

All Parents Meeting: 14 July 2006

1. WELCOME TO AN UNFOLDING JOURNEY – while being deeply rooted ...

Dear Parents and well wishers

We are most delighted to welcome each one of you to this meeting, and thank you for taking the trouble to be here with the teachers and other parents for this very important meeting.

2. AN INVASION OF ARMIES CAN BE RESISTED,

BUT NOT AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME.

Victor Hugo

We are a large group here today, a large group of concerned individuals - new parents of the school, parents of junior school, middle school and senior school. Many parents have had elder children pass out of school. There are parents here who have had a 20 year association with The School, almost as long as the longest serving teachers. And many of us have been teachers of the school, full-time, part-time or as resource people. Today we also have the members of the school's Executive Committee and trustees of the KFI, the parent body of the Krishnamurti schools in India, with us.

Just to refresh our memories, we started arranging All Parents Meetings in the year 2000. As teachers responsible for The School we noticed that there were several changes each year, little changes and major ones: changes in arrangements, in meeting schedules, in procedures, handbooks, norms, and the school's programs. Among staff we have 4 hour meetings on alternate Saturdays; and during the week before school and after school. These help the teachers stay coherent and work together. The possibility of inquiring and deeply pondering questions creates the atmosphere of the school.

The All Parents Meeting is one way of sharing these changes with parents. We don't just want to inform you of the emerging directions. We want you to be part of the movement. We would like to hear your affirmations, questions, doubts, words of caution. These can then become part of the journey of change, a transparent journey.

3.

DO WE EMBRACE CHANGE?

OR CELEBRATE CHANGE?

OR BEMOAN CHANGE?

When Alumni visit school they ask, "What is new, anna or akka?" And when we mention the Mixed Age Group program or the Work Experience opportunities for senior students, or the Vallipuram farm or the self study room upstairs, there's often a pause followed by ... "Not fair. I wish I could have had that!" We often respond to our alumni, "As long as you are able to say this, please note that the school is alive and kicking". When you come back and say, "Oh school is the same as when

we were here 25 years ago", please note that we have stopped moving, probably become frozen. I hope as parents you are in a position to celebrate the changes, and that we can count on your support for all things ahead.

At the school many things have changed through a simple process of wide participation, working together, and becoming clear about our central purpose. Many proposals for modifying existing practices are made and many good ideas come up. Our last question before making a major decision is, "Is this a good idea, or an idea whose time has come?"

Not many parents may remember that once upon a time cars used to be parked near the wild Badam tree. There was hardly any green around the wild Badam. But now, over the past so many years, much greenery has grown and it is difficult to imagine that there could have been so many cars there. We noticed that lichen had started to die on the rain tree, a sure sign of pollution. We also noticed that arriving and departing cars made it difficult for students to walk or cycle into school. The school anticipated the needs of the future and changed.

The water table started to turn salty, almost without warning, about 5 years ago. This campus with its old trees underwent an invisible change in 2001: we had to start buying drinking water. Far more significant than the cost of buying the water is the environmental cost: lorry transport, diesel consumption, depletion of water elsewhere. The School had never been part of this cycle and a land area such as ours, with few children, should not be in this situation. But we are, despite having commenced rainwater harvesting in the early 90s. The rain we collected was not enough to withstand the havoc underground. This has been a major and possibly irreversible change. The school anticipated that water was going to be an important matter and started conserving and rain water harvesting. Either our efforts were not sufficient or the underground erosion was too much.

While many of the trees planted in school have grown well, we have had to bear the loss of some of the big trees. The Jamun trees on the campus have been undergoing slow changes. On one, the main trunk has withered slowly and is almost gone. A minor branch is still green. The larger of the two Jamun trees has been home to many birds in its hollows, and a Banyan sapling started to grow in a high hollow. Now the Banyan tree on the Jamun has grown high, very high, and the roots, as many of us know, have gone down into the ground from 40 ft above. A minute seed and a slow process have brought about a big change.

Many big changes begin small and then grow to huge proportions. Who could have anticipated the BPO's 10 years ago or the iPod even 5 years ago? Who could have thought we would drink water from plastic bottles in India, 10 years ago? And who can even imagine the melting of the ice in the Antarctic? Or, 20 years ago, anticipated the way internet and mobile telephones would influence our lives?

On the topic of change:

one may say that there are enough changes happening in the world and we have only to adjust.

on the other hand it is also possible to say that we need to anticipate and move towards changing things.

The rain has been a great blessing this year. The campus is green and the pond holds water.

4. YOU CANNOT SIMULTANEOUSLY PREVENT AND PREPARE FOR WAR.

Albert Einstein

When two of our Class 12 students during the years 1991 - 93 refused to do animal dissection in Biology - even in the + 2 exams - they raised questions for teachers and the establishment. They did not believe in taking life. Was it necessary to take life to study biology? Was not such killing experimentation? Was it not against the law? We listened to these uncomfortable questions and took it forward: we represented to the Council and also found ways of teaching biology without animal dissection. We are happy to say that The School was part of the movement that made dissection optional in school exams.

The School decided in 1994 that all students who pass out of school must have an Environmental Education. We removed choice in the 6th subject and established Environmental Studies as mandatory. It was an odd move but it seems to have now become the national guideline at school and college level. Our students in 1997 pushed us to offer ES in class 11 and 12. The Council endorsed the syllabus we developed. The ES course has run most successfully. We seem to have anticipated the future by about 10 years.

About 5 years ago, the horror of child sexual abuse surfaced in the Indian consciousness. Thanks to the processes of The School we could evolve a program of Safety Education. Also we could find ways of sharing this concern with other educators, parents, heads of school and lead in the development of programs for Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse.

The horrors out there are not so far away and we cannot be complacent. It is a matter of time before Safety Education becomes a part of the curriculum.

5. THEY ALWAYS SAY TIME CHANGES THINGS, BUT YOU ACTUALLY HAVE TO CHANGE THEM YOURSELF.

Andy Warhol

Many would wait for things to be defined elsewhere but we have participated in ushering in the change.

The School does not support competitive platforms. What then are the alternatives? How do young people meet and interact? To enable students to meet and engage with students from the city schools some of the initiatives that surfaced are The Festival of Drama and Dialogue, the Mixed basketball league and the Symposium.

The special class 11 program.

One of the most creative movements that The School ushered in - with the help of teachers and members of The School's Executive Committee, was the class 11 program. Since then we have had a steadily increasing number of applicants in the higher secondary classes. This is all the more remarkable when we take note of the fact that most city schools seem to be experiencing a reduction in numbers.

The senior students seem to be asking for a challenging program, not only academics. We can see this in the enthusiasm for the Festival of Drama and Dialogue, the mixed basketball league for boys and girls, the trips to places of environmental and social struggle, the projects etc. The school seems

to have been responding to unarticulated student aspirations and the need of the times. It changed its offerings, counter-intuitively.

The counter-intuitive movement that the school has chosen seems to indicate that students seek challenge and an engagement with the real world. They seem to want an opportunity to participate in a real context, not a make believe one. And the educational challenge seems to be to draw out (educare), educate - the resilience, the dream strength, the creative life energies from students at this age.

There is a challenge when they encounter alternatives to the dominant paradigm of development. They feel nourished when the going is rough and trappings are taken away, in the company of keen, committed, minds and hearts; through dialogues and stories they discover moorings.

More rather than less,

learning about the world contextualizes the learning,

discovering we need little enhances well being...

6. YOU SEE CHANGES AS THEY ARE AND ASK, "WHY?"

I DREAM CHANGES AS THEY NEVER WERE AND ASK, "WHY NOT?"

George Bernard Shaw

For newer parents of junior school it is now taken for granted that we have a Mixed Age Group. For the parents who had to decide in 1999 if they wished to be part of the pilot group it was not an obvious matter. Later, they had to decide if they wished to continue in this system; it was a journey of change and decisions. I must share this anecdote and its happy contents with all of you. When we started the pilot MAG in junior school, we were conscious that this may be too much of a departure for some parents and that some students could be withdrawn. To our great happiness not one parent withdrew a child. It is a wonderful thing that such a big change could be ushered in with such goodwill and cooperation of all parents.

Mixed age class rooms are ancient as the hills and are the direction of the future for schools. Who ever said people learn best in the same age settings? There may not have been any need to move this way. But looking at the dynamic of the same age environment we are clear that the greatest danger to a child's well being comes from same age peers.

The school has now launched a Mixed Age pilot group in middle school - classes 5, 6 and 7. We are happy to inform you that 29 students have been enrolled (out of 84) with great confidence into the program by their parents. This was a tricky beginning - the choice lay not only with the parents but also with the students. The program is running well and you will hear about developments in the next newsletter and other reports. Two of our most experienced teachers have been assigned the task of running the middle school MAG. The next academic year may usher in changes in the middle school depending on the findings of this pilot program. It is also likely that the middle school may metamorphose into a fully mixed age environment and move away entirely from age segregated classes.

What is the logic for this move to have a pilot Mixed Age Group class?

The same-age environment fosters competition and rivalry and puts pressure on people to measure up to a so-called 'norm'. The space to learn at one's own pace, with a sense of leisure, is available in a MAG environment. And to take this further the school has been working in the direction of SELF DIRECTED LEARNING and self study. Self study is a strategy with which the senior school is looking to support the intelligent learner's initiative and process.

How is this to happen? From the literature we understand that this isn't an easy transition for anyone. The shift from the teacher-directed learner to the self-directed learner is challenging. The School is committed to doing all that is needed to see that the self-directed learner finds support and nourishment at school. Independence is never easy to find!

7.

" ... IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE, WE ARE NOT DEALING WITH MECHANICAL DEVICES THAT CAN BE QUICKLY REPAIRED, BUT WITH LIVING BEINGS WHO ARE IMPRESSIONABLE, VOLATILE, SENSITIVE, AFRAID, AFFECTIONATE; AND TO DEAL WITH THEM WE HAVE TO HAVE GREAT UNDERSTANDING THE STRENGTH OF PATIENCE AND LOVE ... "

J. Krishnamurti

As you know, the school has been in the process of acquiring 100 acres of land near Vallipuram, about 75 Km from this campus. We applied to the Government of Tamilnadu for permission to acquire the land in 2003. It is with great happiness again that I announce today that the Government has given us permission to acquire the land and proceed with the project. The project envisages a school for up to 150 students who will reside on the campus. We plan initially to set up a retreat centre and a Krishnamurti study by the end of this calendar year. We will be running programs for students and teachers and adults at the centre. These programs will be retreats and workshops lasting up to a week. The land is flat and has extremely good water. A first hut has already been situated there and tree planting has begun.

Now regarding the school - while on paper it is easy to conceive of a residential school and also find the money for the venture the idea is not easy in practice, particularly if one wants to stay contiguous with the existing campus. Soon, the school will have two campuses - an urban and a rural campus. The urban campus will be a day school as at present for students up to class 10.

There are some questions we must consider:

is teaching equal to learning?

is schooling equal to classrooms?

At Vallipuram the facilities and processes being conceived will take these questions into account. Students in their years just prior to adulthood will have an opportunity for much-needed respite from the city and find an avenue of sensible education.

We have been advised that it is a good idea to also consider some younger students for the campus. The details are being thought through and we will give you all the details as soon as they are ready. In the meantime a committee set up by The School's Executive Committee has examined the proposal and cleared it to the Foundation.

The project cost is expected to be about Rs 4 crores. We will seek your support as the fund-raising for the project will commence soon. We hope that the parent body of the school will also help fund this new project.

We are acutely conscious that the relationship with the neighborhood should promise an improvement in the lives of local children and the population in general.

8.

THE BEST WAY TO PREDICT A FUTURE IS TO INVENT IT...

Alan Kay

KFI has emerged as a special institution in the Indian educational consciousness. This has happened due to some essential characteristics of the K schools:

they are set in natural surroundings

they provide space for the individual

the classes and schools are small

they focus on the awakening of intelligence and a wholly different way of living

The Journal of Krishnamurti Schools with contributions from teachers of all our schools has been extremely well received. The tenth issue is nearly ready and will be coming to you shortly.

Outreach is seen as a major thrust of The School - sharing its richness of processes, materials and concerns with outside schools, teachers, people and institutions. This avenue has already evolved to a certain extent over the past few years. The School has been reaching out to other schools and in situations where it saw a role. For example:

The School pioneered Child Safety programs in Chennai, for prevention of child sexual abuse, by holding workshops for teachers, parents and for heads of schools. Safety Education is an essential part of the curriculum of the school.

The School hosted workshops for Alternatives to Dissection for over 30 teachers of various schools in the year 1998.

Valued education workshops were hosted for teachers of Corporation Schools in Chennai over the last academic year.

For Tsunami Relief the school made efforts to collect and distribute aid material.

The School has set up a Junior Resource Centre for the village school in Kilapakkam and also contributed to such efforts at Damodarapuram.

A Child to Child health care program was initiated with the Olcott School and Avvai Home School as well as a school near the Vallipuram farm during the past 2 to 3 years.

Last year, in collaboration with the Theosophical Society, The School has been running EXPERIENCING NATURE workshops for children of various schools in Chennai including the children of the Blind School.

This year the collaboration with Theosophical Society is taking a fresh direction - programs for teachers are being started.

The School has created a new role to enable these projects to move ahead in a concerted manner. An experienced teacher interested in this area, Sumitra M.Gautama, has been appointed OUTREACH

COORDINATOR. She has already set outreach work in the city and in the village of Kilapakkam in motion. Any parents interested in being involved with the outreach work of The School please contact her.

With Vllipuram on the horizon and the maturing of the school (we are now 34 years in age) a larger canvas with a fully fledged Educational Centre and outreach activities will be our major directions for the next 5 to 10 years. The work of Rishi Valley School in greening the valley and hills and educating the rural children is very well known. Our journey is a part of the ongoing concern of KFI.

This is also the time for me also to express very special thanks to the parent body. The School pioneered the idea of a voluntary higher fee in school about 7 years ago. The response of parents has been heartwarming. Today, thanks to this generosity of parents, we are able to maintain a modest annual fee despite inflation and accept students who might otherwise find the school fees difficult to afford.

We thank the parents for being resource people, for helping with advice on architecture, maintenance needs, doing workshops for teachers and for participating in school programs.

With the widening of the canvas, the Executive Committee of the school has designated a very senior teacher and trustee of KFI, Jayashree Nambiar as Vice Principal. She is in charge of the school from Kindergarten to class 8. This is to ensure that all sections of school continue to receive the care and attention that they need.

9.

DON'T LIMIT A CHILD TO YOUR OWN LEARNING

FOR HE WAS BORN IN ANOTHER TIME

Rabindranath Tagore

As a child grows, things stir and new connections are made in the brain. There is the excitement of discovering our possibilities. Some things surface slowly in consciousness: the value of simple living, friendship that is different from agreeing, the dignity of a human being even if poor, enquiry into the mystery of life. There are also rude awakenings: the unfairness that is easily accepted because it is common, the shock of discovering that we are no different from our forefathers.

In watching themselves and each other, the young grow. As teachers we see simplicity, self absorption and wisdom mingled with rebellion. They will need this reflective, watchful movement for living in the world with its terrible conflicts and dilemmas. And our hope is that this movement begins at school and takes root in their beings. Hopefully they will carry the seeds of respect, listening, watchfulness and boldness...

The School is moving, but the path ahead is not readymade. We are unrolling our carpet as we move ahead. The simple processes of thinking together, low hierarchy, and refusal to accept the given as the last word, have helped us move so far.

Teachers are metamorphosing in school into EDUCATOR LEARNERS.

Parents will need to take a greater interest in the journey of their children's education in the future and emerge as PARENT COLLABORATORS.

This may be the only way ahead if we are not to "throw our children to the wolves" as K pointed out.