

**Article entitled ‘Sri Atmananda Memorial School: from India to Texas’ published in the Journal ‘Paths of Learning’ by Torran Anderson (Spring edition, 2003):**

### **SRI ATMANANDA MEMORIAL SCHOOL: FROM INDIA TO TEXAS**

“As we circled over the squatter huts of New Delhi, the flight attendant asked me if I was coming to India for business or pleasure. I told her that my reason for coming to India was to study at an innovative school called Sri Atmananda Memorial School in the southern state of Kerala. Pressing her decorative bindi between her eyes, she quizzically asked me, “Why would you come to the most illiterate country in the world to study education?”

Before I could answer, the captain came over the intercom and told the crew to prepare for landing. As we abruptly bumped down on the runway, I realized that I needed to find the answer to her question for myself.

I grew up thinking that the purpose of education was to make one the most knowledgeable quiz show contestant possible. School didn’t nurture, challenge, or surprise me; if anything, I assumed that learning and boring were synonymous words. Later, as a graduate student studying education, I was still searching for education to expand beyond the four R’s and become autobiographically relevant.

My answer to finding the “real education” found me when I discovered a pamphlet about making education meaningful. Although I never made it to the workshop, a quote on the pamphlet grabbed my attention and has stayed with me:

*There is a latent push in any man which is only a search for perfection. Rightly pursued, one finds this in one’s awakening experience to one’s real nature through the atmosphere between the real teacher and the taught. Education is only an attempt towards this.*

---Sri Adwayananda (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon)

Copyright © 1987-2001 Sri K. Padmanabha Menon

The founder of the school wrote these words as the guiding principle for the school’s educational approach, the KPM Approach to Children. I discovered that this approach is focused not solely on the learning of the student or the instruction given by the teacher, but also, and perhaps more profoundly, on the intimate learning relationship developed between the teacher and the student. Intrigued and encouraged, I went to the southern state of Kerala, India’s most literate state, to study at Sri Atmananda Memorial School for ten months. My primary reason for going was to see the words that I had read put into practice and to get a sense of what education could be.

### **The History of Sri Atmananda Memorial School**

The school was named after the great South Indian Sage, Sri Atmananda (1883-1959), who was a family man, teacher, poet, lawyer, and superintendent of police. His son, Sri

Adwayananda (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon, 1911-2001), carried on Sri Atmananda's teaching and founded the school with the assertion that, "If you want to change the world, you have to start with education." The school's teachings approach, the KPM Approach to Children, takes its name from Sri K. Padmanabha Menon.

Sri Atmananda Memorial School is a K-12 private, non-sectarian, English-speaking school that accepts students from diverse religious and socio-economic backgrounds. Established in 1987, the school seeks to put into practice the ideal that education can change the world by fostering an atmosphere of acceptance, freedom, and love. In this regard, the KPM approach to Children reflects the 4,000-year-old Hindu educational tradition of honoring the profound relationship between teacher and student. The following are some of the basic tenets of the approach, as outlined by school administrators Sheridan Wilson and Suzanne Buckley in their handout, "The KPM Approach to Children":

- 1) The relationship between teacher and child is at the heart of the Approach. The teacher trusts the child with unfailing regard for the child's feelings and opinions.
- 2) The teacher is trained to see and enter the child's world.
- 3) Fundamental self-confidence is the main aim for small children. Academic development occurs at the child's own pace and is grounded in this self-confidence.
- 4) The children move freely in the school, choosing activities according to their interests.
- 5) The child has a sense of freedom, and limits are set without confrontation through common sense, a prepared environment, and redirection.
- 6) Instruction is introduced according to the interests of the child through activities and games that are encouraging, supportive, and non-competitive.

### **On the Playground**

Although I had read all of the school's literature about the KPM Approach to Children, it was only on the playground that I began to see this approach put into practice. On my first day on the playground, I was introduced to the senior teacher I was assigned to shadow. As we were talking, two boys came up to us and pulled me urgently to a hole they had been digging under a slide. Their interest in the hole shifted quickly to my dirty blond hair, so different from their own. The two boys began delicately brushing my dirty blond hair and giving me creative new hair-dos. As they smoothed my hair down over my eyes, one of the boys excitedly jumped up and said to his friend, "I have an idea, Let's give him a haircut!"

"Yes!" The other boy agreed and they ran off at great speed to get some scissors from the supply room.

I was trying to learn how to implement the KPM Approach to Children, but I didn't want a haircut. How could I allow their learning to be based on their specific interests and yet redirect in a positive way their desire to cut my hair? While waiting to face the two

young barbers, I thought of educator Parker Palmer's quote, "To learn is to face transformation." Of course, I didn't think that he was referring to hair transformation! Nevertheless, I did begin to see how his general principle was relevant to the present situation.

Across the schoolyard I viewed the two boys excitedly approaching with the shiny metal scissors, its blades reflecting the piercing Kerala sun. Luckily, the senior teacher and other experienced teachers were there to intervene when the boys arrived.

"Let's go make a wig and then cut it!" one of the teachers suggested. The children ran off with the teacher to find some yarn for the wig. As this story illustrated, it is not that "anything goes" at Sri Atmananda Memorial School; rather, within the freedom is a strong sense of guidance. No one told the two boys that it was wrong to give me a haircut; instead, one of the teachers suggested another option. Using the children's own interest, this teacher turned their desire in a positive direction. The teacher didn't control the students through fear-based discipline but guided them so that they could develop an inner discipline. For the students, in time heading in a positive direction becomes an ingrained habit rather than a forced behavior.

Later in the day, a boy named Michael took me by the hand and invited me into his game. Michael and his friends had created a large steering wheel out of cardboard and were using a wooden block as a gas pedal.

"It is a Sabarimala pilgrimage bus," Michael told me.

I entered the back of the bus. The driver slammed on the wooden block gas pedal and jerked the wheel frantically from side to side. The driver pushed down hard on the brakes, making a screeching sound with his voice. The bus stopped to pick up another teacher, who then sat down across from me. As we sped toward the Sabarimala temple, the teacher suggested, "We have been driving for a while. Do we need any gas?"

"Yes," one of the boys said, jumping out of the side of the bus. "I am the gas station man."

The game expanded, getting more involved. Over the course of an hour, we had filled up the gas tank twice, drawn a map to Sabarimala, and practiced a song that we were going to sing when we arrive. During the Sabarimala bus game, I watched the behavior of the teachers closely as they entered the children's world. Not once in the course of the game did a teacher say, "OK, enough role play, let's go inside and do math." Instead, the subject was introduced into and became part of the game. Measuring gas entailed the students' demonstrating their understanding of or need to learn particular math concepts. Similarly, drawing the road map involved the students' learning or demonstrating their knowledge of local geography. Ultimately, the game manifested the students' total immersion in their learning; academic learning---so often cut off from children's everyday experiences---was a natural extension of their play.

As a teacher trainee, I began to learn how to let students teach me what to teach them. My idea of the role of the teacher shifted as I began to focus more on how to enter the child's world and less on how to push my own thoughts and ideas upon the students. In the process of entering the child's world, I found myself learning and unlearning what I thought schools were supposed to accomplish.

### **Sri Atmananda Memorial School, Austin Branch**

After I returned from India, I began working at Sri Atmananda Memorial branch school in Austin, Texas. The branch school began as a result of the efforts of a social worker named Cliff Chapman and his wife Pattye Henderson, who had gone to Kerala with their family to conduct an evaluation of the Sri Atmananda Memorial School. While in India for six weeks, they enrolled their son in the school and noticed the change in his attitude about school as he became excited about learning. Before leaving India, they asked permission to start a branch school in Austin using the KPM Approach to Children. Since its inception in 1995, Sri Atmananda Memorial School in Austin has grown to become a private school for grades K-8. In February of 2002, the school launched its outreach foundation, the KPM Institute, to "bring about educational transformation through the KPM Approach to Children and its impact in educational thinking all the way from the classroom and playground to the level of government policy."

### **Back on the Playground**

On my first day as a teacher at the branch school I found myself in a familiar yet different looking environment. Instead of playing cricket, the children played tag; instead of dressing up in Saris, we dressed up in head bands and wizard capes. I watched a teacher approach a group of third grade boys who were flicking the lights on and off and scaring younger children.

"Hey guys, what's going on?" the teacher asked.

"Go away!" one boy shouted and huddled with his friends at the end of the hall. Another teacher came up and saw that they were drawing their own Yu-Gi-Oh cards and said, "Those are cool." The boy flicking the lights switch said, "Bring us some markers." The teacher came back with markers and sat and drew cards with them.

At the staff meeting at the end of the day, we talked about this group of boys intimidating younger students and brainstormed activities that might interest them. Third grade seemed to present particular challenges for them, because they felt too old for the Lower Primary Campus (K-3<sup>rd</sup>), yet they were too young for the Upper Primary Campus (4-6<sup>th</sup>). We continued to wrestle with this issue, brainstorming various options that might prove fruitful. As months passed, the teachers met at the end of every day, made weekly themes in connection with the children's expressed interest, and talked about how to deal with the transitional period of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students. It was decided that the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders would

spend one day a week at the Upper Primary campus for lunch and spend more time at their favorite place on campus, the creek.

I had the opportunity to go with the boys to the creek, where we searched for fish, toads, water snakes, and bugs. Walking along the edge of the school's property, we found the skeleton of an animal jaw. Returning to campus, we searched encyclopedias and the Internet to try to identify what sort of animal the bones could belong to. Triumphant with our find, the third graders shared their discovery with the younger students. The third grader's interest in bothering the younger students had been transformed into a learning opportunity in which the third graders taught the other students in the school about animal bones.

Strolling along the large ground of the campus after school, I paused in front of a bronze plaque next to the main doorway. It was the same plaque, with the same inscription that greets students each day whether they are in Austin or Malakara. Ultimately, for me the words were more than the school's mission statement. They were the inspiration through which I had first entered the doorway of my own most intimate and challenging learning:

“There is a latent push in any man which is only a search for perfection. Rightly pursued, one finds this in one's awakening experience to one's real nature through the atmosphere between the real teacher and the taught. Education is only an attempt toward this.”

Sri Adwayananda (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon)

Copyright © 1987-2001 Sri K. Padmanabha Menon

When she visited our school in Texas, Tarla Nanavati, the Headmistress of Sri Atmananda Memorial School in India, said that “coming to the branch school is like coming home.” It struck me that the home which Tarla spoke about is an atmosphere of learning in which education is not the memorization of facts but the facilitation of each individual's search for perfection.