we are apt to be deeply threatened by the values of others. The social atmosphere, while superficially tolerant, is thick with mistrust and violence. We see this every morning when we open our newspapers.

This brief essay is a plea for an alternative path: doubt, and holding values lightly. Then there is the possibility of creative and cohesive lines of action emerging from tentative positions and a deep listening to others, particularly in troubled times.

This is certainly not easy to do. It requires tremendous patience and a sense of non-judgemental affection for the individuals one encounters either intimately or casually. It requires taking ourselves, our

emotional reactions, lightly. More seriously, it requires a recognition that one's self is meshed with others to the extent that boundaries are arbitrary. As Krishnamurti has often stated, it requires a deep and visceral understanding that *you are the world*. Psychological and social forces conspire to pull us way from this insight. We may grasp it in flashes, when we see society embedded in our consciousnesses and, equally, our thoughts projected upon the world.

What will deepen the quality of our collective understanding? This is an open and meditative question. We need to hold this question shining in our consciousness, not grasping for easy answers, and we need to see it unfold in daily living, both at the personal and the structural level.

The move towards doubt is not an argument for complete moral relativism. Some attitudes, core stances, are more logical, creative and inclusive than others. The problem does not lie so much in the intellectual content of the moral stance as with the ways in which it defines the self and its boundaries in the emotional realm. It is here that doubt plays its crucial role in loosening the grip of the value system.

Can there be a universal morality that is not based on specific ideas but on attitudes and processes? A moral code based not upon its content but upon its orientation towards the world? Certainly, a stance that emphasizes compassion over specific outcomes in challenging circumstances allows us to take others into account as well as opening up the field of action to many possibilities. Questioning the impermanent dissolving self pulls the rug from under our feet and enables us to interrogate the world and live in it with a sense of freedom. These questions—empathy, insight, the emptiness of selfhood—can act, if not as moral anchors, then at least as moral pointers in the complex field of daily living.

2014

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