

Notes from a Small School

Articles from CFL Newsletters

2005 - 2022

CfL



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This is a small collection of lead articles from CFL newsletters over the past seventeen years, updated from an earlier version. 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.

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-centredness.

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 convert 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 impor-

tantly, 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 emptiness 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)

Meeting 'otherness'

The moment Gray Fire stopped I gripped his arm. "Who are they?"

"Strangers," he replied. I had heard that word used before but like many grown-up expressions, it didn't mean anything special to me. I thought strangers were some kind of make-believe beings, like the talking animals parents told their children about or the creature who is supposed to be half-fish and half-human.

"Strangers are real?" Even the sound was lumpy on my tongue, as if I had tasted food that was not properly cooked.

"Oh yes. They are like us, but they are not us." Gray Fire answered in a distracted tone.

(Sees Behind Trees by Michael Dorris is a Native American story set in Northeastern United States some few hundred years ago).

How does it even come to be that we consider each other strangers? It appears that the need for belonging is one thing that drives a lot of our actions as human beings, and consequently leads to a who-is-in and who-is-out movement, a coding and labeling of someone as an outcast, a stranger. This clear boundary defines a them and an us.

We have drawn social boundaries ever since we inhabited the earth. For thousands of years, our human species has been conditioned to see the 'other' as different from oneself, to separate the other as alien, and to see family or tribe as an extension of that same 'oneself'. Maybe this was to protect oneself or one's own group. The form that the other has taken has morphed over the millennia, beginning perhaps with another species of humans (such as the Neanderthals) to another tribe, to another caste, another class, another race, another culture, another sexual orientation, another language, another dialect within

the same language... the list can be endless! As Toni Morrison, the American writer says: 'Race is the classification of a species, and we are the human race, period. Then what is this other thing – the hostility, the social racism, the othering?'

So, what is this othering? Where is its beginning and where is its end? The movement of 'othering' is the act of seeing another group as having an identity different from one's own based on, for example, skin colour, class, caste, livelihood, culture, language, background. Such criteria on a group level exist, but, even on an individual level I look with divisiveness, often feeling separation in a friend or family member. Upon my search to unravel these threads, I see a separateness in all my fields of perception.

At school, in a session with 11 year-olds after a field trip, we came to the question: what makes you feel different from the other person? One of the children blurted out in response: 'Basically, someone who is not ME!' Perhaps she had meant, 'someone who is not like me'. But her simple statement said it all, just like Gray Fire in the Native American context from a few hundred years ago! Feeling separate is the point in question. There is also the hyper-need we have to find similarities of culture, appearance, experience and background, which unfortunately overshadow the humanness of being one, being together. At school we nurture a space where children and adults can observe these movements of separation while immersed in the ups and downs of daily life.

Don't we condition our children to see through the lens of othering? We label each other based on this lens and then that person does not rise up in our eyes and become more than what we have labeled. So we appear surprised when the label is challenged! Once I tell the story or define the other person or group according to my definition and according to a difference that I seek to see (creating an image), it limits who they are and what their multiple narratives might be. The Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who uses the

term multiple narratives, says in a talk, 'There is a danger of a single story'; the story of Africa being one of tragedy or poverty, the story of an African American being one of crime. We have this image, this stereotype that is fixed and doesn't allow multiple narratives of that person. Or how about allowing no narrative at all; just a perception of a person - without naming and labeling?

When further exploring what this movement of othering involves, we notice that this is an act of measurement. We look at the 'other' being either greater or lesser than myself (do I enjoy power or experience subordination?) It is an act of qualifying what that person is with regard to my status or position. Depending on that, I either look down on, look up to, respect or disrespect. Action towards the other comes from this definition I have made and qualification I have decided upon. I feel pity, I feel admiration, I might feel disgust, I might feel envy. This act of identification plays out in school, through inclusion or exclusion, and then, associated feelings ensue. Children, like us adults, create cliques or clubs, based on cultural markers such as movies seen, music enjoyed, and even choice of foods!

More acutely in classes, other factors that play out are discriminations based on different abilities. Children often navigate their social realm through measurement. They size each other up. They understand each other through a measure of abilities. However, at school we do not institutionally segregate based on ability or capacity, and we provide many opportunities for shared experience like trips, walks, residential living, dialogue and so on. Given this wide shared experience at school, why does the mind stay small in its perceptions?

Another way we segregate in society is to define the other as not normal. Are these fixed because of the majority group? The boundary line in this case is being drawn by one group and allows privilege to that group, it seems. The criterion could be sexual orientation for example. With children we talk about the transgender community, whom we meet at traffic lights and tollbooths. What are our reactions

and feelings and why? Imagine, we have defined ourselves through sexual orientation and then created the 'other'! By reading groups this way, we dismiss others. If we stepped away and perceived the root of this to be a human consciousness issue (and not based on who you are) with a deep conditioning to see separateness, could one peel away many layers of identity to reveal this root, and could strongly held beliefs and feelings wither away? What would it mean to respond with compassion to *any other* rather than sizing people up based on the mental lists we tuck away?

While we say we need to suspend labels and criteria, it is a fact that we as a school are an affluent space within a vast rural context here on our campus. Yes, we do need to acknowledge the urban lives we have come from, the privileges we have enjoyed, the cultural and monetary spring boards we take for granted. These impact the way we see those who have come from a different set of conditions, in the wider society here. We might 'read' the other groups as lower class, being deprived of something, struggling, preserving religion and tradition. We create stories here: the story of a lower caste dalit being downtrodden, the stories of rural India, the story of an adivasi tribal group. We might want to *give* and *do* something for them. In this complex picture, how do we enable students to reveal their prejudices, build a bridge or sharpen their perceptions of the other, and then and only then, formulate action?

One statement we have come across in society and in school is, 'I am originally from here' ('here' being the Indian subcontinent)! We did a middle school social science project with an 8th standard group titled "Where are you from?," exploring assumptions about people and place, unpacking our limited pictures of nationality, appearances, race, blood and backgrounds. We asked questions of the children to check assumptions (What does an Indian look like? Where is home for you?) and then we would interview and meet people whose lives had taken them through different spaces, countries and experiences and hence blurred the lines of nationality, belonging and homeland.

Blurring the lines was uncomfortable for some of the children who wanted certainty and identity fixed! At one point we looked at a documentary about DNA evidence showing the movement of early humans through continents: Africa, Asia, Australia. We as a species have been moving, settling, moving, settling and moving again. The notion that only some people in India are meant to be here as this is their homeland, was exploded. There were no privileges based on blood type or race since you were informed that you could check your DNA and trace which group of wandering human beings you had descended from!

Our social studies projects in the middle school are an attempt to provide a balanced picture for the children, by integrating lots of outside trips, talking with people, relating and building relationships, and unpacking assumptions and prejudices. The aim of this curriculum is to connect with the world around, local and global; to nurture a sensitivity towards people we are less familiar with; to develop critical thinking skills and an ability to express the basis of our opinions, thoughts and understanding. In our approach, we value the learning that grows from contact with people and places, learning based on our own encounters and processing. In a similar vein, we have valued working with primary material, and with multiple sources or voices of a particular time.

We want to question narrativizing itself, the process of creating a story of the other or oneself for that matter, the movement of the mind to see divisiveness and separation even in the smallest of groups. In questioning and exploring, we are wary of a sensitization process for children, where we help them tolerate others, one group at a time, so that they become sensitive to all. Rather we throw light on the framework in the mind where the separateness begins, where the lens is formed and where the act of othering springs from. Tolerance Education, as it is sometimes called, runs the risk of still labeling and the questions might arise: Tolerance of whom? Based on what descriptions? If we nurture care and compassion without measurement can there be an insight where *othering* ends?

Questions about ourselves

When talking to students, and even amongst ourselves as teachers, we use a shorthand phrase to refer to our philosophical approach: “the questions of the school.” For our own clarity of thought, it is good to slow down and patiently unravel what exactly these are! Of course, as educators, we have a whole universe of questions at CFL—questions to do with the meditative mind, social structures and the art of teaching itself. What follows is one set of questions that we have with regard to learning about our psychological lives. On a different day, or with a different individual, the set may vary somewhat!

These questions are not verbal. They are intended as a pause. A stepping back. A dialogue starter with oneself or another, or with many. Can these questions enlighten us and lighten us? Can we ask them without necessarily even expecting answers? Sometimes just asking is enough.

How can I meet life intelligently?

Often the term “intelligence” is equated to intellect or grades on an exam. This is not the intelligence I refer to here. Nor is it street-smartness. This is something else altogether. It seems to me to mean that I die to every moment, that is, see each moment afresh, as if I have never seen it before. It is the most rewarding experience; for that moment, drop the memories of the past and the projections into the future. To relate to the world as it is now. It is not inevitable that I get into the same patterns of relating to my spouse, colleagues, children and so on. If I see each moment with them afresh, whole new worlds of relating are possible. What is it to live life deliberately, to respond to the immediate and not through all my built-up images or future projections?

Why am I so concerned about protecting my self-image?

There appears to be no way in this world that I can ensure that everyone I know, or at least, value in my life, has the “correct” picture of me, the image that I want them to have. And I am not even sure I know the image I want each person to have of me! Why then is so much of my mental energy spent on worrying about what others think of me? From, “I hope my guests like what I have cooked for lunch” or, “What will my relatives think of me if I don’t perform that ritual?” to, “What if my colleagues misunderstood my question or intentions?” Instead, would it be possible to really feel, “I don’t mind what people think of me”, and drop the pre- and post-interaction analysis? What am I really trying to protect anyway?

Can I be aware and attentive?

To live life intelligently, do I not need to be aware of what is going on in the central processing unit? The brain is abuzz with thoughts, memories and knowledge, filtering my relationships with the world. Most of the time I am unaware that I am relating to people and events through all the knowledge of the past and perhaps, at times, through projections of my future relationship with them or what I may want that to be. Am I really looking, listening in the now? Can I be aware of my inattention? In that awareness there can be a dropping of the filters through which I see the relationship. And in this awareness and attention, kindness, sensitivity and care can emerge, because I am seeing a person or event in the present. Can we experience the beauty and freedom of attention in, to borrow a line from Pico Iyer, “the ever-fleeting NOW?”

How are fear and insecurity guiding my actions?

There seems to me a direct link between the beasts of fear and insecurity and my inability to live life intelligently. Fear, insecurity and of course other so-called “negative” emotions like anger, hurt and

jealousy, distort my present. They distort my relating to you right now, my relating to events around me right now. They may put me in auto-pilot mode where, rather than responding to the immediate, I am responding through a myriad filters each in its own sphere, sometimes overlapping like a Venn diagram, causing even more mental chaos. The “mischiefs of the mind”, a phrase used by Pema Chodron, can be endless!

These questions are of deep relevance and importance in the field of education; in fact they are a response to the chaos of the world into which we are sending our young people. Subjects can and will be learned; they are taught, but of utmost importance to us are the pauses that we encourage in each other and ourselves, to reflect. So when we ask young people at CFL whether they are interested in the questions of the school, we are asking them rather paradoxically, whether they are interested in their own happiness and well-being.

I say paradoxically because living life intelligently, without fear and insecurity requires a lack of self-centredness and self-absorption. And here we are asking them to be interested in their own happiness and well-being which can be seen as encouraging self-centeredness and self-absorption!

At CFL, these questions can potentially be woven into any part of the day during any activity or class. At lunchtime am I paying attention to washing my plate so that it is clean for the next person? During a discussion am I aware of having ‘spaced out’ or having been inattentive? Why am I competing with a colleague for the attention of students? Is my competitiveness and aggression emerging on the sports field? How is self-comparison with peers playing out in a student’s mind? Why are the children dividing into sub-groups within their already small groups? Are parents thinking only of their child and not the whole group or school in their approach? These questions will hopefully lead us to pause and realise that there is nothing inevitable about what is happening, that there are other ways of being. We want

to be able to ask these questions of each other, whatever our identity (parent, teacher or student), from an equal footing, with an interest in travelling together, mentally roughing it out, if you will.

Evolutionarily, we seem programmed to be fearful and wary. It makes sense to protect the physical self, the body. And for that protection, perhaps wariness is required. However, humans have taken this to unimaginable proportions. Our imaginations have cast so much fear into our lives that we are constantly trying to protect ourselves against some future unpleasant imagined eventuality. Alternatively we may be imagining beautiful futures for ourselves while the present moment escapes us. Much of the time, we are not living; we are merely going through the motions of everyday life in a habitual and mechanical manner.

How am I to live responsibly with all this at play? This question pervades all aspects of our lives and requires an intelligent meeting of life, without filters and with attention and awareness of the moment. It is relevant in my lifestyle choice, at the workplace, at home, in relationship and in my mental and emotional spaces. It is not mere navel gazing or narcissism. It is not just relevant to life at this small school. These questions are a response to the ills of the world, not just today but throughout human history. And this bubble in which we are asking them of each other is a microcosm of society.

It is abundantly clear that the social and environmental chaos in the world throughout history is due to *Homo sapiens'* inability to see that there is an alternative to our self-centred, punitive, greedy and divisive responses to the world. We are doctorates in divisiveness with the ability to divide ourselves into smaller and smaller groups, pitting one against the other until there is no one and nothing left to conquer. And sadly nothing much has changed. One need only open a newspaper from the last century and one from yesterday to know that conflict has been and continues to be rife. And this conflict is not "out *there* between *those* people". Its seed is in each of us. And we make up this society with all its insanities.

Yet we are compassionate and empathetic beings. We do care for each other and the planet. So why is the world in such a state? Why are there such disparities all around me? On every continent there is conflict which, if we peel away at the layers, stems from a fundamental insecurity: insecurity over image, identity, property, present and future wealth and so on. How am I responsible and what am I going to do about it? Am I any different and what is my homework, not just outwardly but inwardly?

These questions may give a sense that there is a well-defined individual inside each of us, and it is our task as individuals to improve ourselves, be more aware and so on. Actually, Krishnamurti, in his general philosophical writings as well as his writing on education, often stressed the intelligence of “living life without a centre.” This intelligence he hinted at is profoundly impersonal and has nothing to do with self-improvement, which on the face of it seems very paradoxical. Nevertheless, our educational journey is actually sparked off by questions about individuality and the contradictions this powerful sense brews. Living life without a centre may have the most powerful consequences for the health of the planet as a whole.

Bubble worlds

A few years ago, we had written an article for this newsletter entitled “Our children and the real world.” That article touched upon various meanings of the phrase “the real world”: the world of global poverty and struggle, the world of our achievements and finally the real world of our emotional lives. One dimension the previous piece did not consider was the real world of the environment and our place in it.

We have chosen to locate our school in a rural setting, almost fifty kilometres away from Bangalore. Our campus, while it is beautiful in the manner of dry deciduous forested land in rocky terrain, is a real challenge to manage. There are problems regarding water availability and fire management, among others. However, we have felt that such a setting is a vital part of education, for those lucky enough to have the resources to acquire it. Why have we created an educational campus in a rural setting? What are the aims of such a decision? It is not just a response to the nostalgia we urban folk feel for “being close to nature” and “getting away from it all.”

Rather, we feel this campus is important for reasons to do with a profound disconnect we experience with the living world, and the implications this has for the health of the globe.

Krishnamurti often framed his talks with a description of the world turmoil facing us, in his terms, politically, religiously, economically—and environmentally. Even though the exact nature of the ecological malaise was only dimly guessed at during his lifetime, his observations have an uncannily prescient feel about them, as does his sense of the interconnected nature of the crises.

Projections for the future of the planet are ominous. The exact degree (pun intended) of the problem is unclear, but the outcomes over the coming century are painfully obvious. Rising temperatures mean

melting ice caps and glaciers; world-wide drought on an unprecedented scale; flash floods; rising sea levels leading to the flooding of coastal areas; the mass migrations of millions whose way of life, directly dependent on land and sea, is put at risk; failing crops; forest fires in an increasingly hot and dry world; and, finally, deep conflict and breakdown in societies as individuals and groups battle for critical resources and power. Of course, the poor and the marginalised in all societies will feel the brunt of global warming the most keenly. All of this is not even to begin to mention the scale of destruction of life forms crucial to the planet and to regulating the entire network of life, an ethical responsibility that we humans alone must bear, however reluctantly.

Deniers notwithstanding, this is the broad scientific consensus, so repeatedly articulated as to become clichéd. Cliché or not, perhaps one role of our education can be to keep these rather simple truths in front of our eyes and minds at all times, so that we cannot move away from them, to see what intelligent responses we can find to the issues surrounding us, if any at all.

Could one deep source of the problem be, simply, our diminishing contact with and lack of concern for “nature”? Not the sentimental city-dweller’s conception of nature: flowers, sunsets, evening stars. Rather, we are talking about the failure of a simple capacity to observe, and to hold internally as a way of contact, the extraordinary power of ordinary life: the powerhouses that are *honge* and neem trees, grasses, spiders, the ant on the bough, a bee-eater in flight, lizards basking, mating butterflies, crows playing on a dead tree. We seem to lack the capacity to sense, viscerally, this amazing interrelated nature of all life on the planet and our enmeshed-ness in this network. As a response to this inner lack, we would like to nurture in our educational processes the sense of biophilia, a simple love of life, as this seems so crucial to what being human is.

There is no fixed way of doing this nurturing, unfortunately. There is no formula, just as there is no formula that will enable us to under-

stand any deep truth of existence. Perhaps just a sense of space and beauty around us on our campus, the freedom to wander and observe, might foster this love. Or not.

We don't know what the practical outcomes of such empathy might be when we are nurtured, adults and young ones alike, in a community of living beings. We cannot guarantee that out of this feeling, we will elect the right political candidates and join the right causes. The politics of conservation and its relationship to the state and to corporations in different parts of the world, the balance between human and non-human: these are obviously very complex questions. Our educational aim is not just to acquire more political or scientific knowledge or to join more movements. Rather, the first step to healing the crisis is expressed most elegantly by Lovelock: *We need most of all to renew that love and empathy for nature that we lost when we began our love affair with city life.* This renewal is an endless process, and we can only begin it in our own humble way.

It may already be too late. Some scientists feel that we have already crossed the tipping point, that the planet may be jumping to a new, much hotter equilibrium that will profoundly affect life in its entirety. In other words, nothing we do now may matter much in the long run. On top of which, the political and economic barriers to achieving any form of global consensus are formidable. Love and empathy are slender threads indeed to hang our hopes on.

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To juxtapose and think about *media* against the background of *nature* seems perversely old-fashioned. It sets up simplistic divisions and polarizes thinking. Nevertheless, we do need to urgently consider, in the context of all the above, the world of media gadgets and apps that has become so much an intrinsic part of the fabric of our lives, young and old, and to consider the educational responses to this world.

The ancient Greeks apparently railed against writing, as this was seen as (potentially) corrupting thought, memory and the spoken word. Medieval Europeans (the powerful ones, presumably) railed against the printing press and the dangers of democratizing knowledge. When TV was invented, there were concerns about the corrupting influence of this new technology. All these innovations turned out 'fine.' Therefore, the logic goes, there is nothing much to worry about regarding the current onslaught of smart phones and the social media networks we are all continually plugged into. These are merely illustrations of the power of the human mind to find new ways of extending its thought and network of relationships and communication.

Perhaps. But in rationalizing our digital behaviour thus, we are overlooking some worrying tendencies. We, adults and young, like to stay indoors all day, and we spend many many hours under the spell of one flickering screen or another. The power of the bubble worlds generated by the internet, with its seductive possibilities for communication, is immense. Surely this fascination must have some impact on the way we view, in contrast, the natural world, its relevance and its possibilities, and indeed its very future? E O Wilson, while exploring the Amazon basin in search of new insect species, writes of his encounter with the rain forest: *I savoured the cathedral feeling expressed by Darwin in 1832 when he first encountered tropical forest near Rio de Janeiro ("wonder, astonishment and sublime devotion fill and elevate the mind")*. However excited we become over a YouTube video or a cute posting on Facebook, I suspect that *wonder* and *devotion* are not quite the terms we will use to describe our feelings. Our feelings regarding nature do however matter, since we belong to a class of people with the power to change its face.

In education, we must remain continually alive to whatever impacts us and how we respond to it. What is the quality of mind needed to look at this problem, the problem of our alienation from the natural world and our increasing absorption in the digital one? Can we distinguish between an agonised fascination with the products of our own

thought— an endless delving into bubble worlds—and an absorption in a rich world of complexity and beauty that points to a reality that we cannot invent? How, in daily living and in dialogue and in the activities we do, can we keep such possibilities open in our minds? It seems that we cannot seek simple answers, but keeping such questions alive, investigating them, dialoguing about them, seems to bring about, at the very least, a hope of intelligent responses.

There is no romantic deep past in which humans remained “in balance” with nature. The ecological records seem to show that from its very beginnings, the human species shaped forests and landscapes profoundly across the globe (though of course the power we now possess to destroy the delicate fabric of life is terrifying). We are a technological species, and the crisis we face now probably has its roots very early in our history. At CFL, we would like to use our small educational context to explore the roots of this crisis in consciousness. Obviously we cannot prescribe any solutions, concrete or general; it would be presumptuous to do so, given the depth of the issue and the staggering range of the human contexts in which it is playing out. But we would like to suggest that the quality of mind that looks at the problem and its solutions is crucially important. In the openness of intense questioning, we may stumble upon the freedom to look, observe and live in our shared world with the energy of presence rather than absence.

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.

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.

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!

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.

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!



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.



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!



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!



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.



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.



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.

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.



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?