

# Curiosity, Reverence, Science and the Arts

(For Malala Yusofzai)

## Raja Mohanty

What is curiosity and what is reverence? Are you curious? And what do you have a reverence for? I asked these questions to my ten year old niece and she looked at me and said, "can you buy me a new phone like my papa?" I thought she had not heard my questions and so I repeated them. She looked at me and understood that I had not understood her answers. She was curious about her papa's phone and she also had a reverence for it. She explained that the phone was a magician; you could speak into it and ask for a pizza. Within half-an-hour a smartly dressed boy would appear with a hot pizza. Sometimes when she whispered into the phone, her grandfather who lived hundreds of kilometers away, in Amritsar, could here everything she said clearly. Sometimes of course the call got disconnected, but the phone was still miraculous. Even if she shouted at the top of her voice at her little brother who was playing outside, he could not hear her but a whisper carried all the way till Amritsar. Sometimes her papa also spoke with his friend who was in London, and she could hear the friends voice all the way from London.

I am a science teacher and sometimes when I feel like playing the flute, I play the flute. I wanted my niece to understand something about the magic of science and the beauty of music. That is why I had asked her the question about curiosity and about reverence. But with here answer she did manage to dampen my teaching instincts, but not for long. I thought I would approach the matter through a different road.

So, I turned to my niece and asked her again if she knew anything about solar cells and solar energy. She was using her fingers to type something on the phone and did not even look up when she answered, "Yes. I think that solar energy is a very good idea. We should learn from the bakul tree in our garden. You know the bakul tree just spreads out its leaves in the sun and using what our science teacher calls photosynthesis, makes breakfast, lunch and dinner for itself. It does not go to the mall or carry things in plastic bags...." I quickly changed the subject and asked her if she knew how a flute produced notes that there so sweet.

With a sweet smile she moved her fingers on the phone screen and then

began to tap her finger. What looked like a phone now started behaving like a flute - well almost. It did not sound as sweet as my flute but it did sound like a flute. And she tapped her fingers on the phone again and for a moment she did look like Krishna. Somewhat crestfallen I went back to the book I was reading. It was an interesting book that explained how human curiosity gave birth to science and how our sense of reverence helped us create the arts. I later found a fellow teacher who shared my feelings about how the present generation would lose so much because they did not read books; did not have curiosity and utterly lacked in reverence.

That was thirty years ago. I am now retired after having been the headmaster of my school for ten years. I still hear teachers complaint about the new generation. Habits die hard, and I tend to agree with them; but then I think of my niece who has now grown up and plays the flute wonderfully, and I not so sure if what I was so sure of was actually the truth.