

OUR PRIORITIES IN EDUCATION

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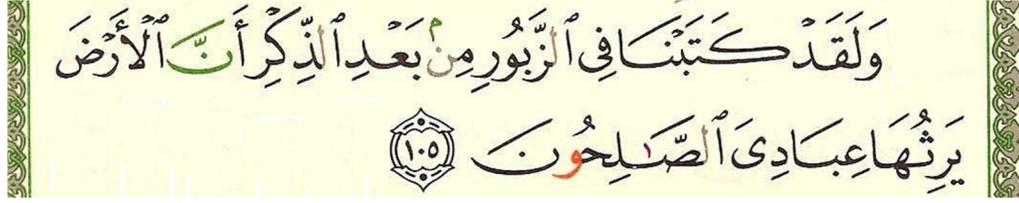
Authors Note

This is not an attempt to evaluate or compare the various methods of teaching (or pedagogies) used in different institutions, but is in a more general sense a note of expectation on the results that are to be expected.

Though many pedagogies were studied to understand the expectation each of the styles endeavor to achieve, this is more an attempt to allow every adult, parent, institute to evaluate or adopt in their list of desired results.

To express the points being made several stories are used and references are made from various religious books without discrimination.

INTRODUCTION



And certainly We wrote in the Book after the reminder that (as for) the land, My righteous servants shall inherit it. Sura al-Ambiya (21) Ayah No. 105

Allah (Subhanahu wa ta'Ala) states that those who are among the righteous shall inherit this earth and be part of His favour.

If we are to use this guidance from the Holy Quran then the formula to make successful people is to create or assist through education the development of righteous people from our of our children.

This is a task much easier said than done. Many educationists have thought through different perspectives and arrived at a method that they convince themselves to be the best.

Without disputing their convictions or pedagogy, there should be pre-identified priorities on how to achieve this above mentioned creed of self-realizing, confident leaders to take the nation into the next 100 years of its independence.

OUR PRIORITIES IN EDUCATION

Without getting into the various methodologies of educating our children it is important that as adults – we need to evaluate our own selves first to check if our education has helped us achieve what is mentioned below.

Then we should check to ensure that our off-springs are also being guided similarly even if it means it is through methods external to their regular school curriculum – like the extra-curricular Islamic teaching that is generally imparted by the visit of an Ustadh in the evenings, or the madrassa education prevalent in some states (besides the regular school education) is imbibing these values in our children.

There should be discussion with education institutions and their managements to drive them to think beyond syllabi, curricula and exam results only and adopt method of teaching and evaluating such values.

1. To elevate our sense of consciousness – of ourselves and the world we live in

This is not a simple statement but depict the meaning of this objective let us use a small story of “THE MONKEY CATCHER” to help us understand its meaning.

Once upon a time there was a monkey who was very fond of cherries. One day he saw a delicious looking cherry, and came down from his tree to get it. But the fruit turned out to be in a clear glass bottle. After some experimentation, the monkey found that he could get hold of the cherry by putting his hand into the bottle by way of the neck. As soon as he had done so, he closed his hand over the cherry; but then he found that he could not withdraw his fist holding the cherry, because it was larger than the internal dimension of the neck. Now all of this was deliberate, because the cherry in the bottle was a trap laid by a monkey hunter who knew how monkeys think.

The hunter, hearing the monkey's whimpering's, came along and the monkey tried to run away. But, because his hand was, as he thought, stuck in the bottle, he could not move fast enough to escape. But, as he thought, he still had hold of the cherry. The hunter picked him up. A moment later he tapped the monkey sharply on the elbow, making him suddenly relax his hold on the fruit.

The monkey was free, but he was captured.

The hunter had used the cherry and the bottle, but he still had them.

What do you make of this tale? At the first level, that of plot, the story seems to be about how much cleverer the hunter is than the monkey. Do you sympathize with the poor monkey? If you do, it is understandable, because this is the same condition of any person with "normal" consciousness.

Now if we relate to the tale at an analogical level, the tale seems to be about life itself. We are like the monkey with our ability to experiment and to find the ways to fulfill our desires. This type of thinking allows us to solve problems and has brought us the many benefits of modern science, also known as "the cherries of life". But our desires for material things as well as emotional rewards have also been the reason for our imprisonment. Letting go of what we had desired is what frees us. If it is our desires that capture us, it is life's tough blows, "the sharp tap" on our awareness that makes us relax our hold and frees us. Yet in another, more profound sense, we are still trapped. These contemplations strike at the question of the nature of freedom itself.

Hence we can safely conclude from this principle that by elevating the sense of consciousness of ourselves and the world we live in – we are in a way setting our children free.

2. To be evolved among Humankind

The Third Beatitude (Matthew 5:5) reads: "Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth." The one who originally translated this part of the Sermon on the Mount (St. Jerome) could have used instruction in "How to Catch a Monkey." What is really meant here is that those who have gained control over their desires will inherit the earth, i.e., be among the evolved of Humankind. The word "meek" is really a mis-translation for describing the person who is inwardly very strong-willed and very much in control over emotions and desires.

This point of meek being a mistranslation is proved from the the introductory Ayah from the Quran which says that "the righteous shall inherit the earth". So the righteous are referred to as "meek" in their ability to get over the weaknesses of men with a common level of consciousness who have not evolved beyond themselves.

For an outstanding example of this great strength necessary for this "meekness," think of Gandhi. One of the main reasons non-violent civil disobedience is so difficult to organize is that it requires such strength of will power and self-control among its practitioners. On a personal level as well it is this desire-world of ours that must be made meek to our higher selves. We must elevate our thinking above the animal level, "the way monkeys think". Learning how to master your desires is not just an intellectual process because it is not your intelligence that is the basis for habits or programmed, habitualized thinking. What one likes and dislikes and the habits one acquires are held in a separate but interpenetrating part of us. This is the reason that knowing something is not good for you, say smoking for example, and cannot stop the bad habit by itself. A person must be willing to work on this hidden dimension of what constitutes the whole self to change habits or inbred thoughts and feelings.

3. Educate them on the science of reality: When the waters change

A short Sufi tale which deals with still other mind-sets is "When the Waters Were Changed"

Once upon a time Khidr, the Teacher of Moses, called upon mankind with a warning. At a certain date, he said, all the water in the world that had not been specially hoarded would disappear. It would then be renewed, with different water, which would drive men mad.

Only one man listened to the meaning of this advice. He collected water and went to a secure place where he stored it, and waited for the water to change its character. On the appointed date the streams stopped running, the wells went dry, and the man who had listened, seeing this happening, went to his retreat and drank his preserved water. When he saw, from his security waterfalls again beginning to flow, this man descended among the other sons of men. He found that they were thinking and talking in an entirely different way from before; yet they had no memory of what had happened, or of having been warned. When he tried to talk to them, he realized that they thought that he was mad, and they showed hostility, not understanding.

At first he drank none of the new water, but went back to his concealment, to draw on his supplies, every day. Finally, however, he took the decision to drink the new water because he could not bear the loneliness of living, behaving and thinking in a different way from everyone else. He drank the new water, and became like the rest. Then he forgot all about his own store of special water, and his fellows began to look upon him as a madman who had miraculously been restored to sanity.

This simple tale is not so simple. It triggers off an unending stream of thoughts that range from the subject of peer group pressure to who is sane, who is insane, to the question of what is reality itself. On a physical, materialistic level one can observe teenage behavior as an example of some entity tampering with the water system which makes adolescents go crazy for some fad in fashion or in music. In this case parents rarely

succumb to the same changed "water." On a more psychological level, where adults are more in control of education, most everyone is induced to drink the changed water. The best examples of the educational power that grips everyone are the lessons of nationalism, racism and religious fervor that elders inculcate in youth.

A historic illustration of this was when Henry David Thoreau objected to the Mexican-American War in 1846 on the moral grounds that this aggressive action was really a pretext to annex territory and extend slavery. Most of this country's political force unified once President Polk decided to conquer Mexico. Thoreau would not drink the same water as his countrymen and refused to pay his taxes as a protest of what the government was doing with his money. When he was put into jail his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to him asking why he was in jail. Thoreau wrote back asking why Emerson was not. It isn't easy to go against the mass of feelings of others in your community. There is a heavy price to pay and most do not have the inner strength to pay it.

However, there is even a heavier price to pay for not paying heed to your inner self - You actually lose that sense of self as did the only man in the Sufi tale who at first did not drink the changed water. He ended up forgetting his own store of special water, his higher self.

Real education should have the insights and the power to prepare students for the time when the waters are changed. Certainly, it is easy to see how the Germans were not prepared by their education for the difficult times that made Hitler possible. It is much harder to see in our own situation the deficiencies that are so easy to see in others. Thoreau and then Gandhi and Martin Luther King all had a sense of the necessity for inner education that could make individuals much stronger in character to overcome injustice in the outer world. This level of education must include principles not normally found in our secular liberal arts institutions and which are normally not found in religious institutions either. Insights and motivation have to be discovered through education so

that the self can be strong enough not to give up and drink the "Mad" water. Rather, the self must become strong enough to come back and live among the mad without becoming mad itself.

4. Encourage them to self-discovery

One of the most important aspects of education is the element of self-discovery. If you learn something for yourself, it is yours. If you learn to do something, you have the confidence that you can do it again. This is very different than being given an explanation by someone else or being forced to memorize something by routine.

Let's read the tale of the "The Ancient Coffin of Nuri Bey" to understand this concept deeper

Nuri Bey was a reflective and respected Albanian, who had married a wife much younger than himself. One evening when he had returned home earlier than usual, a faithful servant came to him and said:

"Your wife, our mistress, is acting suspiciously. She is in her apartments with a huge chest, large enough to hold a man, which belonged to your grandmother. It should contain only a few ancient embroideries. She will not allow me, your oldest retainer, to look inside."

Nuri went to his wife's room, and found her sitting disconsolately beside the massive wooden box. "Will you show me what is in the chest?" he asked.

"Because of the suspicion of a servant, or because you do not trust me."

"Would it not be easier just to open it, without thinking about the undertones?" asked Nuri.

"I do not think it possible"

"Is it locked?"

"Yes."

"Where is the key?"

She held it off, "Dismiss the servant and I will give it to you."

The servant was dismissed. The woman handed over the key and withdrew, obviously troubled in mind. Nuri Bey thought for a long time. Then he called four gardeners from his estate. Together they carried the chest by night unopened to a distant part of the grounds, and buried it. The matter was never referred to again.

What does this story mean and what can it do for us? First of all, there is the story level itself. Short as it is, it has a dramatic plot. There are elements of tension, mystery and climax that make for an interesting and entertaining tale. To the superficial consciousness, this tale remains just that. When asked to make a judgment about characters in the story, all sorts of opinions can be expressed. But beneath the surface one feels certain troubling elements in the story which when examined turn out to defy analysis. The story itself seems to be penetrating our thoughts and to be disturbing to our feelings. To the thoughtful reader, immediately questions arise: Is this a story about adultery and homicide? Is it a story about older men who marry younger women? Is it about wisdom and cleverness? Is it about faith and trust? Is the end of the story satisfying? Has the problem really been buried and forgotten?

The quality is to be seen in this Sufi tale. Its transforming force remains quiescent until the reader spends some time and repetition on it. For this reason, these next comments will not have the same effect as they would have had if the reader had discovered this aspect of the tale for himself or herself. However, there are many other tales available for your own self-discovery.

One of the actual experiences that can be derived from "The Ancient Coffin of Nuri Bey" is the realization of the importance of pre-suppositions in all of our attitudes, feelings and judgments. Reading the story with the assumption that there is a man in the coffin brings with it very different thoughts and feelings than if the assumption is that there is no man in the coffin.

Our deteriorating financial, educational and energy systems are the fall-out from an inadequate level of thinking and cleverness. We are just beginning to see that the solutions to our problems were not really buried at all. The real trouble is that the same thinking that brought us our atomic waste and other problems is still admired and respected in much the same way as one probably admired and respected the solution Nuri Bey found for his problem. And what is even worse is that we "never refer to the matter again."

IN CONCLUSION

It would be unfair to conclude without authenticating these theoretical visions with our field experience. Popular Front of India has been working very extensively, by ourselves and with organizations, like Rehab India Foundation in the field of education for several years now. Our popular national campaign called "SCHOOL CHALO" endeavors to take back to school those who dropout from school in particular, and ensure that they continue their education even after educational aid is withdrawn. This involves counseling the parents and guardians of such children whose parents themselves are uneducated and cannot appreciate the benefits of education. In such situations we have to adopt an entire village under the Sarva Sikha Gram scheme and provide for them their basic socio-economic needs developing in them vocational skills, employment opportunities and confidence building measures to beguile them towards a better future.

Every year we hope that this is the last year of these programs like SCHOOL CHALO and SARVA SHIKSHA GRAM, hopeful that the in the coming year the community would have taken wings and fresh batch of thought leaders will emanate from the resource created.

We notice that compared to South India the northern parts of the country needs more of such interventions because of the broken spirit and low self-esteem among the Muslim masses.

Constant deprivation from basic civic amenities, lack of employment and development opportunities, abject poverty, threat to life from diseases and natural calamities coupled with man-made tragedies like riots, etc. all this indifferently witnessed by an insensitive government, has lead them to believe that this is all that life can offer them or the Creator has destined for them.

Hence the quality of education should not just involve routine academics, but also such character building measures like – self-discovery, realize the higher self, to elevate their sense of consciousness, imbibing in them the sense of social responsibility and sensitizing them to society and their surroundings and being able to adapt to changes in socio-political scenarios and to ultimately lead the community out of its misery into the next 100 years of independent India.

References

"The Ancient Coffin of Nuri Bey," "How to Catch Monkeys," and "When the Waters Were Changed" are all from Tales of the Dervishes by Idries Shah, Copyright @1967 by Idries Shah, published by E.P Dutton & Co, Inc.