

Neglect

By Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

I had scarcely settled back in Egypt after returning from abroad at the end of the summer when I learned that a dear friend of mine had been plunged into a grief both deep and searing—one of those calamities that weigh heavily upon human hearts. His young son had lost his sight as the result of an accident among children. My friend and his family endured this painful blow, resisting it as long as resistance was possible, exhausting every means of hope and ingenuity. Yet the severity of the ordeal proved stronger than all their efforts, and he submitted with the same dignity with which he had first received the disaster.

Still, I saw him shaken and distracted, uncertain how to face life alongside this beloved child. For the boy must one day be educated and prepared to shoulder the burdens of life when his age permits—and the means for such an education in Egypt are either absent or scarcely exist at all. Egyptians, even now, more than halfway through the twentieth century, continue to live as they did in earlier centuries, in times of ignorance and neglect, when it was firmly believed that those who lost their sight, whether young or old, were destined to live as dependents upon their families and upon society at large.

If their families could support them, they did so. If not, there remained the memorization and recitation of the Qur'an, which custom had made a livelihood for some, sufficient to stave off hunger. And if even this failed, then there was begging—enduring the weight of misery and humiliation, content if misery and degradation were enough to persuade people that such a life was acceptable, whether endured willingly or under compulsion.

Al-Azhar alone preserved an older and nobler tradition. It enabled these afflicted blind men to live with dignity, and to find in life something that might console them for their suffering and for this cruel affliction: the pursuit of learning and religion. They studied as sighted students studied, and taught as sighted scholars taught.

As for the modern civil schools established and administered by the state—or founded by private individuals and associations—they are closed to the blind, for they lack the special means required to educate them, discipline them, and enable them to become self-respecting, capable men.

In Egyptian society, particularly in some of its more ignorant and negligent quarters, there exists a strange cruelty that stands in stark contrast to the mercy, kindness, and compassion for the weak traditionally associated with the Egyptian character. People mock the blind and ridicule their mannerisms openly, without shame or restraint, indifferent to the pain they inflict upon those already wounded by life and battered by circumstance.

All that Egypt has achieved in the modern age in caring for the blind is the establishment—out of charity and pity—of a few institutions where some are taught simple manual trades

that allow them to earn the barest subsistence. As for the minds within their heads and the hearts within their chests, these are deemed of no consequence or value. Since God has decreed that they should not see, it is assumed that they should have no share in the life of intellect or feeling.

I have forgotten many things since coming of age, and I shall undoubtedly forget many more before my life is done. But there is one episode from my early youth that I have never forgotten—and I doubt that I ever shall. It embittered my days and robbed my nights of sleep, leaving scars upon my heart that have endured, though they stir neither resentment nor weakness.

This occurred when the Egyptian University was founded in the final years of the first decade of this century, and when young men rushed toward it, burning with thirst for the free learning it offered—learning unshackled by British authority and modern in spirit, unconstrained by the traditional limits of al-Azhar. I was among those eager youths.

One day, I approached a lecture room accompanied by my young servant. I had barely reached the door when I was forcefully turned away. That Black boy, I was told, must not accompany me into the classroom; entry was forbidden to anyone without a student card. I went to complain to the university's secretary, the late Aḥmad Zakī Bey, whose reply was harsher still. "What do you expect me to do," he said, "when God has decreed that you should not attend the lecture?"

Some friends took pity on me. They would wait for me at the lecture halls, escort me inside, and then accompany me back out to where the boy waited for my return.

I recalled this episode many times later in life—when I was a professor at the university and blindness struck certain students after they had earned their secondary certificates, and I found ways to ease their path to learning; and when I was Minister of Education, and blindness afflicted students before their final examinations, and I worked to ensure they passed and entered the university.

I recalled it again when I returned from Europe this past summer and witnessed my friend's grief and confusion over his young son. Hardly had I finished consoling him when I received a bitter letter from another father, similarly afflicted, asking how his child might be raised and educated with dignity—protected from despair, freed from helplessness, and enabled to bear the responsibilities of life when the time comes.

Not all parents are prepared to send their blind sons to the School of Light to learn a simple handicraft. Not all are willing to confine them to memorizing the Qur'an as a means of subsistence. Nor are all inclined to send them to al-Azhar to become scholars of language or religion.

Blind children and youths have the right—and the capacity—to struggle in life and to bear its burdens with dignity, just as many sighted people do. They possess a right to education that the state owes them, like all Egyptians, and a special right to care and consideration, for

the most elementary duty of a civilized state is to care for those whom misfortune has placed in need.

When I speak of the blind, I do not mean them alone, to the exclusion of others afflicted by disabilities that render education more difficult for them than for the healthy. Nor need I instruct the Ministry of Education in what Europe and America have long prepared in the way of educational methods for such children and youths; the Ministry knows this better than I do—or at least it ought to.

In Egypt there exists a school for the blind, established some time ago, which claims to educate and train them as they deserve. This is commendable. Yet it would be better still to establish additional schools in other provincial cities. Not every family can send its child to this one institution, and it is unlikely to accommodate all who need it. They are, regrettably, more numerous than that—scattered across Egypt, united in sorrow, deserving of state care that prepares them for a dignified, productive life. Among them may be individuals in whom nature has hidden treasures that must not be squandered.

This, then, is an appeal I address to the Minister of Education. I do not doubt that it will reach his young and ardent heart, nor that he will receive it with the attention it deserves. His fellow citizens will feel that the revolution of which he is a part will not merely transform political and economic life, but Egyptian life as a whole—granting greater care to the weak than to the strong, and ensuring for all Egyptians a dignified equality in rights and duties, each according to his ability.

I am confident that this year will not pass before schools are established in Egypt where blind children receive the same care and education now available in that single institution—so that no group monopolizes comfort and fulfillment while misery, hardship, and sorrow are left to others alone.

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