

Being positive in challenging times

We looked at two aspects of challenging times; why they happen and how to tackle them by drawing on our strength from experience of our own personal history as well as the history of our people and the world. Today we will see what strategies work in helping us deal with challenging times. To begin, a word about having a so-called positive attitude and outlook. We have little or no control over what happens to us, but we have total control over what we can do with what happens to us. That begins with how we choose to view what happens.

I am reminded of something I saw in Bihar, many years ago. Bihar is one of the least developed provinces of India, known mostly for the utterly horrible condition of all public services, astronomical corruption even by Indian standards, and the number of people it regularly gives to the Indian Civil Services. We had stopped at a traffic light, which was itself something to wonder at, because it takes more than a mere traffic light to stop a Bihari driver. The road was a series of potholes joined together by little strips of asphalt, laid at the time the great pyramids were being built in Egypt. As we waited for the traffic light to change, I saw a young man of perhaps, 15, come racing down a slope on my right on his bicycle. Predictably, he hit a pothole, bounced and was airborne for a few seconds, landed very expertly and yelled, "Wah! Kya khadda hai!" (Wow! What a pit.) And without missing a step, he whizzed through the red light, proving his pureblooded Bihari lineage. Thereby I learnt a lesson. The boy had no control over the condition of the road. But he could choose his reaction to it. He chose to laugh and make others laugh. It is that simple.

Sometimes people challenge you and ask, 'What will change if you are positive?' I say, 'Maybe nothing in the outer world. But everything inside you. That in turn, changes how you view the external challenge and enables you to take a different approach which can be the solution that you need.' As they say, by the rules of aerodynamics, a bumblebee cannot fly. But bumblebees don't know aerodynamic, so they fly. Our conditioning, a great part of which is education, predestines us to succeed or fail.

Let us remember, that our old ideas are the reason we are in this mess. So, another version of the old idea won't work. We need new ideas which may scare the daylights out of us, but which will illuminate the way in this world, darkened by what we have earned. I believe we need a two-pronged strategy: Return to Allahﷻ and change how we educate our children

1. Return to Allahﷻ

This is the starting point. We saw how calamities come when we invite them by deviating from the path that Allahﷻ chose for us. It is a no-brainer to understand that the first thing to do is Istighfaar and Tawba. To repent and turn away from our disaster-inviting lifestyles and become obedient to Allahﷻ. This must be done individually, as families and collectively as communities and globally. The good news is that Allahﷻ' s decision for relief will come when we reach a critical mass and not when every single individual has changed. So, let us begin.

Let us look at ourselves, our lifestyle, our earnings, our spending, our priorities, and above all, our standards and role models and ask what needs to change. Believe me, we don't need a degree in Islamic Law to figure out what we must change. We know it all. The time has come to do what we know we must do. How many of us don't know that to pray the 5 Fardh Salawaat on time is essential? Or that eating Halaal is essential to the acceptance of our Ibadah and dua? Or that if we deal in interest, our name will be written in the list of the enemies of Allahﷻ? If you are shocked by that, ask yourself what you call someone you are at war with. Allahﷻ declared war on those who deal in interest in any form. If we are in that list, how can we expect Allahﷻ' s help and protection? I will let you make your own list but will suffice to say that unless we clean up our act, nothing will change. And what's more, the real story will start when we die. That story has an ending that I don't wish on anyone.

As always, the Seerah of Rasoolullahﷺ is an excellent guide. If we take the Makkan period, Rasoolullahﷺ focused only on one thing; to build and strengthen the connection of his followers, to Allahﷻ. This period was perhaps the toughest period in the Seerah, with challenge after challenge. The Sahaba were persecuted, attacked, some were tortured, even killed. But they were not permitted to retaliate even in self-defense. Their only recourse was to be patient and to turn towards Allahﷻ. This had the effect of tempering iron in the fire to create steel. They understood the power of obeying Allahﷻ and His Messengerﷺ. We must learn that the solution to our problems lies in obeying Allahﷻ; not in making excuses to disobey.

2. Change how we educate our children

To address the need for change in education, we must ask ourselves a very serious question. 'What does my child represent? Is he, my legacy? My Sadaqa Jariya? If so, what is my responsibility towards my child?' I say this because in my experience, most parents do not have any idea of their own power to script the future of their child. Consequently, they do not have a specific plan for their child. They just routinely do what everyone else does and suffer the consequences. Ask yourself if your child is worth your full thought, time, and effort. If so, then ask yourself, what you want the final product, i.e., your child at the end of his/her school education, to be like.

We have managed to create a global society which is almost exclusively focused on amassing material wealth and possessions. A society where worship of personal desire is the predominant religion and selfishness its primary virtue. A society which defines success in terms of the ends without any thought about the means. A society where compassion, cost to others of our achieving our goals, cost to the well-being of the environment, hopes and aspirations of the less well-endowed; have all lost meaning and are not considered even worthy of passing thought. The reality is that we are burning our candle at both ends and are about to be plunged into darkness from which nobody can emerge unscathed. As someone once said, 'Growth for the sake of growth, is the philosophy of the cancer cell.' In this case, look in the mirror and meet both the cancer cell and its victim. In the words of J. Krishnamurthy, 'It is no measure of

health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.' We are profoundly sick.

It is for this reason that we need to rethink education because our present education system which was started during the Industrial Revolution in the UK and later America and was exported to the rest of the world is **spectacularly successful**. You may be surprised to read this, but it is indeed successful in creating what it was designed to create – unthinking, unquestioning, obedient workers.

Education was and continues to be modeled on the needs of the military-industrial complex with children being treated as raw material, to be altered to suit the need of the manufacturer, in which the needs of the raw material are of no significance. Standardization is the key, with conformity being the cardinal virtue. Individualism, imagination, curiosity, diversity, non-standard ways of learning are all seen at best as a nuisance to be 'cured' or at worst as a virus to be ejected. Standardized testing is the tool to convert oppression into a virtue and force all square pegs to fit into round holes. Questioning is treated as rebellion and dealt with exactly as questioning (also called rebellion) is treated in industries (suppressed by force calling it unionization and labor unrest) or in the world (suppressed by the military calling it insurgency). Scant if any attention is paid to addressing issues that led to the unrest because after all the need of bosses (read teachers, school authorities in collusion with

ignorant parents) that 'production' must not stop, whatever the cost, is supreme.

What we need today to cure our potentially fatal global malaise is the opposite of what our schools are designed to produce. We need people who are thinking, questioning, positively rebellious leaders with the commitment to work for the benefit of others. People with the skills to diagnose, define, conceptualize, strategize, communicate and monitor. But before all that, the integrity, compassion and energy to continue to work in the face of disappointment, discouragement and opposition.

I submit to you that we don't have an implementation or quality problem. We have a design problem. A railway carriage is not designed to fly. It is designed to be dragged along behind an engine. No matter how much power you add to its engine or how luxurious the interiors, a train will never fly because flying is first a design issue. A microlight aircraft on the other hand flies even with fractional horsepower because it is designed to fly. **Our education is not designed to create leaders.** It is designed to create mindless, obedient followers. Fancy infrastructure, using state of the art technology in teaching, high or low fee or teacher salaries will still not produce leaders because we are building railway carriages, designed to be dragged along behind an engine. We can't build planes in a train factory. If we want to fly, we need to build a plane factory. We need to rethink our design based on our objective of taking to the air. Design

dictates performance. We need to redesign. Not alter trains expecting them to fly.

In effect the focus must be more on tools of learning than on accumulation of random data. Focus must be on the spirit of enquiry, on asking the right questions with the best question being the one which has no answer; **yet**. So the search can continue and the student doesn't sit smug like a bug in his rug, content that he has the answer and need not look any further. Real education is to deliberately put yourself into a state of positive confusion, of productive stress, where you are forced out of your comfort zone of certainties.

One reality that is clear from all this which takes us to the core issue of all learning is the importance of variety and diversity of life experience. Not standardization but its exact opposite – diversification. The question for us therefore is, 'How do we help students to have a widely diverse menu of life experiences so that they have a sound basis for diagnosis and decision making?'

In summary therefore, real education is the result of the integration of academics with structured life experiences, helping students with the tools they need to derive applicable lessons. In my view this can't be done while keeping our current so-called education system in place. There is only one thing to be done with our production-factory-style-robot-producing education system, which is to give it a decent burial. We must start afresh, with a totally new approach arising out of accepting the

reality about children that they are not little boxes to be filled and labelled, but living breathing, thinking human beings with opinions, likes, dislikes, differences in how they learn, what interests them and what doesn't and above all, the need to learn how to apply the learning. We need to start by convincing ourselves (teachers, policy makers, parents) that children need not agree with us, need not share our priorities about their lives, can have their own aspirations and dreams and that our job is not to change them but to enable them to achieve what they want to achieve. This doesn't mean that we have no role in guiding our children. Just that we understand the difference between guiding and forcing. Our role is to guide and empower. Not to force.

The biggest challenge and greatest resistance to this new philosophy will come from our own minds and hearts. Truly it is not easy to accept that we have successfully destroyed several generations, including of course ourselves in the process and to accept that we were totally, gloriously, shamelessly wrong in everything we did in the name of education. It will not be easy to accept that we – the educators of the world – are responsible for the totally immoral, greedy, toxic, and suicidal society that we are now living in. But that is the truth. The beauty of accepting responsibility for a problem is that, then and only then, are you given the ability and strength to solve it. You can't change what you don't own. So, let us begin by being brutally honest and own responsibility for the problem and pray for success in solving it. The solution is Integrated Education.