

Learning from “What-is”: Resonances with Krishnamurti’s

Pedagogy

Hillary Rodrigues

The University of Lethbridge

Abstract

Using a personal life narrative, I present how my approach to education developed. Although I have had many influences, here I highlight how aspects of my insights align with the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti. These are not incidental, because I once worked at a Krishnamurti school and conducted academic studies of Krishnamurti’s teachings. Therefore, resonances between such life experiences and how I approach education are inevitable. In synchronicity with Krishnamurti’s approach is my understanding that life is the universal teacher, the world itself the ultimate school, and we are perennially students. However, if one can realize that the nexus for all these is the reality of the present moment, the “what-is,” learning is optimized. Dropping our attachments to what we have already learned, or what we might achieve, offers us the freedom to explore what is unfolding around and within us at each moment.

Keywords: Krishnamurti, learning from “what-is,” knowledge vs. intelligence, life as teacher

Introduction

In this article, I present how Krishnamurti's educational pointers may have affected my own experiences in education. The task is not easy for several reasons. For one, my approach to teaching and learning is not derived solely or even principally from the ideas of a single person, even someone as significant as Krishnamurti. Moreover, given the wide array of influences in my life, it is difficult to separate out how a particular person's ideas are at the basis of my own behaviors, especially if others I have read or encountered have expressed similar notions. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the core of Krishnamurti's message, as I understand it, is to avoid being unreasonably psychologically conditioned by anyone, including himself, in one's relationship to the creative unfolding of one's life. So, it may seem counterintuitive to be writing about Krishnamurti's influence on my approach, because such an admission might suggest not having taken his message to heart. Krishnamurti's adamant stance against influence is not fully appreciated, even by those who have read some of his work closely, although not extensively. This quote from a talk delivered in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1960 is telling:

So, influence plays an extraordinarily important part in our lives. We are not discussing what is good influence and what is bad influence. To me, all influence is evil, because it conditions and enslaves the mind.¹ (Krishnamurti, 1960)

Granted, Krishnamurti is speaking about influence with respect to one's cultural self-construction through social and environmental influences, and not the necessary influence exercised by teachers when one is acquiring knowledge and skills. Krishnamurti's advisory is against taking him as an authority figure whose perspectives should be followed as directives.

¹J. Krishnamurti, "Bombay 4th Public Talk 3rd January 1960," Accessed, May 12, 2024, <https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/bombay-4th-public-talk-3rd-january-1960>

Even so, it is perhaps more correct to say that this paper highlights how features of my educational career align with notions found in Krishnamurti's teachings, which resonated with my own observations and discoveries. It is written as a personal narrative, because to me our educational experience is life itself. My approach is rooted in the values of autobiography and autoethnography as teaching and learning tools, on which there is substantial literature.²

Autobiography requires a measure of vulnerability, but an opportunity for me to reflect on how certain life experiences have shaped my pedagogy. Autoethnography entails the analysis of personal experience to understand cultural experience, which in this case are the cultures of teaching and learning. My hope is that resonances of my narrative with the readers' own experiences open spaces for discovery. Although I have not been trained formally in any university's Faculty of Education, and my deep interest in pedagogy is self-taught, I have consistently received excellent evaluations from my students. I have been honoured with my institution's Board of Governors Chair in Teaching as well as its Distinguished Teaching Medal.

Childhood Education

I was born in Bandra, which along with Pali Hill beside it, are seaside suburbs of Mumbai (then Bombay), which abound with the homes of Bollywood movie stars. When I turned four, my grandmother said that I was now a big boy and would soon be going to school. When playing in our front yard, a stream of children would daily pass by heading to kindergarten classes. I mistakenly took my grandmother's words to mean that I should immediately start school, whatever that was, and so I began walking with those students down a few houses to "Auntie Myrtle's School." I only later learned that Myrtle was not an auntie, but a warm and

² An overview of autoethnography is found in C. Ellis et al (2011). W. Pinar (2016, 191) voices a key feature of autobiographical accounts, when saying "[It] is interesting when its telling enlarges and complicates the telling subject, and the listening subject."

generous hearted lady who ran a Montessori school in her home. It took weeks for my mother to discover where I had been spending much of my outdoor play time in the mornings. By then, Myrtle explained to her that I had become a regular attendee and could even count to a hundred. She recommended that I be allowed to stay, and so I did for the next several months, not distinguishing play from learning, which is a hallmark of the Montessori approach.³

I do not know to what extent Auntie Myrtle's preschool in Mumbai, India, rigorously followed Montessori's method, but it likely was solid.⁴ Unfortunately, this self-actualized Montessori educational experience was radically altered after half a year, when our family moved to the city of Kolhapur. My father, an officer in the Indian Forest Department, was posted to the nearby hill station of Panhala, where he conceived and oversaw the creation of Tabak Vana Udyan ("Tabak Forest Park"), a beautiful botanical forest garden that still exists today. The school that my siblings and I had to attend in Kolhapur did not have a kindergarten, and although I was still four, my mother, who was herself a teacher, placed me in the First Standard (i.e., Grade One), to allow my learning to continue unimpeded. As a result, I remained one of the youngest in my classes in India until the age of eleven, when we immigrated to Canada. Although I excelled in the earliest of those years in school in India, the educational system started taking its toll. I began to fear some of my teachers, felt neglected in overcrowded classrooms, did not understand much of what was expected from me, and progressively lost my affection for schooling. This disenchantment continued even after we moved back to Mumbai

³ In her analysis of play and learning, Lillard (2013) notes that Montessori's approach is not strictly aligned with what professional educators classify as "playful learning," since in Montessori learning "play" is designated as "work," and her method does not include such components as pretend play.

⁴ Montessori had influenced the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who had incorporated aspects of her approach in the schools that he founded, including Vishva-Bharati, in Shantiniketan (Kramer, 1976, 306-307). And Montessori's approach had grown popular in India after she was forced to remain there from 1939-1946 during World War II.

after our few years in Kolhapur. I feared corporal punishment, which was robustly threatened by our stern Jesuit school principal and certain teachers to maintain order. I doubt that any student, myself included, avoided at least one experience of being caned, because we had forgotten to do our homework, or for some such relatively innocent failing.

Those early years poignantly illustrated that while it might be a child's natural disposition to learn—and it certainly was for me—that joyful inclination can be thwarted by the unfortunate realities that plague many institutions of mass education. These realities include excessively large class sizes, where attention to individuals is nominal at best, the broadcasting of instruction in what Paulo Friere (1970) famously called the banking model of education, in which minds are empty vessels to be filled, and most perniciously, the authoritarian structures to inculcate obedience through fear, and order through punishment.

After arriving to Canada at the age of eleven, I was placed in Grade Six, commensurate with my age (twelve). My mother, however, had to fight for my place there, two grades below where I would have been in India, because the principal's initial attitude was to place me in Grade Four, which he thought would be appropriate for “immigrants” like us. Although demoted, I was relieved to be among classmates my own age, and after about half a year of adjusting to Canadian accents and such, I once again began to excel in my studies. What I especially liked was the absence of fear and the quality of freedom in the uncrowded classroom (of about 30 students).⁵ My affection for school, and learning, returned as I completed my elementary education and high school. Although I had not read anything by Krishnamurti until much later in my life, I experientially resonate with his perspective when he says,

⁵ The “strap” was still something that was administered by school principals in those days, but corporal punishment was not as common a feature of the school experience as it was in India.

In this world, obedience has been instilled by tradition, experience, and habit – obedience to one’s parents, to society, to the priest. But obedience is born of fear, fear of going wrong, of acting independently, of not being secure, of not being part of a community, of standing alone, of making a mistake. So, it is fear that breeds authority; one wants to live in a respected, accepted way, which society has established. It is this very fear that has conditioned the mind; it is fear that has built the society to which the mind becomes a slave.⁶ (Krishnamurti, 2015a)

My early childhood experiences taught me that curiosity and the love of learning are innate to human beings. However, the alienation induced by large classes, and the aura of impending punishment to induce obedience, can thwart one’s intrinsic freedom and joy. It can create dull minds and broken spirits that would rather conform to the expected order than discover their uniqueness.

Learning through Teaching

Our high school in Quebec, in the late 1960s, was a sprawling, chaotic experiment in comprehensive school design with an enrolment of some 4000 students. A teacher shortage in the province induced a wave of hiring, and many of our instructors were not well trained as educators; others, sensing the new-found freedom of the counter-culture movement’s shifting paradigm, were anxious to try out experimental approaches. Some were dismal failures and others were surprisingly successful. Some teachers sat cross-legged on their desks; others had us sitting on the floor in a circle outside the classroom, because straight rows of desks symbolized

⁶ Most Krishnamurti quotes in this article are derived from the jkrishnamurti.org website, collectively maintained by the Krishnamurti Foundations. However, no page numbers are provided on the site for the book sources. I have listed the website information for the source of the quote, and the book titles if they have been provided. J. Krishnamurti, *The Whole Movement of Life is Learning* (Darmstadt: CRAFT Verlag, 2015), Chapter 58, Accessed, May 12, 2024 [Text] <https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/chapter-58-fear-breeds-authority>

the “establishment.” As part of a generation weaned on innovation and questioning the status quo, we were fairly open to alternative approaches. However, we were also quite concerned about their effectiveness. Our educational futures depended on our achievement in standardized provincial tests, and therefore not on the “means,” but the “end.” Our Grade Ten French teacher simply gave up after the first month, and his periods were spent with him sitting at the teacher’s desk, head in hands, while we socialized with our friends. It was a crucial lost year in my relatively poor trajectory of French language learning. His approach was clearly a failure by any standard.

By contrast, our senior level Physics teacher also hardly taught anything but was extraordinarily successful. He said the explanatory textbook was clearly written, and we simply needed to read it. There was an accompanying book, chock full of problems, all of which we had to solve. Every week he set out the materials for our experiments with motion, optics, and so on. The net effect is that we found ourselves learning independently, asking each other for help, and teaching our fellow classmates what we had learned. Only when nobody knew how to solve a problem or understand some concept would we turn to Mr. Lawrence for an explanation. Once one of us understood it, it would be incumbent on us to teach it to others, until it filtered through most of the class. This approach felt initially stressful, because we were left to our own devices, without a clear sense of how best to prepare for our provincial examinations. Those exams were worth 100% of our final grades, and would determine our overall high school averages, which we hoped would be high enough to enable us to get into the best universities. When those exams were finally written, in a testament to the merits of Mr. Lawrence’s approach, many of us scored among the highest grades in the province. I do not know if Mr. Lawrence’s pedagogy was purposeful, but he was among the wave of teachers that joined school in the 1960s who were

then experimenting with novel approaches. He did not explain the “method” in what certainly appeared to us initially as his “madness.” These experiences, in which we were the guinea pigs in many pedagogical experiments, have left me with a healthy skepticism of faddish innovation, but appreciative of the value of creative pedagogy.

Krishnamurti has not spoken in much detail about teaching the acquisition of academic skills effectively, although he acknowledges their importance. He conveys aspects of what he values when he says:

In the very nature of teaching and learning there is humility. You are the teacher, and you are the taught. So, there is no pupil and no teacher,...there is only teaching and learning, which is going on in me. I am learning and I am also teaching myself; the whole process is one. (Krishnamurti, 1998, p. 123)

Aspects of these notions resonate well with my experience in Mr. Lawrence’s physics class. We had the collective task of learning a challenging subject and were forced to turn to each other for help. In the process of explaining to our classmates what we had barely grasped, we deepened our own understanding of those concepts, methods, and problem-solving algorithms. We were simultaneously students and teachers engaged in an enterprise for individual and collective success. To teach something effectively was to deepen one’s own understanding of it, so there was a sense of learning together to master some concept, rather than simply disseminating one’s knowledge.

Disenchantment and Reorientation

Although I had finished high school with one of the highest averages in the province, my undergraduate years in pursuit of a degree in Chemistry saw my grades slowly decline. I was coping with problems on the home front and had a growing disenchantment with the limitations

inherent in the study of science. I was developing expertise in a field that would provide me with a livelihood while neglecting the conundrum of unhappiness afflicting me and those around me. For my final year's Honours Research Thesis, I devised a distinct bridge mechanism to synthesize a new glucofuranose. I could carry this research into a graduate degree by refining the process and characterizing the compound with the university's newly acquired carbon magnetic resonance machine. And yet, how remote those research concerns seemed to be from the realities around me! There were protest rallies against the Vietnam war, heated discussions on socio-political theories, cosmological speculations about the big bang, indulgences in alcohol and cannabis, summers of hard labour in construction, Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones music concerts, and emotional upheavals with personal relationships and family crises. My B.Sc. might secure me some sort of gainful employment but pursuing a doctorate in Chemistry was not what I needed at that point in my life. To the surprise of my classmates, I said I was going to take some time off to travel before going on to graduate school.

During my final undergraduate years, I had begun to read books on Eastern philosophy and mysticism, in part through the zeitgeist of my generation. We would listen to Alan Watts and Baba Ramdass (aka Richard Alpert) on radio shows or be reading the *Bhagavad Gita* (freely handed out by Hare Krishna followers) and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Transcendental Meditation was growing in popularity, although I did not give it a try. It was at this time that I read a few books by Krishnamurti, which instantly struck a chord. Unlike Eastern philosophy, which required one to grapple with Sanskrit terminology, Krishnamurti's language was immediately accessible. His themes were my own concerns, for they addressed fear, loneliness, violence, identity, intelligence, and love. Nobody seemed to address these issues, except for the moralistic teachings of my religious upbringing as a Roman Catholic, which I had begun to question well

before I hit puberty. However, to me Krishnamurti handled the topics almost like a scientist. He suggested observing oneself, observing the very movement of one's own consciousness. This was not a technique, such as the repetition of a mantra as endorsed by Transcendental Meditation. Nor was it a focus on one's breath, as promoted by certain schools of Buddhism. Krishnamurti requested that one not regard him or anyone else an authority about the meaning of life. Instead, he extended an invitation to inquire into life's meaning, not through words or narrowly focused techniques, but through a highly sensitive but free flowing awareness. In a discussion distinguishing the accumulation of knowledge from learning he said,

That's why life, sir, is a way of listening, perceiving, learning. And when you know those three arts, then you live a life of complete awareness.⁷ (Krishnamurti 1978)

I immediately resonated with that invitation, which not only granted me permission to discover myself, but endorsed it. Surprisingly, all my prior education and guidance had seemed geared to point me away from that. It had directed me towards the acquisition of branches of knowledge, problem-solving, and the attainment of mastery. My moral education, mostly derived from a brand of Christianity centred on sin and guilt, confession and penance, and virtue through blind obedience and faith, had also pointed me away from self-discovery, and into self-judgement, recrimination, and improvement.

I spent the year after completing my B.Sc. in Chemistry in extreme low-budget, overland travel through Latin America. I felt I learned more about myself and life in that single year than in all my years as an undergraduate. Not only did I learn about international politics, economics, national histories, and cultures in Latin America, I met other travelers, who opened my eyes to

⁷ J. Krishnamurti, "Learning is never ending," Public Discussion 1, Madras (Chennai), India – 30 December 1978, Accessed, May 12, 2024, [Text] <https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/learning-never-ending>

the world at large. It took long stretches of loneliness, grueling bus-rides, the uncertainties of hitchhiking, innumerable nights in cheap uncomfortable hotels in sketchy neighbourhoods, encounters with thieves and con-men, struggles with language, and so on, to begin to round out my education. Surely classroom education falls far short of the many skills that are needed to live effectively in our world. Why does a laborer doing the same amount of work get paid \$8.00/hour at home and 0.50 cents per hour elsewhere? What designates an international border? Is there any value in complaining to corrupt policemen, who are as likely to rob you as the pickpocket that stole from you? Such lessons are not generally provided in most formal educational settings. I profoundly understood what Krishnamurti (2015b) means when he said,

The whole movement of life is learning. There is never a time when there is no learning. Every action is a movement of learning, and every relationship is learning. The accumulation of knowledge, which is called learning and to which we are so accustomed, is necessary to a limited extent, but that limitation prevents us from comprehending ourselves.⁸

After those Latin American travels, I found work as a substitute teacher in the very high school from which I had graduated. My mother, who was herself a teacher, had occasionally remarked that I might make a good teacher, because of my patience. Since I was broke, and substitute teachers were desperately needed, I thought I would give teaching a try. Things had grown much more orderly in that school in the six years that had elapsed. I regard that year of teaching as the practicums of my self-acquired teacher education. After the rollicking experience of teaching four or five different classes in different subjects at different grade levels daily, I

⁸ J. Krishnamurti, *The Whole Movement of Life is Learning* (Darmstadt: CRAFT Verlag, 2015), Chapter 7, Accessed May 12, 2024 [Text] <https://krishnamurti.org/content/chapter-7-whole-movement-life-learning>

permanently replaced a science teacher, who had what was referred to in those days as a “nervous breakdown.” It was the Grade Nine General Science class that had likely done that, because the upper-level science courses were a pleasure to teach. My Grade Nine students, though, gave me an affinity for the TV sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter*, whose title character returns to teach difficult students at his alma mater. Suffice to say it was challenging to get the lipstick-applying girls, and the machismo-strutting guys, to appreciate the value of knowing the appendages of a grasshopper. Maintaining discipline and order in the chaotic energy of that classroom was paramount, with the desideratum of teaching and learning playing a distant second. This raised all sorts of questions about the curriculum, and how it might be better constructed in alignment with the needs and interests of students.

Although the students in my upper-level classes were very happy with my teaching, I cannot honestly say I met with any real success with the Grade Nine group. A measurable turn-around did occur when I ran into a group of them in the local shopping mall. One of them was a “bad-boy,” the group’s leader and a bit of a show-off who was being so disruptive that I asked him to leave the classroom a week earlier, only to discover that he had stopped coming back to class. I spent about half an hour chatting with all of them, and the group’s discovery that I was once a student in that school like them, had backpacked through Central and South America for a year, and so on, changed something fundamental in our relationship for the better. I invited the “bad-boy” back, and he returned to class. We began to look at each other as persons, rather than through the lenses of “substitute-teacher” and “disinterested students.” It dissolved much of the tension caused by viewing each other through pre-conceived images, which was a fundamental obstacle to learning. Krishnamurti (1976) repeatedly points to the problem caused by our constructions of images, both of ourselves and each other.

We say as long as you have an image, pleasant or unpleasant, created, etc., etc., put together by thought and so on, there is no right relationship. That is an obvious fact. Right?⁹

I certainly can vouch for the truth behind this statement, which I have seen play out in countless contexts, especially when travelling through foreign countries and encountering people who look and act differently from oneself. However, the example of my Grade Nine class taught it to me in the context of the teacher-student relationship. Mind you, it would be naïve to insinuate that we shed images of each other permanently and image-making in general. However, even dropping one set of pre-conceived images created a space within which to see each other afresh.

During that year of teaching, I enrolled for evening classes in a community college to study art, art history, and sociology, to further flesh out my lopsided formal studies, which had been dominated by my focus on mathematics and science. My Latin American travels had made me aware that my appreciation of life could be enriched by expanding my knowledge into areas that I had ignored or neglected. I can only applaud the efforts of those dedicated to holistic education, which strives to nurture whole individuals in their broadest connections to society and their environments.¹⁰ Krishnamurti, too, encourages a holistic approach to life. However, he cautions us against simply accumulating knowledge, no matter how wide the array of subjects

⁹ J. Krishnamurti, Small Group Discussion 6, Brockwood Park, England, 20 May 1976, Accessed, May 12, 2024, [Text] <https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/any-form-image-prevents-beauty-relationship>

¹⁰ The *International Handbook of Holistic Education*, edited by J. P. Miller, et al, assembles an excellent assortment of voices on aspects of what holistic education means. J. P. Miller's article traces its history. Intriguingly, it is not a recent phenomenon, having early configurations in Plato's Academy, Vedic education in India, and in the cultural practices of Indigenous peoples around the world. It was later articulated by figures such as Rousseau and the Transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Thoreau, and found more recent expressions in A. S. Neill's Summerhill School, and Rudolph Steiner's Waldorf schools. A. Kumar's *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* posits revising curriculum to shift the focus from information transmission the cultivation of meditative awareness in the learner.

may be, since this is only the cultivation of the intellect. Holism, by contrast, is a quality of mind that is responsive to all that is within and around it, including the movement of the intellect.

To learn the nature of thought, which is the movement of the intellect, not from a book but from the observation of the world about you, to learn exactly what is happening, without theories, prejudices and values, is education. To learn from books is important, but what is far more important is to learn from the book of the story of yourself, because you are all mankind.¹¹ (Krishnamurti, 2015c)

Beginner's Mind: Re-enchantment

Armed with my earnings from that year of teaching, I left again to travel. This time, however, my journey was open-ended, and although I was headed to Asia, and India in particular, my purpose was nothing less than self-realization. I call it my "Siddhartha Quest," because self-realization was the supreme goal promulgated in most of the eastern philosophies I had been reading, and Siddhartha had set out from home in a similar way in search of nirvana. Krishnamurti's cautionary remarks against joining religious organizations or blindly following religious teachers struck me as reasonable, and likely kept me from joining ashrams and monasteries like many of my fellow travelers, who had embarked on the "hippie trail" from Europe to India, also in search of themselves. In his teachings, Krishnamurti (1980a) is quite adamant about self-reliance:

If you belong to anything, follow anybody, you are already entering into corruption.

Understand that very deeply, with tears in your eyes . . . You are a human being living in

¹¹ J. Krishnamurti, "Learn from the book of the story of yourself," in *The Whole Movement of Life is Learning* (Darmstadt: CRAFT Verlag, 2015), Chapter 25, Accessed, May 12, 2024, [Text]
<https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/chapter-25-learn-book-story-yourself>

this terrible world; a human being who is the world and the world is you. You have to live there, understand it, and to go beyond yourself.¹²

These travels certainly deepened my interest in world culture and religion because each thing I learned germinated a dozen corollary questions. The journey also shattered my previous sense of identity. To my great fortune, only after my money had almost run out, my spiritual quest eventually found fulfilment. Thereafter, having been gone for some three years, with the last half year spent teaching English in Hong Kong, Korea, and Japan and earning just enough to survive, I returned to North America, penniless, but blissfully humbled by my re-enchantment with life. Instead of feeling arrogant by my accumulated knowledge of world cultures and the rich experiences of extensive overland travel, I was graced with a sense of gratitude and humility in the face of the extraordinary unfolding of life, in all its unpredictability and creative flow.

I am convinced that an effective goal in education is to bend the arc of knowing back to the joyful curiosity of discovery generated by not-knowing, as one has in childhood. Of course, this does not mean abandoning one's knowledge of mathematics, grammar, or geography, but nurturing the quality of openness that not-knowing provides. The title of an influential book by Shunryu Suzuki written for Western students of the Zen Buddhist tradition, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, is pertinent. Certain kinds of knowledge are invaluable, but if misapplied, clinging to what we know can inhibit a freshness of perception to the world as it unfolds before us. Many of the greatest discoveries in science, and the most impressive innovations in the arts, have derived from moving beyond familiar theories or well-worked tropes, with the quality of innocence and curiosity of a "beginner's mind." Perhaps this was a reason why the eminent

¹² J. Krishnamurti, Public Question & Answer 1 Saanen, Switzerland – 23 July 1980, Accessed, May 12, 2024, [Text] <https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/1st-question-answer-meeting-26/1980-‘enlightenment’>

physicist David Bohm was drawn into conversations with Krishnamurti. Bohm struggled to move scientific theory beyond its limitations concerning radical objectivity, for the very act of observation affects that which is observed and measured at the quantum level. Krishnamurti's dictum about the observer-observed relationship attracted Bohm, whose intellectual curiosity was not restricted to discussions solely with fellow scientists. Krishnamurti (1980b) had said:

When man becomes aware of the movement of his own thoughts, he will see the division between the thinker and thought, the observer and the observed, the experiencer and the experience. He will discover that this division is an illusion. Then only is there pure observation, which is insight without any shadow of the past, or of time.¹³

Such ideas inspired Bohm's holistic theory of an implicate order out of which explicate reality unfolds.¹⁴ Just as Newton broke free from pre-existing notions about motion, and Einstein's relativity theory required moving beyond Newtonian mechanics, Bohm's theories propose moving beyond the mechanistic and mathematical paradigms still inherent in quantum mechanics and relatively theory. His ideas continue to foster interest among theoretical physicists. They demonstrate the applicability of Krishnamurti's notion of looking at the world afresh. Although one may not make paradigm shifting discoveries, sensitive awareness of one's own patterns of thinking may enable us drop these if they are outdated, and to tackle the challenges we face today, without being tethered to ineffective approaches from the past.

The World as School

¹³ J. Krishnamurti, *The Core of the Teachings* (Brockwood Park: Krishnamurti Foundation Trust, 1980), Accessed, May 12, 2024 [Text] <https://krishnamurti.org/about-core-teachings>

¹⁴ See Bohm (2002) for these aspects of his theorizing. The recent documentary film on his life, entitled *Infinite Potential*, based on the title of a biography written by David Peat (1997), provides a glimpse of a brilliant mind, who continually thought "outside the box." I have found that such "thinking" is easier said than done, since it implies moving beyond conventional ways of problem solving, requiring one to look at a situation afresh, in a manner that might lead to a creative insight that transcends habitual thought patterns.

I deepened my knowledge and understanding of Krishnamurti's teachings when I subsequently worked for a year at a Krishnamurti school on Vancouver Island. The circumstances leading me there were serendipitous and were the convergence of my interests in teaching and Krishnamurti. They were not, however, based on Krishnamurti's approach to education, because I had only read a few books by him, and none related to education. At that school, I had the opportunity to read extensively, listen to recordings and videotapes, and discover and implement his approach to education in a school expressly founded for that purpose. We were attempting to deliver education that matched the criteria of public schools, while simultaneously providing our students with nutritious meals, physical exercise, a robust appreciation for nature, cultural diversity, self-awareness, and so on. Krishnamurti had posed the question and offered a challenge to educators in this way:

Now, can you, in the teaching of mathematics, physics, and so on – which [the student] must know for that is the way of earning a livelihood – convey to the student that he is responsible for the whole of mankind?...The flowering of goodness does not lie in knowing mathematics and biology, or in passing examinations and having a successful career. When there is this flowering, career and other necessary activities are touched by its beauty.¹⁵ (Krishnamurti 2015d)

Despite its best efforts, the school suffered from similar challenges that face other educators. Not only was there the pressure to get students to master the provincial curriculum, but there was also a continuous struggle that we each had with our own ideas about effective teaching, grasping Krishnamurti's notions of "goodness" and of teaching without authority, and a

¹⁵ J. Krishnamurti, "Education is the cultivation of total responsibility," *The Whole Movement of Life is Learning* (Darmstadt: CRAFT Verlag, 2015), Chapter 8, Accessed, May 12, 2024 [Text]
<https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/chapter-8-education-cultivation-total-responsibility>

host of other personal foibles that seem inevitable when a group of people are brought together, even if their ideological orientations are aligned. One of my most profound realizations I had while working at the school was that I did not have to work at a Krishnamurti or any other ideologically focused school to continue my own education. Even so, it would be disingenuous to claim that this experiment with understanding and enacting Krishnamurti's approach in a milieu dedicated specifically to that purpose did not have crucial effects on my own notions about education. However, I left with a much deeper realization that the world itself was the ideal school, that everyone I met was my teacher, and that life itself was an unending opportunity for learning. This is the spirit that I have brought to all my subsequent roles as an educator in other secondary and post-secondary venues.

Prior to returning to university to pursue graduate studies, and even in the initial years as a graduate student, I taught advanced mathematics and science at a college for foreign students in Ontario. Most of those students were highly motivated, and anxious when they lost even a mark or two on a test. They were driven to obtain the highest possible grades to enable them to enter Canadian universities, which have limited quotas for foreign students, most of whom wanted degrees in engineering or the sciences. Discipline was never an issue, as it was in the public system, and I have never had such mathematically gifted students year after year. I quickly learned that I first needed to prove my mastery over the material to earn their respect. Since then, gaining demonstrable expertise in my subject prior to teaching it has been a hallmark of my approach. If I make a mistake or do not know something when questioned, I admit it, rather than cover up, but strive to find the answer for my students as soon as possible. There is something valuable in demonstrating that no matter how much you may know about a subject, you can be fallible, capable of admitting mistakes and always capable of learning more. I believe my

students, even today, find that quality of vulnerability reassuring, for erring while learning does not diminish anyone. Krishnamurti (1956a) uses the terms wisdom and intelligence almost interchangeably, contrasting them with knowledge, and points to the value of vulnerability. He says:

Knowledge can be taught, but not wisdom; there must be freedom from knowledge for the coming of wisdom . . . An occupied mind is not free, spontaneous, and only in spontaneity can there be discovery. An occupied mind is self-enclosing; it is unapproachable, not vulnerable, and therein lies its security. Thought, by its very structure, is self-isolating; it cannot be made vulnerable.¹⁶

In graduate school, I was impressed both by the knowledge of my professors, as well as the vulnerability they showed when it came to learning. It is perhaps a hallmark of higher education that the more one learns and knows, the more one becomes aware of and humbled by the limitations of one's knowledge. Krishnamurti's comments contrasting knowledge and wisdom were vividly illustrated when I conducted a year and a half of fieldwork for my doctorate in the holy Hindu city of Banaras, India. I had already studied countless books and articles about my subject matter, which focused on the Hindu Great Goddess. Even so, the richness and complexity of her worship, the temple routines, the devotion of worshippers, the festival traditions, and so on were far beyond anything imaginable in comparison to my readings. To learn effectively, one had to open one's senses to the sounds, smells, and sights of what was occurring in that tumultuous Indian pilgrimage centre. This is precisely why anthropologists regard participant observation as vital for the understanding of cultures. One learns by engaging

¹⁶ J. Krishnamurti, *Commentaries on Living, First Series* (Wheaton, Ill: Theosophical Publishing House, 1956), Chapter 66 – Cessation of Thought, Accessed, May 12, 2024 [Text] <https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/series-i-chapter-66-cessation-thought>

with the life of a culture as fully as possible. As Krishnamurti notes, “What is education? It is essentially the art of learning, not only from books, but from the whole movement of life.” (Krishnamurti, 2015c).¹⁷ The fieldwork component of anthropology, and indeed any sphere of learning that entails experiential engagement beyond knowledge gained strictly from books, is far more enriching. This is primarily because it obliges us to relate to the object of our studies with the full compass of ourselves, and not just our thinking minds. Many people find it curious that I have an interest, alongside with Krishnamurti, in Hindu goddess traditions, which are replete with image worship, animal sacrifice, and a host of religious beliefs and practices that Krishnamurti often criticized vehemently. One of the many reasons is simply that I do not personally believe in the religious traditions that I study. I seek to understand them deeply, by entering into their histories, worldviews, and configurations as fully as I can, but do not adopt those as my own. My curiosity about the human condition and our propensity to live in fabricated worlds that give us meaning because we take them to be real remains unabated. In some respects, Krishnamurti’s critiques of adopting any such worldview aligns quite well with such studies. The academic study of religion does not require acceptance of the beliefs of the religious traditions that one studies.

Competence, Clarity, Consistency, and Care

I have used this article to illustrate one of my most effective pedagogic strategies, namely, the use of narrative. And what better way to point to life-long learning than to speak about one’s own life and how one is still engaged in the process of learning.¹⁸ I can now finally

¹⁷ J. Krishnamurti, *The Whole Movement of Life is Learning* (Darmstadt, CRAFT Verlag, 2015), Chapter 25 (<https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/chapter-25-learn-book-story-yourself>)

¹⁸ There has been much written on the use of narrative in pedagogy. Its ancient roots are evident in the enduring myths and legends of antiquity, in cultural characteristics of elders telling a story in response to a question, and in our contemporary thirst for storytelling in print and on screens to convey the complexities of life. A recent academic article on narrative as pedagogy with a rich reference list is Dvir (2021).

turn to my educational approach as a professor of religious studies in a university setting. It is clichéd, but everything I do is an opportunity to learn. I am, of course, constantly engaged in discovering new things through my research. However, even in the act of teaching, which I am required to do, I am perennially learning. I explore new methods to convey knowledge effectively to my students, but more importantly, to elicit a quality of curiosity that will enable them to continue to learn beyond their time with me. I am primarily delighted with conveying what I have learned to my students, and that enthusiasm, I am told, can be infectious. It seems less like teaching, and more like sharing experiences and understanding. It is honestly difficult to analyze what aspects of my “teaching” have been most effective, but I do strive for competence, clarity, consistency, and care. Establishing one’s competence is vital for students to feel that their learning is being guided by someone who is knowledgeable and experienced.¹⁹ My use of narrative, which points to my acquisition of knowledge and experience, extends to various aspects of my teaching. For instance, I tell stories about my process of learning through field experiences because these provide students with touchstones to which they can relate. They might think: “If he rode on the top of a bus through the Khyber Pass, so might I. And if he was at first surprised by his reactions to bodies burning in a cremation ground, I wonder what mine might be.”²⁰

Clarity, conjoined with my other value, consistency, helps to ameliorate the disorientation that new undergraduate students may feel as just one of scores or even hundreds of strangers in a

¹⁹ Although there are valid critiques of competence-based education, I think it is naïve to imagine that one’s students do not expect their teachers to demonstrate competency in their fields. A provocative article on why critiques of competence-based education have been ineffective is found in Edwards (2016).

²⁰ I elaborate upon an aspect of this in Rodrigues (2018a), where I talk specifically about strategies used in crafting Hinduism textbooks. I have also edited a series of books for undergraduates entitled *Studying Religions in Practice*, in which contributing authors first write a narrative vignette about a key experience, and subsequently analyze a portion of it academically.

large lecture hall. Realizing that one's subject matter is unbounded can be unnerving, and so my approach offers students clear instructions, expectations, and presentations of lecture content. These "methods" fall within the category of care because I feel a sense of responsibility and concern for my students' educational experience, which they have entrusted to me. In letters to his schools, Krishnamurti (2015e) illustrates how he dovetails clarity with care, which he equates with love, when he says,

The flowering of the mind can take place only when there is clear, objective, non-personal perception, when it is not burdened by any imposition upon it. It is not what to think but how to think clearly. Flowering implies freedom. ...In every letter we will deal with the awakening of the heart, which is not sentimental, romantic or imaginary, but is of goodness which is born out of affection and love; ...When the mind, the heart and the body are in complete harmony, then the flowering comes naturally, easily and in excellence. This is our job, our responsibility as educators. Teaching is the greatest profession in life.²¹

Freedom within Conditioning: Awareness of "what-is"

The previous quotation offers an ideal segue into how Krishnamurti's educational philosophy, as it pertains to the teachers and students in the schools he founded, is consistent with and forms a subset of his broader teachings, which were directed to humanity at large. Although groomed to be a world teacher, within a mold conceived by the Theosophical Society, Krishnamurti rejected that framework and his affiliation with that organization. However, he spent his life teaching throughout the world about the possibility of a pivotal insight that might

²¹ J. Krishnamurti, "These schools are to educate the total human being," *The Whole Movement of Life is Learning* (Darmstadt: CRAFT Verlag, 2015), Chapter 1, Accessed, May 12, 2024 [Text]
<https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/chapter-1-these-schools-are-educate-total-human-being>

open human beings into a fuller expression of intelligence and love. At the heart of Krishnamurti's (Krishnamurti, in M. Lutyens, (Ed.), 1970) teachings is the notion that our existences are shaped by experiences, individually and collectively, in what he calls conditioning.

We are conditioned – physically, nervously, mentally – by the climate we live in the food we eat, by the culture in which we live, by the whole of our social, religious and economic environment, by our experience, by education and by family pressures and influences. . . . (p. 277)

Our sense of “self,” our identity, which Krishnamurti calls the “I,” the “me,” the “observer,” the “analyzer,” and so on, and which – in the formulations of Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism – is generally translated as the “ego,” is the cornerstone of this conditioning. Self or ego has an ephemeral quality since it is fundamentally constructed through conceptual thought. He says,

[T]he idea, the memory, the conclusion, the experience, the various forms of nameable and unnameable intentions, the conscious endeavour to be or not to be, the accumulated memory of the unconscious, the racial, the group, the individual, the clan, and the whole of it all, whether it is projected outwardly in action or projected spiritually as virtue; . . . all this is the self. (Krishnamurti, 1954, p. 56)

Many Eastern philosophies of liberation, such as nondual Vedanta and certain Buddhist schools, point to a transcendence of the ego or “self,” through a realization of unity with an all-encompassing Absolute Reality, referred to as Brahman or the Buddha consciousness.²² Many

²² A concise presentation of Buddhist conceptions of mind is found in Rodrigues (2018b). Rodrigues (2018c) offers a similar overview of the “self” in Hindu philosophies of liberation.

people think that this is also the thrust of Krishnamurti's message. However, my own close study of his teachings indicate that this is not so.²³ To Krishnamurti (1972) our focus is best placed on the dynamically unfolding reality of the moment, which he calls the "what-is."

So, the "what-is" is not static; it is a movement. And to keep up with the movement of "what-is," you have to have a very clear mind; you need to have an unprejudiced, not a distorted mind. (p. 179)

The application of these ideas in a Krishnamurti school setting is to invite students to observe the inner workings of their minds in tandem with whatever they are learning. In one of his seminal books, *Education and the Significance of Life* (1953), he states,

Education should not encourage the individual to conform to society or to be negatively harmonious with it, but help him to discover the true values which come with unbiased investigation and self-awareness. When there is no self-knowledge, self-expression becomes self-assertion, with all its aggressive and ambitious conflicts. Education should awaken the capacity to be self-aware and not merely indulge in gratifying self-expression. (p. 15)

Such sensitive observation is holistic, and not merely focused on the subject matter being studied. It can reveal how the inner workings of our emotions and thoughts are in constant interplay with what is occurring around and outside us.²⁴ The conventional orientation of university classes, and the expectations of students who register for my courses, is markedly different from those attending Krishnamurti schools. I would face resistance from my students in

²³ While a lot of writings about Krishnamurti focused on his life, my book was among a handful of early academic analyses of Krishnamurti's teachings (Rodrigues 1990). An updated and revised version was published as *Krishnamurti Insight* (2001).

²⁴ In Rodrigues (2018d), I present what I understand to be the ultimate thrust of Krishnamurti's teachings, whether it is to students and teachers in his schools or to the broader public

my religious studies courses, if I were perceived to be teaching self-understanding instead of my subject matter. Our discipline is not concerned with religious education, but with the study of humanity's religious impulses, predilections, and configurations, as these have played out through history. So, we teach about Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and so on, and not how to be a better Hindu or Christian. Of course, to teach about any of those religions effectively, students need to understand their histories, core values, and metaphysical orientations. Thus, one cannot adequately understand the appeal of Buddhism, without appreciating what nirvana might mean and why Buddhists value it so highly.

Always Learning

Despite the seeming disjunction between teaching in a Krishnamurti school versus teaching in a conventional university, the field of religious studies itself, which is my subject area, meshes well with aspects of Krishnamurti's message. This is because as students study diverse religions – whether they hold personal religious commitments or not – they are exposed to varying and even contrasting worldviews. Their own notions of reality may be shaped by beliefs in angels, devils, a savior god, heaven and hell. Through their studies they discover that others may not hold such beliefs at all, instead envisioning the world as created repeatedly and cyclically, with no supreme deity as judge, and that the highest value is freedom from all illusory beliefs. In this way, students may be indirectly thrust into the critical reevaluation of their own worldviews. Such discoveries may enhance their tolerance of other beliefs and systems of value. They are inevitably also led to observe their own reactions to beliefs and practices that diverge sharply with their own values. How, for instance, do they feel when they hear that other social and cultural systems, now or in the past, have endorsed animal or even human sacrifice, have abhorred or persecuted people with marginal gender identities or sexual preferences, and so on?

In theory, a student might even have a profound realization that all individual realities are circumscribed by conceptual frameworks shaped by one's cultural upbringing and experiences.

I shall conclude with one final observation on my pedagogic approach that meshes well with Krishnamurti's teachings on "what-is." After spending over a decade in elementary and high school, students enter university conditioned with certain expectations about how they ought to be taught. In my experience, they do not respond well to approaches that vary radically from ways with which they have grown familiar. This is "what-is," and as a teacher it is incumbent on me to meet them where they are, not where I expect them to be. Put differently, my starting place is to begin with approaches that are not radically different or nouveau. If I wish to implement something new, we collectively discuss and decide to experiment with that approach within the first weeks of classes. Thus, it becomes a shared experimental learning project, and not one that has been thrust upon. In another example of meeting students where they are, I have been among the earliest creators of digital textbooks, even though I initially viewed the medium with skepticism.²⁵ Recognizing that younger generations are progressively growing up in front of televisions, smartphones, and tablet screens, the printed book is progressively passé. While some instructors have chosen to resist and even combat such technologies – and that is their philosophical and pedagogical prerogative – I seek ways to use them to our collective advantage. Although the printing press was used to produce Bibles, it also became a medium for propagating scientific writings, and it took television decades before it included educational content besides superficial entertainment. Portability, rich illustrations, seamless searching, and links to additional content, all for far less than one would pay for a printed text, are but some of the advantages of digital texts. It is little wonder that digital

²⁵ Rodrigues (2016) and Rodrigues (2021) are two pertinent examples.

platforms have growing appeal over older technologies. Learning is best illustrated by one's openness to what might be new and better, but unfamiliar. The capacity for such creative freedom resonates with Krishnamurti's (1956b) ideas, when he says,

Wisdom is one thing, and knowledge another... We have knowledge, the accumulation of ages; and why are we not wise, happy, creative? ... Thought is the accumulated; and how can thought ever be free to discover the new? It must end for the new to be... There is freedom only in seeing the truth of "what-is," and wisdom is the perception of that truth. The "what-is" is never static, and to be passively watchful of it there must be freedom from all accumulation.²⁶

Concluding Thoughts

I have used autobiography and autoethnography as tools to convey how certain circumstances of my life shaped my learning, my capacity to learn, and in-turn, my constantly evolving approach to teaching. Of course, the narrative is incomplete because I have selected only certain features to highlight. Experiences were chosen to illustrate why I resonated with key aspects of Krishnamurti's teachings, not just his approach to education, as well as how my work in a Krishnamurti school and my subsequent close study of him almost certainly fortified those resonances. I hope I have not sacrificed honesty in my effort to weave together those threads into the fabric of this narrative.

Although I have not benefitted from a formal program of teacher education, I have been self-educated through readings, workshops, and experience. And although I do not teach in a teacher education program, I have taught some ten thousand students formally in other subject

²⁶ J. Krishnamurti, *Commentaries on Living, First Series* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 1956), Chapter 81, Accessed, May 12, 2024 [Text] <https://jkrishnamurti.org/content/series-i-chapter-81-wisdom-not-accumulation-knowledge>

areas, many of whom have gone on to become teachers. I have boundless gratitude to those from whom I have learned, and appreciation for those who have learned from me. The most significant lesson in the so-called school of life, and one to which Krishnamurti also repeatedly points, is simply to yield to the creative flow of one's existence. Life shakes us out of habitual patterns with its unpredictability, enchants us with its beauty, and entices our curiosity with its unfathomable depth. This elicits a natural response of attention, care, and love for what it continuously reveals. There is a vulnerable openness in the surrender to that flow, which is the nexus both for life's teachings and for one's own learning. The more fully we yield to that space in all our relationships, but certainly as teachers and students, the richer our capacity to share and to understand.

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