

EDUCATION AS A RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

KRISHNAMURTI'S INSIGHTS INTO EDUCATION

Scott H. Forbes, 1994

For most of Krishnamurti's life what he said and wrote sparked both interest and controversy. His observations on religion, organizations, tradition, nationalism, and relationships often ran counter to the convention of the day. If they are less startling today, it is either due to the affect his insights have had on common consciousness or an indication of the extent to which he was ahead of his time. But Krishnamurti's insights on education are still radical and frequently ignored or dismissed as impractical. This is possibly due largely to the fact that Krishnamurti presents education as a religious activity in an age when most people still see it predominantly as preparation for succeeding in a material world. People often can only hear what they expect or want to hear. We all want our opinions and perspectives confirmed because we prefer thinking that we already see the truth; we already know what is right. This is as true in educational matters as it is in religious ones. Modern education is so obviously failing to solve the world's problems, is so criticized for failing to meet societies' aspirations, and is so clearly unable to be prepare people for the challenges of life. Because Krishnamurti's insights into education marry the religious with the secular, they meet the challenges of living and the failures of society at a profound level, and they do so at a time when these insights are desperately needed. Very probably, Krishnamurti's insights on education will have the greatest impact on the world.

Krishnamurti's interest in education is long standing and was always passionate. In what is perhaps his first book, "Education As Service" (1912), we see his concern for education, and the introduction of a few themes that remained part of his message.¹ We hear the voice of the

seventeen year old Krishnamurti writing from his heartfelt experiences when he says in the forward,

Many of the suggestions made in this little book come from my own memories of early school life;.... I have myself experienced both the right way of teaching and the wrong way, and therefore I want to help others towards the right way.²

And for the rest of his life he worked to help others towards the right way of educating. This right way laid emphasis on 1) the intentions of education 2) the physical nature of the places in which education occurs 3) the nature of the participants in education - the students and staff (and this involves a view of what it means to be human that is quite different from that which has shaped conventional schools) 4) the activities of an educational center. As all four of these essential elements are explored and described by Krishnamurti in religious terms, we can see that for Krishnamurti education is a religious activity. These four characteristics form the framework of this article.

Krishnamurti repeatedly stated the intentions of the education centers he founded in very unequivocal terms, and very religious ones.

These places exist for the enlightenment of man³ ... children who must be educated rightly... educated so that they become religious human beings.⁴

In fact he insists that the purpose of all education is to bring about freedom, love, the flowering of goodness and the complete transformation of society.⁵ Compare this to the intention of most schools which is to prepare young people to succeed materially in the society which exists (or a slightly ameliorated one). Even though it is now fashionable to declare loftier goals, examine how much undivided attention during the day is given to those loftier goals and how much time is given to preparing for earning a living.

Another constant theme in Krishnamurti's declarations of the intentions of education is freedom, but freedom also is more religious in character than material. Of course, there is a

connection between psychological freedom and outward compulsion—it is difficult to help a student find the former in a climate dominated by the latter—but it is not political freedom that interests Krishnamurti, but rather the deeper freedom, the inner liberation that was the means and the ends of education.

Freedom is at the beginning, it is not something to be gained at the end.⁶ There is no freedom at the end of compulsion; the outcome of compulsion is compulsion.⁷ If you dominate a child, compel him to fit into a pattern, however idealistic, will he be free at the end of it? If we want to bring about a true revolution in education, there must obviously be freedom at the very beginning, which means that both the parent and the teacher must be concerned with freedom and not with how to help the child to become this or that.⁸

Krishnamurti's descriptions of what schools should physically be like is another indication of the religiousness of education. Schools were spoken of as religious places, sacred places. This should be reflected in their aesthetics, the atmospheres he felt should prevail, and the special areas Krishnamurti insisted exist in all the schools he founded.

The schools Krishnamurti founded are very beautiful places, and this is not by accident. Beauty is important, not just because it is pleasing, but because sensitivity to beauty is related to being religious and indispensable to the healthy growth of a child.

To be religious is to be sensitive to reality. Your total being - body, mind, and heart - is sensitive to beauty and ugliness, to the donkey tied to a post, to the poverty and filth in this town, to laughter and tears, to everything about you. From this sensitivity for the whole of existence springs goodness, love; ...⁹

He himself was extremely attentive to details and critical of things that were badly done. He was very understanding if things could not be better because of material constraints, and he never pushed the administrators of his schools to produce anything that was beyond the means of the schools. However, if things were not good through slipshod handling, neglect or lack of sensitivity, then he felt it ran counter to something essential in education. To expect sensitivity to

develop in a child when the staff are insensitive to their surroundings is to teach a very strong lesson in hypocrisy. Like Keats, who Krishnamurti greatly admired, beauty was related to truth.

Nature is also an important part of the schools Krishnamurti founded. His schools are in parks or countrysides. Again, it was not just because he felt that nature was pleasing, but because Krishnamurti felt that a relationship with nature had important implications for a relationship to the sacred and to living sanely.

... the healing of the mind is something totally different. That healing gradually takes place if you are with nature, with that orange on the tree, and the blade of grass that pushes through the cement, and the hills covered, hidden, by the clouds.

This is not sentiment or romantic imagination but a reality of a relationship with everything that lives and moves on the earth.¹⁰ If you establish a relationship with it [nature] then you have relationship with mankind... But if you have no relationship with the living things on this earth you may lose whatever relationship you have with humanity, with human beings.¹¹

Another physical aspect of the schools he created, and another indication of the religiousness of education, was his insistence that the schools have special places for silence. He often spoke to the students of the importance of a quiet mind or silence so that they could observe their thoughts.

You see meditation means to have a very quiet, still mind, not a chattering mind; to have a really quiet body, quiet mind so that your mind becomes religious.¹²

The mind of a religious man is very quiet, sane, rational, logical - and one needs such a mind...¹³

Krishnamurti usually asked that these special places not be on the periphery of the schools, but in the center of the them. Like a sanctum sanctorum, they were to be the heart, the space that generated the rest of the school. Unlike the modern conception of schools, action was to be on the periphery and understanding born of silence was to be at the center.

Perhaps the most unique link between educational places and religiousness is the atmospheres that should exist. Krishnamurti wanted the atmospheres of schools to have their own affect on students. At Brockwood, he talked frequently about the importance of generating an atmosphere that would itself transform students the moment they came through the gates! Long discussions were held with the staff at Brockwood about the nature of such an atmosphere and how it might come about. Krishnamurti had no doubt that it was necessary. It had more the ring of something religious than anything commonly associated with a school. It was something sacred that worked its own magic on people in a profound and transforming way. Without that real religious atmosphere, a school is empty; or worse, it is a parody of itself, a kind of Disneyesque education theme park with the impression of something real but no real substance.

Of course the atmosphere, though distinct from the people in the schools, can not be separated from them. A place may carry an atmosphere, but it is the people who create it or destroy it. Places with atmospheres that at one time were special but which were destroyed through neglect, incompetence or corrupt behavior has all too much historical precedence. Krishnamurti often cited great cathedrals or temples that became tourist industries or money making enterprises and so lost any sense of religiousness. They had become lifeless and without meaning even though they maintained all the physical appearance of their former selves.

There was a very memorable discussion with Krishnamurti on his last visit to India when several representatives of different schools he founded in India, America, and England had gone for a walk with him. He asked us all what would be left in his schools to indicate that they were Krishnamurti schools if the name Krishnamurti was removed; if all the books, audio tapes and video tapes were gone. It was a question about the all important ineffable qualities, and it was a question about what we were giving our attention to; and it was answered by a very telling and uncomfortable silence.

As the people that are responsible for schools have such importance to their atmospheres and activities, it is interesting to note the things Krishnamurti said about them. Not surprisingly, the way he speaks about educators is another indication of the religiousness of education.

Because he is devoted solely to the freedom and integration of the individual, the right kind of educator is deeply and truly religious. He does not belong to any sect, to any organized religion; is free of beliefs and rituals...¹⁴

The educator himself is to be religious; he is to be concerned with religious 'being', and then right 'doing' would follow from it. Krishnamurti describes this relationship between 'being' and 'acting' frequently, but perhaps nowhere more succinctly than in one of his talks in Bombay, ... "it is not 'doing is being' but 'being is doing'".¹⁵ For Krishnamurti, 'doing' derived from 'being' rather than 'being' deriving from 'doing'—the reverse of convention. Conventionally a question like, "Who are you?" (a question about being) is answered by, "I'm a lawyer, engineer, etc." (a statement about doing). This confusion of 'being' with 'doing' and the emphasis on 'doing' rather than 'being' is credited by many psychologists and innovative educators as a cause for what they increasingly see; children who can do more and more, but who are socially or psychologically dysfunctional—their 'doing' is highly developed but their 'being' is undernourished.

When discussing the selection process for students and staff at Brockwood (a frequent topic), Krishnamurti always stressed the importance of the candidate's 'being'—their sensitivity to the deepest intentions of Brockwood, their goodness and intelligence (in his definitions of those words), the depth of their questions about themselves and the world. Although he wanted both staff and students to be intellectually sound, he never stressed their academic prowess, their social abilities, or their talents. During one of these memorable discussions, after the staff had answered Krishnamurti's questions by describing what they were looking for in prospective students, Krishnamurti described himself as a boy. He said he had been vague, shy, dreamy and

bad at all academics, but sensitive and affectionate, and Krishnamurti asked if the staff would have accepted him as a child. Again, a painful silence. Our description of the students we were seeking for a Krishnamurti school did not include the young Krishnamurti. How was this possible? It was because we as teachers were acting traditionally, were more interested in 'doing' than 'being', more interested in the measurable than the immeasurable; we were again choosing Barabbas.

Consider Krishnamurti's solution to the dilemma of the selection process. Here again we see the emphasis on 'being' and its religious connotations. In a discussion with staff members at Brockwood in 1980 on this question of selecting new students and staff, Krishnamurti insisted it was most important to first establish "the common ground"¹⁶ for the staff already at Brockwood. As Krishnamurti saw the self or ego as a central obstacle to living religiously, diminishing or eliminating the ego is fundamental. Krishnamurti described the common ground for the staff as, "The intent is to come together to help each other to have no self"¹⁷. He continued,

You see, if we stand on common ground, that will decide who will come and who will go. You understand, sirs? Not my personal opinion, my personal like and dislike... all that kind of nonsense goes.¹⁸

Something could be generated by the staff intention that itself acted or gave rise to insights. He goes on to say that such a common ground and intention would generate the all important atmosphere.

The relationships Krishnamurti felt should exist between students and staff were a further indication of the religiousness of education. There should be no hierarchy in the fundamental concern of schools. Staff members may know more about academic subjects, or gardening, or administration and therefore have a certain authority there, but these are not the central concerns of education. In the central concerns of education, which have more to do with inner liberation,

both the students and the teachers are learners and therefore equal, but this is untouched by functional authority. This subtle point often eludes both students and adults.

Therefore I say, authority has its place as knowledge, but there is no spiritual authority under any circumstances... That is, authority destroys freedom, but the authority of a doctor, mathematics teacher and how he teaches, that doesn't destroy freedom.¹⁹ In thus helping the student towards freedom, the educator is changing his own values also; he too is beginning to be rid of the "me" and the "mine", he too is flowering in love and goodness. This process of mutual education creates an altogether different relationship between the teacher and the student.²⁰

When we compare Krishnamurti's view of the nature of a human being to that which has shaped modern education, we see substantial differences. Krishnamurti's view that a human has both a brain and a mind puts him at odds with the modern view and most learning theory. Although this article is too short to do justice to this topic, we can simplify the difference as follows: the brain is the center of the nervous system and the organ of cognition. It is therefore responsible for co-ordination of the senses, memory, rationality, knowledge, etc. The mind, which is not material, is related to insight (non-visual perception), compassion, and the profound intelligence that Krishnamurti held as the real goal of life and therefore education. Obviously one needs a brain that functions well, like one needs a heart or a liver that functions well; but the real source of acting rightly, goodness, and a religious life come from the mind. In this unequal relationship between the two, a good brain does not produce a good mind, but a good mind does ameliorate the brain. The brain has a role to play with the mind; the role is freeing itself from its conditioning, and this is one of the main functions of education (not accumulating knowledge).

The real issue is the quality of our mind: not its knowledge but the depth of the mind that meets knowledge. Mind is infinite, is the nature of the universe which has its own order, has its own immense energy. It is everlastingly free. The brain, as it is now, is the slave of knowledge and so is limited, finite, fragmentary. When the brain frees itself from its conditioning, then the brain is infinite, then only there is no division between the mind and the brain. Education then is freedom from conditioning, from its vast accumulated knowledge as tradition. This does

not deny the academic disciplines which have their own proper place in life.²¹

A further difference between the view of human nature that has shaped conventional education and the views of Krishnamurti is that he felt that each person needs to be explored and revealed rather than shaped into something. Here we begin to also broach the topic of the activities that Krishnamurti felt should be central to education, and again we see that education is a religious activity. To Krishnamurti, each person has a unique vocation that needs to be discovered; what they really love to do has to be found and then pursued. Krishnamurti was not the first educator or seer to have felt this,²² but it is a perspective that stands in stark contrast to the traditional view that has shaped so much of modern education. In the traditional view, children are seen as empty vessels to be filled, blank slates to be written on, or amorphous pieces of clay that need to be shaped (and if a few recalcitrant corners need to be pummeled into shape a bit, so be it). For Krishnamurti, true education helps the student discover himself.

To understand life is to understand ourselves, and that is both the beginning and the end of education.²³ The function of education, then, is to help you from childhood not to imitate anybody, but to be yourself all the time. So freedom lies...in understanding what you are from moment to moment. You see, you are not educated for this; your education encourages you to become something or other...²⁴

The discovery of the natural vocation for an individual student and the student's understanding what he really loves to do may not fit into the plans of the parents or society, but it is an important part of understanding oneself and, consequently, of education.

Modern education is making us into thoughtless entities; it does very little towards helping us to find our individual vocation.²⁵ To find out what you really love to do is one of the most difficult things. That is part of education.²⁶ Right education is to help you to find out for yourself what you really, with all your heart, love to do. It does not matter what is, whether it is to cook, or to be a gardener, but is something in which you have put your mind, your heart.²⁷ And is not the true purpose of education to help you to find out, so that as you grow up you can begin to give your whole mind, heart and body to that which you really love to do.²⁸

The difference between understanding what one is and striving to become something that one isn't is mirrored in the difference between wanting to discover 'what is' and striving to materially change 'what is'. Krishnamurti didn't deny growth or material change; in fact he applauded it. But meaningful growth and real material change without the all too frequent unfortunate side effects cannot be produced by just insuring young people acquire knowledge and skills and teaching them to conform to the strictures and demands of society in order to get on in life. In emphasizing this, parents may comfort themselves that they are helping their children have material security, and schools may congratulate themselves on their examination results, but in Krishnamurti's perspective they are only adding to the sorrows and violence of the world. He decries the fact that most education is to...

...acquire a job or use that knowledge for self-satisfaction, for self-aggrandizement, to get on in the world.

Merely to cultivate technical capacity without understanding what is true freedom leads to destruction, to greater wars; and that is actually what is happening in the world.²⁹ Merely to stuff the child with a lot of information, making him pass examinations, is the most unintelligent form of education.³⁰

Education should never coerce a child to conform and fit into present society. Education should help create a totally different society and a different way of life. When speaking of his own schools he said,

Surely they must be centers of learning a way of life which is not based on pleasure, on self-centered activities, but on the understanding of correct action, the depth and beauty of relationship, and the sacredness of a religious life.³¹

In fact there are two kinds of learning both of which are important, but in most schools an over-emphasis on material learning that involved acquiring knowledge meant sacrificing a deeper

learning. In describing both forms of learning, he would often begin with the kind of learning we are all too familiar with.

That is what you do when you learn a language, when you acquire technical information and gain knowledge about what you are learning and accumulating, which is learning to acquire knowledge, and using that knowledge skilfully in action. And there is, a learning in which there is no accumulation, a constant movement of learning which is non-mechanical.³²

What Krishnamurti describes above as "another kind of learning" was what he felt should be the principal concern of education, and it is an activity that is fundamentally religious. This profound and life-transforming learning is certainly meant to be the focus of the schools he founded, and this is in perfect accord with what in 1929 he stated was his central intention in life,

I want to do a certain thing in the world and I am going to do it with unwavering concentration. I am concerning myself with only one essential thing; to set man free.³³

For this Krishnamurti started schools, and this reason only. He never did waver from his wish for people to have a constant movement of learning which is non-mechanical, a life of freedom, love, and truth.

We read the words of the young seventeen Krishnamurti who writes,

If the unity of life and the oneness of its purpose could be clearly taught to the young in schools, how much brighter would be our hopes for the future!³⁴

Forty-three years later he writes,

If one becomes aware that there can be peace and harmony for man only through right education, then one will naturally give one's whole life and interest to it.³⁵

That is exactly what he did.

¹While there is some controversy over the authorship of At The Feet of The Master (1910), there is little doubt that he wrote at least parts of Education as Service (1912), especially the introduction.

²Krishnamurti, Education as Service (Adyar, Theosophical Publishing Society, 1912) Forward.

³Krishnamurti, Letters to the Schools : Volume One , Letter of 15 October 1979 (Den Haag: Mirananda, 1981).

⁴Brockwood Park, 2nd Public Talk, 26 August 1979.

⁵There are innumerable instances in which Krishnamurti describes the need for a completely different society, and education as the way of creating that different society. This should not to be confused with the easier goal of social reform. There could easily be an article on 'Krishnamurti: Social Transformation Through Education', but since Krishnamurti posed education as a religious activity, it would in effect be an article on 'Social Transformation as a Religious Activity'. Consider: *"The real function of education is not to turn you out to be a clerk, or a judge, or a prime minister, but to help you understand the whole structure of this rotten society and allow you to grow in freedom, so that you will break away and create a different society, a new world. There must be those who are in revolt, not partially but totally in revolt against the old, for it is only such people who can create a new world - a world not based on acquisitiveness, on power and prestige... - a world that must be totally different from the present one. Unfortunately, neither your parents, nor your teachers, nor the public in general are interested in this."* Krishnamurti, This Matter of Culture, (London, Victor Gollancz, 1964) Chapter 3.

⁶Krishnamurti, Education and the Significance of Life, (London, Victor Gollancz, 1955) Chapter 6.

⁷Ojai, 6th Public Talk, 5 July 1953.

⁸ibid.

⁹Krishnamurti, This Matter of Culture, (London, Victor Gollancz, 1964) Chapter 23.

¹⁰Krishnamurti, Krishnamurti To Himself, (London, Victor Gollancz, 1987) entry dated 25th February 1983.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Rajghat, 2nd talk to students, 19th November 1981.

¹³London, 2nd Public Talk, 7th June 1962.

¹⁴Krishnamurti, Education and The Significance of Life, (London, Victor Gollancz, 1955) Chapter 6.

¹⁵Bombay, 5th Public Talk, 18th March 1956.

¹⁶Brockwood Park, Staff meeting with Krishnamurti, 13th June 1980.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ibid.

¹⁹Ojai, **Dialogue on Education**, 16th April 1975.

²⁰Krishnamurti, Education and The Significance of Life, (London Victor Gollancz, 1955) Chapter 6.

²¹Krishnamurti, Letters To The Schools: Volume Two (Den Haag, Mirananda, 1985) Letter of 1st October. 1982.

²²Maria Montessori is probably the best known educator today to share this perspective with Krishnamurti. Consider; *"The child is the spiritual builder of humankind, and obstacles to his free development are the stones in the wall by which the soul of humanity as become imprisoned."* Maria Montessori, The Absorbent Mind (Madras, Kalakshetra Publications, 1973.) We hear a similar theme in Emerson, *" The secret of education lies in respecting*

the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and fore ordained, and he only holds the key to his own secret..." Ralph Waldo Emerson, from an essay **Education 1864**, published in Selected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York; New American Library, 1965). Montessori had links with Theosophy, and Emerson, as a member of the Transcendentalist Movement in 19th Century America, had interests in eastern philosophy and religion. It is possibly more likely for people with such interests to have this perspective of human nature than those with an old fashioned Christian view of people as born in sin with instincts that lead towards loss of spirituality, and which therefore need to be controlled and curtailed.

²³Krishnamurti, Education and The Significance of Life, (London, Victor Gollancz, 1955) Chapter 1.

²⁴Krishnamurti, This Matter of Culture , (London, Victor Gollancz, 1964) Chapter 3.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Krishnamurti, Krishnamurti On Education, (New Deli, Orient Longman, 1974) Part 1, Chapter 8.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Krishnamurti, This Matter of Culture, (London, Victor Gollancz, 1964) Chapter 7.

²⁹Poona, 3rd Public Talk, 31st January 1953.

³⁰Poona, 5th Public Talk, 26th September 1948.

³¹Krishnamurti, Letters To The Schools: Volume One (Den Haag, Mirananda, 1981) Letter of 15th October 1980.

³²Bombay, 2nd Public Talk, 26th January 1975.

³³Ommen, The Dissolution of The Order of The Star, 3rd August 1929.

³⁴Krishnamurti, Education As Service (Madras, Theosophical Publishing Society, 1912) Forward.

³⁵Krishnamurti, Education and The Significance of Life (London, Victor Gollancz, 1955) chapter 6.

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Additional discussions about Krishnamurti's views on education can be found in these articles:

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- *Freedom and Education* - discusses freedom in its deepest and most time honored form, and what the implications are for education if such freedom is valued.
 - *Values in Holistic Education* - details the primary values that most schools claiming to be holistic would embrace.

These and other articles can be accessed at: **www.holistic-education.net/articles/articles.htm**