

The Middle Ground

COLIN FOSTER



This a reflection on the attempt we are making at Brockwood to put into practice the educational intentions of Krishnamurti. The staff members come to Brockwood because they have seen in his teachings a unique clarity concerning life and education. Out of these teachings came a coherent set of intentions for the schools he founded. I don't wish to summarize or interpret him as his many books and recordings contain insights in a simple and clear way that I cannot improve upon, and he specifically stated he did not want translators or interpreters. What I can offer is a view as to what some of the main questions and issues are for me at Brockwood, and how I have approached them during the 15 years I have been here.

One of the fundamental questions for us is what makes Brockwood different, if not unique, apart from statements about the intentions of Krishnamurti? Or as he once asked us, what would be different about Brockwood if you took away his name? The pressure to be secure by being ordinary is very strong, and it is true that it is not right to experiment with young people's education, so how does one approach this question in a way that can be a basis for a school? We seem faced with contradictions since it should not be experimental, yet should be new and different; and we wish it to be based on intangibles such as trust, responsibility and co-operation, yet have the stability and durability necessary for a school. Another difficulty to be faced is that Krishnamurti demands a radically way of approaching life, yet by the time we come to Brockwood both staff and students are already heavily conditioned, particularly students of high school age.

Faced with these difficulties, it seems to me one has to find an approach to the particular situation one is in, in a sense a middle ground between Krishnamurti's intentions and the actual issues, concerns and situations, personal and communal, that one faces daily. The middle ground will vary from person to person in the staff, but if the staff are to be able to work together there must be some kind of coherence. Otherwise in a given situation or issue staff members will have different priorities and agendas, which will cause conflict and confuse students as to what is being asked of them. This middle ground for me at Brockwood

has at least five areas of thought and emotion that I feel are behind many of the daily questions and issues we deal with here and which Krishnamurti focussed on as being essential to learn about.

Firstly, fear. For all human beings fear is one of the most powerful factors in our behaviour, but for adolescents it is particularly strong, as they are at an age when they have many decisions to make about their lives as they face 'going out' into what is in many ways a frightening world. Also adults use fear, often unconsciously, as a way of coercing young people to behave in acceptable ways. It seems to me that in normal schools fear of failure is the main source of motivation behind the exam system, and the media and parents encourage this by making much of those who succeed and over-stating the consequences of 'failure'. So how does one approach this question of fear in our lives? Somehow one has to learn how to stay with it, not to escape from it into false securities, and also not to let it operate unobserved in our actions. In the daily interaction it is relatively easy for alert staff members not to let fear come into their relationship with a student. That in itself is an achievement, but Krishnamurti wanted fear to be understood so deeply that psychological fear was eliminated altogether! As far as I can see, what we can do is to bring it out in different ways, without boring the student, as something that exists as a powerful determinant in our behaviour unless it is learnt about and understood.

Secondly, authority. Young people are very sensitive to this, partly because they have usually experienced some unpleasant form of it either at home or in school, and also because adults seem to use their authority as a means to enforce conformity and to deny them the freedom, they feel they need, to learn from experience. Most forms of authority are based on fear, and as stated above staff members are clear that they do not want that to be the basis of their relationship to the student, but for an adult deeply to feel no division of psychological authority or superiority over a young person is a different matter. My experience is that nearly all staff members have some difficulty with this, and a small number of male staff members have real difficulty with this, and problems with authority in general. However there is a need for a

functional authority to bring a practical order to running the organizational side of a school. For Krishnamurti this question of authority was fundamental, as he wanted us to be free of all psychological authority, including himself as part of the dogma of our own ideas, and for us to be 'a light to oneself' .

Thirdly, freedom. The idea that freedom is doing what one wants to do and that one has a right to this kind of freedom, together with rather confused notions of equality, are deeply embedded in our culture, and these are behind many of the issues that come up here. Living as a community is a fruitful context to explore this as the tensions between so-called individual freedom and responsibility to community needs are always with us. The point we want to make is that this idea of freedom is just that, an idea, but the prison of our conditioning is an actuality and ideas of freedom are part of this prison. True freedom and actual equality can only be realized when this conditioning is understood. We do allow our students as much freedom of action and behaviour as we can, but a balance has to be found, between letting them find their own way in dealing with things and the inevitable contextual constraints that always exist in life. An important part of this is done by drawing clear and negotiated lines that it is not acceptable for a student to cross.

Fourthly, comparison. We all live with comparison and know the feelings of jealousy, envy, success, achievement and failure. Adolescence is a time when the questions who and what am I? are important, and there is a sensitivity to comparison due to the vulnerability of an embryonic self-image. The social pressures on young people are

enormous as boys and girls are targeted in different ways by advertising and entertainment, which are largely based on comparison, either subtle or not. This is difficult for them to resist, or even see any reason why they should, unless they have some form of self-defence that comes from understanding what is going on. It is hard to counter the exposure they get through the media. What staff members can do is to be clear in themselves about the dangers in all this, and try to illustrate it in their courses and the issues that come up in and out of class.

The final point in the middle ground that comes out of Krishnamurti's intentions is perhaps the most difficult and is to do with there being no division between the inner and outer world. Recognizing that the disorder in the world is the disorder in oneself gives tremendous importance to an exploration of oneself as part of education. Then there is a clear relationship between this exploration and the whole of life outside of school. Without this relationship, there is a danger that the work we do will be reduced to an interesting but ultimately irrelevant exercise in self-analysis, that might lead someone merely to feeling temporarily somewhat better about themselves, or to reduce Krishnamurti's intentions to the relatively trivial goal of personal enlightenment (an oxymoron for Krishnamurti).

I have presented some middle ground factors that have helped me to approach the questions and issues that arise daily here. With these factors in mind almost every situation in the school is a potential learning opportunity for students and staff; and for Krishnamurti, the movement of learning is more important than what is learnt about.

Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools

March 1999 - Issue No. 3