The Importance of People

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As We Look Toward Christmas

A little over a year ago one of ASCD’s founders, a great man and a great American leader in education, went to the American University of Beirut as its president. J. Paul Leonard is well-known to many of us personally—and to the rest by way of his writings. From his overseas post, near the birthplace of the Jewish and Christian religions, Dr. Leonard speaks to us here of the importance of the search for truth.

IGNORANCE in any country is like a deep veil over the face; it shuts out the light of knowledge and understanding. When a man of trained intelligence does not know an answer, he turns to one who does or he discovers the answer by experimentation. Each step of new knowledge opens new vistas, just as a strong telescope takes one beyond the observations made by a weak one.

But there are millions today who do not know the joys of being educated, and they turn to superstition, rumor, religious fanaticism, or traditional practices. They live by the fears and errors of generations. Their beliefs have no vitality, for they leave no room for examination or change. But doubt creeps into these beliefs when they hear about wonder drugs, or freedom to choose, or see airplanes replacing camels, or industry demanding skills they do not possess. As these doubts become stronger and as those who receive education tend to live better, the desire for education grows.

My experience at American University of Beirut has given me a chance to observe this transformation in people who have high intellectual ability although they have sometimes been handicapped by lack of the opportunity for education; men who, when given a chance, prove their ability. Three instances come to mind: a boy in Arabia tending sheep and camels for his father, a tribal leader, who yearned to know and who recently graduated with honors in law from one of America’s most famous universities; the son of a Beirut taxi driver, who will soon be a successful physician; and a third person, whose father is a doorman for a government official, and who will, in spite of great handicaps, be a successful engineer.

Yearning for Knowledge

The yearning for knowledge is the prime motivation in education for the young freshman, for the doctor confronted with a strange case, and for the great research scientist. On this premise they live on common ground. One of the great joys of working in those countries where youth have been handicapped by
lack of education and where unscientific doctrines have at times become unsavory to them is to watch them work with odds few American youth ever face and to see the gleam in their eye at graduation. Education is serious business, a pearl of great price, a personal achievement; and in these lands it is the only thing a man can be sure cannot be taken from him.

Christ, the great founder of the Christian religion, urged that the search for truth was a noble pursuit and therefore made ever vigorous a religion for men of all times. Last Christmas, as I read the Scripture at the traditional site of the shepherds on the hills near Bethlehem, I realized more than ever before the meaning and the value of the search for knowledge. That day I had visited the only hospital for the mentally ill in Jordan, administered by one of our own graduates who was experimenting with new ways to restore sanity. Later I visited his father’s hospital in Bethlehem, where for years his mother had held a kerosene lantern while his father operated on the physically ill—youth and maturity seeking the truth, the light, to bring health and sanity to diseased minds and bodies. Here were the results of education at work in the restoration of health. Several months later I found them both in our Medical School reviewing their most troublesome cases and seeking new light on confusing problems.

“The truth shall make you free” can be fully comprehended only by the free mind, the mind from which the veil of ignorance has been lifted. The statement is an ancient one, nearly 2000 years old, but it is ever alive and modern. The man who knows and whose attitudes are right is the free man. He is the one whose joy of living is measured by his appetite for new ideas. He is the one who can judge and distinguish for himself. He is not dependent. One man buys an oriental rug only at a place where he has confidence in the dealer; another with knowledge is free to roam and buy at will, for he knows quality and values and cannot be deceived. The truth is the greatest release from fear and dependence any man can acquire. It can cause a man to reach into the deepest recesses of facts and falsehoods and sort them out with discernment so as to bring understanding and order to a confused world.

The Christmas message lies in the heart of the Christian philosophy, a philosophy of freedom and respect for all men. With such a philosophy, no matter whence it springs, all men become brothers in understanding and in respect for the common search for a better life. The result of such a quest can only be peace on earth.

Those of us to whom young minds are entrusted probably have a better opportunity and truly a greater responsibility to keep alive throughout the year the philosophy of the Christmas message than any other group. It is the heart and soul of our business. Those who keep Christmas best, keep its meaning constantly. The idea was born in a land where it was not understood, where its principles were so shocking that its creator suffered death. But ideas of merit have a way of surviving persecution and individual lives. The great idea has brought life to those who have adopted it. Let those of us who have profited most from it cherish it with reverence and sustain it with greater insight and responsibility as the years go by. We must either remain close to the promise of the star of Bethlehem or we will suffer the chaos of the cross.

—J. PAUL LEONARD, president, American University of Beirut, Lebanon.