

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### **Rural Reflections: Krishnamurti in the Rural School**

Carolyn Prest

Middle School teacher, Nova Scotia

**Abstract** *This piece examines J. Krishnamurti's and A. Andersen's conversations as recorded in the work A Wholly Different Way of Living through the perspective of an educator in rural Canada. First, the paper discusses Krishnamurti's concept of self-understanding and its role in his authentic living and his emphasis on nature. Next, it considers how rural students are especially well suited to achieving Krishnamurti's desired state of self-understanding and attentiveness. The paper goes on to explore how this educator has begun to apply Krishnamurti's teachings within their classroom in a way that makes use of their students' unique strengths as rural citizens to begin their own journey toward Krishnamurti's self-understanding.*

**Keywords** rural, education, Krishnamurti, self-understanding

#### **Introduction**

Through years of academic engagement, I have enjoyed the works of various philosophers, academics,

and teachers, and have benefitted from their teachings and insights, particularly those I have been able to apply to my own context. My most profound experiences have been with those who I have found to be relatable in a personal context, either as a citizen, educator, or based on some aspect of my own experience. I was introduced to J. Krishnamurti through the text *A Wholly Different Way of Living* while enrolled in a graduate program, and I anticipated an enjoyable, if not significant, experience. Through examination, however, I discovered a powerful connection between Krishnamurti's teachings and both my personal and professional lives. In this reflection, I will share the pieces of Krishnamurti and Anderson's conversations that are most relevant to myself, as a schoolteacher in rural Canada. Next, I will reflect upon how I have begun to implement Krishnamurti's ideas into my practice so that I am able to develop an authentic connection with my students and provide them with an experience that allows them to

develop skills to begin a journey of exploration and self-understanding.

I was introduced to J. Krishnamurti through conversations with Allan Andersen as published in *A Wholly Different Way of Living* (2000) while enrolled in a graduate degree program at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The course, entitled *Holistic Education*, with Dr. Ashwani Kumar, covered the full text of *A Wholly Different Way of Living*. With many differences between Krishnamurti's background and my own, I did not expect to find any substantial personal connection with this work or his teachings. To my surprise, it was not long after beginning the text that I began to develop deep and authentic connections to his ideas. Krishnamurti and Andersen examine the nature of reality and society on such a fundamental and foundational level, that their insights seem to have universal relevance. The insights that emerge while reading *A Wholly Different Way of Living* have illuminated the beauty, intelligence, and interconnectedness of the place where I live and work, and the people that I live and work with.

I reside in a rural community in Nova Scotia, Canada. I teach at the local Primary-12 school which consolidates all students within a 30-kilometer radius. I have taught a range of grade levels, most of my time being at the middle-elementary and junior-high level. We are situated on the unceded, ancestral territory of the

Mi'kmaq people, and consist of communities that have strong historical connections with natural resource-based industries. While some still make their living through use of our natural resources, many working-aged individuals commute for employment. Whatever the occupation, many find that the benefits of spending more time in nature outweigh what some may see as the inconveniences of living in a rural location.

As I reflected through *A Wholly Different Way of Living*, two aspects of Krishnamurti's teachings resonated most deeply: that the path to an authentic connection with reality is through self-understanding, and the importance of the natural world in the individual's life. In Chapter One, Krishnamurti describes the condition of the so-called individual: "And human beings are never whole. They are fragmented, they are contradictory, they are torn apart by various desires" (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 5). He states that through constant conditioning from the external world (for example, with aspects of one's culture such as politics, market, and religion), the person has become fragmented to the point where we no longer fit the meaning of the term individual: "the word individual is really not a correct word because individual, as you know sir," Krishnamurti points out, "means undivided, indivisible, in himself. But human beings are totally fragmented, therefore they are not individuals"

(Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 5). It is, according to Krishnamurti, incumbent upon each person to understand their conditioning and to discover their true individual self. It is only after one understands oneself deeply in relation to other human beings and nature that an individual can address large-scale human issues such as poverty, pollution, or fear. He says, “any observant and serious people would say that this society cannot possibly be changed except only when the individual, the human being, really transforms himself [themselves] radically” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 4).

On the topic of the transformation of society, Krishnamurti makes it clear that it is not collective society that will bring about change to itself, but the transformed individual. Society and the human being are intertwined. One causes the other and exists as a result of the other: “there is not the division, the society and the individual, the collective and the separate human being, but the human being is the whole, he is the society” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 11). We cannot, therefore, bring about change in society without change to the individual. Krishnamurti argues: “So, when we are discussing change we must be, I think, fairly clear that we mean the change in the psyche, in the very being of human beings. That is, in the very structure and nature of his [their] thought” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p.10).

Krishnamurti addresses the role of knowledge in the transformation of the individual, and argues, unlike any other philosopher, that knowledge can be an impediment to one’s transformation. What is considered knowledge is derived from experience, and according to Krishnamurti, knowledge exists only in the past, “The known is the past,” he points out, “therefore knowledge is the past. Knowledge cannot be in the present” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 18). The modern mind is based upon millennia of knowledge, our previous knowledge affects new knowledge, and while it has its place, a freedom from knowledge is required to approach this kind of transformation: “There must be a quality of freedom from the known” argues Krishnamurti, “otherwise the known is merely the repetition of the past, the tradition, the image, and so on” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 28).

Later in their conversations, Krishnamurti and Andersen discuss beauty and listening. Krishnamurti questions the concept of seeing (beauty, for example), and suggests that it is something that is so inhibited by prior experience, judgment and prejudice that it may not be considered seeing at all. He says, “So we have this screen after screen between us and the object of perception. So do we ever see the thing at all?” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 200). Listening is inhibited by the same sorts of screens, and likewise to the point where we must wonder if we

truly hear anything at all. True seeing and listening only occur as actions in themselves: in doing so without preconceived judgement or notion, “without a single interference of thought or ideation or mentation, just listen to that, the miracle has taken place” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 204).

Krishnamurti connects his idea of true listening and seeing with learning. He asks if there is any other kind of learning which is beyond the mechanical, experiential, or cultural learning that has been built up around humankind. Learning that goes beyond the mechanical, according to Krishnamurti, is learning about oneself. Deep learning requires the ability to separate oneself from previous knowledge and to see, listen and experience in the moment.

In their conversation about pleasure, Krishnamurti and Andersen press again at the idea of experiencing something without the lens of prejudice, experience or thought: “When you see the sunset, see it completely” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 166). Although brief, this reference to nature resonated with me, and I felt the weight of the statement. As a component of the Holistic Education course that I attended with Dr. Kumar, the class was asked to design and implement an activity that would nourish our individual creativity and promote self-relaxation. We were to practice this activity periodically throughout the term and share it with our classmates and Dr. Kumar several times during the course. I decided to

practice meditation, which I felt could help me examine myself in response to my busy schedule and day-to-day life. Because I am fortunate enough to maintain a relationship with nature, I worked to practice my own version of meditation in as many natural locations as possible. This is where I began to relate my experiences to Krishnamurti’s concept of seeing a sunset completely (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 166). As these experiences developed, I began to recognize that I was attending to the world in a new way; I was developing the ability to set aside my own baggage and experience the timeless, the constant in my reality. I began to achieve small glimpses of the timeless nature of the external world. I began to understand Krishnamurti’s idea that to see true beauty of a sunset, a person must exist within that single moment, both within and outside of themselves, without internal or external interference. For me, this description is the key to understanding how we can move beyond Krishnamurti’s screens and experience reality as it exists, without all the considerations and understandings that have been built up in us over years. Fostering a connection with nature can allow an individual to begin to experience listening, seeing and authentic learning, particularly for those who live in rural locations. With this connection to nature, we can finally see and listen in the way that Krishnamurti intends.

The chapters “The Nature of Hurt” and “A Different Way of Living” address the importance of an educator’s journey toward self-awareness. In the chapter on hurt, Krishnamurti and Andersen consider how an individual is exposed to hurt repeatedly and from a young age, both physically and psychologically. The act of comparison of the child by the parents is one common way that a child is hurt, “From childhood the parents compare the child with another child” he points out, “When you compare, you are hurting” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 230). An individual who is not hurt remains innocent: a requirement of Krishnamurti’s for one to be properly attentive to the world, “because a mind that is not hurt is an innocent mind. And you need this quality of innocence to be so totally attentive” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 225). The hurts that an individual experiences are a part of what inhibits them from experiencing the world authentically. Krishnamurti’s innocent attentiveness can allow a person to observe and interact with reality in its most authentic form, “that quality of a mind that is capable, that has this feeling of being sacred in itself, and therefore is capable of seeing something immeasurably sacred” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 226).

As the conversation proceeds, the pair recognize that the state of individual hurt is nearly universal, “All people are hurt” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 229). They consider how

individuals can work to live authentically despite their hurt, and the role of the student and the educator in the process of understanding hurt. Educators must understand the nature of hurt to teach without hurting our students further—an insight that has become known widely due to the emergence of trauma-informed pedagogy. Part of this understanding is that of the hurt that is inflicted upon students through the traditional education model, one example being the assignment of marks to students. Through understanding what it is that hurts the individual, we are able to look at what has caused harm, and then work toward Krishnamurti’s call for attention. According to Krishnamurti, “In understanding the image, in understanding the hurts, in understanding the education in which one has been brought up in the family, the society, all that, in the understanding of all that, out of the understanding comes attention” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 233). Once we recognize these hurts, the relationship between ourselves and our students begins to change, “So I say, all right, we both are hurt my friend, let us see, let’s help each other to wipe it out. That is the act of love” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 237). When the teacher can recognize the hurt and is able to talk about it with their student, both may begin to move beyond it, “I would say, look, you are hurt and I am hurt, we are both of us hurt” he describes to Andersen, “I

would spend ten minutes talking about that, every day, in different ways, till both of us see it” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 240).

Chapter 13, “A Different Way of Life,” addresses Krishnamurti’s concept of living in comparison to the way society currently functions, “it is a matter of constant struggle from the moment you are born to the moment you die, it is one battle” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 264). We are in constant conflict with ourselves and those around us to achieve certain measures of success and normalcy.

When speaking of education, Krishnamurti states that the utmost purpose of education should be to make students aware of the conflict in which we exist, and to help them consider another way of life, “to point out a way of living in which there is no conflict. That seems to me is the function of the highest form of education” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 274). Andersen questions if to do this as an educator, should the educator be without conflict themselves, and Krishnamurti argues that transformation is not pre-required of the teacher. Like when a teacher addresses hurt, there can be an acknowledgement of the conflict that exists within themselves and their students: “begin with that and say, I am in conflict, you are in conflict” he suggests, “let us see in discussing, in becoming aware of our relationship, in teaching, if it is not possible for me and for you to resolve this conflict” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 275).

Krishnamurti believes that the educator should spend time discussing conflict up front before the teaching of more technical topics. When the student and teacher move into more traditional or technical learning, they move with an awareness and understanding of their conditions. This discussion and development of awareness helps build a meaningful relationship between the student and teacher, “that produces an extraordinary relationship” (Krishnamurti, 2000, p. 275).

As an educator in a rural location, I see potential to use nature as an entry point to Krishnamurti’s transformative living. For many, the value of living in a rural setting is the ability to access and live in a close relationship with our natural environment. It is logical to make use of our closeness with nature to help our students access and experience the world on a deeper level. Since my introduction to Krishnamurti, I have experimented with providing his “seeing” experience to my students. Many students are fortunate enough to have some prior experience with the concept of experiencing nature completely. In my classroom, it can look like the reflection practices that Dr. Kumar led our group through at the beginning of each class; quiet reflection where the student allows their thoughts to pass through their mind, reflection time with an objective, for example, “write the things that you are worried about right now,” or simply time to

allow their mind to settle into their own considerations. As time passes and students become more skilled at quieting themselves and observing, I like to begin to provide the same experience but set in or close to nature. This can become an experience that is like my own creativity and relaxation activity where I spent time alone in the environment. Through these experiences, they develop their ability to quiet their minds and begin to look at the world with fewer of the screens of their conditioning.

Outdoor experiences in general are highly valuable to my students. I make a point of providing them with space to observe and discuss nature regularly. These observations are sometimes of the physical world that immediately surrounds us, and sometimes of what we know is taking place but cannot readily see: for example, an examination of local tide tables to explore how the tides interact with the phase of the moon, local marine forecasts, or sunrise and sunset times around an equinox or solstice. This helps provide my students with a greater understanding of their physical environment, which leads to deeper observation or “seeing” when we are practicing attending in nature. Because our geographic location provides us with innumerable opportunities to be in nature, I find that students begin to enter into their own, independent practices with nature more frequently.

Krishnamurti describes the importance of the educator’s acknowledgement of their own hurt and conflict. I have found that the acknowledgement of one’s strengths, challenges, and insecurities to be crucial to developing a trusting relationship with students. Without a high level of trust in their teacher, students are not willing to engage in any activities that may expose their own vulnerabilities, even if only to themselves. Acknowledging my own weaknesses and allowing my students to witness my own journey toward self-understanding creates a level of comfort that often allows them to make beginning steps of their own journey. This acknowledgement occurs regularly and in many forms; generally, as Krishnamurti suggests, at the beginning of the lesson. While I work in a location where I am fortunate enough to watch former students progress through high school graduation, I cannot claim that all my former students continue these practices once they have left my classroom. My hope is that these practices of working toward self-understanding play at least a small role as my students move through their years as students and into adulthood.

As discussed, Krishnamurti sees self-awareness as key to the transformation of the individual and subsequently the transformation of society. Krishnamurti repeatedly emphasizes the necessity to promote these transformations for the benefit

of our world. I take this point to heart in my personal and professional practice. Personally, I work to examine my thoughts, fears, and joys through the meditative practices that began in Dr. Kumar's course. Professionally, the brief periods of contemplation and observation that I engage my class in not only create a stronger link between my students and their environment, but also help build their self-awareness. In spending time modeling and then having my students practice examining their emotions in this way, they begin their journey toward deep self-understanding. When they can analyze their emotions and their reactions to these emotions, they begin to understand their own hurts. This also helps them recognize their individuality. It is my hope that these examinations continue as they grow.

Through this essay, I have related the aspects of Krishnamurti's teachings that are most applicable to

my experience as a rural citizen and educator. While many of his concepts are universally applicable, this essay has identified some of the ways that rural students can use their unique strengths and experiences to work towards Krishnamurti's attention and self-understanding. In the context of the classroom, I have shared Krishnamurti's perspective on developing authentic and productive relationships with our students and identified some of the strategies that an educator in a similar location may use to apply Krishnamurti's teachings in their classroom.

### **References**

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### **Author Details**

Carolyn Prest was born in Mooseland, Nova Scotia (Canada). Following her education, she has chosen to settle and raise her family on the Eastern Shore, in Pleasant Harbour. Currently teaching Junior High Mathematics and Visual Arts at the local P-12 school, she is passionate about rural education and the nuances of teaching in small communities with rich histories. Email address: [CPrest@hrce.ca](mailto:CPrest@hrce.ca)



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