

EDUCATION OF THE MIND AND THE SOUL

(A Visit to Hariharananda Balashram , Odisha ,India)

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"There are some parts of the world that, once visited, get into your heart and won't go. For me, India is such a place. When I first visited, I was stunned by the richness of the land, by its lush beauty and exotic architecture, by its ability to overload the senses with the pure, concentrated intensity of its colors, smells, tastes, and sounds. I had been seeing the world in black & white and, when brought face-to-face with India, experienced everything re-rendered in brilliant technicolor."
Keith Bellows, National Geographic Society.

Keith Bellows has captured my reflection on my recent visit to India. I too was stunned by the richness and beauty of the land, the ancient architecture and the people. The beauty of the fabrics and grandeur of the temples were awe inspiring however, these are dwarfed when compared to the richness in the “the color” of the souls of the many people we encountered. As I revisit our experiences and tell of our adventures, the stories that are more often told are of the spirit of kindness and humble generosity of our many hosts. I write this with some caution, hoping that this limited description will appropriately communicate the respect and awe that I feel for those who welcomed us and shared their world so freely. To say the experiences were profoundly moving is an understatement and I’m surprised at how difficult it is to appropriately capture the full emotion and impact of the visit.

I had the good fortune to travel to India with colleagues from Fresno State to visit schools and teacher preparation programs in various cities. Dr. Jyothi Bathina arranged for the travels and visits. The highlight of the trip was when we got a glimpse into the work she had been doing with students who are attending a boarding school at the Hariharananda Balashram. Dr. Bathina had collaborated with teachers and students there for a number of years and recently she published a book with students as part of her “Literate Voices” project, titled *The Flood, the Bear, and the Dog*. We got in on this most auspicious occasion when the book was presented to the young authors and teachers and other friends of the Balashram.

Our travels to Hariharananda Balashram from Bhubaneswar foreshadowed a day that would be unlike any other I had ever experienced. Our bus was diverted from the main highway as government Opposition Party supporters in the state of Odisha staged a strike, blocking the highway we needed to travel with many large transport trucks. Our bus was re-directed to go down a small road that ran near the main highway. It actually was a turn of tremendous good luck to have to take this detour. We got to see the beautiful villages along the way up much more closely. We watched people as they worked at harvesting rice and other tasks of tending fields and gardens. In one small village, we were greeted by local residents, who were curious about our large bus passing through. One man stepped to the middle of the intersection and held up his hand bringing our bus to a halt. We assumed this was an act of solidarity with the others striking and blocking the main highway. The crowd began to grow around this man and a sort of standoff began. Our bus driver and guide attempted to negotiate with the man but he was not to be moved. He crossed his arms and stood his ground showing full commitment to keeping the bus from going through. There were suggestions made that someone might just pull the man to the side and we could carry on. Thankfully, this wasn’t the solution. A young man with a knit hat and Hindu markings

on his fore head emerged from the group and came directly and dramatically to the man who was standing in the road. The young man took the protester's face in his hands in a most gentle and loving way. Whatever was said caused the older man to step aside without anger and he let the bus continue. This was a profound and gentle moment. We had just witnessed an act of peacemaking unlike anything I have ever seen before.

The blessings only got larger that day. One of the Monks Swami Achalananda Giri, from the Hariharananda Balashram joined us along the way and provided an escort to our bus leading us from the back of a motorcycle. When we arrived at the ashram, we were greeted as dignitaries and esteemed guests. It quickly became evident that we were in an extraordinary place with extraordinary children working under the guidance and care of extraordinary leaders and teachers. We were taken into the company of the school's principals and gurus to see this oasis that was created to educate and love children from the area who are orphaned or desperately disadvantaged. The children and teachers we met transcend any glowing description I can offer! This was a place full of color and life and love. The children were beautiful in all ways possible. We saw very young children in kindergarten chanting and singing their English lessons. We saw teachers using technology to enhance their lessons with media. We saw studious and focused middle school students hard at the work of algebra. These children did not look as if they bore the histories of abject poverty and pain that were told in Dr. Bathina's collection in *The Flood, the Bear, and the Dog*. They were thriving now! They learn three languages, they create beautiful art and dance and music. They have daily physical fitness and we even observed a martial arts class in action. This is a place where the whole child is educated; mind, body, and soul. There was a grace and gentleness in the teachers and leaders that mirrored the peace we had seen on the road. This seems to stem from the mutual respect for all taught by the school founders, the gurus.

The gurus we had the honor to meet embodied a caring and love for the children that was full and genuine and gorgeous. The simplicity of the lives they live and spiritual depth they show is literally awe inspiring. These are the people that the children describe in their stories that showed them a full-hearted kindness that made the invitation to come to school irresistible. "*Akash came closer, a little hesitant but attracted by the man's kind demeanor and gentle voice.*" I too was captured by the honest beauty of these spiritual leaders. Their humble smiles and unavoidable warmth welcomes all. It is a charisma that is powerful and yet subtle and light. Dr. Bathina's parents are both monks and we had the excellent good fortune to see their ashram, Hariharananda gurukulam in Puri as well. They are the most beautiful couple I have ever met. Their possessions fit into a colorful satchel and yet they are the richest people I know. They are servant leaders and teachers, dedicated to the transformative power of education. It is an education of the heart and the head, the mind and the soul. It is not just about doing well academically, but doing good to make the lives of others better.

The experience of being in India was overwhelmingly large and I fear this writing is underwhelmingly small in capturing all that it was. I will always hold this time in my mind and soul. I feel as if I was among holy people, some of whom were four years old and some of whom were advanced in age. You can't be among such beauty and not be transformed. The kindness we were shown was like new color on a pallet. I will stay with the task of making meaning for myself each time I describe the travels we took to others. We were challenged at the end of the trip by one of our colleagues to describe how our work will change because of our experiences. I'm grateful for this prompt as it forced me to synthesize the experience into future action. Here is my response: I will pass on a vision to future educators which

challenges them to teach others in their lives, not just to do well, but to do good. I want them to see the full color of kindness, and to understand the power and potential for good in all of their students. I hope to share a bit of India with my students with this calling.

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