

At the heart of all things, emptiness

An interview with educator Valentino Giacomini, who, along with fellow-educator Luigina de Biasi, has co-founded the Alice Project Universal Education schools in Sarnath and Bodh Gaya.

Interview for the magazine "mindfields": Amruta Patil

The school in Sarnath

It has been an early and restless summer. In nearby Varanasi, the watermark of the Ganga is low. And Sarnath's stark, beautiful Buddhist ruins are not swarming with tourists and pilgrims. The tree-fringed and spotlessly clean courtyard of the school is a refreshing change. It is swept as part of the morning routine of the students who live on campus.

The residential students also tend a kitchen garden, grow their own potatoes, and make their own meals. The courtyard is lined with prayer flags – some inscribed in Italian, some in Tibetan, some in Hindi. There is a stupa in the middle. There is a wall where images of Laxmi, Buddha and Jesus sit in peaceable conclave. Morning begins with a goat kid that wanders into the heart of the school assembly and brings the house down.

"There is a Stupa in the middle..."

Though it is orderly, there is an unselfconscious warmth about the place, a palpable lack of tension. "Ciao, Sir!" children in the corridor call out to Valentino – Italian is one of the foreign languages taught in this school, the only concession to the 'foreign' origins of the school founders.

My apprehensions about meeting a Westerner running a school for underprivileged children in rural Uttar Pradesh are quickly laid to rest. Valentino Giacomini is as Gandhian as they come. He has few material possessions, no time for small talk, and deals with the scorching heat and absence of creature comforts with more equanimity than most of my friends in Delhi ever could. I have been forewarned that he doesn't suffer fools. It is soon obvious that the peppery, matter-of-fact facade conceals great thoughtfulness.

A boy who looks distracted in class is intuitively diagnosed as being faint with hunger - there was no food in his home - and is served up a quick breakfast without fuss or fanfare. When he speaks, Valentino dives right into the heart of the conversation. We do not talk about his and Luigina's continued struggle to find funds for the school, the number of times they've dipped into personal resource, or the dismissive attitude occasionally meted out by visa-issuing authorities. ("Who needs white social worker types?") These details are gleaned from the passing conversations of others. Valentino is only interested in talking about the big picture.

Early

Born on 27th April 1944 in the North Italian village of Zero Blanco, Valentino was one of six siblings born in a farmer's family. "I was lucky to be born poor," says Giacomini about his childhood, "it ensures you aren't spoiled. There can be two responses (to being poor). The first is – *I'll become rich and enjoy myself*. The other is - *I know how this feels, so when I have money, I'll use it to help others.*" Valentino credits his mother, a devout Christian, with having given the siblings an unshakeable moral education. "It gave me a sense of direction, of doing what was right, of being socially involved."

The decision to be a teacher was made early on. "At the age of sixteen, I went to Treviso to study to become a teacher. In those days, you could decide soon after junior high school what kind of career you wanted to follow, and you learned the relevant subjects. The teacher training studies lasted five years.

We had pedagogy, literature for children, teaching methods for primary school, drawing – everything that you need. For the last two years, we were supposed to go to a primary school and teach.”

Is it a good idea for a person who is but a teenager himself to start training to be a teacher? Doesn't a teacher need to be trained to be more than a teacher? What of further education – the B.Sc, M.Sc, B.Ed – that one assumes a qualified science teacher ought have? Valentino's response is emphatic. “To be a good science teacher, you don't need to know everything about science - you need to know *how to teach!* This is extremely difficult. I think its better to be a bit ignorant, but have the skill of teaching.”

It was during his teaching career that Valentino met Luigina de Biasi - also a teacher like himself, and the dynamic public face of the Alice Project. The two would go on to form a working partnership that would continue through the years, across continents. In his off-school hours, Valentino worked as a journalist for *North East*, a weekly news magazine.

Later, he would take a brief sabbatical to work fulltime in the media (TV news, radio, as well as print journalism) – but the love affair with education would be an enduring one.

Going beyond Cognition, Shunyata.

After years of observing batches of children come and go through his class, Valentino and some of his colleagues came upon an important realization. “Every year, our students seemed to be more difficult than the ones we had in class the year before. More behavioural problems, less attention span. Did we need to change our mode of teaching, make it education more child-centered?” They came to the conclusion that, in fact, the problem did not lie in *how* the children were taught, but in something deeper. “The behaviour of children is, after all, only the *symptom* of the disease. And the disease was not scholastic in nature, it seemed to be *existential*. The food we were giving them was not the food they needed! Their behaviour, their lack of attention – this was an unconscious response to teaching and stimulation that they did not need.”

Valentino recognized some of that dissatisfaction in his own boyhood. Though his school experience was generally a good one, in retrospect he could see that it was missing some grounding, some stillness, something like meditation practice. “We were too involved in only the cognitive aspect – study, study, study.” Perhaps the children in his own classroom were missing the same sense of grounding. Valentino toyed with this thought, until, at the age of thirty, a chance encounter in a hospital crystallized his intuition. “I saw a man who was about to die – his breath had become irregular, you knew he was about to go. I had a sudden sense of how completely alone that man was at that moment. I remember thinking - *What can help a man at this stage?*” Oddly, it was the word ‘yoga’ that entered his mind. Up until that time in his life, Valentino knew nothing about Yoga, or for that matter, about Hindu or Buddhist philosophy. “When I left the hospital, the first magazine I set my eyes on had an article in about ‘Yoga for the Dying’.”

He was determined to find out more, and made his way to a Buddhist centre in a nearby town. “An old teacher there spoke for three days about different kinds of sufferings and hells.” For an enquiring young mind raised in Western tradition, what he heard and saw was undeniably alien. He could barely check his skepticism.

1993 – An historic photo: Gosel Lama, the president of the Society Awakening Special Universal Education (who passed away on 2006) with the founder of Alice Project (red cap), visiting the site where where the school was going to be built.

“I came from a tradition where there's just one hell – this talk (about multiple hells) made me laugh. I remember complaining to someone there about the teaching - *What is this man talking about?* One monk came and said to me, *Just look at your mind*. There was sudden dawning of light. I realized that the old teacher was not talking about anything in the outside world.

They were not talking about external hells – it was on a level of consciousness. As soon as I realized that, it was a turning point. I realized that everything comes from the mind.”

“Ask even a scientist and he will confess that we don't understand more than 5% of our universe. 95% of the universe is unknown. We don't really understand how the human mind works either. But we *do* know that everything comes from the mind. And if it is true that the mind controls everything – then what happens to you if you can't control your mind? You are lost! You end up being controlled by

external phenomena, by your teachers, by a mind you do not even understand! What can you possibly expect in this situation but disaster?”

This was the springboard for Valentino’s spiritual path, as well as his educational philosophy - to create an equilibrium between study and spiritual practice. “Buddhism gave me a chance to understand the concept of what Hindus call *maya* and Buddhists call *shunyata* - emptiness.

The concept of ‘emptiness’ made a huge difference to me as a person, and to me as a teacher. I wanted to bring this concept into the curriculum of schools.”

“**I never let go** of a chance to try out something innovative in the class,’ smiles Valentino. But nonetheless, when he and some other teachers started incubating ideas in the school in Italy, it was, in Valentino’s words, ‘very discreet, not a big revolution’. The aim was to shake the foundation, get children to break the habit of knowing and to rethink everything. So we started this off as a research project in an elementary school. I tried to integrate the core ideas of Buddhism, the psychology, in my way of teaching.

A Fragmented View

“Our education system is built on separation, on classification. In primary school, we tell the children, *Look at the tree. The tree is divided into three parts – roots, trunk, leaves.*

First act of separation. Later, in middle school, there are further classifications and labels for different parts, and the “tree” disappears.’

He continues, ‘But we stop and ask – is it really true that the tree is divided into three parts? Who decided that the tree is divided into three parts? Is this objective knowledge or subjective knowledge? Or was it just that one day in the 15th century, some botanist took a pen in hand, drew a tree, wrote a name, wrote that the tree was divided into three parts – and the idea came to existence. And you tell the children, this is the truth, go memorize it, if you don’t memorize it, you will fail your exam. But this is not the complete truth about the tree – it is only a concept, a ‘scholastic truth’. The real tree is not ‘divided’.

According to Valentino, conventional knowledge is poison. It is the big missing in our fragmented ‘truth’ that create a problem. It is not true that the tree is divided into three parts. What is true is that we project what is in our mind.

What is true is that our senses are extremely limited. “When the foundation of things is fragmented knowledge, what can we expect from the learners? Right motivation? Right behaviour? Right action? Not at all!”

The practice of teaching subjects in a disconnected way further magnifies the fragmentation. “The science teacher says, *If there is any problem with the kids, it isn’t my problem, I’m just the science teacher.* I say to the teacher, you teach a student how to think. ‘How to think’ is where emotions come from. From emotions rise motivation, and motivation is where action comes from. You are the first ring in the cognitive chain! And you think you are *just the science teacher!*”

We want to shape the progression of knowledge we share with the students and how we share it. I ask the science teacher, what percentage of the universe do you know about. He cannot say more than “5%”. And this means that 95% of the universe is unknown – in that case, are you not ashamed of standing in front of a class and asking them to keep silent and listen to you?

So we don’t know anything about 95% of the universe.

And we don’t really know how the human mind works either.

But we *do* know that everything comes from the mind. And if it is true that the mind controls everything, if you cannot understand or control your mind – you are lost!

You end up being controlled by external phenomena, you're controlled by a teacher who knows more Math and Science than you, you are controlled by your own mind which you do not understand.

What can you possibly expect in this situation but disaster.”

Schools, Secularism

What does he make of the new suspicion that educational institutions regard matters of faith with?

People are questioning the need or place for spiritual matters in school and making claims of being secular – is it a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water? Valentino, a practicing Buddhist who increasingly reacknowledges his Christian upbringing and values (in reflection of the Universal Education theme, and in reflection of the wall where images of Laxmi, Jesus and Buddha sit in confluence!), is quick to respond to this. “In a time of emergency, it is essential for children to know the working of their mind, to know that there is a place inside them that is pure that they can hold onto, to have a spiritual grounding.

When people say they are “secular”, they are insulting the culture of this country. What they mean by ‘we are secular’ is, ‘secularism is our religion’.

Vehemently refusing religions is a religion in itself. Why, even science itself is a religion – because it gives you a vision with which to perceive all phenomena! What secularism means is to respect *all* religions, not to deny them all.

Europe established this model (of viewing spirituality as the nemesis of progress) that India is unfortunately trying to emulate.

We rarely acknowledge the tremendous problems Western countries are now facing because of their obsession with material culture.”

“I never use the word ‘religion’. I use the word spirituality, which has nothing to do with individual cultures - it is in the realm of ‘superculture’.

Religion, usually, is about morality, about doing good, being good. And the concept of *shunyata* has nothing to do with ‘do good’ and ‘be good’. It is a unified way of knowing, a very holistic view of the world. What we are trying to do here has nothing to do with religion.

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We make students aware of the mind,’ he continues. ‘If everything around us is the perception and construct of the mind, then let us study the mind!

Not just how to *use* the mind, but how to understand the working of it.

There is nothing that I am saying to you now that cannot be proved scientifically. What I teach here is something that can be taught to a Christian, to a Hindu, to a Buddhist.”

Journey into Wonderland

At the age of fifty, after a rich, multi-faceted career Valentino left Italy, bought a piece of land in Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, and built a school to realize a dream.

It was during an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1988 that HH suggested that Valentino come to India and work in the domain of education. “I had been to India before, but the thought of staying and working here was something I had never thought of.” After thinking of various possible places where the school could be started, he chose Sarnath as his base.

Sarnath, the very place where the historical Buddha gave his very first discourse. Between intent and realization of the plan stood a mountain of red tape, small-town politics and intrigues and local goons. A veritable obstacle course followed (including outrageous allegations of Valentino being part of the Italian mafia!) and, miraculously, dissipated. In 1994, the Alice Project Universal Education School came into being.

'Alice' in the school's name refers to none other than the heroine of Lewis Carroll's classic, 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'. To Valentino, she embodied the sort of solitary, courageous journey that we all need to embark on so we can do justice to the business of learning, living, and dying mindfully. In Carroll's tale, Alice is bored with the dense, picture-less book she is reading, and very sleepy. Then she musters the courage to enter Wonderland – a place 'inside' - and embark on a great adventure. Alice enters Wonderland alone - a potentially risky thing to do – but she is fortunate to find an inner guide (in the form of the White Rabbit). "We all need to do what Alice did," says Valentino, "but in a more protected way." We need to guide students through both realities – the reality of boring books, and the reality of their inner lives."

According to the school's website, "The methods used tap the most powerful potential we possess – the potential to be wise and kind." Easier said than done. To translate abstractions into living reality, Valentino left no stone unturned. While core subjects for higher classes (Math, Science, Social Studies and Language) adhere to the syllabus prescribed by the State Government, the children also learn ancient Indian disciplines such as yoga, meditation, ayurvedic medicine and massage; and what Valentino refers to as 'integrated universal branches of learning' (encompassing everything from dance and drama to ecology, mythology, ethical teaching, farming and philosophy).

To teach the latter, Valentino set about the gargantuan task of creating original – a series of textbooks, teaching manuals, moral tales and stories that are used through the school years as a springboard for discussion, and for the exploration of ideas of self and reality. Each book is profusely illustrated, painstakingly bound and produced. "Visuals are very important" explains Giacomini, "because philosophical concepts are hard to get."

Our conversation is interrupted by Manish, a boy of around eleven in a spanking new blue school uniform. He is one of four boys of a lower caste community that looks after funeral pyres at the burning ghats of Varanasi. He hangs around the staffroom because he has yet to fit into a peer group. Before he came here, Manish spent all day hanging around burning pyres, poking at embers, sifting bones and ash to retrieve bits of metal and valuables – until he was brought to school, that is. Keeping the boys within the embrace of the school is a challenge. One of boys who came here with Manish ran away, back to the freewheeling life by the burning ghats. It is life stories like Manish's that make Valentino's books strike such a chord with their readers.

Take 'Ranjit and His Stories', for example which has even been turned into a school play. In it, a young lad named Ranjit is the junior high school's guide through moral stories that deal with forgiveness, concentration, social injustices. What makes that so interesting? The fact that the characters resemble the children in the school. The landscapes are familiar, the social problems ring true, the emotional preoccupations are their own – in short, *these stories reflect the childrens' own reality!* **Probably the only** stories of this kind they will come across. Valentino has given the children every reason to want to read their Grammar Books.

While younger children are taught entirely with Alice Project material, students use state board books after Grade 9 so they can get ready for the board exam system – a necessary compromise. Do they have a problem integrating back into the state board system after having been taught in such a different way? "On the contrary!" exclaims Valentino. "They (students from this school) see how other children struggle to understand concepts, and realise the difference in the way they were taught. Going inside yourself gives you incredible power. There is light in these children's eyes. When there is light, you know there has been introspection. When there is no light, you know there is an alienation from one's own inner self. As teachers, our job is to turn on the light."

The Crumbling Village

What have the parents' responses been like, thus far? "We have a special method we use for socialization in kindergarten," explains Valentino, "and parents often think that the children are just playing and wasting time. We have asked the teachers to be very strict about this – if they do not trust our professionalism, then it is better that they take the child back and send them to another school."

By and large, though, a lot of the parents are illiterate and don't have fixed notions of how things ought to be done in schools, and trust the school. "A large task that lies ahead is of educating the parents while educating the children – but it is too much for us to take on right now," admits Valentino.

"**Fourteen years ago**, when children came to school, they were so dirty, we needed to bathe them there first. You will not believe the living conditions in some of their homes." Abject poverty. Alcoholism. No food in the house, no place to keep their school books, nowhere to wash and dry their clothes. Some of the kids don't have a second set of clothes, and will wear a uniform till it is in tatters. The school's headcount is now at 950 and rising. A handful of boys live on campus, but most of the boys and girls are from around Sarnath and Varanasi.

When the school started, most of the children were first-generation learners in their family. This has been changing – and now almost 100% children in the area go through primary school.

Valentino is pragmatic about how far-reaching the effect has been. In sixteen years, he has been the fibre of the rural landscape irrevocably alter.

The village where the school stands used be one of weavers. A hundred families were once involved with weaving handloom. Now, only one family carries on the tradition. Many adults are jobless, some work as daily wage labourers, some as vendors of small objects and vegetable. "It is painful to see the indignity in their state."

"**India,**' says Valentino circumspectly, 'didn't follow the Gandhian model of development, it chose to follow Nehru's vision instead. Nehru's wisdom came from the west, he thought that *that* (the socio-economic model he saw in the West) was development. The Nehruvian model chose big factories.

The village is destroyed, their economy is destroyed, all the people that are working with the soil are destroyed. Lifestyles have altered, groundwater has been plundered, the water table has almost dry. Everyone wants a bore well in their backyard.

The village well is full of rubbish." It is no longer just a sociological problem, it is also an ecological problem.

Valentino is convinced that it is this fragmented viewpoint and crumbling system of villages that has resulted in the kind of large-scale ecological and social problems that are facing Sarnath, and indeed, all of India. "What is amazing is that a country like India will throw away everything it once knew and blindly follow the idiocy of the west. And you can see the damage infecting India faster than in other countries, and no one is talking about it."

This is not armchair criticism. Every effort has been made by the founders of the school to create an environment where contemporary thought works hand in hand with indigenous good sense; where wiser traditions are nurtured, while meaningless things are sifted out. Sudhakar Prasad, one of the first students to graduate from the school, summarises the culture at his alma mater as being a fortuitous 'Kaliyug mein Satyayug'. (Golden epoch in the midst of the dark age).

Invited by the Bhutan Government to a recent convention of educators, Valentino saw in our neighbours, a ray of hope. India, he feels, would do well to emulate Bhutan in one thing – their emphasis on GNH (Gross National Happiness) instead of GDP (Gross Domestic Product).

"Parents want kids to be professional, successful, rich - "happy" rarely makes it to that list. You spend 20-odd years studying, storing mostly useless knowledge in your memory. And when you become old, lose your memory – what are you left with then?"

Valentino recounts what the vice chancellor of a nearby university once told him - *In India, we had the key to solve the problem. And then we lost it. And now we are in a position where people from the outside need to remind us of what we had.*

The wisdom locked away in the myths and lore of this country is incredible. And instead of discarding them en masse, Valentino makes a strong case for turning this lore into our own personal White Rabbit as we journey our Wonderland.

“Indian mythology says that the world rises from the dream of Vishnu. *We* are the dream of Vishnu. So, in a sense, it is from us that the world comes.

We create the world we are! This is what we are trying to teach the children.” It is as simple, and as impossibly difficult as that.

For more information about Alice Project schools, how to sponsor a child, and Valentino and Luigina’s future work, visit:
<http://www.aliceproject.org>
Or write to v_giacomin@hotmail.com