

# Networks of Agape and Creativity: Learning Across Boundaries and the Calling of Planetary Realizations<sup>1</sup>

Ananta Kumar Giri<sup>2</sup>

You long to wander far and wide and are preparing for a speedy flight; be true to yourself and true to others, then even narrow confines will be wide enough. (Goethe)

The network of agape involves a kind of fidelity to the new relations; and because we can all too easily fall away from this [...], we are led to shore up these relations; we institutionalize them, introduce rules, divide responsibilities. (Charles Taylor, 2009, p. 739)

“Learning to be” is also a permanent apprenticeship in which teachers inform students as students inform teachers. The shaping of a person inevitably passes through a transpersonal dimension. (Basarab Nicolescu, 2002, p. 136)

## Introduction and Invitation

Education helps us realize our potential as well as that of our cultures, societies and the world when it moves from narrow confines within closed walls of classroom and given boundaries of many kinds and embraces the joy of learning with the wider and uncharted paths and rivers of life in this vast world of ours. From the dawn of humanity, seekers all through have been animated by this quest for learning beyond the boundaries and across. This has led to travels and seeking across the roads and rivers of life. Seeking souls and institutions have moved in this world with a passion for meeting, learning together and embracing each other for the light of knowledge, mutual illumination, shared enlightenment and co-realizations. The present discourse of international education as well as internationalization of education is part of this deep yearning of humanity. Such a yearning is realized with facilitating institutions as well as networks. We need creative institutions which foster learning across borders and creative networks which bring new energy to institutions which many times become imprisoned within a

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<sup>2</sup> Ananta Kumar Giri is on the faculty of Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, India, and has worked and taught in many universities in India and abroad including University of Kentucky, USA; Aalborg University, Denmark and University of Freiburg, Germany. He has authored and edited many books in English and Oriya on themes of creative transformations including his most recent *Sociology and Beyond and Knowledge and Human Liberation*. [www.mids.ac.in](http://www.mids.ac.in)  
[aumkrishna@gmail.com](mailto:aumkrishna@gmail.com)



logic of self-justification, self-valorization and closure.<sup>3</sup> We need creative institutions and networks for fostering learning and inquiry across boundaries. Our networks are not just mechanical extensions of existing institutional logic but become networks of agape and love where the seekers build bridges by being bridges. Learning across boundaries is facilitated by seeking institutions and networks where leaders and participants become students of life and friends of the world.

## Networks of Agape and Creativity: Being Students of Life with Life and the World

Threads that connect and weave us together are threads of agape. Agape is love as it is understood in Christian tradition. It is not passive, it is love in action and infused with eros.<sup>4</sup> Agape is also understanding.<sup>5</sup> Recently, secular philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas as well as religiously inspired thinkers, such as Charles Taylor, have been urging us to understand the significance of agape in our lives, especially when we are devoted to mutual moral argumentation, co-learning and flourishing.<sup>6</sup> Agape has a dimension which overflows acceptable boundaries and help us meet each other and the world unconditionally. Agape facilitates genuine and pregnant meetings, meetings which mother new possibilities in self, other and the world. These meetings and encounters start with creative selves and then overflows into existing institutions.<sup>7</sup> These institutions despite their logic of closure feel the breeze of opening and create new institutional spaces for facilitating such creative encounters. We need to cultivate agape in our act of networking among institutions as well as individuals. This is particularly relevant for

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<sup>3</sup> In his essay, “Institutions and Networks,” Andre Beteille shares with us: “Networks of interpersonal relations play an important part in the linkage of different institutions with each other” (Beteille, 2010, p. 116). Furthermore, (cont’d)

many persons now find networks better adapted to the demands of a rapidly changing world than institutions whose adaptive capacities are constricted by bureaucratic and political pressures. Networks provide greater flexibility to individuals, but they also demand greater individual initiative. (Beteille, 2010, p. 125)

<sup>4</sup> As Sudhir Kakar writes: “Agape is neither worth receiving nor worth giving if it is without eros. Real agape must be infused with the passion of the eros” (Kakar in Kakar & Jahanbegloo, 2009, p. 85).

<sup>5</sup> In a recent essay, Mihir Shah (2010) presents us such an understanding of Agape coming from Martin Luther King Jr.

<sup>6</sup> In his work on moral consciousness and communicative action, Jürgen Habermas (1990) urges us to realize the significance of agape for both and calls for integration of “cognition, empathy and agape” (Habermas, 1990, p. 182). Charles Taylor (2009) talks about networks of agape where networks are different from categorical grouping: “[...] it is a skein of relations which link particular, unique, enfolded people to each other, rather than a grouping of people together on the grounds of their sharing some important property (as in modern nations, we are all Canadians, Americans, French people; or universally, we are all rights-bearers etc.) (Taylor, 2009, p. 739).

<sup>7</sup> What Jean-Luc Nancy (2008) writes about processes of overflowing can help us understand overflowing accompanying genuine encounters and meetings:

[...] Politics assume[s] a dimension that it cannot integrate for all that, a dimension that overflows it, one concerning an *ontology or an ethology of “being with,”* attached to that absolute experience of sense and passion for sense for which the word *sacred* was but the designation. (p. 5)

the Grundtvig-Kold tradition of learning and international education from Denmark (cf. Das, 2007).<sup>8</sup>

In this journey of learning across boundaries, we become students of life with life and the world. In Denmark in the middle of the nineteenth century, Grundtvig and Kold had striven to build schools of life in place of dead Latin schools. One significant aspect of this school of life was the opportunity to build friendship across social division and boundaries. Over the years, folk high schools of Denmark have become international and one meets students from all across the world not only in international folk high schools such as International People's College in Helsingor but also in other schools in remote corners of Denmark. In such schools there is an ideal of being students of life a flame of which we find burning in some teachers and students.<sup>9</sup>

“Who am I?,” “Who are you?” are perennial questions of life. Now for a long time, when I am asked, “Who are you?” I say: “I am a student of life.” Then immediately, the questioner comes back: “Oh, I am also a student of life.” Out of our many identities of life, an identity such as “student of life” is a broad, seeking, and embracing one where one chooses in solidarity with Nature, others and Divine to be with the roads and rivers of life and continuously learn. Love and labor of learning and inquiry become part of our vision and practice as students of life. Networking for learning across boundaries calls for such vocations of being students of and with life.

In the roads and rivers of life as students of life we meet others who, many a time, come to us as a God without a name. Such meetings transform our lives. In his poem *Morte d'Arthur*, Tennyson has written, “More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.” Holding the hands of Tennyson, we can also sing: “More things are wrought by meetings than the world can dream of.” Networks emerge out of such pure meetings of souls and are not just extensions of existing institutional programs. Even when we are part of existing programs of networking, we need to bring our own soul, self and the very being of passion, prayer and imagination to these networks.

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<sup>8</sup> As is well known, Grundtvig was a creative pastor, poet and father of modern Danish renaissance. Kold himself had a life-changing turning point in his life when he heard his teacher Peter Larsson Skrappenberg at the Teacher's Training College that God loves us unconditionally (see Das, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> During a visit to Testrup folk high school near Aarhus, I saw such flames of aspiration in some students and teachers, especially in the inspiring Principal Jorgen Karlsson. I sat in a philosophy class and after this I had composed the following poem:

A Student of Life I am  
 There is a dance of colors in my eyes  
 But I have questions, not only kisses, in my lips  
 Questions flow In my wings  
 and flowing hairs  
 Towards the Sky and Ocean  
 Questions of Life, Questions of Relationships  
 Mediating Between  
 And meditating With  
 Moments and Eternity

Highlander is a place of meeting in Tennessee. It was started by Myles Horton in the highlands of Appalachian mountains in the 1930s who was inspired by the way seeking souls meet in the folk high schools of Denmark (cf. Horton & Freire, 1990). From its birth, Highlander has been a mothering place where people involved in social change can meet. In the small auditorium of Highlander there are rocking chairs. Participants of social movements come and seat in such chairs, share their experiences with each other and learn together. In the 1930s, participants of workers' movements met in Highlander. In the 1940s and 50s, it is the fighters of civil rights movements who met together in Highlander. Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks joined these meetings and sat in those chairs of sharing which then inspired them to take a different walk in their paths of lives. Rosa Parks tells us that, in taking part in such meetings, she could overcome her fear which then planted the seed of saying no. This then emboldened her to refuse to give up her seat in a bus in Montgomery. If saying "no" is an important part of becoming a subject as Alain Touraine, the heart-touching sociologist of our times, tells us, taking part in such meetings as organized in Highlander, provides a momentum to the process of subjectivation of the participants (cf. Touraine, 2007).

While creating networks for learning, we can learn with such stories of meetings, encounters and transformations. For this we would have to transform our existing institutions as well as methods and modes of networking. While making our institutions sites of experimental creativity, we would have to make networks more creative by ourselves being engaged in creative boundary-crossing of body, self and language.<sup>10</sup>

Our networks then become networks of agape and creativity. Here we can walk with many inspiring co-walkers of life and history. We can walk, for instance, with two students of life, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) and Chitta Ranjan Das (1923-2011). Erasmus was not only an incorrigible traveler but also a passionate letter writer. He met princes as well as commoners walking on foot and wrote letters to many sharing with them the challenge of building peace and reconciliation in a world of hatred and propensity to war. Erasmus' networks of agape and creativity created a republic of letters as a counter and alternative to the existing republics of hatred and war.<sup>11</sup> Similar also is the seeking and striving of Chita Ranjan Das who like Erasmus travelled far and wide and wrote letters to countless radiant souls he met on the way (cf. Giri, 2011). Chitta Ranjan became a living thread of energy bringing many aspiring

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<sup>10</sup> Here I wish to share my experience of travelling across the world. When I meet people, I request my fellow beings to share a poem or a song which then opens up many realities and possibilities. I spent a month in China in August-September 2009. I began with Kunming, the capital of the Yunan province in Southern China. I learnt four words (*nihaho* for saying hello, *sese* for thank you, *piolian* for you are beautiful and *changama* for singing). The last two words created new sharing and possibilities. When I met people I invariably requested them to *changama*, to sing. Initially there was always a lot of reluctance but it slowly gave way to sharing, singing and loosening of boundaries.

<sup>11</sup> Erasmus wrote letters for peace. For example, in his Complaints of Peace, Erasmus writes:

Peace speaks: If it were to their advantage for men to shun, spurn and reject me, although I have done nothing to deserve it, I would only lament the wrong done to me and their injustice; but since in rejecting me they deny themselves the source of all human happiness and bring on themselves a sea of disasters of every kind, I must shed tears rather for the misery they suffer than for any wrong they do me. I should have liked simply to be angry with them, but I am driven to feel pity and sorrow for their plight. (Erasmus, 1986 [1516], p. 293)

souls and institutions together.<sup>12</sup> Chitta Ranjan also worked with the folk high school movement in Denmark as well as built folk high schools in Finland. In his own experiments in co-learning

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<sup>12</sup> Chitta Ranjan is a friend of the world. But the world to him was not impersonal, he cultivated deep personal friendships with innumerable souls around the world—Odisha, Kerala, Denmark, Finland, Germany, USA and around. Ramesh Ghode taught Sociology at Hilsop College, Nagpur and in the preface to the collection of letters that Chitta Ranjan had written to him and he has edited, Rameshda tells us:

We ‘discovered’ each other in the All India Conference of Sociology Teachers from Rural Institutes all over India. [...] The conference was held in the last week of November, 1960 in Rural Institute, Amravati [...] I was then a student of 2<sup>nd</sup> year [...] I had a chance to speak on a sociological concept of social disorganization in that conference. After having delivered my lecture on the concept all the eminent scholars of Sociology cross-examined me by asking pertinent questions, including Professor Chitta Ranjan Das. I could feel the depth of empathy in his eyes. During that short encounter with him, he asked me several questions to glean my personal profile, family background and interest in academic pursuits. I frankly shared all the personal information with him.

I perceived in him a Guru, a preceptor and an elder brother who would guide me in academic pursuits. As luck would have it, he immediately said in a soft tone, “Ramesh, do not call me Sir, you can call me ‘Dada,’ and I mean it in real sense of thought and action.”Hearing his words I was spellbound and could not believe myself. I saw in him a Guru, elder brother, a friend, philosopher and a guide. I was convinced within that he would help me not only to tide over all the obstacles in my academic ventures but direct me in the right path of life too. Our camaraderie and kinship commenced and it was to be a sincere and life-long commitment. (Ghode, 2010, pp. iii-iv)

K. Viswanathan, the founder of Mitraniketan, Vellanad, Kerala and a great Gandhian and social activist of India shares with us the following:

Chittada is a genius in many fields of human development. My acquaintance with him goes back to 1940s, when I joined Shantiniketan as a young student [...] We got to know each other better and from this time stems our friendship. He, too, was a habitual wearer of Khadi and he also took up spinning. Living in the hostel himself, he also looked after the newcomers, helping them wherever he could to adjust themselves to the routine of life in Shantiniketan. He was very gentle, simple, friendly and soft-spoken and even at that age he had a scholarly look.

[...] In the formative period of my work in the village of Vellanad, he was kind enough to spend some time with our group. Later, some of his students, who were fortunate to study under his guidance, also visited me in Mitraniketan (the name of my Centre) and from the impression I gained of them, I could judge how valuable his influence on them was as a guide, a friend and philosopher and how it moulded their lives and outlook. When I started my programme of integrated development education in Mitraniketan, I longed very much to have Chittada associated with this work. He has, no doubt, all this time been associated with it and continues to influence us with his thinking and even with his presence, whenever I ask for it and the advice of this silent worker, profound thinker and prolific writer has always been invaluable. I also know him as an excellent letter writer, always very prompt and regular in his correspondence. (Das, in press, pp. 151-153)

Eaghor G. Kostas who lives in Germany and to whose Ukrainian translation of *Gitanjali* Chitta Ranjan had written a foreword tells us:

He was not only interested in Europe as an alien country [...] He came to a deeper contact [...] he sometimes even idealized the Europe of his friends, once feeling at Christmas as if he were with them “trying to revive the ever-live inspirations of the birth of Christ, singing round and meditating upon the Christmas tree”, as he wrote to my wife and me (probably in 1966 - the date of that aerogramme is no longer identifiable). “Though the practical and the logical in me induces me to be

in the schools he established at Champattimunda, Osidha, as well as in the subsequent integral education movement, he brought different streams of transforming learning together—Gandhi, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Grundtvig and others (see Das, 2012).<sup>13</sup>

In networking for learning and inquiry across boundaries, we can walk with fellow co-walkers such as Erasmus and Chitta Ranjan who made their own lives threads of agape and creativity. We can also thread with each other and weave together by being networks of agape and creativity.

## **Internationalization of Education: Institutional Creativity and Networks of Creativity**

In recent times, there is much talk about and some concrete moves towards internationalization of education. This is happening through exchange of students and teachers. In the European Union, there is a program of exchange of students quite aptly named after Erasmus. But in internationalization of education, most of the time, the flow is usually from South to North. There are many scholars from India who are teaching in Europe and North America. For American and European students, such teachers bring a new cross-cultural experience of learning and mutual challenging. But compared to this, we hardly see teachers from other countries in Indian institutions. This impoverishes the capacity for learning across boundaries on the part of Indian students.

There are now some creative experiments in international education. One such is the Global Studies Master's program led by the Institute of Sociology, University of Freiburg in Germany. In this learning program, participants spend a semester at Freiburg and then at two partner institutions in India (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi), Thailand (Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok), South Africa (University of Cape Town) or Argentina (FLASCO, Buenos Aires). In these moves of teachers and students across boundaries, there is possibly a network of agape and creativity at work, or participants can self-consciously cultivate these more.

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pessimist about how we face in our world and with one another, my heart persuades me to believe in it and heartens me up to encouragement. This heartening gives me hope, the energy required to live one's life as a dedication, as an act of supreme and all-embracing identification. And apart from all the institutional gloss and glamour, is not the life of Christ an example of a life offered, a life regained by offering? And can we eliminate hate from the world as long as we do not accept life as an offering? Of course, I do not mean that we have to be fanatics to do that." (Das, in press, pp. 154-155)

<sup>13</sup> Chitta Ranjan founded Jeevana Vidyalaya (School of Life) at Champattimunda, Anugul, Odisha in 1954. Then in the 1970s, he joined the emerging integral education movement in Odisha and played a pioneering role in the building and nurturance of such schools. These schools strive to follow the educational vision and practice of Sri Aurobindo and Mother and impart a holistic education.

## Education for Creativity and the Calling of a New Enlightenment: Learning Across Boundaries and the Calling of Planetary Realizations

Education is linked to enlightenment in many ways. European ideas of Enlightenment have influenced modern conceptions of self-formation (what is called *Bildung*), as well as models and pathways of education in the modern world. To these early European models of Enlightenment Grundtvig and Kold brought the vision and practice of people's enlightenment which also resonates with the discourse of vernacular Enlightenment suggested by Foucault (cf. Korsgaard, 2008).<sup>14</sup> Through learning and inquiry across boundaries and creative international education we now can bring people's enlightenment to the world level beyond national borders. This calls for more labor and love of learning through intercultural and transcultural dialogues and planetary conversations. As part of such planetary conversations, we also rethink enlightenment as simultaneously rational and spiritual, individual as well as collective; an enlightenment in which not only rationalist philosophers such as Kant but also Buddha, Spinoza, Grundtvig, Erasmus and Chitta Ranjan hold our hands and help us in new realizations of both creative solitude and soulful togetherness in a world of alienation and fragmentation.

Such education does not aim just at creating global citizenship in a conventional sense; rather, it interrogates available understandings of both globality and citizenship. Learning across boundaries is not just an extension of our identity as citizens of a nation-state; rather it is an unfolding of our vision and practice as students of life. It contributes to planetary realizations. This means that all of us realize that we are children of our Mother Earth, not only human beings but also including non-human beings (cf. Giri, 2013). We are children of our Mother Earth and we are also called upon to be mothers of our Mother Earth. Networks of agape and creativity and manifold learning and inquiry across boundaries help us in planetary realizations and embody our responsibility as mothers of self, other, and our Mother Earth.

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<sup>14</sup> People's enlightenment in Denmark was accompanied by struggle of people for freedom from state control and creation of free and responsible associations, movements and institutions. Thus it helps us to break the link between Statist projects and projects of Enlightenment. For Grundtvig and his followers,

It was not enough to change old state institutions into people's institutions; rather new people's institutions had to be founded, as for instance 'open' or 'free' schools, 'free' congregations, and 'free' associations. [...] Freedom cannot ultimately be guaranteed by the state; only the people can secure freedom. And that can happen only with a foundation in 'popular' and 'civil' society. Open associations [such as free schools, Folk High Schools] were seen as a sign of a voluntary social solidarity, which in turn was seen as the ideal for a grander popular and national society. Willingness to render voluntary and unpaid assistance was thus regarded as the ultimate test of one's civil virtues." (Korsgaard, 2008, p. 63)

In order to understand the last point about voluntary sharing of labor, yes this is what happens in Grundtvig-Kold free schools and folk high schools. These schools do get state support but not fully and the participants do share their labor in building and maintaining such schools. Thus voluntary sharing of labor is an important part of Grundtvigian tradition of people's enlightenment which also resonates with the tradition of Gandhi in as much Gandhi also emphasized on voluntary sharing of labor and building on people's associations, movements and institutions not dependent on or controlled by the State.

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