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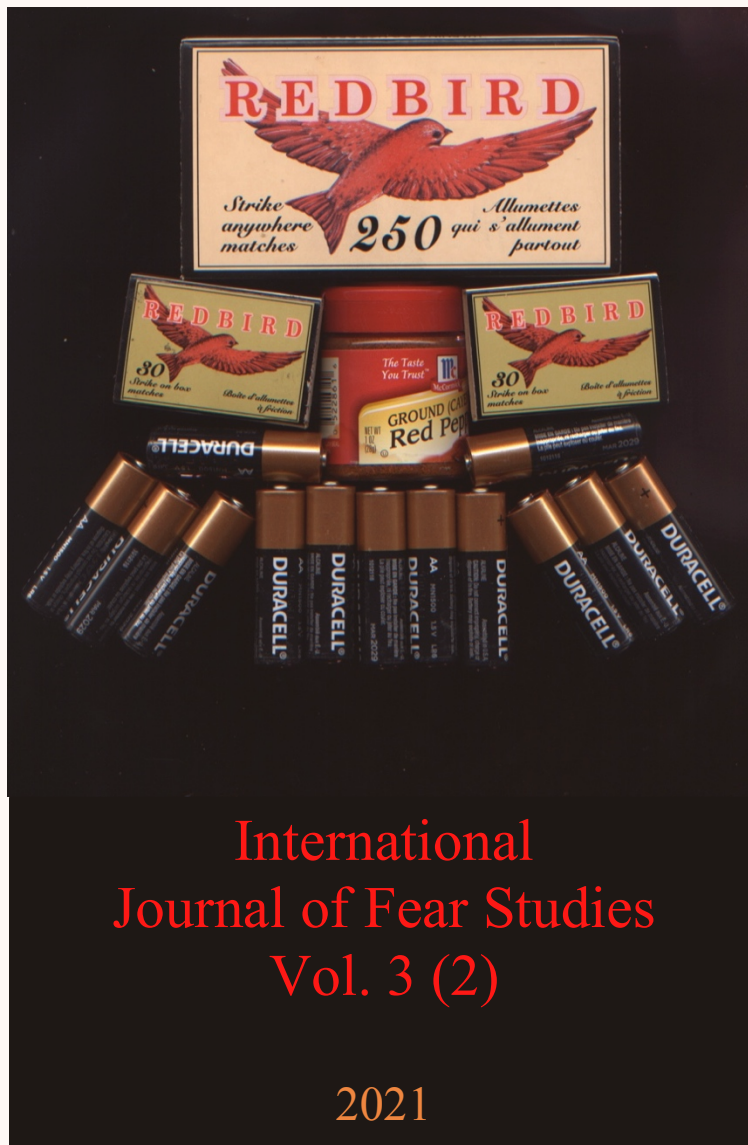
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Fear and Meditative Inquiry

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(Canada)

Introduction

R. Michael Fisher

Always Going Somewhere Else For Spirit(ual): A Short Story

The trouble with normal is, it always gets worse. -Bruce Cockburn

Toni Packer is a highly respected Zen Buddhist, who 21 years ago wrote *The Wonder of Presence: The Way of Meditative Inquiry*. Now, more than ever, since meeting my dialogue partner (Ashwani Kumar) in this article, I am curious about *meditative inquiry* and how various people understand it and practice it. I think of myself as not a serious/trained “meditator” *per se*, but I am certainly a natural contemplative who enjoys *extrovert meditation* mostly – and at times I enjoy some *introvert meditation* [1] when it seems appropriate to my spiritual practice and growth. Packer’s book ended up on my desk recently, and I read its Foreword written by Michael Atkinson.

Atkinson wrote about meeting Packer and adopting her as a teacher – and a radical teacher she was. She left behind the trappings of traditional Buddhism and started her own center. I’m curious of the admiration of Atkinson for his teacher and the detailed attentiveness of his careful description of the traveling to meet Packer at her center in Springwater. Atkinson, on his own intense spiritual journey at the time, eloquently describes the scene:

Although Toni [Packer] travels to teach in both Western and Eastern Europe and holds retreats in California, the geographical center from which she moves and to which she returns is Springwater, perched on a hillside in the Finger Lakes region [New York]. It is in the retreats conducted there that most of who work with her encounter her, and it is from there that most of the talks that form the basis for this book’s chapters were given.

Leaving the two-lane highway that leads away from the tiny village of Springwater, a dirt road takes you past a sprinkling of houses, turns into the woods, and winds its way toward the center itself. Fifty yards from a gravel parking lot partly sheltered by the surrounding woodlands, high on a hillside, is a large, modern, wooden building, with great glass windows looking south. Entering the reception area, where racks

hold shoes and invite you to leave yours, you find someone from the staff there to greet you ... and you find your way to the room and roommate with whom you will spend the next week [in silence] [2]

How many retreats have I gone on to meditate or how many others have gone on to do so and get away from the banal and bustling world of the ordinary? It is called *doing spiritual work* by most of us. Meditation of some form is central. We want to grow and 'be spiritual' and who knows we may even become enlightened. Meditative, these days, holds a lot of promise and hope for many diverse aspirants.

So, everything seemed quite *normal* in the writing of Atkinson's journey to the retreat center. The walking from the car in the parking lot to the center house and then going to one's room for the rest of the week. However, I stopped reading his story the moment I read the word "gravel." Did you? Why stop on the word "gravel" you may ask? You may even meditate on that word. But I'm guessing you didn't stop just like everyone else reading a text like this, which is all about getting to the *normal* retreat center and to one's assigned room, and finally arriving on the meditation pillow, surrounded in silence and safety, and falling into the ritual of meditation itself, including listening to a dharma talk by the spiritual teacher who is facilitating. What stopped me this time in the reading flow, and the textual narrative and movement, was to listen deeply to possibility – starting with the word "gravel."

Understandably, to readers here, that may seem odd. Yet, I think gravel can be *very spiritual*. I think the gravel, small stones, that are fractured can be great teachers of human violence. Oh, really?, you may ask. How so? Because they exist – they teach as ancient ancestral materials and holders of memories; and, they offer gifts as relational mirrors for human's activities; they tell us of how we blow up mountains of Mother Earth, fracture them cheaply and sell them to decorate or keep the weeds down in our open spaces, and/or we drive over them in our automobiles thoughtlessly without gratitude for their role in our driveways and parking lots. Not much sacred there in our *normal* human use.

Stones (gravel) are part of the attentional mentioning by the author of the Foreword quote above, but then they are neglected by the same author (and readers) as intentional materials of something more. And only then, in omission are they reduced in the text to something to walk upon without much notice other than to name them and move on. The author's description of the journey is then a privileged and neat spiritual path somewhere else, as a motivation to achieve something greater, an end or aim, and more blocks built for the constructed and so-called 'real spiritual' place to be.

What about the gravel as a spiritual place to be, if not to stay with, if not to stand on, for the entire retreat – instead of a cushion(?). Oh, would that not transgress indoor protocols for this so-called (high class) spiritual retreat? Would that be thought to be crazy or 'off' or ... (?) Okay, maybe the author and other retreatants did go outside in Nature to meditate at times, but I'm guessing they didn't sit-meditate on the stones in the driveway.

It turns out that for the past month I have been working as an artist in concentrated-intimacy with gravel (stones). I found them. They found me, in a filled space of about a quarter of a meter around the base of the old house we just moved into. It was the first space of attraction for me to create some art, to meditate and to make familiar. It is not that the gravel was unfamiliar or exciting but my intention was to make it familiar at a deeper level, to inquire into the unknown and unlearning, all through actions taken. And, a lot of patience. So, I cleaned out by hand one by one each grass blade, spruce needle, spider web, seed and other 'debris' from this stone bed that's long been neglected. It was prior a dumping site of stones, raked out by the owners of the house and property and left to function as it will. However, I was seeking a relationship. And it would be an unusual one, a demanding one. Yet, I was a ready student.

On my arrival, it felt like a sacred place to put my caring attention when I knew not anyone in the neighborhood we'd just moved into. It gave me a home with these "stone peoples." It was a unique and strange identity-making location of aesthetic and meaningful existence – in the moment and moments to follow in the labor over cleaning and ordering and creating beauty with this material. I love the quote by artist and early childhood *atelierista*, Dr. Sylvia Kind:

Materials are not immutable, passive, or lifeless until the moment [we humans] *do* something to them; [rather] they *participate* in our early childhood They live, speak, gesture, and call to us. [3]

A month later, I had created a unique space of some four meters of 'Zen Garden' as I called it, for lack of a better name. It is a place I touched each stone and placed it, arranging an aesthetic formation out of what prior was a random gathering of stones. I transformed the *normal* and it felt very satisfying, albeit, at times painful to persist with. I even got bored now and then.

So, what about at the retreat in the story told, is it really a retreat that opens the mind to many places to find the spiritual? Does it really disrupt the *normal*? Or are we all still hypnotized at some level, on automatic, even at the Zen retreat centers going down the road, stepping out of the car and walking on gravel to get to the destination to find spiritual(ity) at some other site – some 'over there place' which is culturally conditioned and pre-designed for becoming (so-called) "spiritual" – a place over there – like a prayer and meditation hall.

I'm not sure all of the reasons I felt it worthy to (re-)tell this story. It seems however, in part, related to the dialogue; that is, related to meditative inquiry practice that Ashwani Kumar had offered me to participate in. It seems Kumar wanted me to study his work, walk with him, and attend to whatever seemed worthy (un-normal) AND to *notice* the unfolding process of human-to-human communication – and, thus ask about him and his work, and comment upon it – all in the form of a rather spontaneous (yet disciplined) exchange. I attempted to listen and see and sense not only the words and spiritual insights in Ashwani's writings, especially his reflections on J. Krishnamurti's teachings, but I wanted also to be with the simple, basic and in between the word spaces and potentials for creative, alive, and meaningful exchange. I checked myself while studying, while speaking with him, and at times it became important to listen without pursuit of a more spiritual or depth place in the conversation. It's easy for me to pursue such an

aim, especially if I feel bored. More recently, the stones have been teaching me of this tendency.

We recorded our talk-walk. Transcribed it. Edited it slightly. And all, an effort beyond normal, may there be more therein than just an aim to 'get to the retreat center,' more than an aim to 'get to the end,' and more than an aim to just publish this all and get some added piece to our CVs and some kind of recognition from some academic community. Or are we still, even at the end of this dialogue, looking for the spiritual – heading in that somewhere else direction(?). I trust we at least attempted to be with the base foundational gravel (gravity) of it all. The foundations of what is right there, under our feet – and, yes, down to earth in our speech – and, that is equally spiritual as anything else we might find in the Zen center or in the depths of a great meditation sit, or in the deep conversation with the text of Krishnamurti or some other spiritual teacher.

In this Introduction, if I would have stayed on a boxed-in, direct, linear, normal course, I would have been obliged to describe in more detail how Ashwani Kumar and I came to engage in the following dialogue we wanted to publish in the *International Journal of Fear Studies*. As well, I could tell a story of my discontent, perhaps a "profound discontent" in the nature of what Jiddu Krishnamurti refers to in seeking "out what is truth," for I wish not to engage in only complaint; but sure enough, I admit part of my sharing this part of this Introduction is to honor my own critical thinking on the "spirit(ua)l" and how it too often gets confined in habit and tradition to the point of reducing Spirit and enspiriting performances (as practices) into something ... well, let me call it, something of lesser quality than I see fit for the spiritual path. And, in both these aspects of my wish for this Introduction, indeed, Ashwani and I (like Krishnamurti) are very curious, often troubled, by the negative impacts of fear. So, in that tone of Introduction, may I cede, and say something brief on what I call the path of fearlessness. And, to that point, I wish to say that next time Ashwani is going to practice meditative inquiry and lead with the questions, and another article could be published in the future as Part 2.

When I first heard about Ashwani Kumar and his combining music, meditative inquiry, and arts-based research in educational settings with his graduate students and in service teachers at a Canadian public university, I must admit, I didn't really take it in. The encounter with his name and work was a brief swirl of conversation I had heard at times when my life partner (Barbara Bickel, an artist-researcher-teacher) was talking to him on a zoom chat or in some other context because she was editing a journal issue and Ashwani had a long piece in that issue. Indirectly, therefore, I heard of this educator who was not afraid to dwell in long pieces of writing which breached the barrier (often) between spirituality and education. But I never followed up to look further at what he was teaching and doing as a practice of inquiry.

Months later, we came in contact, of which all the details matter not, but he and I decided to co-participate in one of his series of meditative dialogues, in which two or more people engage in. Ashwani has carefully construed the format for these dialogues and we decided to enact two of them on different occasions: [4] I would read and study his work, and prepare questions to ask (although, with spontaneity always a possibility as well) and he would return at a later time

to do the same. This mutuality of respect and honoring, in my view, is a way to sit and meditate from the gravel—to see the simple, if not banal, in each other’s texts and teachings, and to slide them into something as important as a publication, and/or maybe as something so important they influence and change our lives for ever.

MICHAEL: Welcome Ashwani Kumar.

I am Michael Fisher in Calgary, Alberta, and we agreed to do this talk on exploring your notion of meditative thinking, meditative inquiry, and dialogical meditative inquiry [1]. So, we are going to do a dialogue that is quite open ended and we will aim to speak for at least an hour.

ASHWANI: That sounds perfect.

MICHAEL: You and I have never met in person or even online before today.

ASHWANI: That is correct, we had some email exchanges, but this is the first time we are speaking to each other. I have a good feeling about it, and I look forward to this conversation.

MICHAEL: For our readers’ sake: we are educators, but obviously we have wide interests in the inner dimension of reality and in the outer dimension of reality. This shared interest has brought us together to discuss education that is appropriate for the future and for the challenges of our times.

I would like you to open this dialogue with an invocation if you are okay with it.

ASHWANI: Thank you, Michael. I am very honored that you took the time to have this dialogue with me. I really loved your idea of having an invocation. As you know I write poetry, and I also compose music (primarily Indian classical music). I recently wrote and composed a piece. I am going to read it aloud, first in Hindi, and then I will translate it to English. I have not titled this poem, but for now we may call it “In Search of Truth.”

सत्य की खोज

काम, क्रोध, मोह त्याग दे बन्दे,
सत्य को धारण कर ।

द्वन्द, इर्षा त्याग दे बन्दे,
प्रभु का सुमिरन कर ।

सत्य अमर है,

सत्य अजर है,
सत्य ईश्वर की डगर है ।

सत्य को खोजो,
सत्य को मांगो,
सत्य ही उत्कर्ष है ।

In Search of Truth

Let your desires, attachments, and negativities be dissolved and disappear

Embody, embrace, and invite Truth.

Drop your conflicts and antagonisms, jealousies and envies

Instead, contemplate the Sacred, the True, and the Beautiful – The Ultimate.

Truth in eternal,

Truth is indestructible,

Truth is the door to Reality, Beyond, and the Transcendent.

Seek and search Truth,

Demand from the Existence that Truth be revealed to you,

Discovering Truth is discovering everything,

Coming upon Truth is the ultimate flowering of our Being.

This poem I have composed in an Indian classical raga called Shankara.

MUSIC PLAYING (click on speaker icon):



MICHAEL: I feel created. I feel welcomed into the pursuit of truth.

When you were young – go back as early as your memories can go – did you feel invited into knowing truth? Could you explore some of your early memories?

ASHWANI: There are two instances that I recall. Of the two instances that I am going to share, the first I had completely forgotten until now, and the second I have widely discussed. In fact, you may have come across the second instance in my writings. Nevertheless, in this first instance I was quite young, maybe grade five, six or seven. At that time, I had a habit where I would look into emptiness, just look into the vacant space. During those years my mother was a teacher in a private school named Bhagirathi Baal Shiksha Sadan. The principal's son from that school used to call me "Dhyan Chand," which means somebody who loves contemplation and meditation. That was quite early on, and I remember that he was the only person who ever gave me that name. Before you posed this question, I had not reflected on this occurrence. I knew that it had happened, but I cannot recall recounting it to anybody prior to this conversation. I believe this points to my interest or perhaps some kind of internal inclination towards understanding or towards exploring life contemplatively. That was one instance where I felt being noticed from somebody else of my interest in meditative observation even before I realized it.

Another memory I have was from my teenage years when I was in grade nine or ten, and I have discussed this account before [see Kumar & Downey, 2018; Kumar, in press]. I came across the poetry of medieval century mystic and poet, Kabir – I was completely touched by his thinking and expression. Kabir's poetry was an exception though. Generally speaking, I do not recall to have enjoyed poetry when I was in grade school. I remember thinking "gosh, these poems are terrible as you have to understand their meaning then you have to memorize what the author means to reproduce it on the exams." We hardly used to have much discussion in the class to understand the meaning and essence of what we were reading. I do not remember if many of my Hindi teachers were really excited by the poems either, but I somehow liked Kabir very much. I also liked Bollywood songs because they were really beautiful – particularly the era between the 1950s and 1980s, the songs were very beautifully written and composed.

Kabir's work is aligned with a critical mind, and I was unknowingly and unconsciously developing inclinations towards critiquing the orthodoxy, corruption, and the superstitions that I was seeing around me. Kabir's radical poetic thoughts helped me identify a lack of authenticity and contradiction around me. For example, people would use abusive language and abuse others physically or emotionally, but then they would go to a temple and pretend they had suddenly become "religious." Or, they would exploit poor people, but they would still think that by giving money to a Brahmin, or to a pundit, they had absolved themselves of any sin. I also found a lot of mechanical ritualism in the name of religion. But when I read Kabir, I experienced a breath of fresh air because Kabir was a radical critical pedagogue.

In medieval time, the Mughals ruled India. India was under Muslim rules for a long time, but the majority of the people practiced what we now call Hinduism. Kabir had the capacity to be critical of the orthodoxies of both Hinduism – the religion of the majority – as well as Islam – the religion of the people in power. I would say that it takes a lot of fortitude for a person to criticize these two major religions and their orthodoxies and still gain so much respect in India. I would say he is one of the most respected poets and spiritual teachers in India. Here are two poems that will give you an idea of his radical thoughts and courageous being. These poems were translated by another one of India's great poets called Rabindranath Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize for his collection of poems called *Gitanjali - Song Offerings* (2020).

I do not know what manner of God is mine.

The Mullah cries aloud to Him: and

why? Is your Lord deaf? The subtle anklets that ring on the
feet of an insect when it moves
are heard of Him.

Tell your beads, paint your forehead

with the mark of your God, and wear matted locks long and showy:
but a deadly weapon is in your heart, and how shall you have
God?

(Kabir in Tagore, 1915, p. 110-111)

O SERVANT, where dost thou seek Me?

Lo! I am beside thee.

I am neither in temple nor in mosque:

I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash:

Neither am I in rites and ceremonies,

nor in Yoga and renunciation.

If thou art a true seeker, thou shalt at

once see Me: thou shalt meet Me
in a moment of time.

Kabîr says, "O Sadhu [seekers]! God is the breath of all breath."

(Kabir in Tagor, 1915, p. 45)

MICHAEL: Taking space. Dissolve, drop, demand. Three Ds, not three Rs, that you mentioned in your invocation song. Can you comment on that? This is all related to being in space in your earliest memory to see if there is any connection there.

ASHWANI: Since I translated the poem on the spot, the three words that I unconsciously used were: dissolve, demand, and drop. I think these words are very connected though. Regarding “dissolve”, and “drop” – what I have understood through reading and also through experimenting with my own self-understanding, examining my own mind, and through exploring my own being – I have found that the problems human beings face are rooted within themselves. Whether problems arise out of anger, fear, which is a subject of your expertise, or a propensity to continue to want more, or anger, or envy, you cannot directly do anything with these feelings, because the more you try to suppress them or indulge in them, they become stronger. That is why dropping the idea of doing anything to them, or attempting to control them, or modify them, or shape them – which is the essence of Western psychology, predominantly – is not very helpful. You can modify your ego through control and suppression but that is not real transformation. So, words like drop or dissolve, to me, indicate a perception that you cannot or should not modify and control, and therefore strengthen the ego, but let it drop and dissolve. Whenever I have a crisis in my life, this is what saves me – when I drop it the crisis dissolves on its own. This inaction works because I am the creator of the crisis, and when I allow it to drop away, it dissolves. I think that is the significance of these two words for me, since they create the vacant space in you. Only in vacant space, or in open space can you directly encounter or have a direct experience. To me, this is the truth.

As for the word ‘demand,’ I am glad that I used it, even though I was apprehensive and conscious when I was using this word in my on-the-spot translation. In the moment, I was thinking “maybe I should not use it, maybe I should use some other word instead of demand.”

I have a friend in Vancouver, British Columbia. His name is Ashutosh Kalsi. He was one of the speakers at J. Krishnamurti and the Contemporary World Crises that you also attended. In one of our dialogues, I asked him a question, ‘how does one discover truth?’ He responded with something that completely shocked me and I thought, “that does not seem very spiritual or meditative.” He said, “you have to demand for it, demand from the Ultimate and demand from the life. If you want this, you have to make a demand.” But this demand is not the demand of a politician or the demand of an unhappy person. What you are asking for is a freedom from your own self, a state of being, or a state of mind, in which there can be complete peace, which is not possible if your ego is there, because your ego is the source of the conflict. So, he said, “demanding of the resolution or the dropping of the ego is not a selfish or self-centered demand. It is a demand of being free of yourself.” To me, all of these three terms – drop, dissolve, and demand – are connected to a waiting space. The ability to look freely, totally, and to receive the truth that life is ready to offer you.

MICHAEL: It seems there is a search taking place in your work, you have used this philosophy of *in search for truth*. I wonder if you could connect that with *in search for fearlessness*? I know Osho used that as one of his main teachings – it is the title of one of his books. Could you connect those for us?

ASHWANI: I think fear is basically rooted in untruth or in falseness. We have been subjected to a lot conditioning, propaganda, and indoctrination, which create fears from outside. I am not saying that there are not existential fears, but I will come to that in a moment. A lot of fears have been created in us from outside agencies. These fears create a lot of ignorance and take us away more and more from the truth. For example, people will go to the temple to do the *puja* and worship, thinking they are doing something spiritual, but when they come out of the temple, they are the same – they have not changed inwardly. They can be mean to poor people who work for them as servants and they can exploit other people to gain benefits. I noticed a lot of things growing up in India as well as in my observation of what is happening in other parts of the world, about how false ideas are inserted in peoples' minds. That is how fear emerges. For example, in India, many people will mechanically either touch their ear, or bow down when they see a temple. What they are doing is a mechanical action. If you ask them why they are doing it – especially since there are temples on every street in India – they will tell you it is because they have been made afraid that unless they do it, unless they follow a particular practice, they are going to be cursed by the Gods. So, in most religions you see fear has been used as a way to threaten and control people, under the pretense that if you do not do this, you are going to go to hell; if you do this, you are going to go to heaven.

Similarly, parents tell their children falsehoods if they want something from them. For example, in India parents will say things like, “the ghost will come and take you” if you do not drink your milk or if you do not go to bed. So, I think a lot of the fears are put in us by the people in power; the people in authority can get us to do what they deem right, whether that be religious authority, whether that be a political authority, or in many cases even educational authority – a teacher. Occasionally children are told, “you will fail in your exam if you do not do what you are told.” Parents will say that if you do not ‘do good’ in life, nothing will become of you. These types of fears are put into our mind from various sources and figures of authority. I think they are anti-truth because they are not rooted in truth. On the contrary, these fears stem from forcing us to comply to certain ideals and ideologies that a person, group, or authority cherishes and considers valuable. These kinds of fears, definitely take us away from truth as they are antagonistic to truth, and they block the search for truth. If one wants to really search for truth in life, these fears which have been created from outside, must drop away.

On the other hand, I think there are also a lot of existential fears. The central most fear, in my opinion, is the fear of death. “What is going to happen to me? Am I going to continue with my life tomorrow? What happens when somebody dies?” That existential truth, or that existential fear of being no more, I think, is very fundamental to human beings. It is within all of us, all of us experience that, and I would say a lot of the things that we may do in life comes from our attention to the fact that we will die, or that everybody dies at one point. This probably compels us to collect a lot of things, to create a name, or to exert power because deep down we know that existentially – what we know as ourselves, the mind and the body – it is bound to die. I think in education and in society, we need to encourage study of both the existential fears that exist independent of any external figure of authority and the fears that have been put in us by the figures of authority. I think that the study of these fears should be a central focus of the educational experience.

MICHAEL: I would like you to imagine for a moment: you are going through your PhD application, and you are going to talk to a potential supervisor at UBC. Let us just go back even before you started. You are on your way, and you are going to ask one of the supervisors of curriculum studies at UBC, at this high level, “I am thinking of doing a dissertation and I want to do it on fear education?” What do you think would be some responses to such a question?

ASHWANI: I would say it depends on the person. Someone who has no idea of, or who has not paid attention to fear – that exists in our lives at all levels – will respond differently than someone who has considered it seriously. You know better than anybody, that fear controls every aspect of our life. If a person has not met this within himself or herself or themselves, I do not think they will be able to even understand what I am talking about or what is its significance for the educational experience. On the other hand, there are people like Bill Pinar, who was my supervisor at UBC, for instance. If I were to ask this to him, he would openheartedly accept this topic. Because of his studies of psychoanalysis, existentialism, and phenomenology, he knows that the existential angst, existential crisis, and the fears, agony, and boredom, are central part of us as human beings, and therefore their study should form a significant part of the educational experience. So, I would say it depends on person to person, but most people that I have been lucky to have met understood where I was coming from. But for many other people, it would be shocking.

MICHAEL: If you were in presence of curriculum philosopher, James Macdonald, during the 1950s or 1960s, and you suggested that you would like to do something on fear education and bring that into curriculum theory for the future, what do you think he would respond?

ASHWANI: My response will be based on what I have heard of him from Bill Pinar and from my own studies of his work. I think he was a very big personality; Pinar (2009) calls him “a great curriculum theorist.” I would like to think that he would have supported me tremendously since I would be bringing such a significant topic to the field of curriculum theory. From what I have studied of his work, he is very concerned with anxiety and personal responsiveness, personal questions, and open-mindedness. I think he would have welcomed this idea because I have heard how he has supported other new scholars and helped them expand the boundaries of curriculum theory. So, for these reasons I feel that James Macdonald would have liked and supported research on the role fear play in education.

MICHAEL: Imagining another hypothetical situation; if you were to come to a parent council for a regular public-school council and you were to share your vision by stating, “I am thinking we need a better, fairer education for our children, and I have this vision of meditative inquiry that I would like to explore with you. It starts with children being unafraid to question adult, parental, church or authority of any kind.” Have you ever had that kind of conversation with a parent or group that would be interesting to explore? What could you imagine might happen and how would you maybe respond to some of the resistances if that was the case?

ASHWANI: I think that is a very important question. Most of my primary interaction are with pre-service teachers and in-service teachers, and it is important to note that many of the in-service teachers are parents as well. So, in most of my classes, teachers have told me that “this is a class in curriculum theory and holistic education, but it also feels like it is a very deep

counseling.” Also, they tell me that “this is a class that is a ‘must’ for parents, because whatever we discuss tends to be so holistic and expansive in its purview, and that it is not just sharing with us techniques to teach in the classroom or work through the curriculum that has been imposed on us”. The students add, “you are not expecting that we be tied to the curriculum documents. What you are expecting us or what you are encouraging us to do is to study ourselves in relationship to others and the world”.

In the beginning, I would say there was some resistance, although I have been very lucky and pleasantly surprised with how positively most of the students have supported and enjoyed learning about and engaging with the teaching as meditative inquiry approach. I would say most of the students have loved and embraced these ideas, because for them, it is like a breath of fresh air. Somebody is not making them afraid of the provincial curricula, somebody is not making them afraid of the authority or the people who develop the programs and techniques for implementing the curricula uncritically. Here they have someone who is giving them this space in which they can be free of fear, free of authoritarian structure, and a free space in which their creativity can flourish. Many of them see that this kind of pedagogical space allows them to study their fears, go deeper into them, and at the same time challenge the sources which have created those fears in them, or which keep on reinforcing those fears in them.

I use one exercise often in my class in which what I do is ask them to create a two-column table, on any notebook. On the left-hand side I ask them, “first, list all the fears that you have, no matter what kind or whether it is a small fear you are used to or something you are deeply afraid of. Even if you have a fear of spiders, or a mouse or anything, or the fear of death, just list all of them without correcting or fixing them or thinking ‘this is not right, I should not have this fear.’ Do not judge it, or if the judgment comes, notice it but place all of your fears on the paper.” Sometimes I ask them to do it at home, sometimes I ask them to do it in the class. I then say, “in the right-hand column, locate the sources of your fears. Where do these fears come from? Is this a rational fear or an irrational fear without judging an irrational fear to be bad? – just notice your fears and their sources. Do you know the source of your fears, do you know the causes of these fears? Do you know when a particular fear began in your life?” Creating an awareness of the fear in all its dimensions is very important part of my pedagogy, so most of the students have found it quite illuminating.

If I were to meet a random parent, or a random educator who has not taken the time to delve into these questions, I think they will be shocked, probably because the education system is built on fear – fear of the exam, fear of the performance, fear of the comparison, fear of the teacher, fear of the principal, fear of the supervisor of the board, fear of the Ministry of Education. The whole system is based on fear, and we are responding to fear through fear. Even the laws, for example, the traffic laws or laws against racism and all that are based on fear. If you do not do this, you will be punished.

In Western society – I am sure that is true for Eastern society as well, the contemporary society everywhere around the world is Westernized in many ways – it has been accepted that the only way to learn something, or to be appreciated for something, is to get external rewards. The opposite of that is punishment – subtle or explicit – which one gets if one does not follow the expected social norms. Somehow, implicitly, we have accepted that fear is the principle through

which we relate with each other, and through which we govern the society, because if you do not do something that is laid out, you will be punished. Rather than understanding why a certain thing has been laid out and why I should follow it, many of us follow social norms out of fear. I think the system of the society is quite centered on fear. In the beginning, I would say anybody will find these questions and topics related to fear problematic. In my classes, I slowly and gently introduce students to the notion of fear via reflective activities and discussions. But if it were to be just a direct encounter with somebody, it may fall out completely.

MICHAEL: Do you notice any general trends or differences between genders regarding their acceptance, capability, and willingness to explore this inner dimension?

ASHWANI: I do not see a difference based on my experience. I think more than the gender, it probably depends on the consciousness or the being of the person. A lot of women, and a lot of men and transgender people have taken the meditative inquiry approach very seriously. So, I cannot say for sure if the gender has had an impact on it.

MICHAEL: What are you learning from teaching about fear?

ASHWANI: When I ask students to complete any of the exercises, I do the same exercises myself. Therefore, when they are writing their fears, I am also writing my fears. Generally, I do not ask students to share with each other what they are writing in their notebooks like the fear activity I discussed above. If they want to share, it is up to them, but I say that the “inner work” that we do does not necessarily have to be shared in class. However, we can share our experience with the activity, how we felt about it, but we do not have to share the substance.

As I also complete the same activities as my students, I am more engaged. In fact, I think this is important. The reason I am interested in meditative inquiry is not because it is a catchy approach, or it is something that somebody else has done and maybe I should adopt it. It is something that has emerged from within me. I have learned a lot of things from individuals like Kabir, Krishnamurti, and Gurdjieff. I have learned a lot of things from other people too, but meditative inquiry is something that is rooted in my life. Thus, whatever I want my students to understand and learn – whether it is fear, whether it is conditioning, whether it is how the capitalistic and neoliberal world controls us and reduces us to commodities – is something that I am also interested in learning about. Everything that I expect them to do, or whatever they do in class, I am doing it with them – it is a collective inquiry. Meditative inquiry is personal as well as communal. It is reflective and dialogical.

Through these reflective activities and dialogical engagement with students, I have been learning a lot about myself – the superficial fears as well as the deeper existential fears. And I would say the deeper I have studied fears – for example, how people controlled my ability to bring my music out and the associated desire for others’ approvals, which is fear of others’ disapproval – the more fear left its clutches in my deeper self. And the more the fear gave way, the more the music flooded my being. So, I would say I have learned a lot by studying with my students and by studying my own fears and other aspects that are part and parcel of our consciousness – fear is connected to jealousy and comparison and conditioning and anxiety, anger, there is this whole

movement that goes on within ourselves. Everything inside of us is connected to everything else. When you study one thing, you begin to learn about other things, too.

MICHAEL: Conditioning is a term that is very important in your work. Obviously, fear as you just said, is connected to other aspects of ourselves. The other thing I think I would like to hear more about is conflict, because I hear you use that a lot in your work. And can you connect conditioning with fear and conflict, explore that a bit?

ASHWANI: Conditioning begins as soon as one is born. In other words, we are always born into cultural systems, which are inevitable. People have learned how to cook food, how to dress, for instance, in accordance with their culture, and our cultures have become complicated over time. Then people have created rituals and ceremonies, ideas of good and evil, right and wrong. All of this, to me, is the field of conditioning and every child are born in this field of conditioning. But all the conditioning influences may not necessarily gel with one's own natural inclinations or spontaneous ways of being. For example, imagine if a person with musical talent and inclination were born in a family which thinks that music is not good, that music is something for 'cheap' or uncultured people. There are so many stories like that in India where someone is drawn to music, they really love it, but their family thinks it is really bad. There was a time when Bollywood was emerging, people used to think that anybody who goes into the film industry is characterless, they do not come from a reputed family. Imagine being a person who naturally loves acting, singing, and dancing, being born into that culture. So, when a child, or even an adult, is drawn to something, and they have a conditioning environment around them that makes them feel that this is not right, I think that is one of the sources of conflicts that we have within ourselves – conflict between the social/familial expectation and our own passions and inclinations.

From the very beginning, we are taught right and wrong and good and evil, or what you should do and what you should not do. And that does not always necessarily connect with how you think, or what you think. More than what one would expect, it actually leads to clashes. Often this is where teenage folks have clashes with their parents. They have clashes with their teachers, because authority figures have one idea of how one should be, and the teenagers are discovering themselves and their own unique ways. So, I think one factor of conflict is expectations established in society and family clashing with the emergence of individuality. If you are afraid, then you hide things you want to do. You have to hide it from your parents to avoid conflict – it is rooted in fear. For instance, you want to do something, but you can do it because the priest, or the pundit, or some other authority figure thinks that this is not the right thing to do, so you should not do it. I think that this is one example of how they are connected: that there is the conflict between individuality and the social norms, and fear as something that connects the two. Fear is the thing that connects the conflict that is happening between these two domains.

MICHAEL: It exacerbates, it acts like a glue.

The word transformation is important in your work, yes? So, where did you first encounter that word or concept. Can you remember?

ASHWANI: I would say I first encountered the idea of transformation in Osho's work. I think I can use a little bit of time to talk about Osho, since he is a very controversial figure. When I

came across Osho, I was a teenager. I had read Kabir a little bit and developed a critical mindset. I was critical of everything. All the superstitions and all the rituals etc. And then, through a friend, I came upon this book called *Dhyan Sutra (Principles of Meditation)*, 1989 by Osho. It is as if I was waiting for it. As soon as I got it, I started experimenting with it. So, the basic essence of that book was that you have to study your mind, your body, and your emotions through awareness. You have to transform them, or the simpler way of putting it would be that when you pay attention to them, they begin to transform on their own, especially the emotions and the thoughts. So, transformation I would say is the central part of Osho's philosophy.

There are also a number of books Osho wrote, and I would say the central theme of those books is to transform your mind and emotions through paying attention to them. That connects to the central aspect of the three people who I have read very carefully – Osho, Krishnamurti, and Gurdjieff. There is an antagonism and contradiction that exists among their followers, but I have studied them quite impartially, and I am not part of any of their groups as I love them all. I am only interested in understanding truth, not supporting an organization. There is one element that is central to all three of them: self-observation is the path of transformation. So, if you study fear, if you observe fear existentially, deeply, then that very observation will give you deeper insights into the fear and will transform the fear. Your observation will dispel the fear. This is a common element to each of the three individuals, and they have been very influential in my life. I would say Osho was the first person who explicitly brought this notion of transformation to my mind, and then it has been continuously reinforced by the authors that I have encountered and the people I have met. This idea of transformation has become, as you very rightly note, the central part of my educational approach. The core of meditative inquiry is the idea of transformation, but this transformation is not according to a pre-established idea of transformation. Transformation is deeply connected to awareness. Basically, the deeper your awareness is of yourself and your relationship to the world, the deeper is the transformation of your being and your relationships.

MICHAEL: I would like you to comment a little bit on the problem of consciousness; it has been so controversial in philosophy, especially in the postmodern era, even post-Hegelian era. Needless to say, my understanding of consciousness is primarily rooted in the Western philosophy. If you were in an interview for a faculty position, and you actually were to use the word *consciousness* as much as it is in your philosophy and writing, I think almost any people listening would say: that is *passee*, that is done. Unless you are a neuroscience cognitive psychologist or researcher, you are not expected to even talk about consciousness. What is your response to this development in Western philosophy regarding the notion of consciousness?

ASHWANI: Let me ask you one question because I may not be as versed in Western philosophy as you are. What is the concern that people have with regard to consciousness? They think that only the people with scientific tools have the right to talk anything about it, or something else?

MICHAEL: Yeah, sure, materialist-base philosophers like empiricists, positivists, and behaviourists – unlike George Hegel some other folks in the idealist schools who kept consciousness alive – have crushed the idea of consciousness.

ASHWANI: So, at one point there was an emphasis on the inner world, and then that happened in Education too. The inner world became unimportant. Behaviorism and the positivism took over, and they began to value only what can be measured in quantitative terms. This focus on measurable activities and the measurable outcomes has become very prominent now. The standardized testing is rooted in the belief that unless you can test something and measure it, it is of no use.

I would say there is a lot of dominance of those tendencies, but because of the work of people like Bill Pinar, Barbara Bickel, Rita Irwin, Celeste Snowber, James Macdonald, Dwayne Huebner, and Maxine Greene, among others, the significance of our subjective, embodied, aesthetic, and contemplative perspectives have become important in educational scholarship. So, there have been a lot of educators who have talked about the significance of our inner world in thinking about teaching and learning. We have begun to value the need to study our feelings and emotions including our fears. Not in order to study them so that you can self-regulate better and so that you can perform better on standardized tests, but because there has been a recognition that it is actually the person and being inside who is actually learning. It is not just the mechanism of the brain that is learning. There is a subjectivity inside of us. Subjective being that gets drawn to something, that takes deep interest in something. Our ears, eyes, and the cognitive functions of the brain help that subjective being to learn and enjoy the learning.

When some people hear the word consciousness, their conditioning comes forward, and they feel that consciousness is something that educators should not be concerned with – rather, we should be concerned with techniques. We should focus on effective techniques and approaches to help the teacher teach curriculum efficiently so that students may perform well on the standardized tests. So, for those people concerned with outcomes, efficiency, and testing, the whole field of consciousness and the idea of meditative inquiry are useless. They have no significance, but for the in-service teachers and the pre-service teachers, this work has shown tremendous promise.

The way I introduce pre-service and in-service teachers to the notion of consciousness is not as if I am introducing a philosophical concept. I say “close your eyes, see what is going on, what do you observe?” When they close their eyes, they see that there is constant flow of thoughts and emotions one after another – I am continuously making lists in my mind; I had a fight with somebody, and it is continuously repeating in my mind; or my parents said something to me I did not like it so I am fighting with that in my mind; I saw somebody had a better car than me or got better grade and that caused a little bit of discomfort and jealousy in me. So, all that goes on inside of us. Whatever we are experiencing happening inside of us in the form of thoughts and feelings is consciousness. It is not a philosophical concept – it is a very existential phenomenon that is constantly happening in our very beings, all the time. Because I introduce it in this way, most teachers seem to have had no problem with it. In fact, they appreciate it, and you know, a lot of people say when you are meditating, that you have to control your thoughts that you have to regulate your thoughts, or you have to like focus on breathing and bring your thoughts back to present. I tell them a completely opposite thing. I say do not worry about what is happening inside you, just keep watching it. If you are having a violent thought, let it be. Just keep watching, if you are having a happy emotion watch it, if you are having a sad emotion watch it, but do not try to control it in any way. So, study your consciousness, that is, whatever is happening inside you. Without a desire to control and modify and change it according to your

liking, which is basically the conditioning that you have received from the society – real meditation is to observe your thoughts and feelings as they are. Observing the movement of consciousness, as it is happening in the day-to-day life, is central to meditative inquiry.

MICHAEL: I appreciate your perspective on the notion of consciousness, and how you engage your students in exploring their own consciousness. To move on, your book *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* is part curriculum studies worldwide series that Bill Pinar edits with Janet Miller. I noticed that you have a sociologist, Meenakshi Thapan, write the Foreword. And I kept thinking, you know, that just sort of felt like a little disconnect for me initially. Could you say why did you invite Meenakshi to write a Foreword to your book?

ASHWANI: After I finished my PhD on Krishnamurti, I went back to India for one winter and I met my teacher Shyam Menon. Professor Menon, who was my supervisor for my master's thesis, thought that as I was very interested in Krishnamurti, I should meet Meenakshi Thapan. So, he phoned Meenakshi and she met me. I gave her my doctoral thesis, which she really loved, she also invited me to work as a visiting fellow for a term at the D.S. Kothari Center for Science Ethics and Education. Meenakshi is now retired. She was a professor of sociology at Delhi School of Economics Delhi University. Meenakshi met Krishnamurti in person in her youth, and then she also taught in a Krishnamurti school for a year. Since then, she has kept her connection with Krishnamurti organizations. She is currently the trustee of Krishnamurti foundation of India and is also a director of one of their schools called Rishi Valley School. Meenakshi has also authored a book called *Life at School* (2006), which is an ethnographic study of one of the Krishnamurti schools in India. So, the reason why I asked Meenakshi to write the Foreword was because I could not think of any other individual who was so deeply interested in J. Krishnamurti, has worked on his ideas and school, and also is interested in education. So, I did not have any hesitation in inviting her to write the Foreword to my book – I thought that would be a really good connection. The connection was not to just any sociologist but to a sociologist who was deeply interested in Krishnamurti – Krishnamurti was the common connection.

MICHAEL: And I sense both listening to her and reading her Foreword, she is quite compatible as a thinker with you in terms of psychological revolution and political revolution within the educational sphere. So, as a sociologist, she so much appreciates the social sphere and then has this great understanding of our interior world because of the influence of Krishnamurti and perhaps social phenomenological perspective.

ASHWANI: I think she brings that angle to it because she is a very well-trained sociologist. So, she understands the social dynamics and she brings Krishnamurti's perceptions or insights into understanding sociological phenomenon, as I do in understanding educational phenomenon.

MICHAEL: Yes, I think so. I am kind of moving near the end here. I am interested to have you just spin off a term that you use in your book, "conditioning implies an incessant repetition of values, beliefs, attitudes and so on." So, an incessant repetition, it sort of sounds like a negative connotation in that phrase. Have you got a positive connotation that you could spin on incessant repetition?

ASHWANI: There are so many aspects to the problem of conditioning that I would like to cover in my response. In that particular context in my book, conditioning is definitely being considered as a negative force. The more something is repeated the more it gets normalized. It is seen as truth or representative of truth. Even though there may be no truth in it, it has been repeated so many times it becomes truth. This is also one of the key insights of postmodern philosophy which considers discourse to be all encompassing. It also brings to mind people like Hitler or Stalin. They all relied upon this possibility of repeating something so many times that people begin to believe in propaganda. And after a few generations nobody, except maybe some people, raises a question. The propaganda becomes truth. I think in the context of ideas and beliefs incessant repetition and expectations of the individuals to follow them uncritically is problematic. Having said that, repetition can also be amazingly valuable. For example, this song I recently composed, and which is now part of this paper, is a bit raw still – I did not have enough time to polish it. I tried the best I could given the time I had because you mentioned to me the possibility of an invocation yesterday. But, if I was performing in front of somebody else, or in front of a group, and if I had advanced notice, then my wife and I – because she plays violin with me – would have practiced it again and again and again, quite a few times, to the point that the brain is completely saying “I do not want to sing the song any longer”.

We could have repeated it many times because our brain is also a mechanical kind of instrument and it gains proficiency in something when it is repeated sufficiently. The brain is also extremely creative. And it can channel creativity, but it also has this left side, which is mechanical, which is calculative, which is repetitive. So, the more you repeat something like a song, the more it becomes part of your blood and marrow. Having said that, even in those activities where repeating something can be beneficial, repetition should be a conscious and voluntary action. So, what happens in schools in the name of learning is at times problematic. Often, we want kids to learn the tables right and we ask them to repeat and repeat – children get bored to death. So, when you repeat something in which you are not interested, you are destroying the brain, because there is a constant conflict between your being, who does not want to learn something, and the force of authority that wants you to repeat that thing. So you repeat something, but there is a constant resistance from within you. That, to me, destroys the capacity to learn, the desire to learn, the passion to learn, and the intensity that comes with learning. On the other hand, if you really love something, then in that particular context, you voluntarily and consciously want to repeat something, repetition can be very valuable, and it is inevitable, like, in music. I can definitely say it is inevitable in music – but you can repeat mechanically, and you can repeat devotedly, you can repeat with your whole being present all the time. If you repeat because you are enjoying the repetition, then that repetition can be quite useful and beautiful.

MICHAEL: One more topic before we go. There are a number of contemporary educators today writing about the importance of fear in education, and the importance of fear even in compassion. I have been following their work with question marks as to the motivations behind that work. I would like you to communicate, since in your book you say that Krishnamurti says, “we do not really need fear, it could actually be completely dissolved, and we do not need it to motivate anything.” But there is a strong discourse that fear makes us good, and it is actually scary to have people who are fearless. So, I am giving you a Western discourse that I am seeing more and more. One of the versions that recently showed up by very sophisticated postmodern curriculum theorists was that we need to have ‘fear for the other’s suffering,’ in order to be

ethical beings. So now in context of Krishnamurti's work and your work on fear, how would you respond to something like that?

ASHWANI: I can understand where they are coming from, but probably the word that they are using does not sit well with me. Krishnamurti says, authority figures create a lot of guilt. If you do not love me, then I will not love you back or something like that. You can create guilt in people. There is a guilt that can have a value. For example, if I cheat somebody or if I hurt somebody, and that feeling, that noise inside the heart, is a good feeling because that shows that you are sensitive. You try to misuse them or try to use them for your own good and if that hurts you a little bit or if you are angry at somebody and being angry at somebody is really causing a little bit of discomfort and unhappiness in you – that is a good thing. That shows you are sensitive and alive. So, I think in the context that they are using the word fear is that if you have fear, then you probably will not cause suffering to others.

To me, the use of the word “fear” is wrong here, it should be “sensitivity.” I think what is happening is they are thinking that if a person is fearless, they are insensitive. They can go into a grocery shop and kill 10 people – they are calling that fearlessness. That is not fearlessness at all. That is harshness. That is insensitivity. Something really has gone wrong inside the psychological structure of that person, that they are not sensitive to others' suffering. For most of us, when we have a fight with our parent, or with our partner, or with our colleague, if we have a fight or a struggle, we feel a lot of discomfort inside. “God, why did that happen, like who lost control? Why did that have to happen?” It brings about a lot of discomfort and anxiety in ourselves, and unless that relationship is made whole, that discomfort does not go away, that anxiety does not go.

That sense that one feels within oneself is *sensitivity*. It is not fear. So, suppose I have a fight with my wife, and because of which, I am feeling uncomfortable. But if I go and make connection with her out of the fear that if I do not, we will break apart, or we will not have a relationship any longer, that is self-centeredness, that is selfishness, rooted in my own fear. But if I see that the fight or the conflict has caused discomfort within myself, so of course it has caused discomfort in the other person as well. We need to talk, we need to communicate and figure it out, but not out of fear of the other person rejecting you, but out of the sensitivity that we both are hurting, and we need to talk it out. We can apply this understanding to any relationship between individuals and groups – we both are hurting, and we need to get together, not to gain from each other, but we need to get together because that is human sensitivity, we need to reconnect and let the harmony and connection flow between us, again. To me, I would be very concerned when they use the words ‘fear for other's suffering’ (e.g., Yan & Slattery, 2021), I would say “sensitivity to others suffering.”

Actually, I would also like to question the idea of ‘the other.’ When you say fear for others' suffering, you are creating a division between you and the other person. If a person is dying of hunger in an impoverished region or country, I should not donate because of fear for others' suffering. I should donate because it is me – another human being – in that region who is suffering. So, it is us as a whole, it is not you and me. I should be afraid because it is somebody else's suffering. I should be afraid of suffering, period, whether it is you suffering or me. This understanding, however, should not be rooted in fear but in sensitivity.

That is the work of people like Krishnamurti. One of Krishnamurti's book's title is, *The Awakening of Intelligence* (2000). And he is talking about intelligence. How can an intelligent person, who also compassionate and sensitive, hurt others? Krishnamurti says that, unless this intelligence or compassion is awakened, the sensitivity cannot be awakened. Sensitivity towards me within me and towards everything that I interact with, whether it is birds or animals or human beings, is the basis of true compassion. So, I think that sensitivity is the crux. So, we should not make people afraid of killing other people, we should help them understand how someone becomes so insensitive, that they can kill so many people and have no remorse or nothing happens inside of them. When even a butterfly or a little animal is killed by any normal human being's hands, they can feel a lot of discomfort. "Oh god, how did that happen, why did it happen?" I think part of the fear education, which has been your life-long project, is to cultivate the sensitivity and the compassionate intelligence.

MICHAEL: And I think what your meditative inquiry adds probably even to those is to attune to what you are actually experiencing as close as you can phenomenologically. Below the conditioning umbrella or lens. And so, we need to do that and that is what holistic experiential education has always been, but I think we are adding layers. That is what I see in your work as you are adding layers a lot more around conflict and fear. I have to say I do not think I have seen an educator like you who put so much attention on fear and conflict in holistic experiential education – Krishnamurti's work and your work are a tremendous contribution to understanding fear in education.

ASHWANI: That is exactly I was going to say. It is what I have studied, but not studied just intellectually. It is what I have studied with my whole being. When I read Krishnamurti, I just did not read a book. I have read Krishnamurti with my whole being to understand what this person is saying. So, when you study something like that, that understanding becomes part of your understanding, and then it begins to flow from you. It can also happen through conditioning. You study a particular text, and because of fear of authority or whatever, you get conditioned, and you start talking about it, but it can also happen the other way around where you are so inspired and deeply touched that it flows from you. But I think that is why the constant questioning and critical attitude should always be central to any learning, so that one knows that one is not doing something out of just being conditioned but because one has fully engaged with it.

MICHAEL: What would you like to improve on, as the last question, in your own writing? There is something, always a translation from what you know inside and what you would like to say and then as you must write and use the language even, as you know yourself, being an Easterner more, even though you have a Western education to a large degree. Is there something you would like to improve in your writing, or you have a sense of something that is yet to be matured in your writing?

ASHWANI: You know, when I came to UBC I realized that within the Western culture, there is a lot of emphasis on writing. We used to do assignments in India too, but mostly it was exam-focused. In assignments, for example, they would ask you to write about Freire. We would take materials from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973), put it together nicely and give it to

the teacher, and that was acceptable. In Western culture generally, it is expected that you critique what you are studying. I had no problem in critiquing things and sharing my own thoughts and comments. But what I hated was the writing itself, and then I did not know how to type when I began my doctoral studies. When I came to Canada, I used to hate computers. Then I started learning typing, but I hated the idea of writing. I met a lot of teachers in India who were real thinkers but who did not necessarily write a lot – now the system is changing in India, too, as they have expectation that you have to have this many conference presentations and this many publications in order to get promoted. But when I left India, these expectations were not there. Teachers were really professorial. A lot of them who I met were inspired by Socrates' dialogical method, "okay let us sit and talk." You go to the library, you read, and you talk; so the focus was not always "okay, now I have to write a paper, and I have to get it published, because unless I do that, I have no value in the academy."

When I came to Canada, I saw an overemphasis on publications, and I did not like that. I actually quite abhorred having to write so much, because everybody is writing and writing out of the pressure to perform. I do not think you can write a lot of great insights if you are writing like a machine. You must study deeply, and let something touch you and inspire you, and then you write something original. Most of us then will not write for the sake of writing. Maybe for some people writing a lot comes more naturally, but for most people it may not be that they are writing every day, six hours and continuously producing work. To me that is a decline of scholarship, that is a decline of real intellectual pursuit. So, I abhorred that I had to write, but very quickly I learned two things: whatever I wrote was really appreciated by most of my teachers, and they asked me to publish it. And the second aspect is that I realized that if I do not publish, I am not going to get a job here. Interestingly, the circumstances in India were changing also. It was at this point when I started writing, but luckily most of the stuff that I wrote really carries a deeper meaning for me. My book, *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry*, which is based on my doctoral dissertation and that you kindly have read, just came out of me effortlessly. I added references, footnotes, and quotations later, but the actual writing of it was just a pouring of the heart. I knew what I wanted to write, and writing came naturally. When I finished my dissertation, I became completely devoid of any desire to write.

I did not write new stuff for a while after writing my doctoral dissertation. When I met Adrian Downey, who had a bunch of dialogues with me, I had regained the desire to share new insights that I had gathered through my meditative, pedagogical, and musical engagement. At that time, I told Adrian that "I really hate the idea of writing, I do not want to write anything. I want to have a dialogue. Would you like to have a dialogue, because you seem very interested in my ideas?" I really love dialogues and that is why I requested to you, Michael, if we could have a dialogue, instead of writing a piece for your journal.

The style of writing that I have loved most so far, is something that just flows from my heart. I have written a paper called "The Way of Gratitude" for a book recently (Kumar, in press). That is something that just flew out of my heart, and it did not take me a long time to write it. The book's editors just loved the whole piece as it is, they did not ask me to even make a single change.

Now, the long-winded answer to your straightforward question is that I want to write more and more from heart. I do not want to camouflage my inner and authentic voice into one hundred references – I want to write more personal essays and personal opinions and personal thoughts. I want to share with people my original thinking rather than be bogged down under references and citations – I lose my voice in that kind of writing. I have always tried to maintain my voice, but I want to bring that more and more out. I am currently editing a book in which I have written the first full section without any citations, because that is how I wanted to write it, and I really love the way it came out. So that is what I want to do more and more: be an authentic writer, teacher, and artist.

MICHAEL: I see the importance of aesthetics for you, and the poetics, and it reminds me of going back to Kabir soon. Thank you.

Conclusion

R. Michael Fisher

Thanks Ashwani for the quote below. I feel this quote would be appropriate to my writing a Conclusion for our dialogue. Of course, there is no conclusion as much as there are some findings that lead readers and you and myself into territories for further inquiry.

Kabîr wrote:

O brother, my heart yearns for that true Guru, who fills the cup
of true love, and drinks of it himself, and offers it then to
me.

He removes the veil from the eyes, and gives the true Vision of
Brahma:

He reveals the worlds in Him, and makes me to hear the Unstruck
Music:

He shows joy and sorrow to be one:

He fills all utterance with love.

Kabîr says: "Verily he has no fear, who has such a Guru to lead
him to the shelter of safety!"

Whatever you or I might think of the nature and role of 'guru' and "no fear" and traditional dialogues with gurus as part of a quest for developing consciousness and maturity, I believe both you and I show in this first of our two dialogues that we both aspire to finding an authentic voice, as you say: "I have always tried to maintain my voice."

Because I cut my academic teeth in the natural sciences for many years, where I began writing, I was less attuned to the need for that authentic voice. I wanted empirical accuracy. Both of us searching for truth no doubt is underlying herein; but we have had different experiences of how to come to that – me starting with exterior truths and sensitivity in my

study of nature – and, you more so with the inner perceptivity of interest in depth interiority or this emptiness approach, which is amazing that you developed so early in life. *“I had a habit where I would look into emptiness, just look into the vacant space ...”* and for me, I would look into natural space(s), especially the wildlands and edges of civilization that I so felt at-one-with from my earliest years.

And, then both of us became critical naturally and yes, we both seemed to look for the contradictions in the ways people behaved, and I think that was a natural observational ethical imperative in each of us as part of the *why* it is that being aware and awake is important. You said, *“... people will go to the temple to do the puja and worship, thinking they are doing something spiritual, but when they come out of the temple, they are the same – they have not changed inwardly.”* That resonates with me around many things I observed in life early on: I remember in the ecological movement many almost religious eco-fanatics criticizing everyone for using fossil fuels, but they went on planes all the time to their rallies of protect, for example; and, I remember being quite critical of how pre-service school teachers would say this or that about how they were to be a great teacher, and then I observed them in the staff room during their breaks and after school, and I wasn’t impressed. It always seemed to me preservice teachers and practicing schoolteachers, especially when I conducted workshops for them early in my career so they could be more creative, were largely unable to “wait” and be patient and connect with the subtle things of some activity, some experience, I would present them with. They were so quick to try to prematurely resolve and/or conclude in organizing the problems I presented rather than dwelling with them openly. They struggled finding emptiness as part of their inquiry, as you had suggested is part of meditative inquiry and thinking; as you said, *“Only in vacant space, or in open space can you directly encounter or have a direct experience. To me, this is the truth ... these are connected to a waiting space.”* I wanted to free them from that compulsion to resolve, and be more comfortable with freedom itself, as you say, *“The ability to look freely, totally, and to receive the truth that life is ready to offer you.”*

Yet, beyond such things, you and I have pulled out discussion of fear and fearlessness somewhat in this dialogue, and I will say that is all very satisfying to find such a co-inquiry, from someone in the field of Education, here in Canada yet. Wow. It still amazes me because this is so rare of a thing to happen to me. Meditative inquiry, I would suggest and you do as well, is not about getting rid of fear or sliding around it but learning from it – and, on that note, I’ll say not more but to encourage readers to dwell with the findings you and I and Krishnamurti and Kabîr offer as curriculum for a 21st century. I’m delighted all of us, and especially your voice as an educator in the mainstream of Education, are calling once more for focus of attention on the nature and role of fear.

As you said the pre-service teachers in your university course: *“Creating an awareness of the fear in all its dimensions is very important part of my pedagogy”* and let’s not forget what comes forward in this dialogue, is your future desire, which I trust you will achieve as you apply yourself: *“I want to write more and more from heart.”* Now, to inquiry in many ways into what that ‘heart’ actually is, I found still rather incomplete in our dialogue above but no doubt the nuances of such a ‘heart’ approach will appear for our exploration again in our second dialogue.

I empathize, in closing, that ‘heart’ and ‘truth’ are very intimately connected. So, on that note, I’ll wait. I’ll listen. Yes, I am ready to end this writing. Oh, and I will end with quoting from you, because I love thinking about fearlessness as much as about fear, and you noted as a critique that often fearlessness is misconceived, even by the brightest people. I agree. They think in too literal of ways. They think fearlessness is insensitivity and unethical. You correctly say,

That is not fearlessness at all. That is harshness. That is insensitivity.

Endnotes

1. I borrow these terms of distinction from Fr. Matthew Fox.
2. Excerpt from Atkinson, M. (2002). Foreword in *The wonder of presence and the way of meditative inquiry* (pp. ix-xviii). Shambhala, p. xi.
3. Excerpt from Kind (2014), p. 865 in the issue of the 2014 *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*, 5(4.2), p. 718, cited in Kocher, L., Pacini-Ketchabaw, V. & Kind, S. (2014). Introduction to the special issue on materiality in early childhood studies, pp. 718-21.
4. See the philosophical background of meditative inquiry (a la Kumar) in Kumar (2013).
5. See Kumar (2013, 2014, 2019, in press); Kumar & Downey (2018, 2019); Kumar & Acharya (2021).

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“Unfortunately, when it comes to understanding a problem, most teachers do not treat the student as an equal partner; from their superior position, they give instructions to the pupil, who is far below them. Such a relationship only strengthens fear in both the teacher and the student. What creates this unequal relationship? Is it that the teacher is afraid of being found out? Does [s]he keep a dignified distance to guard his [her] susceptibilities...?” – Jiddu Krishnamurti