

Each age in human history has thrown up its particular challenges for human beings. In the past the challenge was perhaps more focused on each individual and how she would meet life with all its ups and downs in the most intelligent way. Challenges such as:

How does she earn a livelihood?

How does she navigate her powerful emotional landscape and come out unscathed?

How does she relate with other human beings without being hurt or hurting others?

How does she meet the inevitable fact of death not only of herself but of her near and dear too?

Of course, she was part of a tribe or a community and would have to periodically be concerned about the fate of the community as a whole.

Today we face a very unique challenge. Not only do we as individuals have the same challenges that life posed all our ancestors, but we face challenges that threaten the existence of all life on earth. Thanks to what maybe irreversible experiments that humans have unleashed, we are on the brink of a huge environmental crisis. It is a crisis which threatens the mass extinction of hundreds of species in a very short period. Going even by the most conservative estimates, there is going to be untold suffering unleashed by the effects of climate change which will unfortunately impact those who have made very little contribution to its cause. If we were to believe some estimates, the time line in which this will occur is very very short.

We also have economic and political crisis with deep division and hatred among communities. Poverty, terrorism, mass lynching and war are the ugly faces of these crisis.

Many individuals experience deep personal predicaments and feel alienated and find life rather meaningless.

Perhaps we can say that there is a crisis in human consciousness itself.

How do we as individuals respond to this? Many of us maybe in denial. My particular life is going relatively smoothly in spite of the ups and downs, but the world itself is alright. I don't see any great crisis. Others respond in various ways. Some do so by agitating to change things at the systemic level by bringing about changes in laws and governance. Others work at grass root levels to bring about changes at a local level. Some others try to set examples by creating communes with alternative life styles.

Our response has been to see if education can help regenerate both the human being and society.

We feel with H. G Wells that "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."

So why do we feel that education can address these daunting issues that face us? It is clear that in order to respond to the various challenges that face us we need to have unprecedented cooperation among a large number of countries, organizations and individuals. And it seems that our current mindset with its deeply divisive nature is woefully inadequate.

Crisis or not we also have the timeless challenge of how do we educate children so that they live with a deep sense of well being. A well being that is inclusive in nature and which has compassion and sensitivity as its main pillars. It is clear that individual well being without well being for society at large is rather limited.

So we feel that education has to have these twin intentions, to explore at the individual level what it means to live 'sanely in an insane world' and as global citizens to have the strength and vision to go beyond one's parochial goals.

If education has to achieve these intentions then we have to begin by exploring the nature of learning.

Nowadays there are many buzzwords associated the word learning. Child centered and not adult centered, learning at one's pace, mixed age group learning and so on. We hope in this morning session to try and communicate our understanding of learning and how best it takes place and we hope you will share your questions, doubts and even fears about learning and other issues.

We are child centered in the sense that we hope children who study in CFL feel deeply secure and happy and more importantly they have a say in many matters pertaining to their life in school. They are most welcome to question and discuss anything they wish. However, we are not child centered in the sense that the curriculum and day is designed by children.

We are adult centered in the sense that we are a teacher run school. Adults enjoy tremendous autonomy and are completely responsible for the school. But we are not adult centered in the traditional sense - where the teacher is an authority figure to be feared and dreaded and of whom no questions can be asked!

I think it would be fair to say that we are 'learning centered'! Sounds good - but what does it really mean?

To begin with we feel that there has to be an environment of learning where the relationship between the teacher and student is based on mutual trust and affection. Where the tools for motivation are not fear, reward and punishment, competition and comparative evaluation. It is important that the child's self-worth is not linked to her abilities. The child should have the leisure to learn and find the process of learning meaningful.

I would like to add here that we also strongly believe that these conditions are absolutely necessary because when the opposite prevails—when fear and competition are the main tools of motivation—they do great harm to children and eventually create uncaring and ultimately dysfunctional societies.

The minute our focus becomes 'learning' then many things follow.

It is clear that for learning to take place we need an alert mind and a healthy body. So we need to emphasize exercise, healthy food and adequate sleep. We will create an atmosphere at home and school that nurtures learning rather than inhibits it. Like a young sapling that needs a tree guard to grow properly, we will also shield our children to the extent possible from various dangers. Our approach to media then takes a different turn. We will become conscious of not only the content but also what impact the media itself is having on a child's capacity to learn.

We will create cooperative structures in school rather than competitive or coercive structures. All interaction with children then becomes process oriented rather than goal oriented. Communication and dialogue becomes tremendously important. Such dialogue will have to be open and it is important that participants shed their defenses for it to work.

We are also forced to take a far more creative approach when children break norms, do not cooperate or commit misdemeanors. We cannot resort to punishment or making examples of children. In fact, mistakes become tremendously important – because they are often excellent teachers. So our concern in such a situation will be to see if we can help the child see the consequences of her action and how they may potentially hurt her or the community. We hope that she learns from her mistakes and moves on in life rather than be scarred and in fear of making more mistakes.

Having established an environment of learning one might then ask what is the content of this learning?

It is clear to us that one of the responsibilities of bringing up the young is that we need to make sure that we equip them with skills to navigate the world and to earn a livelihood. It is also important that we expose them to many of the beautiful ideas and creations of human culture. One of the claims we can make with certainty is that it is possible to do so without having to subject children to stress and use the rather unintelligent methods that conventional education seems to use. However, we do recognize that each discipline of knowledge has its own rigour and demands that need to be respected to master them. For example to master the addition of fractions, one must understand the algorithm and why it works, and in addition devote a fair amount of time and effort to practice it. Moreover the same concept will have to be revisited periodically. In this, as in many other disciplines, there is no escape from hard work and drill.

It is clear that as a species we are capable of learning and as I mentioned above it can be done in a rather intelligent manner without leaving a child brutalized.

If we notice a large part of our learning has to do with manipulating the environment for our own purpose and then 'survive' in it, but a lot is also for the sheer pleasure of learning. It is interesting to note however that apart from language – which every human seems to be capable of learning, mastery in other fields is not evenly distributed in humans as a species. However it is enough if some members of the species learn some of the skills for humans to survive. For example technical skills – it is not necessary that every one of us learn these skills, but a few individuals having learned these is enough for a technological society to survive. It is also interesting that not all of us can learn all that has been learnt and mastered by human beings as a whole. I am convinced that even if I had individual instruction and was allowed to learn at my own pace by the most caring and passionate teacher I would be never able to learn to dance! Thank god that is not a problem for mankind!

However is there a 'learning' that each and every human being is capable of that not only helps us lead a meaningful life free of conflict but will also face all the challenges that I mentioned earlier? For us such a learning is absolutely vital without which we will continue to cause suffering for not only humans but the earth itself.

The first thing I become aware of when I undertake such a journey of enquiry is that I am deeply conditioned by my parents, teachers, peers, society and the media. The content of my conditioning is my belief systems,

my world-view, my likes and dislikes and my biases and prejudices. This conditioning is operating in the background almost as a reflex and is informing my decisions, my actions and even my moods and emotions.

I also become aware that I am always looking at the world with 'me' as the centre. This 'me' needs to be protected and is always separating itself from everything – from nature, from other beings and quite interestingly from its own emotions, thoughts and experiences. This sense of separation and the need to protect it in our opinion creates the crisis in the world I was talking about earlier. For example, our ability to separate ourselves from nature and our unique ability to manipulate our environment has unleashed an experiment that is threatening all life on earth.

So the question we have before us is – can we learn about our conditioning, the divisive nature of our selves and how this divisiveness is destructive and see if there can be an end to it? This learning obviously begins with oneself and is grounded in observation and skepticism. It is not accumulative in nature and seems to demand mindfulness, energy and sensitivity.

For Krishnamurti

A mind that is learning never says, "I know", because knowledge is always partial, whereas learning is complete all the time. Learning does not mean starting with a certain amount of knowledge, and adding to it further knowledge. That is not learning at all; it is a purely mechanistic process. To me, learning is something entirely different. I am learning about myself from moment to moment, and the myself is extraordinarily vital; it is living, moving; it has no beginning and no end. When I say, "I know myself", learning has come to an end in accumulated knowledge. Learning is never cumulative; it is a movement of knowing which has no beginning and no end.

None of us here can claim to be experts at such a 'learning'. We are humble beginners and perhaps will always be so. We hope that Centre For Learning is space where this learning is nurtured for both children and adults.

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