

Discovering the Art of Work

Producing the first Krishna-based Learn to Read program

By Urmila devi dasi

Early in 2008, stack after stack of children's books covered my desk, extra chairs, the floor, and just about every horizontal surface in the room. These were books systematically designed to teach any child how to read English, produced by the top publishers from all the world's English speaking countries. A small group of teachers, we read through them all, those books picked from the lists of the world's reading experts.

“How strange it is,” we remarked, “that, although it was common for a book to take the side of the prey animal rather than predator in a nature story, not one title promoted vegetarianism. How strange it is that, although it was common for a book to show people from various cultures, religion and God were totally absent. How strange it is that all the stories were about middle-class families with 1-3 children—there were no poor people, no rich people, no large families, no renunciates, and no simple rural life.” Clearly, these books are teaching much more than how to read and some universally agreed-upon values. They are forming children and a society by the word choices and pictures, the choice of themes, and perhaps especially in what is absent.

My journey with wanting children's books that supported a spiritual lifestyle and worldview started as a very personal one. Back in the 1970's before the general public heard that vegetarian was healthy, before there were yoga studios in small American towns, before kirtan singers attracted big audiences, our first son was born. When he was small we lived in Manhattan where signs abounded and he quickly taught himself to read. “‘Krsna' is K-R-S-N-A with three dots, but no dot on the K or the A,” he said one day at age three, followed by, “Why does ‘coffee’ have two ‘f’s’ and two ‘e’s?’” Srila Prabhupada had encouraged children's books as early in the Hare Krishna Movement's history as 1968, so a few story books were available for him to practice his new skills. But, they were very few. And, Prabhupada wanted not just story books. He wrote in several different letters in the late 60's and early 70's: “ it is good to note that you are writing these children's books to comply with the academic standards of the public schools... these children's books are very important because our next program is to start children's schools... if you can illustrate these books with pictures they will certainly become very, very popular in the [government] schools. ...make some nice Krsna conscious children's books and we shall then see to printing them... you can write many books for children and insert pictures, then they will be a sure success....The books should be written in simple language. ... What one learns as child is not lost throughout the life. So this is a very important business. Please execute it with great care and seriousness of purpose.”

I quickly became a nursery school teacher, and by the time our third child was two-years-old, I was an academic teacher in a primary school. Soon I became principal and head teacher in a

primary and secondary school for children of devotees. Although well over a decade had passed since Prabhupada wanted children's educational books produced to academic standards, only a dozen or so story books existed for children. There were many coloring books, a few activity books, and 2 or 3 concentrated attempts to produce a reading program. Unfortunately, still there was no educationally sound learning program that used stories and principles from India's ancient Vedic culture. By 1977 Prabhupada had become displeased with the lack of a sound educational program for the children, and was not interested in producing simply non-academic Krishna based children's books. As the years went by, my own heart broke while teaching reading to hundreds of children using stories that directly and indirectly promoted the idea that we are only material beings in a purely physical world.

Over the nearly three decades that I taught children, we made two attempts to produce a "learn to read" series. The first time resulted only in two beautiful story books that we "published" on a photocopier. The second time resulted only in some plans and outlines. I studied and discussed and researched and put together a children's book on the Bhagavad-gita, all the time nursing Prabhupada's dream for curriculum materials that would be top-quality both spiritually and academically. I prayed daily for such materials to be produced. But life was busy with the school and our household. Then, our children married and had their own children, my husband and I took up the renounced asrama of vanaprastha, I got a master's and doctorate in education, and worked for a year as an administrator in a government elementary school. I then wrote four simple festival-based education books for primary and secondary students while I traveled teaching Krishna consciousness. I wondered what I could do to produce curriculum without a team, an office, or financial backing.

In August, 2007, Sitarama Dasa from London, who had pioneered various educational projects for adults, contacted me. He wanted me to produce children's story books. We discussed how Prabhupada wanted books that would comply with academic standards and would teach reading, not just stories. Sitarama arranged for me to get guidance from top experts at the UK's Institute of Education. The Hare Krishna School in Auckland, New Zealand, offered me a place to work on the books in a room overlooking a tidal pool and a field of cows. There I got the help of Dvarakapuri Dasi, a NZ government reading expert, who connected me with another of the world authorities on writing children's books. She, along with the Manor Primary school in London, arranged for all the sample books overflowing my room.

Does it ever happen that when a long-cherished dream starts to unfold you ask, "Now what exactly do I do with this treasure?" I had a quiet and beautiful place to work, expert advice, samples, but still no team, no finances, and no experience in publishing. I had taught reading, and written for adults, but writing for children according to strict rules of learning steps was something new for me. Writing each book was like solving a puzzle with a set of 20 rules to follow—a fun story with a problem and solution, related to spiritual life, using the new words to be learned, not using any words not yet taught, having a certain number of sentences, certain sentence structure...I would try and fail, try and fail. And, even if each story was great on all

counts, would they be illustrated or published? Perhaps the books would simply be word processing documents on my hard drive, to live and die with me.

During this time I learned something about a phrase used often in the Bhagavad-gita, Krishna's beautiful song of yoga, the art of work and living. The phrase is "fruitive activity" and is a description of how not to work. Often, our happiness is in the imagined and hoped-for future fruit of our work. But that fruit may not come, or it may be bitter. Perhaps most importantly, we have limited control over whether our work bears *any* fruit, what to speak of tasty fruit. Even if the fruit is sweet, it comes only occasionally. A life based on fruitive work is therefore filled with fear, hankering, disappointment, and anger. The brief moments of happiness are fleeting, and then one starts the next working towards another fruit!

The book work had the most uncertain fruit of anything I had ever attempted. In fact, achieving publication was so unlikely as to be absurd! The only hope was that Prabhupada, my spiritual master, wanted these books done and that Krishna would fulfill Prabhupada's desire. But I did not live in a hope for an external fruit, even for my guru's desire. Instead, I turned to the Gita: "Do thou fight for the sake of fighting, without considering happiness or distress, loss or gain, victory or defeat... Those who want to enjoy the fruits of their work are misers.... without being attached to the fruits of activities, one should act as a matter of duty, for by working without attachment one attains the Supreme..." Did that mean acting as a robot without joy or caring? No, as the Gita says, "You should always think of Me in the form of Krsna and at the same time carry out your prescribed duty... the perfection of religion... is joyfully performed."

I started to offer every part of the process to Krishna, envisioning Him enjoying what I was doing minute-by-minute, as He says, "A person in full consciousness of Me, knowing Me to be the ultimate beneficiary of all sacrifices and austerities, the Supreme Lord of all planets and demigods, and the benefactor and well-wisher of all living entities, attains peace from the pangs of material miseries.... Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer or give away, and whatever austerities you perform—do that.. as an offering to Me."

The work was still very difficult, and often days went by with only a few lines written. However, my life began to be filled with a joy and peace that was expansive and induced me to sometimes get up from my desk and start dancing. How wonderful to be in a position of external uncertainty that lead me to discover the art of work!

Still, I *did* want to be able to fulfill Prabhupada's desire for published books, and my own inability kept staring me in the face, mocking me with my audacity to consider such a task. Here I was, alone, trying to produce not only the first Krishna based and professionally organized learn to read program, but I was also attempting to marry two normally opposing schools of teaching: phonics and whole language. What hubris I had to even consider this audacious idea!

In desperation, for book after book, after consulting, studying, and writing, I would come to my knees in helplessness. "I do not have the strength, Lord! Please fill me with your potency!" I

would recite a prayer to Krishna spoken by His great devotee Bhima, who tried for 28 days to defeat the demon Jarasandha: “na çakto 'haà jaräsandhaà, nirjetuà yudhi mädhava (äpyäyayan svena tejasä)” Then each book would manifest, sometimes all at once, and sometimes a little at a time. During this time, 6 teachers worked for 6 months to solidify the foundation of which words and sounds would be introduced in what order and in what combination. Finally, over 40 story books were written, one per reading level from alphabet to fluency.

Local and international teachers reviewed them, praising some parts, criticizing others. Books were adjusted, or re-done from scratch. Reviewed again. Changed again. Then, magic started to happen.

I went to Australia for medical treatment and got connected with devotees in China who are professional animators, as well as other artists. I was invited for lunch and handed a donation that would cover all the costs of color artwork. After a review from one of the experts at the London Institute of Education, the whole foundation that joined whole language and phonics was re-worked and 1/3 of the books re-done so that they were substantially improved. I received a visa in one day instead of 60 and had airfare covered for China to meet with the artists. The Chinese devotee animators sketched 250 pictures in 3 ½ days instead of 10. A friend introduced me to a Lyn Kriegler, an artist who had 75 children’s books published by Scholastic and Penguin and who loved Krishna. The husband of an old friend offered to do layout. Devotees in London offered to print 400 each of six books as a trial.

After selling 2,000 of 2,400 books in two days, Sitarama brought me to meet a publisher friend of his, the head of Mantralingua. We learned about a new technology that would embed audio files into ordinary paper using nearly invisible dots. Our books would be able to talk with the touch of a special pen-like device. We decided to have each page of text speak in 25 languages. The characters in the pictures would also talk, adding conversational English and songs beyond the text. Children and teachers could also record their voices into the pages. No other “learn to read” book in the world had such features.

Soon after we made the decision to add this technology, I happened to hear one of Prabhupada’s lectures, “Therefore I am stressing on this point: "Where is book? Where is book? Where is book?" So kindly help me. This is my request. Print as many books in as many languages and distribute throughout the whole world.” The thought of Prabhupada smiling at these books, filled with stories of Krishna’s pastimes, of simple living, of the instructive stories he has told, that could be heard in 25 languages, increased the joy that had permeated the project from my days overlooking the Auckland tidal pool.

But this was not a joy to be relished as a peaceful recluse. There was much to be done. The 42 color story books would not be enough for a full reading course, so an additional black and white book would need to be added per level, with instructions for teaching and lots of practice with words, phrases, and sentences. There would then be 83 books—a total of close to a thousand pages. I wrote the first 14 activity books and then was introduced to Rachel Espinosa, an early education teacher living in Mayapur, India. She worked closely with me to write most of the rest of these activity books and teacher guides. Yet, we only met after we had worked together for many months! We worked exclusively through chat and email while I traveled around the world

giving scripture classes and talking to people about the project. Each of these books needed between 40-100 illustrations. Devotee artists in Vietnam, Hungary and India joined the program.

We needed translators. Finding them and organizing their work became a full-time job. Anasuya of Belgium, who was partially invalid, took up the challenge and learned that Krishna can empower those who work in His service. Sitarama worked with a professional project manager and organized dozens of volunteers in London to turn the written translations into dramatic speech, edit the audio, and prepare it for publication. My oldest son took over the layout full-time. Two donations came in that covered all the artwork for the activity books. Many small donations covered the ongoing costs. I was now constantly traveling and teaching while overseeing a team of nearly 200 people scattered throughout the world, with three managers working on specific areas. The work was intense and difficult—for example, in many places the Internet was so slow that it would take three days to look at sketches for one book and give feedback to the illustrator. We had to give instructions to the Chinese artists using symbols and arrows. When we couldn't find a speaker in London for a particular language, we had to guide a person remotely in the complex process.

Yet throughout the intensity and the almost daily obstacles, the work remained one of joy in offering each moment's endeavor to Krishna and begging for His empowerment. Finally, almost exactly three years since the project started, we had a grand launch in a huge tent on Krishna's birth anniversary (Janmastami), 2010, at Bhaktivedanta Manor, London. Volunteers demonstrated using the magic pens with stacks of books, and all were enthralled.

As we have brought the books to various countries, everyone is attracted to the technology that makes the books come alive, to the beautiful illustrations, and to the charming stories and philosophy that is at the heart of Krishna consciousness. This is true whether we are showing the books to a meeting of ISKCON's international leaders in India, to newspaper reporters, to families, or to government school teachers.

Materially we aim for fulfillment in our work by thinking of ourselves as the doer of our actions and taking pride in our accomplishments. But in bhakti yoga, the art of all work, one's satisfaction is in the moment-to-moment relationship with Krishna who is one's ability and intelligence. One's sense of meaning and fulfillment is in doing one's utmost to satisfy one's spiritual master's desires. Having tasted such actions, the ordinary doing and making in worldly consciousness seems merely unfortunate and pathetic no matter how grandiose the fleeting results may appear.

(To virtually look inside each book, virtually use the MagicPen, and see videos of the books in action, go to <http://www.illumination.com>, from where the books can also be purchased. The books are also available from <http://www.krishna.com>, <http://talkingpen.in/> (India only), and <http://blservices.com/books/children-books/dr-best-urmila-dd>)

For interviews with successful devotees, including an interview with Urmila devi dasi sharing her experiences creating the Dr Best Learn to Read books, please visit <http://successfulvaisnavas.com>