

## **Extracts from The strained silence of fear**

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*Good weapons are instruments of fear; all creatures hate them. Therefore, followers of Tao, never use them. - Lao Tsu*

The student is in a most awkward situation. Damned if you speak and damned if you don't! Is it surprising therefore, that students cope bravely even in the face of punishment, indignity and unreasonableness? We don't seem to be able to say, "For some reason my child finds this uncomfortable. A happy child is sad. This cannot be the aim of education. However good the school, this may not be the school for my child. Maybe my child needs a different kind of education. Let me see what is possible."

Fail, ridicule, detention, stand in the sun, crawl on your knees, cane, whip, suspend! One may ask if fear makes one learn better. One may ask what is the connection between kneeling on the gravel and percentages and spelling. Or is it that the student's spirit has to be subdued, so that the teacher can feel superior? What is the connection between these practices and education, right living, right thinking! Many of us feel that punishment in schools is only rarely used, and not something to be blown out of proportion. The teacher does not have to do it again and again. Superior position and power need to be demonstrated once in a while, that is enough. Make an example of one and the whole class is subdued and will behave. You can then complete your agenda, the syllabus in an orderly class. Not a cheerful and easy class, not bubbling with energy of youth, but heavy with the strained silence of fear!

If one were to pause at this rather unfortunate choice of words and reflect, one could ask if schools should be talking about "strength" in the same way armies do. Can a school say that its strength is the relationship between students and teachers? Or the quality of initiative we see from the students and teachers or the quality of conversation between students and teachers? Or would such a statement be incomprehensible, making too much of nothing.

In India, the teacher has been venerated and belongs in a high position. Parasurama could curse Karna and Dronacharya could ask for Ekalavya's thumb. The ambivalence that permits us to hold Drona with high regard is what makes us impotent in the face of injustice being done to a young child. Would we be able to say clearly that what Dronacharya did with Ekalavya was terrible, unjust and most unbecoming of a teacher? Or would we say "the teacher has a right". We hear in India many adages such as: the hand that feeds will be the hand that corrects; only fear and discipline make a good student; the teacher is God and nothing is more important than to be God fearing. No price that the teacher asks for is too big. Rhetoric such as this has elevated the teacher to a position of power and part of that power was the right to punish the student, to ask favours as a matter of right, to demand servility. There are few teachers who do not get trapped in the myths surrounding the role.

I have had occasion to hear from agonised parents, stories about their children - most parents treat the unhappy child as a problem and impatiently wait till the child "adjusts" to school and is able to carry on. Then they can carry on with their lives. Some, however, took their children seriously and could not ask that their child "adjust" to indignity and casual horror. I have often felt that the entire system of education as we know it in India is because children "manage" and endure - they cope with the drudgery, sadism, meaninglessness and indignity. And children often do with a smiling face. Till we hear of an Abhinav, a smiling cheerful child who ended his life, we do not sit up to take note. I dare say that if adults, caring parents listened carefully to their children, the system would change. Love for one's offspring, one's loved child, would create options.

Ongoing teacher education is needed to bring to the consciousness of teachers the necessity, the imperativeness of humane education. However, any school's management which makes such a demand must be open to learning how to function effectively without punishment. Many times the "effective" teacher develops a "right" to punishment - ends justify the means. The school gets "good" results and is willing to overlook the means, particularly if they are not extreme. One can see that this is a dangerous game and, even within the parameters of the school, can get out of hand.

The only option to the impersonal large school model is to find a system that values the relationship between the child and the teacher. If we set up large systems, control will

have to be maintained by centralisation and authority. If we have large systems tolerance for aberration would have to be small. Zero tolerance, however is a mechanical, manufacturing metaphor. However, there has been an outcry against the inhumanity of such a system. If we do not want heavy centralisation we must have small systems, systems where the web of relationships can be self-ordering, self-correcting and organic. We need to shift in our thinking from the mechanical model to the intelligent living system models.

But are you and I, as parents, willing to listen to our children, and be sensitive to the new breezes that are blowing? Are we clear that punishment is not going to take us forward, and violence and aggression are no solutions for individuals we profess to love? Are we definite that we will not dismiss a child's complaint and merely put up with the situation, that for the sake of the child we will find solutions? And are we clear that we will not add to the burdens of another through punishment and indignity? For the teachers, of whom the author is one, the questions are somewhat different. Am I the agent of another, Headmaster, Trust, Society, Religion, Nation or do I have an autonomous location as an intelligent, sensitive human being? Will I punish and beat to maintain order, to hold my job, or will I refuse to do any of this?

Am I certain, that whatever I teach through fear and coercion is worthless, and hence unworthy of the teacher's role, unworthy of my humanness? Can I relate to students with dignity and intelligence neither looting for dependence nor for authority?