

The Burdens of Education

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In olden times and ages past, it used to be said: whoever opens a school closes a prison. This phrase was repeated often in the early years of this century, when we were boys and young men, and when this homeland's sincere well-wishers urged the founding of free schools, complaining that the governments subject to the occupier's authority were stingy in establishing schools, and spread education only to the extent of their own need for officials, not to the extent of the people's need for knowledge, culture, and emergence from the darkness of ignorance into the light of learning.

And if memory does not deceive me, the newspaper Al-Liwa — published by the leader Mustafa Kamil — repeated this phrase more than any other paper. The important thing is that Egyptians in the early years of this century believed, with the truest and deepest belief, that ignorance is darkness, that learning is light, that founding schools is a national duty among the gravest of national duties in consequence, and the farthest-reaching in bringing the people out of abasement into honor, and in enabling it to resist colonialism and rebel against the colonizers. For some reason, the leader Mustafa Kamil founded that school of his, which was not merely a house of learning, but a house of learning, politics, and resistance to the occupation.

A well-known writer — who died some time ago — was devoted to opening schools, so that whenever he opened a school he would inform his friend, the acting director of Alexandria University, Professor Hussein Fawzi, that he had closed a prison.

He would say this to his friend laughing and joking, but he did not laugh and joke out of disdain for this common wisdom or doubt in it; rather he laughed and joked out of confidence in it, affirming it, and rejoicing in his victory over ignorance in some quarter of his fellow citizens' world.

Such was the case in the early years of this century, and such was the case between the two World Wars, when Egypt won some of her rights and turned to matters of education, managing them with concern, eager to establish government and free schools wherever she was able.

She believed that education restores to people their lost selves, makes them feel their forfeited rights, endears dignity to them and adorns it in their hearts, and makes abasement hateful to them and ugly in their souls. For this reason the Egyptians founded their first university despite the occupiers' displeasure, and founded their many free schools despite the occupiers' displeasure as well. That was in olden times and ages past, as the storytellers used to say; but now the world has changed, and opening a school has become something close to an evil to be guarded against; for learning has apparently become so abundant that we have grown weary of it and wary of it. The best of matters is the middle course, as is said. Stinginess in learning is an evil, and excess in learning is an evil, and the whole good lies in a matter being midway between the two.

And I know full well that this speech I am dictating utterly contradicts the principles and aims of the Egyptian revolution, and the grave efforts it expends in founding schools and in organizing this founding, such that within a few short years all Egyptian children will be given the chance to learn. Such that the constitutional provision that primary education is compulsory for Egyptian boys and girls becomes a depiction of actual reality, not mere words that depict nothing.

I know all of this full well, but I also know that in Egypt there are those who are impatient with education, and wary of its danger to morals, indeed to security, indeed to the whole order. Did not some who speak say that the Ministry of Education is responsible for that abominable crime some pupils committed in a Cairo neighborhood some weeks ago? Did not writers in some newspapers write columns calling for education not to be made available to all people, but rather to be eased for the capable and qualified, while the great mass of the incapable and unqualified be directed to whatever trades, crafts, and familiar work suit them in earning a living with their hands in the fields and the roads, and whatever God wills of fields of manual labor?

All this was written while Egypt was preparing to celebrate the second anniversary of the revolution, and while the men of the revolution themselves were telling the citizens — whenever they had the chance to address the citizens — that they had resolved to build hundreds of schools every year, so that the people might emerge from the abasement of ignorance into the honor of knowledge.

And I understand full well that Egyptians should differ over education policy, and take various positions on it, and dispute over this policy, some disavowing others' policy and some recognizing others' policy. But the thing I do not understand and cannot accept is that rivalry should drive us to let our words fly without reflection, deliberation, or patience. So one speaker says: education is responsible for the crimes and sins some pupils fall into, and another speaker says: education must be restricted to those qualified and able to bear it.

And the tables turn in less than half a century, so that whoever opens a school seems as though he had opened a prison, after whoever opened a school had closed one. What is the source of this reversal? Is it truly a profound reversal, truly a grave one, which we must reckon with in assessing contemporary Egyptian life and managing its affairs in the days to come? Or is it merely talk that rivalry sometimes tempts one into, and mental shortsightedness tempts one into at other times, and that hatred and rancor, which some hearts have not yet been cleansed of, tempt one into?

As for me, I believe with the firmest and most settled belief that the Egyptian people still believe that whoever opens a school has closed a prison, and that their faith in this wisdom has become, in these days, more widespread and more firmly rooted than it was in the early years of this century. The proof of this is that the existing schools — whether government or free — cannot satisfy people's need to educate their sons and daughters, and that the revolution has established a special body to multiply the building of schools every year, and that the revolution calls upon citizens to establish their own free private schools, and supports and assists them if they do so.

Had the revolution felt any aversion to education, or any indifference toward it, it would have spared itself this toil, and limited what it spends of effort and money, or resorted to dictatorial means to compel people to educate their sons and daughters; but the revolution spends effort and money, and resorts to no means of compulsion toward education at all, but resorts instead to various means to ease education for those who desire it and seek it. And what is chiefly to be held against those who speak thus is that educated people should, in these days, live up to it, especially when they rise to public burdens and to guiding the people in their lives toward what suits their near and far interests.

Egyptians must know that many truths are hidden from them, not made clear to them; for Egypt, for instance, is not the only country where schools are so crowded with pupils as to expose education to deficiency and weakness — this is rather a widespread affliction in many countries, including many countries that some of us take as a model and guide. For school overcrowding with pupils is an affliction of which the English complain, of which the French complain, and of which the Americans also complain. And great efforts are expended in those countries, as they are in Egypt, to treat it and be rid of it.

This is one matter; and another truth hidden from Egyptians, not made clear to them, is that Egypt is not alone the country where the burdens of teaching are undertaken by people not adequately prepared for it; for the scarcity of competent teachers is not an Egyptian or Arab affliction, but a worldwide affliction of which the most advanced countries of the world, and the most firmly established in culture, civilization, and learning, complain.

The English complain of it, and the French, and the Americans, and other countries of Europe in their various ways. The secret in this is not difficult, for democracy wants all people to be educated, because it views education as a right, not a gift or a grant, and because it views education, in some of its stages, as a duty citizens have no choice but to fulfill or be relieved of. And democracy needs a long time, heavy effort, much money, and a settled and secure peace, to build what schools must be built, to prepare what teachers must be prepared, and to establish education on firm foundations that satisfy the jurists of education and the philosophers of pedagogy alike.

And a third truth hidden from Egyptians, not made clear to them, is that Egypt is not the only country where pupils and students commit some crimes and sins; rather, the involvement of youth in crime and sin is a worldwide question of which very many countries complain — countries that preceded Egypt in spreading education and bringing it to the depths of the people.

I have witnessed this very year, in Paris, a grave and abominable offense committed by groups of pupils after they had finished their baccalauréat examination. They assaulted people's honor and persons and property, wrecked many shops, and cost the French tens of millions of francs. Yet the French Ministry of Education was not charged with the responsibility for this corruption; rather its matter was left to the public

prosecution to study and investigate, then to the judiciary to rule upon it by force of law, and its explanation and interpretation were left to students of social affairs to pronounce upon after reflection, deliberation, and inquiry.

Had we heeded those gentlemen who charge education with the burdens of the sins the educated commit, schools the world over would have been closed, humanity would have been returned to ignorant ignorance and darkened darkness, and governments would have turned their efforts and funds from founding schools to founding prisons; for ignorance does not absolve people of crimes, but rather tempts them into them and drives them toward them.

I read in the French newspaper *Le Monde* a report by the chief of police of New York, in which he affirms that the crimes committed in that city are not counted by days, nor by weeks, nor by months ... nor even by hours, but are counted by minutes, a crime being committed every two minutes.

And education in New York is far more widespread and has penetrated far deeper into the people than it has in the city of Cairo or Alexandria, and the chief of police of New York does not lay the blame on education nor demand that it be restricted, but rather asks that the means be provided to him to protect security and track down criminals.

Let us be true to the truth, true in our counsel to the people, let us take our time in the judgments we issue, and let us avoid, as far as we can, letting our words fly without verification, without caution, without care ... and let us ask God, mighty and exalted, to grant us wisdom when we act, when we think, and when we speak; for He, exalted be His name, says: (And whoever is given wisdom has indeed been given much good).