

# ***Holistic Education and Krishnamurti:***

## ***An Interview with Scott H. Forbes***

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### **Abstract**

For the interview that follows, Scott H. Forbes discusses some of his learnings about, around, and within holistic education from the 1970s and 1980s during his years at Brockwood Park School in England. He speaks from his direct experience in working with J. Krishnamurti. In this two-part interview/conversation, Scott recollects his years at Brockwood Park and discusses his own understanding of how radical Krishnamurti's approach to education was.

Introduction	1
<b>Part 1: Being and Educating at Brockwood Park School</b>	<b>2</b>
Meeting Krishnamurti	2
The Purpose of Education was Absolute Unconditional Freedom for Krishnamurti	3
Daily Learning at Brockwood	4
<b>Part 2: Follow-up Interview</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Considering the Importance of Relationships in Learning</b>	<b>8</b>
About the Krishnamurti Educational Research Project	9
Some Core Elements of Holistic Education versus Mainstream Schools	10
Why is Conditioning So Important to Consider?	12
Structures, Changes, and What Schools Must Consider	13
Education and Sustainability	14

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### **Introduction**

Scott Forbes and I have been friends for over 20 years, and we have had many long conversations over those years. From the beginning, I've always found Scott to be open, good-natured, and joyful in ways that feel nearly tangible to me – with so many fascinating life stories too. We met a few years after I had learned about alternative, holistic

approaches to education. Early on, I was asked by another friend, Ron Miller, to proofread Scott's book based on his University of Oxford dissertation, which was to be published and called "Holistic Education: An Analysis of Its Ideas and Nature" (Forbes, 2003).

For the interview that follows, I was especially intent on hearing from Scott about his own learnings around holistic

education in his years at Brockwood Park School in England and from working with J. Krishnamurti. In this two-part interview/conversation, Scott recollects his years at Brockwood Park and discusses his own understanding of how radical Krishnamurti's approach to education was.

In the story that begins this conversation, Scott is situated in Paris in the early 1970s. Most of the rest of Part 1 takes place at Brockwood Park, the school in England that Krishnamurti and Mary Zimbalist founded in the late 1960s. Then, in Part 2, I continue to probe around issues such as student-teacher relationships, the research project that Scott is doing now about Krishnamurti and education, and the importance of Krishnamurti's life work given where we are now, as educators, continuing to grapple with how to bring more holistic approaches to learning into our classrooms and schools.

Jiddu Krishnamurti was a well-known speaker and educator, a wise human being who started 10 schools on three continents in his lifetime; he claimed, "truth is a pathless land." People came from all over the world to hear him speak. Originally, Krishnamurti was "found" by the Theosophists around 1909 in Adyar, Madras, India, at the age of about 14, and was raised by the Theosophists to be "the World Teacher." However, after 1929 when he parted ways with Theosophy, he was not affiliated with any religion or movement. He continued to give public and private talks around the world, with his last public talks being in 1985. He died in 1986 at the age of 91.

In the transcript that follows, Scott refers to Krishnamurti as "Krishnaji" a term of affection and respect used by Krishnamurti's friends and colleagues when talking with him or about him.

## Part 1: Being and Educating at Brockwood Park School

### Meeting Krishnamurti

**Robin:** I guess I was hoping to start with a little bit of your own history, if you could tell about how you came to Brockwood?

**Scott:** Well, I was very interested in psychological things in the mind since I was in high school. I'd read at least half a dozen of Freud's books when I was in high school, things like *Totem and Taboo*, his one on religion, and all kinds of the more socially-oriented books of his. Then when I was in

college I became very interested in Alan Watts and people who were more mystically inclined. In college, I also became interested in the work of Georges Saint-Bonnet who died about 10 years before I heard of him and who had a group of people he worked with in Paris. He was a phenomenal healer.

So, I went to Paris. His books were only available in one book shop in Paris, so I went there to acquire some of his books and to speak with people he had worked with. I met an actress and a friend of hers who was there at the time and I was commenting on his healing prowess. This actress broke her toe coming off stage and she'd had a meeting scheduled with him; it was apparently hard to get personal meetings with him. It was a compound fracture, so the bone was sticking out of the skin. She bandaged it up as well as she could to go to the meeting because she couldn't just not show up. He always met in the cafes, in the back room of a cafe or anywhere. I can't remember her name but let's just call her Julie. He walked in and said, "Julie come and give me a kiss," and she just came up and walked over, and she realized her foot was all right. And then he asked her what was wrong, and she took off the bandages and her bone was back in place and healed. Now I heard this not only from her but from a friend who had accompanied her. And of course, you could call that collective illusion but it's impressive.

Anyway, so I was there and living in Paris. I thought I'd gone to Paris from England for a weekend, but I spent nine months there. One of my friends there who I knew well said, "Look you can't just learn from books you actually have to learn directly from a true holy man and the only one I know of alive today is Krishnamurti and he speaks in Saanen, Switzerland in July." So, I wrote to Krishnamurti in Saanen, Switzerland and asked if I could come. I assumed he was just speaking in someone's living room, but I got no answer. So, being an American, I just went anyway.

I arrived the day before the first talk in 1972 and there were thousands of people there. I couldn't believe it, and so that began my interest. I had never read a book of Krishnamurti's. My first contact with Krishnamurti or his teachings was sitting on the floor right in front of him listening to him speak. Krishnaji was always interested in this story. It was very impactful at any rate, so that led me to apply to go to Brockwood in 1974.

One of the things that I did when I was in Paris was tutoring for a living, so it was not a big jump for me to join an educational establishment. And at that point Brockwood

was pretty small, it still is a small school, but I mean it was 1974 and it had started only five years before with one student, right? I can't remember how many students there were. There might have been 20. I can't remember but it was a very small school.

**R:** You were working with high school students?

**S:** When it started, Brockwood took students as young as 10 which is normal for an English boarding school. Of course, that led to all kinds of problems because they had to have different bedtimes and they had to play sports. I mean it was just a challenge having 10-year-olds and 18-year-olds in the same cohort. But it all worked incredibly well.

### **The Purpose of Education was Absolute Unconditional Freedom for Krishnamurti**

**R:** How did Krishnamurti see the purpose of education?

**S:** Oh, he was very clear about that. He said, and it's in at least one of his books, that he feels that the purpose of his schools is the same as the purpose of his talks, which he said in 1929 was to set men absolutely, unconditionally free.

**R:** And in your time, you spent how many years at Brockwood?

**S:** Hold on [*does mental math in his head*]. So, I spent a total of 21 years at Brockwood, and while he was alive, he was there for 11 of those years.

**R:** Across those years, especially while he was alive, how did you come to understand what he meant by setting people unconditionally free?

**S:** You know that presupposes that my understanding was worth anything. I just had my limited understanding of everything he said and did.

But I was very lucky because one of the things that I initially did when I went to Brockwood was teach French, teach history to little ones, and do maintenance work. Brockwood is a house that was built in 1769, so it has constant maintenance requirements and one of the things that that resulted in is that I also often had to do maintenance things up in Krishnaji and Mary's quarters, but specifically Krishnaji's quarters and so I got to meet him outside of the public sphere as it were.

And he had two Patek Philippe pocket watches which he just adored and of course I would go to Saanen every summer when he gave his talks there. In one of the summers, I went to Patek Philippe in Geneva and bought some watch tools and had them instruct me on how I could adjust the insides of the watches to make them run faster, or slower, so I could adjust his watches. He loved his watches as being exactly on time. And you could get the exact time by telephoning the BBC and they would have a tone at the time and say it is 11 25 and 30 seconds or something like that so you could get it exactly, but as Krishnaji said, his watches didn't like to travel. So anytime he traveled which was essentially flying; his watches needed to be readjusted so it was something that we enjoyed doing together, this fiddling around with his watches. I just got to know him personally in a way that most people didn't have the chance to.

**R:** As you got to know him personally, he was also doing meetings I would assume, with the teachers at Brockwood?

**S:** Yes. The way the schedule went – first of all, he spent longer at Brockwood than at any of his regular places in the world. So, he spent more time at Brockwood than Ojai, than India, than Paris, than Rome, than any place and he was there for many, many months. Every, I think it was Tuesday, but I would have to check on that. He would hold a talk with the staff only. And then every Thursday, I think it was, but again I have to check, he would talk with the students only – no staff members were allowed and no recording of the talks were allowed, so that the students would feel free to say anything they wanted. Then, every Sunday he would talk with students and staff together and any guests who showed up. So, on Sundays, Brockwood was flooded with guests. In total he spoke three times a week at Brockwood for months every year.

**R:** What did he do in those talks? How does one facilitate people to help them learn to be unconditionally free? What was he doing or how was he being in relation to the staff, students, and sometimes the guests on Sundays as well?

**S:** If you can imagine, a public talk like a talk at Saanen or the Brockwood public talks with a small audience who felt free to ask questions at any time, so there was a tremendous amount of back and forth.

**R:** Well, let's say some of the people who may be reading this transcript may have not listened to Krishnamurti even though lots of his videos of his talks are all available now on YouTube. Let's say, if they're reading this for the first time

and are just hearing about this man named Krishnamurti who was... he didn't maybe call it holistic education, but he created schools that were all about a more holistic approach to setting people unconditionally free. Yes, what was he talking about?

**S:** He was talking about the mass of humanity, how our minds work, and what the consequences are for our lives, so he was talking about our fears, desires, egos, identities and conditioning, which are the things that he always talked about. But he could just do it much more specifically at these talks because he knew the people he was talking to; he knew the Brockwood staff, and he very quickly came to know the students every year. It was a much more personal, intimate disposition of his talks and his teachings.

**R:** And after you would sit through a talk for the staff or a Sunday talk with a bigger group because the guests and students would be there too, how would it sit with you? I mean how did it? It was just a talk and a conversation. How were you learning from that?

**S:** I was always deeply impacted by Krishnaji's talks, whether they were small, intimate talks or personal talks that I had with him or the big public talks. I was always deeply impacted because I could see things about myself and my own mind that I had not previously seen. So, he was teaching or connecting with you, and other people like students and staff, in a way that helped you to see into your own mind and into the minds of my colleagues and friends.

**R:** When he talks publicly, he always says at the beginning that "I'm not lecturing; this is not a lecture," and that seems so important. Every time I listen to him, I keep thinking what is he doing that's different from a lecture?

**S:** Well, in a lecture one is espousing knowledge, which one hopes the listeners are acquiring and accumulating. But Krishnaji wanted us to see things, so he would talk about things not so that you would commit them to memory, not so that you would accumulate them into your body of knowledge, but so that you could look at things with him. And having seen things with him, having seen things, you can't unsee them. It affects a change; if you really see something you can't unsee it.

So, if you see that your relationship is principally driven by desire, if you really see that, it's like it breaks it because you can't unsee that, and so that's why he would say this is not a lecture. All of us who are educated are so used to lectures and turning anything we hear into knowledge – we're not

very good at honestly and openly looking in an unprejudiced way.

**R:** So how did all that, those talks with Krishnaji, affect how you were working with students and what education was like at Brockwood for the students?

**S:** Well, to be deeply impacted by something that you see means that you are changed. Now you can't say, "Well how did that change the way that you ate your yogurt or how did that change the way you drove your car?" because it's not a single-topic change. But if you are changed, then in a sense, everything you do is changed. Perhaps not enough. I would never contend that or against that, but a person has changed, so everything they do is changed.

### Daily Learning at Brockwood

**R:** So, I'm still curious though. What did learning look like at Brockwood for the students? What were they doing day-to-day, how were they learning in a different way than they would in a public school?

**S:** Well, that is a huge topic because it had nothing to do with normal education. Normal education, in typical schools, is determined by some bureaucratic structure who decides the curriculum, hours, and materials. So, students are really like animals who are being trained to do something; they don't have any choices about anything, and their natures aren't really taken into consideration.

**R:** What do you mean by their natures? Human nature is considered by a lot of teachers.

**S:** It's just very general, but my nature is not like your nature, and it's not like someone else's nature. If you have a small class size where you can accommodate different people's learning styles, human nature is accommodated. I can remember having a very hyperactive student fifty years ago who is still close to me, and I could see when he was just getting extra wound up and I would send him off on an errand, and he came back then he was ready to learn again. As a teacher, you can see that some people really respond to books, while other people want to be told things – they're not good at book learning, and some people can best learn through doing. Some people have a very hard time learning through abstraction, so you shouldn't give them that – just let them come to an abstraction on their own. But if you have an externally driven curriculum, nowadays they have what they call teacher-proof curriculum, which means that the teacher can't ruin it, but also the teacher can't really

affect it. The teacher is really not much more than a delivery person; they could be delivering pizzas or they could deliver a math lesson – it's the same thing.

**R:** I'm thinking that some kids don't learn by abstraction, but when you actually listen to Krishnamurti's talks one could feel that some of those are very abstract.

**S:** You could label them as that, and of course, if you are just keeping them in your head then they are abstract. However, if you are actually looking at these things in yourself as he's talking about them, they're not abstract – they're very real. He can talk about [topics] like conditioning and tradition, but if you're seeing something about your own conditioning and how your traditions have trapped you into thinking and responding in certain ways, that's not abstract; that's very concrete.

**R:** What was a day of learning like, or a week? What was the flow and how was it so different from mainstream schools?

**S:** We started off the day at seven o'clock, I believe, with 10 minutes of the whole school together sitting in silence, or perhaps someone would read a poem. Eventually, there was a piano in the room where we all gathered and someone might play something on the piano or the guitar, but it was a time of being together with inward silence. That actually has quite an impact. Then we all went to breakfast and after breakfast we all had a half hour of morning jobs.

Morning jobs were things like doing the breakfast dishes, chopping wood, bringing wood in for the fireplace, working in the garden, or cleaning the floors. We all had a half-hour morning job.

After that, classes would begin. Then, halfway through the morning around 10am, this being England, we had teatime. We would all break for tea, herbal tea or whatever we were drinking and then we continued with classes until one when we had lunch. Again, all the dishes were always washed by a rotating group of staff and students, so everyone had their rotating duty periodically. After lunch, there was a rest period from two to three.

**R:** Wow, an hour for the rest period.

**S:** Yeah, it was really nice. Then, at three o'clock the afternoon's activities would resume, and those could be classes of some kind. After that there would be sports of some kind and then dinner was at seven. Relationships were very, very important.

**R:** You had a long well-balanced day. Who decided what the schedule was? Did it change from year to year?

**S:** Not really, that was consistent. The schedule evolved through feedback from students and staff, so when I first went to Brockwood in 1974 the schedule was slightly different. For the young ones this was a point of contention as the young ones had to go to bed early, they had to be in bed by nine, whereas the older students could stay up until ten. This was a big thing.

Also, our weekends were Tuesday afternoon and all day Wednesday because we had so many people who wanted to come visit us on Saturday and Sunday. If we took those days off they'd have nothing to visit, so we changed our weekend to a day and a half in the middle of the week. Initially, the school's weekend was a half-day Saturday and Sunday. Our midweek weekend was good for the students and staff because it also meant that cinemas were open and the shops were open; usually those things were closed on Sundays in England.

**R:** Let's go back to the learning process itself. At the school where I was just working, a holistic school in Thailand, it was important for the teachers to talk and think about how to create a curriculum that combined knowledge, skills, and values. The values were a really important piece of it all and that was their way of looking at the whole human being – by taking into consideration how to facilitate learning that involves the wholeness of each student. At Brockwood, how did you all create curriculum or facilitate learning for students in a way that considered their wholeness?

**S:** England has a system of exams that are the same – well there's different examining boards – but the exams are the same for every school that uses that board. So, for instance, there is a system of chemistry tests that has two levels, the ordinary level (the O level) and the advanced level (the A level). One exam usually takes place when a student is about 16 and the other one takes place at about 18. For those curricula, they are determined by an examining board. In O level in math, the contents are determined by the examining board, and in the advanced level in biology it is also determined by the examining boards.

The vast majority of classes at Brockwood were not exam classes. Instead, we had a funny thing that was really quite charming – at the beginning of every year, each student would talk with every staff member even if the staff member just worked in the kitchen or garden. So, it wasn't just

teaching staff. Every student talked with every staff member about what they liked and didn't like, what they wanted and didn't want, what they felt they needed and didn't need. Out of those discussions, courses were created. So, perhaps someone would come to me (because they know I teach history) and say, "I'm really, really interested in the French Revolution" and someone else would come and say, "I've always been attracted to Napoleon." I might respond by saying, "Look, why don't the two of you get together and determine if there's something that you can do together?" This might result in me having a two-person class of the French Revolution through the Napoleonic period. Then, they would talk with their friends about it, and someone else would say, "Oh yeah I didn't know what to do in history; I wanted to do something in history and that that sounds good to me," so then my class would grow a few more students.

Now, the school principal always had to approve the course of studies of each student. When I was principal, I really wanted people to have a well-balanced education, especially the younger ones. If someone came to me with just art, pottery, photography, woodworking and weaving, I would always ensure that they had some math, science and humanities as well. They could determine what humanities they wanted, what science they wanted, and so forth, but they had to have something that exercised that part of the brain.

After we had all of the students with all of their different courses that they wanted to do, the staff members would spend about a week trying to fit everything into a week's schedule for the whole school. It was really quite a feat. We had a full student body, which was usually about 60 or 70 students; none had the same schedule, and they had to fit it all into a week's schedule.

**R:** So, within a class, what would they do? They would study whatever they're studying, but would they then also create a project, do a presentation or do something that contributes to the community?

**S:** Yes, whatever they decided.

**R:** Would they decide this with the teacher of that topic, or how did they decide what they would do?

**S:** It was usually decided together.

**R:** So, they wouldn't necessarily have to take any tests?

**S:** They didn't have to take any tests. In exam classes of course they did, but I never needed a test to know what my students knew.

**R:** Did you incorporate any self-assessment activities so they could see their learning process?

**S:** Seeing their learning process was a part of the process. We all have to see our learning processes, otherwise we can't improve them; we don't know where we're going.

**R:** Would you talk about that whole metacognition process and the meta-learning with them so they could learn to monitor themselves or how did they learn?

**S:** Just in individual discussions. There was no class on meta-learning. I might be saying to a student after some work, "Johnny, you don't seem to be relating to this reading material. What's going on here? How can I help you? Do you want to just talk about it together?" We're all living together, so such discussions are easy to get into.

**R:** What about sharing their learning with others? Would that just happen in the course of doing a class? In regular mainstream education, doing a project and sharing it with others is an important aspect [of the learning process]. Even in how I teach, it's not just about learning and absorbing information, but it's about connecting with other things in the world [such as a research project] so that it has real world application.

**S:** Since there were no two students who had the same timetable, the classes were very small. I didn't like having classes of more than 7, and most classes I think the average class size was three. So, you just don't have a lot of the same issues of presenting your work in a class of three that you have in a class of 30. A student can just share it saying, "Look this is what I've been thinking about," or I would have them write. I had my students write a lot because I believe in writing, and I believe it is a way to organize thinking.

**R:** Other teachers might not do it that way so much?

**S:** That's right, but there might be a math teacher who has students doing math problems up on the board. Or in chemistry classes everyone sees what everyone else is doing in a chemistry lab.

**R:** Well, nowadays they have so many things with integrated learning, that the greatest problems in the world can't be solved within a single silo of a subject. So how did you look

across subjects? Would that start to unfold sometimes when they would ask certain kinds of questions?

**S:** I can't speak for other teachers, but certainly in courses on history, philosophy, psychology and writing that I have taught are all cross-disciplinary. We might think of them as silos, but they aren't. History is about human nature, psychology, sociology, and it's even about geography. You know that simple, funny quartz that the Vikings discovered which allowed them to tell how far east and west they were going even when there was no sun? That was a revolution that started the Viking invasion of the world. So, you end up talking about geology, mineralogy, or physics.

**R:** So how would you assess yourself as a teacher to make adjustments, to connect with the students in different ways, or to connect the subjects with the students in new ways?

**S:** There were some days that I would feel I had cheated the students terribly because I had gotten so much more out of the class than they possibly could have. I would float out of the classroom, but I would also notice that they were also floating out of the classroom. I mean I don't know of any better self-assessment than that, or if people are bored you always know; if you have 3 to 7 students in a classroom, you know if people are bored. Especially if you invite them to be honest all the time, you know that they're bored, and you know yourself if what you are doing is boring. And you also know if you, as the teacher, are bored or excited. There is such a thing as emotional contagion.

**R:** Can we go back to what's the most important thing to be learned in a school like Brockwood? Krishnamurti set the big goal of setting humans unconditionally free, but what are the elements of learning within that, that you were kind of holding in your heart as you were working with students? Of what you wanted them to learn beyond the subject? About being?

**S:** The academic subject was always just incidental; the subject is an arena. It's learning about oneself; it's always learning about oneself, and in that there's always an importance about learning about relationships, fears, desires, conditioning and reactions. I mean if someone didn't remember any of the history I was teaching, I couldn't care less if they were learning about themselves, and they really saw something about their lives that was what was important. The fact that Napoleon invaded such and such a city at such and such a date, who cares?

**R:** Would there be a danger in that approach, even in holistic education, it becomes almost self-centered learning?

**S:** Well, this is a good subject for contemplation. What is the difference between self-examination and narcissism? [long pause]

**R:** Well, are you asking me, or are you just putting it as a question to hold?

**S:** I'm putting it to you as a question to hold because it's a complex question and it's a question that needs to be approached if one is to answer your question.

**R:** It feels like there's an edge that's always asserting one's own opinion; I feel strongly since returning to this country that people are really good at that. 'I think this, and I think that,' and it feels like if I'm encouraging self-reflection, there's got to be a way to do it that's not encouraging that narcissism.

**S:** Yes, otherwise it's not self-examination, and I agree with you about the increase of opinions in our current time. I think it's all part of the obsession with identity that we currently have, and identity is just an extension of the ego as far as I can see, and it is just destructive.

**R:** So, do you think Krishnamurti's teachings were such that it's not sidestepping the issue, but it got people to look more carefully beyond identity and ego? So that when they were in your classrooms, you didn't have to deal with some of that?

**S:** Oh, well, you have to deal with it, but it's an open question. In our current society, in most of us, it's not an open question, it is an absolute certainty that identity is important, and that you have to assert your identity...

**R:** And with different identities it gets confusing too; it gets very confusing...

**S:** It's actually a very flawed concept, and I think that of the many, many certainties nowadays which are absolutely toxic, the certainty about the value of identity is right at the top of the heap.

**R:** Can you be more specific about what you mean by identity?

**S:** This is who I am, as if "I" as an entity exists. Yes, my body exists; yes, my brain exists but this whole ego, this whole sense of identity, let's say...

**R:** What about cultural identity? We all come from different cultures and respecting that I'm from Thailand or Turkey or India, isn't that an important part of education?

**S:** No. An important part of education is questioning that. And let's just take your identity, okay? Your cultural identity when you were 10, 12, 13, 14 has ceased to exist.

**R:** I still appreciate some of the songs I learned or...

**S:** It doesn't matter that you appreciate some songs, that's not the cultural identity that you had when you were 10, 11, 12, even if you appreciate the same songs. But your cultural identity now is completely different from the cultural identity you had then.

**R:** I'm a little different than the average person because I've traveled so much at this point. There are a lot of people that I'm teaching here in southern Oregon who were born, raised, grew up here; this is their local culture, it's a part of who they are, and [their identity] hasn't gone through as many shifts as what I've gone through.

**S:** And I'm saying that's a pity because cultural identity may be important to the people who will hold that identity, but it is still a toxic certainty...

## Part 2: Follow-up Interview

### Considering the Importance of Relationships in Learning

**R:** Thanks for agreeing to continue our conversation. I had been looking over the notes during the last 20 minutes from our prior conversation and one of the things that stood out to me was a comment that you made about the importance of the teacher-student relationship. How you explained it, it sounds like it's more important than what students are learning. I also know from many past conversations with you that one of the things you like to quote is Goethe who said, "You only learn from those you love."

**S:** Exactly.

**R:** And that just has stuck with me for many years and yet it doesn't make it easier to teach necessarily and yet going back to that premise seems so important. I wondered if you could talk more about why those student-teacher relationships are so important and what does it really mean to love your students?

**S:** Well, first of all, I think that to talk intelligently about education, one has to make a distinction between teaching and learning. I have said to teachers around the world when I have talked with them that teaching is irrelevant; it's learning that matters. I could, for instance, teach you a brilliant class in Chinese, if I spoke Chinese, which I don't, but if you don't speak Chinese you wouldn't learn anything, it didn't matter how brilliantly I taught it. So, Goethe is saying that we only learn from those we love. Now, this is distinct from saying we can only be trained by those we love. Fear is used for training a lot; it's used in the army; it's used for training animals; you know, like the old lions performing in zoos, etc. You can train an animal with fear, you can train a person with fear but that's distinct from learning.

To learn, there has to be a certain comfort with vulnerability on the students' part; they have to say and be comfortable saying, "I don't know," which is a very vulnerable thing. I think one has to openly admit that one doesn't know something in order to be open to learning it. This requires a certain amount of trust on the students' part to have that vulnerability, and to be comfortable with that vulnerability. And it requires a kind of relationship that a student is able to really extend themselves in their not knowing to the point where their brain is open to making new connections that it's never made before.

We are, after all, in holistic education, interested in students learning things that are meaningful to them and making meaning is always about making connections.

Also, there's a tremendous amount of learning that goes on by teachers modeling things. Teachers have to be able to say that they don't know, that, "Well, I know how to do this mathematical formula or equation, but I don't know the best way to convey it to you. So can we try and discover this together?" Even though it's unspoken, there's a tremendous amount of modeling, and that modeling only works if the student wants to learn from something that's modeled. If the student is fearful of the teacher, dislikes the teacher, or is even indifferent to the teacher, they aren't going to want to follow anything that that teacher is modeling. So there has to be the openness to another that love generates. Does this make sense?

**R:** It does make sense. Is openness and love the same thing, or can you be open without love? Where you like the student...



**S:** I don't think they're the same thing, but they're related. You can't not be open to someone you love. You can be open to someone that you just want something from and that you don't love but that's a kind of ...an exchange; it's an instrumentalism that we have too much of in our world.

#### About the Krishnamurti Educational Research Project

**R:** I was wondering too -- you've got a kind of a project that you're doing right now related to Krishnamurti and education. Could you tell me more about that?

**S:** Well, yes, of course I can. Let me begin by saying that I have been a steadfast and ardent student of Krishnamurti's teachings about education for 50 years. I don't know of anyone alive who knows more about Krishnamurti's work on education than I. I hope that there are many, but I don't know of any.

But if you were to ask me, "So did Krishnamurti speak differently about education in the 20s and the 30s and the 40s and the 50s and the 60s and the 70s and the 80s?" I would have to say that I believe so because I have anecdotal memories of him speaking in different ages. But I couldn't really tell you intelligently what those differences are. Or if you were to ask me, "Did he speak differently to students in India and America and Europe and even South America?" I would have to say: I think so, but I only have some anecdotal things I could say. I can't really tell you how he spoke differently. Or if you were to ask me, "Did he speak differently to students and teachers and trustees of the schools and foundations?" I would have to say I think so, but I couldn't tell you exactly what that difference is. Now, for me to have to admit that these fundamental questions are ones I can't answer, strikes me as just very wrong.

And so, using an intellectual tool called discourse analysis, I have thought that I should do a discourse analysis of all of the talks and discussions going back to the 20s until the end of his life on education with educators [and with students, parents, and school trustees]. I am very fortunate that I have everything; it's the equivalent, I think, of more than 100 books, maybe 130 books, maybe 140 books. So, it's a tremendous amount of material, and all of these things require a kind of conceptual or intellectual backbone that you can use for coding.

**R:** Can I ask more about why it is important how he spoke differently in the 1920s and 30s than how he spoke in the

60s and 70s? And why is it important how he spoke differently to different groups? Because we all adjust how we talk to different groups of people, so why do you think it's so important, so "fundamental" is what you call it?

**S:** Because I have from my own 50 years of study and from listening to him talking in America, India and Europe, I have a strong suspicion that he wasn't saying different things, but it sounds different because the language changes. So, to actually get down to what he was really trying to convey, one has to get past the peculiarities of the expression, the peculiarities of the time, the peculiarities of the audience.

To do that means that you have to dig into all of them, so that's kind of what is at the root of this project. Especially because we, being the kind of beings that we are and suffering from the education we've suffered from, glom on to different quotes and different expressions and think, "This is what Krishnamurti was really saying." Well, those were the words he used at a particular time in a particular place with a particular audience, but to think that that expression conveys a fundamental truth, I think it is a mistake.

**R:** Now, toward the end of his life, if I am recalling correctly, I might be wrong, but I feel like he spoke to the people in the Foundations when he was having conversations that, and this is not from me having been there or anything, but from having [transcribed and] read a lot of Mary's memoirs, I thought he really didn't want people to interpret his teachings, that even the Foundation was really tasked with...

**S:** Yes.

**R:** So, they were tasked with distributing the teachings but not interpreting them.

**S:** Correct.

**R:** So, what you're doing, could that be seen as some interpreting of things?

**S:** Only if someone doesn't understand it. If I say that, which is true, during the independence movement of India when he was speaking to the students in Indian schools, he made a great distinction between political independence and the kind of psychological freedoms that he had always spoken about; that they are not the same thing. Now I feel I can say that quite clearly, and I'm not interpreting him, I'm not saying what freedom is for him. But, I'm saying that in the 1940s around the time of Indian independence, he was

really clear about making this distinction to the students in his schools.

**R:** So, it's almost more of a historic analysis?

**S:** Well, I don't think of it as historic, although you know being living creatures we are captured in time most certainly, but this is not trying to look at the history of the development of his language. It's trying to say things like: "He spoke..." – I'm just making this up – "He spoke in 30 percent of his talks with students and teachers about conditioning." I'm not interpreting and saying what he meant by conditioning; I'm just saying in 30 percent of his talks he talked about conditioning. So, we might think, if we're interested in Krishnamurti's approach to education, what percent of our class time today do we talk about conditioning? Or invite students to look at their conditioning?

**R:** Do we talk about it and use a different word? I'm just.. I'm just trying to think if we do sometimes...

**S:** You know then if you do; you would have to say what it is we mean by our words. But if you say what he meant by his words, that gets into interpreting.

**R:** Right.

**S:** I would just say that here's a subject area, now we can look and try and figure out what we think individually, then openly acknowledge what our understanding is of what Krishnamurti meant by conditioning, then we are talking about our understanding and not saying "this is what he meant." If we have collected a lot of material about Krishnamurti talking with students and teachers and trustees about conditioning, and share through discussion of what we individually understand, then we might deepen our individual senses of what he was saying.

And then we have to ask, do we give attention to that in our schools at all? I personally don't think so. Except when we're trying to condition students when we want them to think a certain way, or behave in a certain way along certain political lines, religious lines, or certain cultural lines.

**R:** Or where sometimes when we're talking about B.F. Skinner and how we're getting away from B.F. Skinner and Behaviorism which was all about conditioning and how we're moving toward Constructivism and other approaches to education where students are making meaning.

**S:** Yes, I wish us well with that. We have not made much progress as far as I can say.

**R:** So yeah, we still use a lot of rewards and punishments...

**S:** All the time.

**R:** So, tell me more about...you've already done a deep analysis of six authors historically from your Oxford research that really looked at some of the fundamentals, the nature and precedence of holistic education, that you had published in 2003 and I think you finished your Oxford research in 199...

**S:** 1999.

**R:** Okay, will that influence how you're doing this at all?

**S:** Well, I have a feeling that anything that we do which is deeply meaningful to us, and my dissertation was deeply meaningful to me, it influences us. Anything we do, from things that we'd rather not admit that we did to things that we're proud that we did, I think they all influence us; but this is not an offshoot of my doctoral work. But certainly, discourse analysis is something that I learned about as a research tool when I was at Oxford.

**R:** Well and you also came to conclusions about sagacious competence that seems really important even to the extent that maybe it's the other way around, that your work with Krishnamurti influenced how you did your doctorate.

**S:** Hugely, hugely. My work with Krishnamurti and his work on education influenced my doctoral work completely.

### Some Core Elements of Holistic Education versus Mainstream Schools

**R:** Is there anything you can say now, in terms of some key topics and issues, that Krishnamurti talked about especially with students and teachers? Other than when he talked with the public audiences? What were for him the essence and core elements of holistic education? Or I assume what he talked about most, so what were those?

**S:** Well, he talked about relationships in the school a lot. Not just between the teachers and the students but between everybody.

He also talked a lot about the importance of the environment. When you see that schools are painted inside

with vomit green and vomit yellow and the furniture is supposed to be unbreakable, and of course it's just a hideous environment, a hideous environment. I often feel I wouldn't want to put a dog in those environments. There's no beauty, there's no care, there's no invitation! Schools do not invite students to take care of them. Schools do not invite students to be sensitive to them. Schools do not invite students to respect them.

**R:** Their environment, you mean?

**S:** The environment, the physical places. And there's a whole [historic issue] about architecture where for a long time there was a feeling that the bottom of school windows had to be up high enough so that students couldn't look out and see things. They could only look up and see the sky. What is that about?! The environment is not asking students to look at things. Or they don't want students to look at anything that the teacher isn't showing them because the teachers are so boring that they can't have any competition, like some birds outside or some dogs running across the fields?

Anyway, I don't want to be too harsh on anybody but it's just the public schools that I grew up in, really, they were not places I would want any child to go to, and I wasn't in poor schools. I also have to tell you I saw many astonishing things in exhibitions when I was at Oxford, and I remember a particular exhibition that was an architecture exhibition that was looking at the evolution of architectures of three institutions from the 1700s until the 20th century and those three institutions were prisons, insane asylums, and schools. The extent to which their architecture looked similar from the 1700s until the 20th century was horrifying. Shortly after seeing this, I was visiting my parents in Tucson, Arizona and when we were in a poorer neighborhood we were driving by a building, I said to my dad, "That looks like a very small prison," and he said, "No, no, it's an elementary school." Bars on windows, barbed wire on the top of fences, you know....

**R:** The thing is, though, we have lots of examples now, not just Krishnamurti schools, there are really beautiful schools all around the world. I have worked with one, and I've visited other beautiful schools. It's not like we don't know the importance of the aesthetic environment to learning. And the same with all elements of holistic education, it's not like we don't know. But it's almost like there's some other reason that keeps schools from really changing and

modifying themselves and maybe partly it's economic, but what's your theory on why schools do not change?

**S:** I think it's because the people who are in charge of physically creating schools don't take into account the students. I can remember that I had asked Keith Critchlow, who was the designer of the Krishnamurti Centre at Brookwood, to draw plans for some further school buildings. And he asked me some really interesting questions. He said, "Could you try and find out what the average stride is of a student at Brookwood? Can you figure out what their average height is when they're sitting down and standing up?" In other words, he wanted to make buildings for our school that fit the students. You know the width of the corridors, the length of the corridors, all of these things. When you think that Montessori was the first person who made child-sized school furniture... what? It took until then?

But I just don't think that we consider sufficiently the beings who are going to be occupied and shaped by the environment of school, the physical environment of schools.

**R:** You've talked about the environment as something and the aesthetics of the environment as being critical to how Krishnamurti was looking at education. What other elements are important to that approach to education? If we can call it an approach.

**S:** Well, Krishnamurti wanted all of his students, all of his schools, to start the day with some silence. They've had busy lives, they've come in from home, they've traveled together, they've been playing around the school field, etc. When school begins, we all get together for 10 minutes of silence, or maybe someone reads a poem, or someone plays some music. And he also suggested, all the time, that all classes begin with a few minutes of silence.

Somehow just being in silence, being silent, affects students psychologically and emotionally. And I think that's true and that's something that doesn't cost anything.

**R:** Right.

**S:** So, we could do it. There's also something about the teachers, the staff members being consciously aware of the atmosphere in a school and deliberately trying to make it positive. Schools I've been into have often felt hyperactive; some of them have even felt a bit violent. One of my ex-students, a lovely young man, who went off to teach in New York City in a poor area said that armed policemen had to walk around in pairs because a single armed policeman

was not safe. My cousin, bless him, who had been an advocate and a supporter of the Black Panthers since the 60s, was really dedicated to education for minorities and in the roughest areas, was a black belt karate expert, taught in Oakland. He was hospitalized twice by students. That's an atmosphere which is not very conducive to holistic learning.

**R:** One of the things you talked about a lot in the last interview was how small the classes were [at Brockwood Park]. Do you think that to have a holistic school you have to have small classes, or is it possible to facilitate learning in other ways where you don't necessarily have to have small classes but you rearrange things and maybe get away from the class model altogether? Because it's very expensive to have very small classes.

**S:** I think proper education is expensive. I don't know what's possible and impossible, I really don't. I know that for myself when I had more than seven students in a class I was talking AT the class, I wasn't talking WITH the different students.

I can talk AT more than a thousand people at a time, I've done it. But I'm not talking WITH anybody. And if I'm trying to talk with somebody, which to me is required in education – not in demonstrations, you can demonstrate to a hundred thousand people – but to talk *with*, to communicate *with*, my limit is seven. It's just my limitation; someone more gifted can possibly do more.

### Why is Conditioning So Important to Consider?

**R:** So, going back to the conditioning as one of the major topics that Krishnamurti talks about, how do we integrate that more into teacher education and why is it so important?

**S:** Well, imagine you have a student from a really, really conservative part of Texas and you have another student, same age, same sex, from Copenhagen. Now, are you going to say that their conditioning is not important? It's tremendously important. And that is what you have to face as a teacher, but it's also something that they have to face as a world citizen. They have to look at how coming from deeply red, rural Texas has affected their thinking and what they see and don't see, or coming from Copenhagen how that affects what they see and don't see. And how they think and feel. If those two people are to have a relationship with one another, they're going to have to relate to each other differently than they would relate to their peers back home

and they're going to have to figure that out. In the global world in which we live, we all have to figure that out.

**R:** Yeah, it's awfully difficult even for us as adults to navigate it.

**S:** Yes. It is. Most adults can't do it and most adults aren't interested in trying.

**R:** Right. How do we learn to care about that? Because maybe we're just not even caring and that's why we don't pay attention to it?

**S:** Well, I think we have to see the importance of our own conditioning, how it limits us, how it affects us, and how it hems us in. If we care about anything spiritual, if we care about any kind of psychological awakening, if we care about anything having to do with becoming the most we can be – we have to look at what hems us in and what influences has us looking at that and automatically reacting that that's bad and looking at that and automatically saying that's good – without understanding either!

**R:** Yeah, we have lots of reactions, that are “I like this and I don't like this.”

**S:** All the time, and “This is good and that's bad.”

**R:** And they're not helpful conversations; it's me making judgments about the world.

**S:** No. They're not good at all. They don't help our conversations and they don't help us understand the world in which we live.

**R:** Right.

**S:** And they don't help us understand who we are as individuals, as humans, and how to face the many challenges that confront us.

**R:** So, with Krishnamurti in education, did he talk a lot about collaborative learning and how students were to work together?

**S:** He did not. He was not into the how-to of anything. But certainly, he talked a lot about people working together, people thinking together, people looking together, people questioning together. So, there's a kind of an implication that he might have favored collaborative learning, but that's only an implication.

### Structures, Changes, and What Schools Must Consider

**R:** Right. I've heard it called the "methodless method." A long time ago I read an article someone wrote on Krishnamurti and education, called "the methodless method." That's kind of contrary to how we approach education now too. I can't imagine someone promoting or creating schools who doesn't have an approach of how we're going to do this.

**S:** Well, you have to have certain things. You have to say, "All right we're going to start the day at 8 o'clock," you have to have some kind of how-to. You have to have some kind of method, and I would disagree with the title. I don't think you can call it a "methodless method" for one because it's an oxymoron, but also because it implies a structure or an importance to a lack of structure. And that was not how Krishnaji lived and not how he wanted any of his schools to operate that I know of.

**R:** So, there was a basic structure in every school?

**S:** There was a basic structure.

**R:** But how teachers in India approached the learning process with students was different than at Brockwood Park or at Oak Grove, so there wasn't a how-to in the teaching methodology?

**S:** No, or in anything. There weren't agreements between the schools on really hardly anything. But then I think that there shouldn't be. You have to respond to the students you have in front of you. When I was at Brockwood for 21 years, Brockwood changed all the time. It was important that it changed. It was important that it changed with the times; it changed with the different students that came.

**R:** Last time you talked about how the structure was fairly similar in terms of the school day and things. What were the big changes that you were noticing?

**S:** Well, I was just speaking to my wife a few days ago about the fact that in the 70s was when the whole ecological concern began, there was a tremendous concern about overpopulation – The Limits of Growth report. At that time, I noticed an anxiety creeping into students that did not exist before. The students were being told [by the media, etc.] in a thousand different ways that they were going to be handed a totally damaged planet overrun by way too many people that couldn't be fed. And so we would have huge

migration issues and necessary violence, "Here's your world. Good luck with it."

What does a 14-year-old do with that? They get worried; they get anxious; they think they might not have a future. There was even at one point in my being there in England, there was a very nice boy, a student, who was really concentrating as much as he could on art. He wasn't very good, and at one point, I think I might have been principal at the time, at one point I said to him, "I'm just curious why you are pursuing art so strongly," and he said to me, "Well, the way the world is going, I don't think I'm going to have a job that really fulfills me, and I'll live on social security," which in England is quite generous, "so I'm just learning things that I'll want to do to amuse myself." So, that was his education plan.

I struggled. I struggled to talk about doing something meaningful or finding, but I came away thinking that it's really hard to argue with him with all that he's been fed, with all that he's been told, with his current worldview. I could talk about trying to be a productive member of society, I could talk about "Yes, well, don't give up, you might find something that's meaningful that you can earn a living by, and pursue the academics that are most close [to your interests]." I could talk about anything, but I'm really just trying to talk him out of his current plan. I wasn't sure I had anything really substantive to offer him.

**R:** What happened to him?

**S:** He went to art school.

**R:** Even art you have to have some passion to do it well. Well, but you don't have to do it well, you can just do it.

**S:** You can just do it.

**R:** That's kind of sad.

**S:** Yeah, it broke my heart. He was a really nice boy.

**R:** But you didn't feel it was your responsibility to try to get him to shift his worldview?

**S:** Well, I did feel it, which is why I came up with some things I was trying to say, but I couldn't convince even myself that I was offering him anything given what the world was telling him.

**R:** Well, again, going back to what is the importance that Krishnamurti brought to education. He created ten schools and he oversaw them in his lifetime on three different continents. Why was what he was doing so important to what we need to understand better now?

**S:** Well, he really was, to everything I have understood, talking about a really radically different approach to education. He was talking about holistic education before that was even a phrase.

With the world changing so quickly, we have to consider what is the ultimate development of any single human being. It's not like we all have to have the same goal or the same idea of what ultimacy is; Ultimacy as coined by Paul Tillich as an expression meaning the greatest development a person can achieve or the greatest engagement a person can aspire to. We all have notions of ultimacy; otherwise, we can't have cultural heroes, we can't have saints, etc. But we don't really have anything built into our education that might help a student discover what ultimacy is for them. That ultimately was what Krishnamurti, I think, was talking about. If we aren't helping students do that, then we end up creating education that can just lead to mediocrity at best, but also corruption and violence. I always say that look at the biggest criminals in our current history, people like Bernie Madoff or the Enron people or the high-level crooks that we've had, they've all gone to the best schools. But I would say that they're not educated. They're highly schooled but not educated.

We have to think about how people might learn goodness, might learn about love, might learn about beauty, might learn about compassion, and really, really deeply learn about themselves. And if education is not doing that, I don't know that it's doing anything meaningful.

**R:** So, we need education that's geared around the highest human values?

**S:** And the highest possible human development.

### Education and Sustainability

**R:** All right, there's one topic I just realized we didn't talk about at all. You might have used the word once, but we haven't talked about it. What about education and sustainability? Do schools have a responsibility to help students learn how to make their lives and the world a little

bit more sustainable? Because we're facing a massive issue right now with the changing environment – that it's not sustainable.

**S:** You see that's part of the anxiety I identified in the 70s.

**R:** [laughing] That's the new anxiety beyond what was from the 1970s.

**S:** It's just continued, and the number of young people I have met in the last 10 years who have anxiety, it's amazing. I grew up not being anxious about anything. Now I might have just been a complete dummkopf, and I will go along with that, but I had no anxieties about anything. And nowadays, yes, sustainability, it's important. But if you are trying to solve sustainability through anxiety, you might not be able to do it. You might need to be looking, first, at your response to the world, your response to your environment, your response to yourself, your response to your fellow humans. Yes, I can make my little garden sustainable, but I mean...

**R:** Yeah, it does need to be a much bigger thing, and bigger than education too. Right?

**S:** Yes, but it all begins much closer to home.

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### Author Acknowledgement

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