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TOSHIRO KANAMORI, THE JAPANESE PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER FROM THE MOVIE 'CHILDREN FULL OF LIFE'

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INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago the award-winning documentary *Children Full of Life* was made. It is the story of an extraordinary Japanese teacher, Mr Toshiro Kanamori, who taught the fourth grade class in an ordinary Japanese primary school in a typical suburb of a large Japanese city. The documentary spread across the globe and has been seen by millions of people; it inspired thousands of teachers, touched the hearts of countless people who care about children and became a true example of the essence of education.

I have seen the film at least fifty times, with different audiences, under different circumstances. Every time, when the film ends, a silence follows that nobody wants to break; it takes a few minutes for people to come to themselves and find a language to express what they have just seen¹. The film shows the audience lessons for life, taught by Mr Kanamori. Often a discussion follows about the essence of the movie: about the simplicity or complexity of the way in which this teacher educates his students, about what the purpose of education should be, and about what can be done about changing the ways in which most children are currently educated.

Marcel van Herpen, one of the co-founders of NIVOZ, a Dutch education think tank², wanted more than just to watch the film and engage in the subsequent discussions. He wanted to meet Mr Kanamori in person. So in 2006 he left for Japan, taking with him little more than the name of the city where Mr Kanamori's school was based and a few pictures of the school building taken from the documentary.

Arriving in the city of Kanazawa he found these pictures to be useless as all schools looked identical, with similar playgrounds and swimming pools at the front of each school building. However, some people recognized the picture of Mr Kanamori from a television programme and directed Marcel to the right school. "When I entered the school", Marcel relates, "When I took off my shoes and walked through the building with the principal a feeling of excitement, interest and happiness came across me. In a school of six hundred students Mr Kanamori was teaching in a classroom at the end of a long corridor. When I knocked on the door and he shouted "come in!" it was as if I was stepping into the documentary." A deep encounter between Mr Kanamori and Van Herpen followed. And that was where it ended for the time being, other than the fact that Van Herpen wrote and published an article³ about Mr Kanamori and a deep wish that was born in Marcel to try to bring him to The Netherlands.

At this time Ingrid Helsloot saw the *Children Full of Life* documentary as part of her preparation for a trip to Japan and was very touched by it. She then came across the article that Van Herpen had published, came to meet him and set off for Japan carrying a formal invitation from NIVOZ for Mr Kanamori to visit The Netherlands.

¹ The documentary *Children Full of Life* can be seen on YouTube.

² NIVOZ is a Dutch education think tank, committed to creating a culture in which every child is enabled to display what he/she is capable of. Any "system" should follow from this principle and not the other way around. NIVOZ is a knowledge centre, it develops courses for personal development for teachers and principals and is a voice in the public debate (www.nivoz.nl)

³ www.marcelvanherpen.nl/download/artikelen/A%20Als%20een%20iemand%20oniet%20ogelukkig%20is,%20is%20oniemand%20ogelukkig.pdf visited on 26 September 2014.

The result was a ten day visit to The Netherlands in September 2012 of which I will try to give an impression.

MR KANAMORI'S BACKGROUND

Mr Kanamori sees himself in the context of an education system in Japan that originates from the period after the First World War, which was characterised by a rigid structure with the same textbooks and training for all pupils. A group of free thinking teachers took another path but were prevented from continuing their work during the Second World War. While the Japanese culture became even stricter after the war, a small group of free thinkers continued to develop other approaches to teaching and education. Mr Kanamori became one of these free thinkers.

As a scholar of philosophy and pedagogy he was inspired by the European tradition of educational reformers, of which Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) impressed him most. During his visit in The Netherlands we also discovered that Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) was a great source of inspiration to Mr Kanamori.

Pivotal to Mr Kanamori's vision is that children must be able to be children; that every human being must be allowed to work out of his or her own unique capacities; that one should not put one's destiny into the hands of others and that children must be liberated from the expectations of their parents.

Toshiro Kanamori was awarded the prestigious Pestalozzi award from the University of Hiroshima in 1997.

It was not only famous educational reformers who influenced Kanamori in coming to his lively, life embracing vision of education. The source of learning for Kanamori is life itself. He grew up on a farm where he was in daily contact with Mother Nature and life and started to feel part of nature and the stream of life. This feeling was deepened when, as a young father, he had to bury two of his children who had died in infancy.

He learned how unpredictable life can be. For him this was not a reason to become bitter but rather a reason to embrace life! He realised that there are many things that we cannot control, but it is in its vulnerability that our existence is so valuable. His philosophy is "Let us try to positively influence life as best we can; starting with good education for our children."

THE FILM 'CHILDREN FULL OF LIFE'

In the film *Children Full of Life* one can see how Mr Kanamori teaches his students not only how to be students, but also how to live. He gives them lessons on teamwork, the importance of openness, how to cope, the harm caused by bullying and how life and death are two sides of the same coin. He teaches them lessons about compassion: if one child is unhappy then we are all unhappy! For example, he instructs each child to write their down true feelings in a letter, and to read it aloud in front of the class. By sharing their lives, the children begin to realize the importance of caring for their classmates.

Mr Kanamori is an amazing example to all teachers across the world. He truly understands what teaching children is all about and I was particularly impressed by the children's independence as well as his perspective and wisdom. In the film the children are given tasks that they solve in defiance of his authority, leaving him – in the end – impressed by (and proud of) their courage and the eloquence with which they stood up to him.

MR KANAMORI VISITS THE NETHERLANDS

During his ten-day visit he drove over 2000km through The Netherlands and spoke to 4,500 educators and adults who care about and for children. He met over 500 children between the ages of one and 18 years of age, and appeared on stage 22 times.

Often people ask if it is difficult to listen to a story in Japanese (which is being translated) and does it not get boring after listening to the same story over and over again? I can wholeheartedly say that it is not; even during the ample time he took to answer questions, in Japanese, he held the full attention of the audience. Often people commented that they had listened to a story in Japanese of which they didn't understand a word but that they were able to comprehend everything! Toshiro Kanamori spoke with his whole body, his whole being. And, of course, we had a wonderful translator who did a magnificent job of communicating to us the words of Mr Kanamori.

LESSONS FOR LIFE

There are many things that we learned from Mr Kanamori during his visit. There are a few I would like to highlight:

During Mr Kanamori's lecture in Driebergen on 5 September 2012, at a sold out auditorium at NIVOZ, I remember well how the interviewer asked Toshiro Kanamori how he would respond to the question which is frequently asked by teachers "how to cope with the shortage of time available to prepare well for classes in which connectedness and moral development will be the main focus?" His very short answer was: "Lack of time is a bad excuse".

During his answer to the next question Mr Kanamori came back to this theme by means of an excellent example that enriched his earlier answer: he shared with the audience how he had walked through the woodlands of Driebergen an hour before the lecture and how he had come across a meadow of flowering grass. He had asked himself "for whom do these beautiful little flowers exist? For the bees, the ants and other insects" he thought: insects, which were attracted by the grasses and able to feed themselves from the nectar and seeds, while consequently playing an unconscious role in the fertilisation of the meadow itself.

This story illustrates how Mr Kanamori connects his way of educating children to their way of seeing the world and how he makes his "lessons for life" the basis of all learning. He showed the audience a small grass stalk and said: "what I want to say is that you can find everything in a small aspect of nature that can demonstrate the connection between life and

death. It makes a huge difference if you can take children along and let them experience for themselves, rather than teach them from a textbook. I prepared this lesson during a spare 15 minutes while walking through an unknown area of Dutch forest. To come back to the previous question, you can never say 'there was no time'".

In this example several aspects of the importance of his visits become clear. At NIVOZ we try to inspire, connect and legitimise. Mr Kanamori did all three and managed to do so all at the same time.

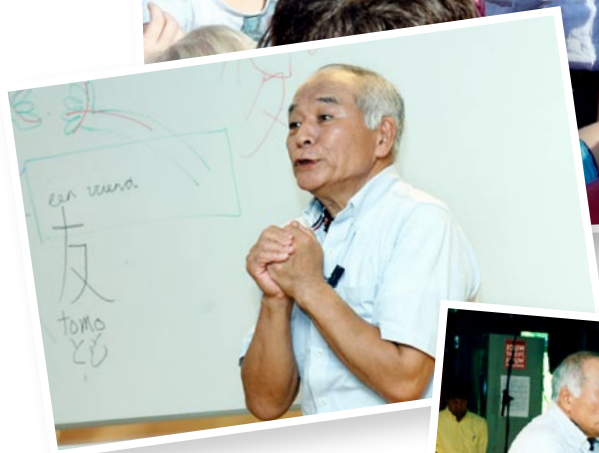
His approach begins with the fact that he emphasises connectedness in everything he speaks about, the connection between life and death, between people and their surroundings, and between people themselves. He maintains a sense of wholeness. What he does is to make things round, whole. We fragment so many things in life, through our conflicts, but also through our tendency to (scientifically) analyze everything. When analyzing we tend to separate things, magnify them, and study things in isolation. Mr Kanamori showed us the importance of staying connected, with our surroundings, our fellow citizens, with life and with death.

Mr Kanamori's choice of the title "lessons for life" may seem radical. The ethical basis which underlies his classes enables him to bring young children into contact with a terminally ill patient. Learning and life go hand in hand. Education and learning follow from life itself and not the other way around. What is illustrative in this respect is how he teaches the Japanese characters to his children. The usual way of teaching the characters is to ask children to practice writing the characters, hundreds of times. But not Mr Kanamori, he starts by telling the children about the origins of the character, how the character for "wrapping", for instance, originates from the drawing of a pregnant woman with the baby visible in the drawing. He teaches the children about the care a mother takes of her child to protect it. If he gets the chance, he will ask a pregnant woman to come into his class and spends time letting the children become familiar with motherhood. He will then, at the end of the class, teach the children the character for "wrapping". None of his students will ever forget that character and everything else that they learned during that lesson!

Working out of such a vision of education like this asks – in Japan but also in our culture – not only for courage, but also for a great sense of openness, in which one does not hide one's vulnerability, but displays it!

Only when you reveal your doubts and uncertainties to others can you be understood by others and together create a whole.

In this aspect also lies the legitimization of the approach. Mr Kanamori illustrates the logic of our existence in his actions: what life offers, it also demands in a certain way. When sadness and sorrow cross your path life demands you do not hide this fact, but that you find a way to accept it. Kanamori shows us how all aspects of life connect to each other. Nature is in constant evolution, in flux. Its course is unpredictable. The only thing you can do is to embrace its natural logic and accept it.



The story of the flowering stalks of grass also inspired me. Mr Kanamori speaks with an authenticity that comes from his real deeds, from what he does. He is not patronizing, he does not want to explain all the time. Instead he wants to do things, act, endeavor, exemplify. The accompanying words, the verbal side, are of lesser importance, they follow. We need the verbal side, but you cannot show life in words alone. It must be seen, taken hold of and experienced!

The Chilean neuroscientist and philosopher, Francesco Varela, calls this “embodied knowledge” and one of his most important observations lies in the realization that knowledge makes itself visible through actions, in situations that call for specific acts. Acting is our primary *modus operandi*. When Mr Kanamori speaks he immediately draws you into an experience. If he needs to clarify something, he does so by telling stories.

What I found remarkable was Mr Kanamori’s surprise at being asked so many questions about being physical with his students (in the documentary he touches them a lot). He was surprised, because he thought he was coming from a prudent into a liberal culture where people kiss each other whenever they meet, for example. He answered these questions by explaining that it was essential for physical contact to be a part of the relationship between teacher and child. However, every instance of physical contact should be articulate and open, and in that way impossible to be misinterpreted as contact of another sort. He often asked a woman from the audience to come forward and would put a firm arm around her to demonstrate his point.

An intimate and moving moment during his trip, which made a big impact on many people present, was when my colleague Marcel van Herpen asked Mr Kanamori (after having confirmed the importance Mr Kanamori gives to discussing life and death with his children) how it was possible that he never discussed the death of two of his babies with his wife. Mr Kanamori mentions this in his book that NIVOZ has had translated from Japanese into Dutch⁴. The audience held its breath before Mr Kanamori answered “words are not the only form of communication”. The lesson for me came during the preparatory phase for Marcel’s interview with Mr Kanamori; Marcel asked him if he could touch upon this sensitive topic. and Mr Kanamori did not answer yes or no, but told Marcel it would be Marcel’s interview and therefore his responsibility. He would, however, answer all of Marcel’s questions from the perspective that both Marcel and Ingrid had travelled all the way from Holland to Japan to invite him to visit. Marcel realized that he could go far in his questioning but that he would always retain the responsibility for the questions he decided to ask!

I would like to end this summary of lessons learned with something we at NIVOZ now refer to as “the right to speak”. In all the interactions Mr Kanamori had, from prepared talks to audiences of more than 300 people to random encounters with individual teachers and students, not once did he talk about something that he had not actually experienced himself. He did not “comment” on fragments of movies made in schools, he did not

⁴ The Dutch translation of the book written by Mr Kanamori (*Lessons for Life*) can be ordered from www.hetkind.org

judge the dilemmas that some people confronted him with. He always brought the question back to the here and now or linked it to something which he had personally experienced.

In one of the conversations we had with him whilst driving through The Netherlands he told us that an important reason for him accepting our invitation was that he would be able to visit the Anne Frank House. He wished to do this not only because of who Anne Frank was and what she represents, but more importantly because Mr Kanamori asks his students to write diaries. Once he had visited the Anne Frank House he could then bring her as an example to his children and elaborate on the importance that writing diaries can have! To be able to do this he had first to have experienced the Anne Frank House for himself.

At NIVOZ, we now often ask each other if we have the right to speak about something and frequently we find that we do not!

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Mr Kanamori made a big impression on the people in The Netherlands whom he met. His book has sold over seven thousand copies. Is it not remarkable that so many people in The Netherlands recognized the “master” teacher in Mr Kanamori, who comes from the other side of the world, from a different culture, with a different language? The true professional was recognized instantly, which means that somewhere, somehow, there must be fundamental, or universal ingredients, that make a good teacher. These ingredients may be values, or beliefs, or aims but they must be there and it is essential that we get to understand what they are!

Without theories or models, Mr. Kanamori showed us that the essence of teaching and educating children is connected to the world around us, to life, and that teaching and education should start there! We will never forget this!

BIOGRAPHY

Nickel van der Vorm (1969) started his career as a Dutch lawyer and then moved into international business after getting an MBA from London Business School. He then started his own technology company before joining Prof. Dr. Luc Stevens in setting up NIVOZ, an education think tank, in 2005. www.nivoz.nl