



Like a dewdrop at the edge of a blade of grass

Transience is the way of life. This we all understand, at least intellectually. Yet we seek continuity and permanence in all that we do, especially when it comes to organisations.

Take the Catholic Church, for instance. It has lasted nearly 1500 years and currently has about 1.3 billion followers. As long as there is continued belief in the Catholic theology, there is no major threat to this institution.

When humans come together it is often around an idea, a belief or a goal. The simpler the goal, the easier it is to pursue and sustain it: making a profit, for example. This bottom line is easy to understand by all stakeholders, and this allows corporations to survive over several generations. A corporation rarely fragments over its goals. It may fall apart for other reasons, but not because everyone in the company stops believing in its central aim anymore or because there are subtle differences in the interpretation of their work!

Hate is another bond that does not seem to break as easily. Political parties that are born out of an ideology of *othering*

seem to hang together far more than those who have come together with nobler aims such as equity and justice. Nobler aims suffer from what Freud called the “narcissism of small differences.” Money is actually a very abstract concept, but humans have been ingenious in making it measurable and universal, allowing us to cooperate around the concept of money far more than any other concept. Ideas like equity and justice are far more prone to subtle interpretation, and one person’s notion of justice can be another person’s notion of iniquity. The more identified one becomes with one’s idea, the higher the chances of fragmentation.

What then of a group that comes together over questions? And if they choose to do something together, how robust is the activity they have chosen to do? This has been a central question for us here at CFL, especially in the times of a pandemic which has upturned all our lives.

The questions we hold are precious and beautiful. They are part of a perennial quest to end all illusion and live a life free of conflict. The work we have chosen seems absolutely



fundamental: to share these questions with young minds, nurturing the possibility that human beings can function from a ground of love and compassion rather than self-centeredness.

Why then is our work “like the dewdrop at the edge of a blade of grass”?

After all, we have survived 30 odd years, we have a beautiful campus and nearly 200 alumni, some of whom are doing amazing things with their lives. More importantly, we have a parent body very keen on our “method” of education, with its unique features and educational experiences. These features are very attractive: a small school with highly qualified staff and a space where most children feel safe and happy. The experiences in our programmes are rich and varied: swimming in a local pond, hiking in the Himalayas, growing vegetables, cleaning toilets and learning all the marvelous things that thought has invented. (As an aside: both experiences and features have been sorely challenged in the dreaded online mode of education!)

But what is the engine behind all this? At CFL, it is relationships and the act of seeing together. To state the obvious: the engine is the relationship between all members of the community—teachers, parents and students.

It is true that a common intent has brought us together. The trouble is, our brains are very deeply conditioned to con-

vert *intent* into *ideas*. We deeply believe in these ideas. They seem completely logical and coherent, and we have no reason to doubt them. But they are ideas. By this I mean we hold our questions and perceptions conceptually, in the form of words, pictures, emotions and in memory. More importantly, they form a part of our self identity. They have become part of the framework from which we experience the world.

This adherence to ideas and identity appears to ensure stability. After all, as pointed out earlier, many groups have come together over ideas and have been robust and lasted centuries. All institutions, such as universities, have a goal that transcends individuals. Even if every employee of a university were to quit, as long as there is an external governing body and a continued belief in the idea that knowledge should be created and disseminated, a whole new crop of faculty could be hired to keep the university going.

What else ensures longevity in an institution? Is it that these organisations are based on security, power and growth? Myths and beliefs provide a great sense of security, not only when you are alive but even after you are dead! So does money and its pursuit. Any group that provides a sense of belonging based on shared ideology is also designed to survive. Power is somewhat counterintuitive. One would think that any structures with power built into them would be unstable because of the very nature of power, but the lure of power,

and the glory it offers, no matter how brief, seems enough to keep these structures going.

What about growth? Growth as a driver can manifest in many forms, from the crude need for material (and self) aggrandizement to the constant state of becoming. Many organisations have tapped into this need of ours to *become*. Built into their structures are hierarchical ladders to climb and subtle goals to achieve. Reward and punishment, competition and the need for acknowledgement and recognition reinforce these structures.

Growth can also have an ennobling purpose: learning more about the universe and gaining greater knowledge for its own sake and for the betterment of humanity. This need to grow has helped humanity unravel amazing mysteries of the universe, increased our life span, made life extremely comfortable for the elite and helped us dominate the earth. Unfortunately, the bearers and executors of this knowledge don't function keeping the well-being of the earth and its inhabitants at their heart, and a lot of the knowledge that humanity today possesses is a serious threat to all life.

Growth, power and security are all designed to build, consolidate and safeguard an institution over a period of time. What if the ground that we stand on is based on dissolution, negation and not-knowing? Our questions at CFL are constantly challenging myths, beliefs and the narratives we construct on a daily basis: narratives about ourselves, about others and about the school we are creating. They are

pushing us to question identity and the need to believe in a permanent self that endures over time. Our questions goad us to doubt the security that comes from belonging to and being part of any organisation. There is constant scepticism about received wisdom, especially in the psychological realm, and we see strength in functioning from not-knowing rather than from certainty. There is a feeling of being nobody, while constantly struggling to be somebody.

If CFL is driven by relationship, and if relationships are based on images and ideology, they will inevitably lead to conflict. Conflict destroys meaning and energy. Our brains are deeply conditioned to record memories, and we relate to everything through images rather than through direct perception. After all, at a fundamental level, we are programmed to construct the universe through images, from instant to instant.

Energy comes from clarity. This clarity can't be only for the individual; there has to be collective insight. Seeing together can't be based on concurrence and knowledge. Such a seeing together often fragments into subtle divisions. Seeing together is ephemeral. It seems to happen when there is a shared intensity and non-directed attention.

Is all this a tough ask for mere mortals? Can a school built on a philosophy of negation survive? Perhaps this is a wrong question. The very idea of longevity and survival is based on time, and thinking in terms of time often leads to fear and insecurity. Perhaps there is great strength in empti-



ness and transience—not being tethered by structure or time. After all, there are many who believe that the whole universe emerged from pure nothingness! Can we stay with nothingness the way Krishnamurti invites us to?

You are nothing. You may have your name and title, your property and bank account, you may have power and be famous; but in spite of all these safeguards, you are as nothing. You may be totally unaware of this emptiness, this nothingness, or you may simply not want to be aware of it; but it is there, do what you will to avoid it. You may try to escape from it in devious ways, through personal or collective violence, through individual or collective worship, through knowledge or amusement; but whether you are asleep or awake, it is always there. You can come upon your relationship to this nothingness and its fear only by being choicelessly aware of the escapes. You are not related to it as a separate, individual entity; you are not the observer watching it; without you, the thinker, the observer, it is not. You and nothingness are one; you and nothingness are a joint phenomenon, not two separate processes. If you, the thinker, are afraid of it and approach it as something contrary and opposed to you, then any action you may take towards it must inevitably lead to illusion and so to further conflict and misery. When there is the discovery, the experiencing of that nothingness as you, then fear—which exists only when the thinker is separate from his thoughts and so tries to establish a relationship with them—completely drops away.

J Krishnamurti (Commentaries on Living I, Chapter 39)

What's the matter?

Despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic, we tried to explore an interesting science topic. We undertook a scientific enquiry into the nature of matter with ten and eleven year-olds over a term. Our broad objectives were to help children understand different states and properties of matter, think about the role of matter in our lives, and understand their own conceptions.

The project occurred in three waves. The first wave consisted of learning about what matter is made of and the properties of different states of matter and material. The second wave focused on how different materials are produced or mined and worked with, and the third wave allowed us to look at the human-created conditions around certain materi-



als such as wood and plastic. In this article, we will mention only the broad aims of the project along with some activities we undertook.

Throughout the project, we conducted experiments to understand the different qualities and states of matter. The children were to develop a way of thinking that would help them make propositions about a particular object or phenomena and then test the propositions by conducting different experiments. For instance, children observed what happened after copper wire was mixed with a silver nitrate solution. As they could see the silver deposit on the copper wire, they made propositions about the fact that the two elements had changed their state. They claimed that copper changed to a liquid state while the silver turned into a solid. Then, similarly, they created a hypothesis about what would happen if we put magnesium blocks in a copper sulfate solution. By watching the colour of the copper sulfate solution change, they could confirm their hypothesis about the copper and magnesium changing their states of matter.

Understanding the limitations of the online mode, we wanted the children to be active by writing, moving around their house, answering and asking questions, and performing experiments. To encourage their participation, we also asked them to do a book talk on a library book that was posted to them. The children also did presentations on different materials based on the reading we gathered for them. These presentations helped them deepen their understanding of atoms and molecules, how materials are produced, and to ask more questions.

Another way to involve the children was to make them representatives of different planets in our solar system and then to present their understanding of the chemical structure of their planet to others. This grand event was called The Inter-Planetary Conference. The children presented their understanding based on the reference material we gathered for them. This presentation allowed them to think about different planetary atmospheres and the role elements and compounds play in creating a certain planet.

We also used audio-visual material to display the astonishing properties of atoms and molecules which the naked eye cannot see. The periodic table song inspired by Tom Lehrer was a good way to introduce the periodic table to this age group and to help them understand the different elements in the table along with their properties. We also played a game where children asked questions to find out which element in the periodic table was chosen by their classmates. This game helped them recognize the different groups of elements in the table such as radioactive elements, noble gases and so on.

An important aspect of the project was to build upon the questions that naturally came to the students. Here is a short

list to give you a taste of their questions:

- Are there living and non-living atoms? Do living things have living atoms and non-living things have non-living atoms?
- What makes things alive?
- What is life?
- Why is there so much plastic?
- What state of matter is fire?
- What is dark matter?
- What is the universe made of?
- If everything is made of something, then what is nothing?

The children maintained a wall chart where they noted new words introduced in class along with their questions. These questions moved us to invite guest speakers, find relevant reading material, and share our own understanding.

We hope that the children have retained the content shared during the project, but most importantly, we hope that they have developed a way of thinking that helps them to ask and answer questions about the world.



Zoom kitchens

As the pandemic continued through the summer of 2021, we were in for another term of online classes. Much of the Sevantika programme (the third year of senior school) during the first term was centred around academics. Since students pursue subjects of their choice, there were very few periods where the whole group would be together. As coordinators of the group, we felt that a timetabled session with students where all of us could do something together would be both fun and another opportunity for the group to spend time with each other.

An interesting and unusual idea to cook together in our respective kitchens, following a common recipe, occurred to us. We were a little unsure about the enthusiasm this would generate, but we boldly put up our first recipe on Google Classroom – a simple vegetable pulao and raita. Students were required to be ready with the ingredients and at the scheduled time, we planned to log on to Zoom and cook together for an hour and twenty minutes. When we joined the Zoom session, we were delighted to see all students on

the video call cooking! The bunch of 17-18 year olds were debating the right size to which carrots need to be diced, how frying onions till they caramelize adds to the overall flavor and why boiling peas for long would lead to a mushy texture and must be avoided at all costs. Students helped each other, joked, and showed each other how their cooking was going and served their dish for lunch to their families. Needless to say, it was an instant hit!

As the weeks went by, students continued cooking enthusiastically and shared their family recipes and pictures. Even those recipes which needed preparation ahead of time were followed dutifully. We began hearing from parents about how delighted they were to see their teenager cooking and serving them delicious lunch once every week! We cooked pasta in red sauce, railway cutlets, sponge cake, akki roti, paav bhaji, aloo parantha and a whole bunch of other items.

It turned out to be an amazing activity which many groups in school tried with similar results! It was heartening to get a feel of togetherness and hone a skill that many would include in their survival toolkit.





A mammoth timeline project

Time travel became a possibility right here on our campus this past year when the 9th and 10th graders worked with parent Michael Little to research, design, illustrate, assemble and present a timeline. We journeyed from the Big Bang, currently thought to have been about 13.8 billion years ago, to present-day life on Earth. One foot in our timeline represented ten million years, so over a distance of 1380 feet starting midway on the school mud road to our assembly hall, we were taken on a journey of the origins of life on Earth as we know it today.

Questions, stories and possibilities were the mode of enquiry and learning, supported by rich and challenging text sources. Students formed groups, each working on an aspect of the project—plate tectonics, flowering plants, mass extinctions and so on. All these aspects in illustrative form came together and were brought to life in an engaging assembly presentation by the students.

The audience's heads swivelled through the presentation

as students walked us around the last one billion years or 100 feet using the circular structure of the assembly hall. From the youngest to the oldest, all listened intently and were both entertained and informed.

The lucky junior school children even had a chance to walk through 13.8 billion years, or rather from midway down the school mud road to the assembly hall with Michael acting as tour guide on this historic journey. En route, they would have noticed the formation of our galaxy, the Milky Way, 13.6 billion years ago, witnessed the formation of the earth and our moon between 4.5 and 4.6 billion years ago and then encountered the first life on Earth, a mere 370 feet (or 3.7 billion years) away from the present.

Next time we look up towards the night sky or clamber over the granite boulders strewn across this landscape, we may recall the timeline and wonder where all the living and non-living things around us originated along the 1380-foot stroll.

Mapping the Contours of our Minds

In the year gone by, one dialogue class with a group of middle-school children stood out for both parents and teachers— perhaps, for differing reasons. The teachers’ account of all that transpired then, though now distorted by memory, is still worth recounting here for the sheer richness of what unfolded.

At the start of the dialogue class each child was handed out a blank sheet of paper and was instructed to draw a rough outline of the human brain. A simple drawing was made on the board to help them through this first bit. Next, they were asked to make a list of items illustrative of what typically occupied their mind space during the days when this class took place, which was after spending many, many months isolated at home due to Covid-19. Finally, they had to demarcate sections inside their brain to show how much of their mind was occupied by each item in the list. Adults in the group, too, did the same activity alongside children.

Once everybody’s brain drawings were ready there was a suggestion to show it to others. After an initial reluctance, children agreed to pass around their drawings for others to look at. The room quickly filled with a light buzz of exchanges such as “Oh, look!”, “I never knew you were into this”, “Hey, I have that too”, “Almost all of us have...” A couple of children made predictions about what would definitely occupy space in their peers’ drawings, hinting that they know them well! There were quick comments about something being a recent addition to their lives during Covid-19 lockdowns and life away from school as ‘normal’. Furthermore, there were also epiphanic moments about how big a particular section was in relation to others and a general wonderment about whether their brains would look the same a few months or a year from then.

Often children participate in dialogue classes by listening to what some of their peers say and may not add anything to the conversation themselves. Instead of starting as a conversation, this class was anchored around creating graphic representations of what emerges as intangible material in the minds of human beings when they think about themselves.

And it resulted in each child expressing themselves. They shared several aspects of their lives with each other, even if not in spoken words. In addition to the particular content in each mind, the drawings also revealed the sameness of human experience— each one’s brain was occupied with something or the other, no matter what the content!

Later during that class, when the teachers inquired into the reasons for children’s initial hesitation to share their brain drawings, something interesting surfaced. All the children felt they would be judged by others in the group. Several of them admitted that they were in fact judgmental of each other’s brains, almost involuntarily. They also confessed that while their brain sketches were representative of their actual preoccupations and leanings, they did not present an accurate picture of their current mindscape— a certain discrimination was already employed to decide what to put on paper and what to leave out.

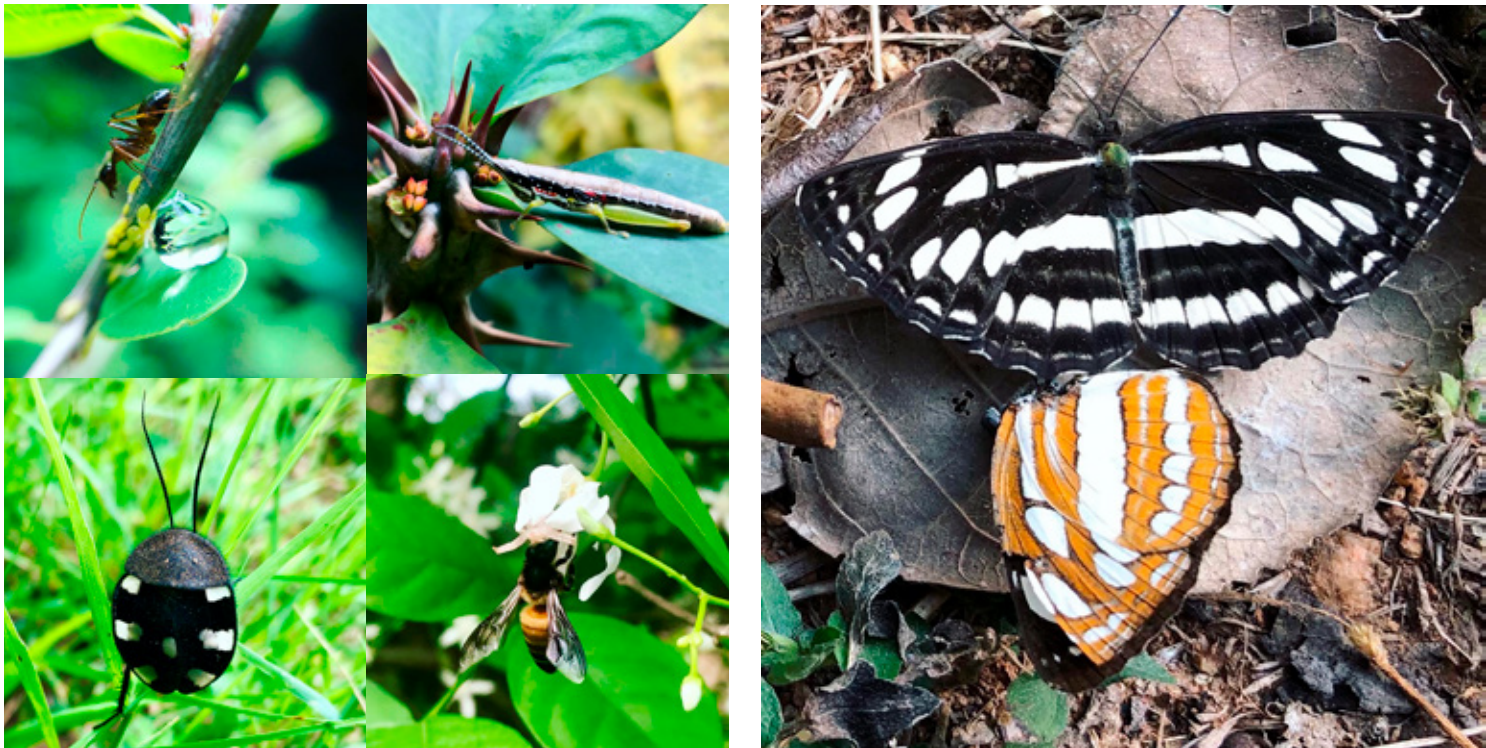
The resultant reflection about judgment and its ubiquity in human interactions was pursued in the following dialogue class as a focussed conversation. Through their anecdotes, examples and comments, children shared that this disposition is present through most of their social interactions on any given day, and that in general, they don’t like to be with those with whom their predominant experience is that of feeling judged. The question about how much of this ‘feeling judged’ is imagined also came up. Interestingly, one child stated that they don’t judge others because in their opinion it is not the ‘right’ thing to do, indicating that judging and feeling judged were voluntary mental acts and could be willed!

Overall, it was an engaging interaction then, and seems rich now when it is being remembered in order to write about it, as it brought to light an aspect of daily human experience and enabled a conversation about it. Through the day one hardly articulates in spoken words the feeling of being judged or the fact of judging others; nevertheless, it is one important undercurrent of our day-to-day.





The picture above is a sample from the group activity and provides a glimpse of what two children's minds were preoccupied with. Other preoccupations on display were: plans for the future, books, Frisbee, observing nature, compliments about me, friends and family, planes and pilots, how well I take pictures, baking, judgment, drums, random thoughts, unfairness, embroidery, what people think of me, what time it is, I need to lose some weight!, to-do list...



#theworldwithincfl

The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown brought quite a few changes to the campus. From a population of around 100, we were now down to 14 plus 2 dogs! But there was an element that maintained its “normal” pace and perhaps thrived during this period. The campus continued to buzz with changing colours, activities and sounds. Every square foot of open space seemed to support some creature or other. What the human mind called a quiet walk through the sanctuary was teeming with life and the noise of constant activity! The chirping of the cicadas, caterpillars chewing on leaves, bees and wasps buzzing; with the absence of humans, these sounds became prominent through the day.

There was something new seen or observed every day. Nature remained untouched by the protocols of social distancing and continued to display a variety of shades with the changing seasons. Some of us started documenting these through sketches and photographs as they unfolded. Daily progress of wasp nests, blooming trees which later turn green, caterpillars turning into seemingly lifeless pupae and emerging as butterflies: in the absence of a regular timetable, these became a part of the daily structure.

While some creatures attracted attention through sights and sounds, there were others, silent and hidden and yet in abundance on campus. The patient spider, found in all conti-

nents except Antarctica, probably inhabits every single indoor and outdoor space on campus. With many spaces unused because of the lockdown, webs could stay undisturbed for long periods of time. Unlike the busy ants, bees, butterflies, birds and beetles who constantly crawl and flutter about looking for food, this creature weaves its intricate trap and waits and waits for others’ inattention to play out. The laws of probability and design principles are probably in action in the planning of the web. There are some varieties on campus which weave large webs late in the evening and swallow the whole web and hide behind leaves during the day, routines they follow every single day.

In our attention to humans, their thoughts and activity, the entire play of nature just becomes a background for us to live in. Or at times we look at it as a large unified body to protect and conserve. A single spider waiting for its prey, a team of ants carrying a dead grasshopper are all easy to miss with their lack of concern for human attention. But in their simplicity, in life and in death, in their lack of celebration of either, in their lack of search for deep meaning, there is a beauty and at least a momentary silencing of the mind, a shift from oneself to something seemingly without goals, ambitions and despair.

Follow the world within CFL at <https://www.instagram.com/theworldwithincfl/>





Comings and goings

Owing to the COVID pandemic, we had a dearth of visitors in the past two years or so, but now the school is bustling again with activity, guests and parent volunteers. But first, some goodbyes.

Krishna Haresh, who had worked at CFL for many years and in many varied areas, has moved on from here but continues to enrich the world of education, at Azim Premji University. Yashodara Kundaji, our librarian and Inchara hostel parent, left this year after her long stint at school. Aside from being an active presence in our library,

she hopped into Hindi and craft classes with juniors as well! Sruti Yusufi, who was running the kitchen, doing clay work with children, as well as junior school classes and coordinatorship, is pursuing other interests but continues to stay within our community as a parent. We wish them all the very best.

Once the world opened up in January, we welcomed Prayaag Joshi, his partner Biraj and their two daughters to stay on campus, tend to the land and support the general studies programmes and craft. They are from Chhattisgarh where they used to run

the Imlee Mahua School.

We had several visitors on Zoom for courses in the GS programme, library classes and author circles. Those were fulfilling sessions which enhanced our Zoom experience.

We would like to thank many parents for lending a hand in the visit days, offering to accompany children on buses, helping in the kitchen and library as we opened up and much more!



Friends of CFL: a fund-raising appeal

For the past few years, we have been introducing our micro-charity fund-raising idea, the “Friends of CFL” programme, to our newsletter readers. We are sincerely grateful to each and every individual who has supported us and helped us meet our target.

To explain to our new readers: CFL has consciously chosen to work with a ‘deficit budget’. Each year we offer unlimited and uncapped scholarships to any of our families who request them. Therefore, every year there is a gap between the running costs of the school and the contribution from parents. This makes CFL accessible to any student whose parents are serious about a different kind of education and who wish to join us in our philosophical exploration. The scholarship model has worked well all these years.

We have two sources to cover the annual deficit: the income from our corpus (endowment fund) and the generous donations we receive each year from well-wishers and friends. So far we have managed to meet our scholarship needs each year quite successfully, thanks to the considerable time and energy spent by several individuals in the community (parents, alumni and teachers) towards raising funds.

For the year 2022-23, we anticipate that we need to raise a sum of Rs 50 lakhs (approx USD 65,000) to help meet our deficit and shore up our corpus. If we have 1000 “Friends of CFL” each donating a sum of Rs 5,000 (approx US \$65), we can cover our deficit for the year. If you are interested in joining the “Friends of CFL” programme, please do contact us by sending an email to the address below with “Friends of CFL” in the subject box. Thank you very much for your support.

Donor information: Centre For Learning is a registered charitable society. Donations to the society are exempt from Income Tax to the extent provided for under section 80G of the Income Tax Act, 1961. If you wish to avail tax exemption in the USA, please email us for details. For more information, please visit <https://cfl.in/support-us/how-can-i-help-cfl/>

Teacher search: We invite applications from individuals interested in self enquiry, who have specific skills to offer in terms of teaching, administrative duties and hostel care (our needs may change from year to year). Applicants should be excited by living on a campus in a rural setting. If you are interested in working with us, please visit our website (<https://cfl.in/working-at-cfl/>) and follow the procedure outlined there.

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