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What I learned from the J. Krishnamurti and the Contemporary World Crises International Online Conference in February, 2021

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Abstract

The J. Krishnamurti and the Contemporary World Crises International Online Conference that took place on February 19-21 and Feb 26-28, 2021 was a huge success. In this conference, a group of Canadian and Indian scholars, educators, professionals, and students came together to discuss the relevance of J. Krishnamurti's philosophical ideas in today's world.

Keywords: Krishnamurti, awareness and human consciousness

How do we work smarter, not harder? This may seem like a trite saying, but as I've sat with the intention to write this article for a while, this is the key thought that has come to me since participating in the Krishnamurti and the Contemporary World Crises Conference in February, 2021 (Kumar & Acharya). The conference was a free, virtual event and one of the best online events I have participated in since the Covid-19 pandemic began.

The J. Krishnamurti and the Contemporary World Crises International Online Conference that took place on February 19-21 and Feb 26-28, 2021 was a huge success. In this conference, a group of Canadian and Indian scholars, educators, professionals, and students came together to discuss the relevance of J. Krishnamurti's philosophical ideas in today's world.

The online, free conference featured twenty-two speakers from a range of disciplines including; psychology, law, religious studies, philosophy, and education. The speakers engaged in panel discussions and question/answer sessions with attendees in six two-hour sessions throughout the two weekends of the conference. There were over 370 registrants.

The sessions included a rich variety of journeys with the work of Indian philosopher and educator Jiddu Krishnamurti.

A range of people from around the world participated, creating a broad cross-cultural and interdisciplinary conversation about individual and societal betterment.

The conference was organized by Dr. Ashwani Kumar (Program Director) of Mount Saint Vincent University in collaboration with Dr. Nayha Acharya (Team Member) of the Schulich School of Law, Dalhousie University, with the support of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute's Program Development Grant. All the sessions were also recorded and are accessible through links on the event's Facebook page. The purpose of the conference was to better understand contemporary world crises, including the impact of the Covid 19-pandemic, through the lens of Krishnamurti's philosophical and educational ideas.

Insights and personal experience from panelist's and participants helped create a very rich opportunity for everyone to be able to explore Krishnamurti's ideas. The keynote addresses were delivered by Dr. Meenakshi Thapan, Dr. Ravi Ravindra, and Dr. Hillary Rodrigues. Key themes of the conference explored how Krishnamurti's insights into the art of awareness and human consciousness could help inform our approach to dialogue and addressing conflict. Topics also included; how Krishnamurti's idea could help us identify the root causes of the wicked, complex challenges

we're dealing with, what the purpose of 'education' today should be, and how Krishnamurti schools were designed to prepare students for life in general.

I was attracted to the conference because I had just been exposed to the work of Krishnamurti as a PhD student in Educational Studies by one of my professors, Dr. Ashwani Kumar, who was also one of the conference organizers. I am very new to Krishnamurti's work, but almost from the first time I heard of his ideas, they resonated with me very strongly. I am a community educator, activist, former journalist, former filmmaker, consultant and a few other things. I did a Masters in Adult Education and Community Development at St. Francis Xavier University, home of the infamous Antigonish Movement. I am not a spring chicken. I have lived a full and complicated life to this point in my life and I bring a broad range of experiences and ideas to my work; which now also includes researcher and scholar. These are new identities for me. I never expected to be able to get into a PhD program, but through a variety of serendipitous events and connections, I am now in one. It is interesting because when I did my Masters (2008-2013) I was trying to re-enter the workforce after about 12 years of relying on disability benefits because of various challenges I experienced due to a mental illness called bipolar disorder. I am happy to say that getting that degree did help me get back into the workforce even though it was a very difficult experience. I think it was different because I was so desperate to be part of the 'official' workforce again, my ability to learn and specially to write, was hampered by my illness and a lack of support at that time within academia for people like me. I'm very happy to say my PhD experience so far has been very different. I have a lot of support, and I'm not so 'desperate' as I was during my Masters work. I have a well-established career now, with work I relish, and people I enjoy working with. My circumstances now are very different from years ago.

How has this life experience informed, or affected, my reaction to the work of Krishnamurti? For those who are familiar with his work, you will know that an attention to 'mindfulness,' and an astute and careful attention to one's own consciousness is a cornerstone of Krishnamurti's work. Perhaps I was predisposed to embrace this aspect of his ideas because I had also spent many years in therapy being encouraged to pay close attention to my own thoughts, but also my emotions and moods in relation to those thoughts. Medication for me is very important, but as for many dealing with mental illness, it is only half the battle. Learning about one's own mind and how it influences your thoughts, moods, and actions is another critical part.

I am also a community educator and an activist. What does this mean? I believe very strongly that we all have a

responsibility to serve others and to work to create a world where people in all communities can flourish and thrive. I also think the pandemic has aggravated many cracks and crises we were already dealing with; including rising economic and social inequities, and a sense of paralysis over what to do about such issues and the climate crisis. Ironically, the pandemic has also shown us what is possible when we significantly change the way we live in relation to the planet, and the reality of the interconnectedness amongst not only us as human beings but also of us to everything else in this world.

Sometimes it can seem weird to be doing a PhD at this time. There is so much work to be done. I think this feeling is echoed in our daily lives as well, and for many, the pandemic has created much more stress, urgency, and sense of powerlessness. I am a white, middle-aged, married, well-educated woman of European descent (as far as I know) with two children who are in their early twenties, who also have just finished their post-secondary education and have quite secure, privileged paths in life. My husband and I both were able to switch to working from home, and we live in a rural part of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada where the reaction to the pandemic has been very well-managed. Many people of means are actually moving to our area to escape the worst of the pandemic.

I tell you this to be transparent about where I am coming from, and the limitations to my point-of-view as well. Despite the pandemic, I am in a very secure - even happy - time in my life. I know that is not the case for many people around the world. This bothers me, but I try to do what I can in a way that looks to leverage the privilege, the life experience, and the opportunities I have as effectively as possible. As I've moved along in life, this means focusing my work more and more, and trying to be 'smarter' about the nature and range of work I do. To that end, I have been active in my own local community in my early years in community development (mainly as a volunteer and parent), and then gradually the scope of my work has expanded to include regional, national, and international work. I have worked in the nonprofit sector providing learning opportunities related to good governance and strategic planning. I have taught leadership in community and university programs. I am now also adding research, scholarly, and policy advocacy work to my life experience.

Being a scholar and researcher are new identities for me. To be honest, I'm still suffering a bit from 'imposter syndrome,' but as I do more work in each field, I become more confident. I am also rediscovering a love of writing that I first learned about as a budding journalist. My writing approach though is very different from what I was taught more than 30 years ago. I call it my blog voice now in a way.

New learning and new approaches to academic writing, and writing in general, have enabled me to break free of the semblance of a neutral, objective, third person perspective to be able to 'speak' directly instead to people reading my work.

I feel much more comfortable in this skin because I feel I can be more transparent and share more of myself and my perspective. I actually think there is no such thing as an objective or neutral perspective. As complicated, complex, social beings with unique experiences and tremendous variety of influences, how could we be anything else than unique individuals with unique perspectives? Our ideas, influences, and experiences may overlap - but they can never be exactly the same.

To get back to the conference, I think this idea of the value of diversity but also common purpose, is another cornerstone of Krishnamurti's work. Within each of us is a unique consciousness but also a collective consciousness as well. I have also recently been exposed to the work of Braidotti (2019) and others related to post humanism, and I would encourage us, because of that work, to go beyond even our sense of our collective being composed of just human beings and to include other living and non-living entities in our world as well in our considerations.

Again, we all have very busy lives and for many of us just living is a key goal; finding ways to keep ourselves and our families going in these very difficult times. Times that for many have been made even worse due to the pandemic, the climate crisis, and increasing automation even. Given all these crises, how do we move forward? How can we leverage our energy, our minds, our ideas, our bodies in such a way as to not only look after ourselves, our families, our communities - but also the world itself?

These are overwhelming questions, but Krishnamurti's work does contribute to pointing the way. This was one of the reasons I made the time to attend this conference, and not just one or two sessions, but the whole thing. The beauty of the design of the conference was that because there was only one 2-hour session per day, in the middle of the day, and spread out over two weekends (Friday to Sunday), I was able to make that time and not be overwhelmed. In true Krishnamurti fashion, the conference enabled participants to attend various sessions and still have time to digest the ideas and perspectives they were experiencing. I think this contributed greatly to the level of discussion and sharing in the chat sections of the sessions, and question and answer opportunities. I think there was also a similar like-mindedness in the sense of the values and purpose of the participants, even as there was tremendous range in the perspectives and ideas we learned about, and questions that

came up. This was a group that was keen to squeeze out every drop of learning they could to bring new ideas and perspectives to their own work, and to their various communities.

As someone who has spent a lot of time studying and learning in the western philosophical tradition, I think I also leaned-in heavily to Krishnamurti's work because I wanted to explore both his ideas, and those of others, that were rooted in a very different tradition and perspective. In my work, I often characterize myself as an innovation, learning and leadership specialist and consultant. The ideas of innovation and learning are very important to me. I firmly believe diversity is a critical component of innovation, so over the years, I have welcomed opportunities to explore new and different ideas and perspectives from my own; especially as I have learned more about the limitations of my own perspective.

I have also come to focus more on how to create more inclusive economies focused on collective wellbeing versus the dominant, neoliberal ideas of individualism and capitalism. I am also very passionate about how to include communities more who have been historically marginalized, and continue to be because of race, gender, sexual orientation, different abilities and colonization. I believe education and learning are tremendous tools to help in this, but that the structures of formal, western educational systems still often act as 'gatekeepers' who perpetuate many of the power imbalances, and consequences of such, that we are trying to work through. I use the words 'work through' versus dismantle because of my recent learning related to post humanism. In Braidotti's (2019) work, she seems to refer to a sense of hopefulness, which I think is very important. She writes and speaks (2018) often of the importance of an 'affirmative' ethos; a 'post' post world beyond the deconstruction and critique of the many 'isms' in our world. I think many of the ideas of Krishnamurti and Braidotti actually complement each other very well.

During various sessions that were part of the conference in February 2021, there was one that stood out very strongly in my mind related to 'philosophical counselling' by Vikas Baniwal. The description for the session refers to how Krishnamurti's perspective can inform philosophical counselling in deconstructing our images and illusions about the world to enable more genuine engagement with the world, and give direction to one's life. This session in particular stood out because it included a conversation about the role that philosophical counselling could also play in addressing mental illness in our work; both in ways caused by biological reasons, and those caused by a deep sense of existential angst. I purposely asked Baniwal to clarify further his thinking on this point. As he explained it, the idea

is that yes there are often biological reasons for mental illness, but there are also existential ones. Many people have questions such as: Why do I exist? What is my purpose? What is the point of my life? Where do I fit in this world? What am I supposed to be doing?

I related to these questions because there have been many instances in my life where having some sense of purpose is what got me through some very difficult times where I didn't even want to exist, I was in so much pain. And often what made things even worse was that the pain I was suffering was something no one else often could see. Even family and friends. This pain, unless you've experienced it, is I think very difficult to relate to. What do you mean you don't want to exist, say family, friends and others. Through some speakers at the conference, and in videos of Krishnamurti speaking that I've watched since the conference, I also see that this concept of pain - sorrow even - was something that was very important to him. In many of his talks, he urges us to 'lean into' pain and sorrow; to not allow ourselves to be distracted from it. He encourages us rather to sit with it, to suspend judgement, to work to distance our own personal reactions to it. Not to numb ourselves, but rather to see the pain or sorrow we're feeling, or others are experiencing, more clearly; to understand it fully.

For Krishnamurti, pain and sorrow were also inextricably linked with passion and beauty. What did he mean by this? I've been mulling that over for a while now. It's like I'm on a journey with Krishnamurti that has been evolving since I was first exposed to his work by my professor, to then attending and really 'leaning into' learning everything I could during the conference this year, and then exploring various videos (J. Krishnamurti - Official Channel), of him speaking directly. The range of videos of Krishnamurti speaking directly, in addition to the conference, are a treasure trove. I know many people go on about social media and technology in this day and age, but being able to watch someone speaking and engaging with people directly about their ideas is invaluable in my book. Many of these videos are on YouTube and so also very accessible. It is wonderful to see Kirshnamurti's body language, to see when he seems tired, when he becomes more energetic, when he becomes excited, and to hear the change in emphasis in his words as he works to explain his ideas.

So what did Kirshnamurti mean when he talked about a connection between pain, passion and beauty? To me, I felt like he was saying if you don't understand pain and sorrow, you cannot then fully understand joy. To me, when he speaks of beauty, he is speaking of joy and light, and a positive way forward in the world; the ability for all of us to take action to create a better world. The connection between

the two really is also this idea of passion and of action. For some, this may seem like a lot of navel-gazing. The situation in the world is desperate, people are desperate - we need to 'act.' I think the question Krishnamurti raises though is what kind of action do we need? If we don't take the time, and do the work, to fully understand ourselves, our own biases, experiences and perspectives, how can we possibly know what kind of 'action' is really required? I don't think this means we should not act. I think it means we need to combine careful reflection, meditation, and inquiry to work to fully understand the complexity of our world, and how best to create change to reduce suffering and pain in it.

For Krishnamurti, this meant fully understanding our own pain and the pain of others, and I would even say of the world itself. In fully embracing this suffering and pain, only then might we experience fully the passion and motivation to act to change it. Not that we can eliminate pain completely, nor should we. Again, to understand beauty and joy - we need to 'know' pain and suffering. It is only in this 'knowing' of one that we can fully understand the value and beauty of the other. I will fully acknowledge that I am only beginning my learning journey related to the work and ideas of Krishnamurti. I recognize others with more experience with his work may have many other ideas and perspectives on it.

One of the reasons I find Krishnamurti's work so powerful, and why I think it has resonated with me so much, is because it demonstrates the value of another perspective, of 'bracketing' what we think we know to explore in depth the perspective and ideas of another, to learn more and to embrace a variety of ways of knowing. It is as if a door to another world has been opened, and to a world with a more spiritual, holistic and less mechanistic way of looking at the world. The way Krishnamurti explores the depths of what is consciousness, what is it to be human, what is it to be connected - to each other and within the world we live in - is I think critical to finding a way forward for ourselves and the planet. These are not new questions. Many cultures and societies have different, but also similar, ways to try and answer these questions beyond the civilization those of us whose education has been, and continues to be, dominated by western philosophies, science, art, and culture, and ways of being, knowing and acting in the world.

Fundamentally, one of the greatest learnings for me from the Krishnamurti Conference on contemporary world crises is that there is so much more to learn than I was aware of, so many more diverse ways of knowing and learning. This does not mean we should be paralyzed; that we should not act because who knows what the right thing to do is. Rather, the point of Krishnamurti's work I think is that we are constantly evolving, and that we need to be constantly

learning by combining both reflection and action. The two together are at the heart of how we might actually pull ourselves out of the various messes and challenges we find ourselves in. I think the other is that we are all interconnected. Pain or joy for you is also pain or joy for me, and vice versa; if I allow myself to feel it, to sit with it, to truly appreciate and embrace it. Both. It is only in doing this that I will also find the kind of purpose and fulfillment that will enable me to not only embrace who I am, but also the value and beauty of others, and the world itself.

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Acknowledgement

Laurie Cook is a PhD student in the Inter-University Educational Studies program hosted by Acadia, Mount Saint Vincent and St. Francis Xavier Universities in Nova Scotia. Her research interests include: how to create change in communities more effectively, how to create more inclusive economies in the time of Covid 19, how to include marginalized and radicalized communities more in community-based economic development, co-operatives and social enterprise, youth engagement in co-op development, and online learning for business succession including co-ops. She is currently working with the Co-operative Enterprise Council of New Brunswick (CECNB) and she is part of a research initiative with the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA). Laurie also has her own consulting company, Chutzpah Consulting, where she specializes in supporting community organizations in innovation, learning and leadership development. She is also part of new community consultants co-operative, Leading Edge. She has a strong background in governance and communications. Her Masters is in Adult Education and Community Development from St. FX, and her undergrad is in journalism from the University of King's College. Until this past June, Laurie was also President of the Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet). She is also a spokesperson for the international Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll). Laurie lives in Musquodoboit Harbour, Nova Scotia with her husband and two grown children. She loves walking local trails, and nearby Martinique Beach.