

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**URMILA SAMSON**

My current favourite definition of education is: engaging with everything living and non-living. It is possible that in India our curriculum makers would, hearing this, jump to list everything living and non-living and then only consider our education complete once a student has engaged with everything. Finding this impossible, we could subscribe to the Indian concept of Karma and attempt this task of 'engaging with everything' over several life times! Before you dismiss all this as frivolous, please just for a moment consider this rather impossible view of education, for among other things, it does bring us in awe before the infinite possibilities of learning.

My limiting education requires me to put down thoughts in linear fashion. Left to right, top to bottom, up again, left to right, down to the bottom and so on. This makes me wonder how damaging this pattern has been for the evolution of the brain. The more highly educated one is, the more one has forced one's brain to read and then write thoughts arranged in this repeated pattern. We know through many sources that learning happens non-linearly; that we should further develop the ability to perceive things holographically. The following are the headings that pop in to my school-trained brain, though I do so wish I could think and write in different patterns, colours and textures:

- Collaborating with the universe.
- Collaborating with the self.
- Collaborating with spouse and children.
- Collaborating with loved ones.
- Taking it beyond immediate circles.

Research is usually looked upon as separating phenomena from its natural realm to study in isolation. It is surprising that this view of research is still so highly upheld in spheres where it doesn't really apply, after we know that even the introduction of an observer tends to influence the observed. I am not this kind of researcher. I am a mother who lives in urban India and among many other things, never sent her children to school. All that I write is subjective, and in a sense, and at least in my world, I wonder how anything can be considered objective at all!

In September 1992 when my first baby, a daughter, was born we had no books in the few English book stores on education. We still don't. If you ask for the section on education, you will find a mountain of books on management, on how to crack examinations and all manner of books connected to school and college curricula. It so happened that a friend of mine in the '80s had a collection of books by John Holt, Ivan Illich, Paolo Freire et al that had had a strong influence on my mind. I began to feel that the worst place for children to grow and learn would be school. This was further confirmed by my experiences teaching in seven schools over ten years before my first child was born. Apart from there being only a few books, there were no PCs or internet (or even cell phones) until after my third child was born. So I had no idea that there was anyone else in the world who had chosen not to send their children to school.

Of course we live in India, where many children do not go to school. And let us remember that before the advent of schools, everyone learned and grew without schools! This is an important point to note, and I hope we are fast approaching a world where children will not be required to go to school, but will have school as an option, with various kinds of schools and non-school places to work-play-learn in and more importantly, out. How did these few books and stray influences reach me, a not very highly educated mother-to-be? This and countless examples in my own, my husband's, my children's and others' lives inevitably leads me to believe that the universe is collaborating with, working through, and in fact is us. But because of this illusory 'separate sense', our starting point would be to 'collaborate with'. This possibility of collaboration with the universe is not only possible, but actually happening in everyone's lives. It's just that we do not see it until we begin

collaborating with our deeper, inner selves. Learn the Self, so to speak. The 'how' of this important starting point of education follows.

Each person seems to have an inbuilt curriculum, a group of interests, talents, capabilities unique to that person alone. Our unschooling experiences have led me to believe that if children are allowed to grow in freedom (well relative freedom, because that's all we, as a society seem ever able to manage) then they will collaborate with the Self, the Other and the Universe, naturally; remain in alignment with their inner curriculum, the community and the universe. The moment we convince them that something else is more important to learn or do than what they are naturally drawn to, or rather, when we take them away from the moment, the fragmentation begins. When we teach them behavior they must adopt to integrate in to society, the disintegration of their natural alignment begins. Rural or perhaps tribal indigenous children do not go through this artificial separation. The beauty and great significance of remaining in alignment is that there is a natural deepening of understanding of one's gifts. Each child/student/person naturally spends time honing skills and talents, following interests and strengthening what one already is. Understanding of interdependency follows naturally, as each is strong in one or more fields and understands that through the sharing of our gifts can we not only survive but thrive. On the other hand the danger of fragmentation of the being, the self, as we see around us today is the ever deepening fear and insecurity that comes from a weakening of the self due to early separation from self and the moment, in which, and with which, the self is engaged. This leads to irrational tendencies towards self protection. This attempt to protect the self has far reaching negative consequences, right from the need to acquire more money, property and possessions, to trying to feel more and more powerful than everyone else, the need to compete rather than collaborate, the need to bully each other at personal, national and international levels, and sadly the inability to be sensitive to others' needs, others' pain. Worst of all, to be disconnected from the understanding of our interconnectedness with everything living and non-living; the very basis of learning, which I see as fundamental to the quality of evolution and progress.

The negative connotation of power I just mentioned is diametrically opposite to the power that comes from human potential being unleashed both individually and collectively. Something that has become imperative at this point in our evolution.

The smallest unit and probably the most powerfully influential learning comes from our personal interactions, and the ones we interact most with are with those closest to us: the family. In tribal and other small communities, the whole village or community raises the child. On the other hand, urban nuclear families can either be a disaster for raising children, or a haven within which a child may safely experiment and explore, and from which a child can gradually increase forays into the world. Not all children have families, though; all families do not provide safe havens. But one thing is sure, and that is that the world of people that immediately surrounds a child is the most powerful in its holistic influence over a child's whole being. Friends who understand the deep importance of traditional knowledge systems and wisdom, who are trying to safe guard it from the grave danger of it being lost within a generation, say that an important way to preserve biodiversity is to preserve the transmission of traditional knowledge through home education (or life-learning as it is sometimes called) in remote areas where modern education has thankfully not yet reached. In our rush to educate everyone, we are misunderstanding the whole concept of learning and confining it to the uni dimensional market-driven concept that may soon have the whole world eating the same food, speaking the same language, wearing the same clothes, vying for the same resources to deplete with no hope of renewal. Furthermore we are being separated from many other ways of being that do not fit in with the dominant culture. Ways of being that are gentle and wise, integrated and deeply meaningful.

I am not the sort of person who would keep people from 'modernization' or would keep people from 'advancing'. I imagine that if children, rural, urban and tribal, are allowed to grow in freedom, there are internal forces, the evolutionary impulse, that will steer them towards sustainable life styles - thirsting for traditional knowledge, lowered material needs, building of interdependent community, inner and outer searching for truth and meaning...I say 'imagine', because there are fewer and fewer adults who understand how to 'allow children to grow in freedom'. It is a tricky business. Many will think I mean laissez-faire, do whatever they wish, but that may lead to something frightening akin to *The Lord of the Flies*, perhaps! Whereas I like to imagine children being surrounded by adults with a higher consciousness, or heightened awareness. We are getting into even trickier territory here! Parents, (teachers), care givers who Know how to Be with children and Know how to let children Be. At least for the early years until children, at any age, begin to feel the need to learn more specific things, which is when all kinds of teachers can be useful. Is there something other than a teacher's degree that we can think of to qualify people to be around children? Some new criteria not based on studying in an institution, that qualifies people who are allowed to Be with and

around children. On the other hand, all through life, all kinds of people, situations and things are teachers. Mistakes are very good teachers! Learning never ends. An individual should be able to separate certain kinds of learning for certain practical purposes, for a specific time period, short or long, according to the need of the student, or rather, the call from within the self. The dominant view of education now revolves around curricula prescribed by 'the other', who know nothing of the individual, 'the self', and which is mostly aimed at preparing students to run the existing dominant (and increasingly dominating) system. I believe that children growing up in alignment and without being repeatedly torn from the moment, would grow up asking for a very different education of which an integrated future of Gaia would be a natural consequence.

There is the learning that can happen purely through engagement; learning that happens through approaching a person who is good at something; learning through trying all sorts of combinations of things; learning that happens through every pore of the physical, mental, etheric and other bodies every waking and sleeping moment. There are teachers who don't realize they are teaching; teachers who draw things out from a student. Teachers who are gifted at teaching the most complex things to the most tardy student by making it somehow broken down or just plain fascinating. Eccentric teachers with whom the student has to go through hell and back to learn what it is the teacher has to teach. There are teachers who learn from the student how they would like to be taught, and teachers who teach through learning themselves. There are spiritual teachers who teach through parables, exercises, puzzles or lengthy discourses. And those who say that nothing can be taught.

In 2004, after over a decade of being lost in family, motherhood and the confusions of doing something completely against the tide, I was invited to share my experiences at a conference on Indian Psychology at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pudducherry, (then Pondicherry). Presenters were mostly PhD degree holders or PhD students. Having no formal higher education myself, I had never written a paper before or even made a presentation. My friend who had invited me helped me through the process once I got a whole lot of thoughts down. This process was an invaluable learning experience for me on many levels, forcing me to delve into the past decade of experiences, not only at the superficial level of what happened at home, but the multi layered experience of what happens when children do not go to school; all the intricate layers of thought, emotion, questions about relevance, learning and Being in the world. By the time I arrived at the Samadhi of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother I felt, where I sat down in silent meditation, turned inside out, transformed. At the moment I am learning a lot through engaging with various communities. The unschooling community worldwide, the home education community in India, and a very special community called Learning Societies. Through sharing personal stories related to home education with young families who are starting off on this rather uncharted route, it is almost therapeutic for me to re-live, recall, and recount our family experiences. This sharing is a whole different level of learning altogether. The meeting of hearts when there is a shared experience or sudden insight, the touching of minds, the direct and seamless acceptance in to the intimate circle of another family, the smiles of children who know that we care so much about their well being...We are together learning about love, in love.

Almost twenty years ago, in India, there were no other families home educating by choice like us. Over the years we came across a few families, although so scattered, that we have barely been in touch. Over the internet after almost a decade into unschooling, I discovered that there are thousands of families in the US and Australia who had chosen this path, and also that what we were doing is called 'unschooling'. How I tumbled into unschooling I am not really sure. I am aware that there were constant cycles of gut wrenching experiences, inner work, discussions and arguments with any and everyone and most profound and multi layered learning through the close relationship shared with my husband and children. The most difficult, deep learning that caused me to keep questioning and re thinking everything was my engagement with my children. I could not call anything a fact or a truth and hold on to it for safety anymore, because each secure belief when held up to the light of stark honesty that only children possess, it would crumble. There came a time when I was throwing out so much that I was terrified that the baby would go out with the bathwater. Though that never happened, I often felt on the brink, as if I too were drowning! The babies, however, grew and thrived, and so did I. Only it was an ever shifting 'I' that no longer knew what was 'up' or 'down', 'left' or 'right', or even 'wrong' and 'right', and where was this 'I' in relation to it all...The 'I' began to lose the 'who' that it needed to survive. This is when I started talking about the difference between the 'rishi' let go and the 'hippie' let go. I have nothing against hippies, and in some ways consider myself part rishi, part hippie! But just for the sake of explanation, I would say that people are afraid to 'let go' in case it leads to deterioration. That would be a kind of passive 'hippie' let go. Whereas the 'rishi' let go is an alert form of letting go with full active awareness. It is a stripping away of everything irrelevant, and when this learning process starts, there is no knowing what will be left.



Urmila Samson is a whole being learner and mother in an unschooling family. Her main work right now is changing the current dominant perception of education and learning, through conversations, relationships, self search and healing. She has unschooled her 3 children Sahya g 19, Rayn b15 and Niom b11, together with her husband, extended family and community in Pune, India, where she lives. urmilasamson@gmail.com