

WHAT DID I LEARN AT SCHOOL? MINDS WITHOUT BORDERS

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I spent my entire school life (from about age 4 until age 16) at St. George's School in Jerusalem, an Anglican School, charmingly built in classical old-style with Jerusalem stone, complete with a Cathedral and a Bishop. We didn't see much of the Bishop, as I remember, though we were, for many years at least, invited to the Cathedral for Thursday morning prayers and –I am afraid my memory often begins to falter here- a piece of wise Godly advice.

In retrospect, I honestly can't tell you whether, academically speaking, I benefited from my experience, or simply survived it.

What I can assuredly say, however, is that I am infinitely grateful to my parents for having sent me there, rather than to any other school available in the area at the time. But perhaps this feeling springs from the natural prejudice one slowly comes to harbor for oneself, the institutions one has been through somehow becoming incorporated into one's biography and acquiring, for that, rather than for any objective reason, a status of distinction in one's estimation.

Anyway, it is the *foreignness* of the school's environment, or ambience – an ethereal quality that I cannot quite describe - that is, that curious constellation of its architecture, the kind of furniture there was in the reading room, the arm-chair, the desk-chairs, and the way all these were laid out, the English books on the shelves, the drawings on the walls, the special sessions in intimate space with tutors, the school play, the piano recitals and concerts, and, above all, the foreign headmaster and tutors themselves, with their

foreign colors and complexions, and their distinct attires, tweed jackets, ties, and all, some living in the school lodge with their wives, the occasional afternoon tea in the tutor's sitting-room: it is all these, and more, that stand out in my memory as perhaps having been pivotal in ensuring the preservation of an open, welcoming space in my mind, of a fundamental appreciation for what I want to call the "*naturalness of difference*".

Of course, had I been growing up in England, and attending an English school, I doubt I would be in a position now, that is, in retrospect, to say that it was an English-school education that helped preserve my openness to the world at large. Indeed, my short-lived experience at an English boarding school immediately after the Bishop's School -as St George's was apparently called before my time- was shocking for, among other things, seeming to be so closed-in to the world at large. St. George's- or the Bishop's- School in the world's backyard that was East Jerusalem as I grew up, was far more of an international, pluralistic experience, rich with cosmopolitan variety, than Tom Brown's rugby fields, where my father sent me next.

You noticed of course how I intentionally used the expression "preserve" – rather than, for example, "help form"- in relation to the openness of the mind. I am most definitely ignorant when it comes to psychology, and educational psychology, and suchlike, but I have come to believe, not from any scientific research done on this, that we start out being open-minded, or having an open, welcoming space in our minds, a space naturally open to accepting –even delighting in differences. Our environments thereafter begin to create borders.

Let me recount to you an incident that may help explain what I mean:

His Beatitude the former Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michelle Sabbah, was being driven from Jerusalem to Amman one day during one of the countless disturbances we have in the occupied territories. On this occasion, his driver thought to bypass a road-block along the main route out of Jerusalem by taking a side lane on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives where His Beatitude's car was stopped by some kids using the dirt-track as their playfield. He got out of the car, in his formidably colorful attire, to seek the kids' assistance. Anywhere else, his flowing robes would immediately have imposed awe, if not reverence. But to his horror, instead of being met with friendliness from his fellow compatriots, he found disrespect, disinterest, and even disdain. Why do you have this big cross on your chest? They asked him, not quite putting two and two together, and not realizing that, though a compatriot speaking their language, he was a Christian. "Take off that crusader cross", they told him.

I heard the story from him some time later when I went to pay him a visit in the Patriarchate inside Jaffa Gate one day on one of those religious occasions. Hearing it was almost like being stabbed with a knife right through the heart. It has already been more than seven years since the incident. But I can't wipe off its painful memory from my mind. But as a lesson, a message, the incident tells me that those kids would have behaved totally differently had they been attending St. George's, or the Bishop's School; but perhaps also that their parents wouldn't have sent them to that school in the first place. More tragically, those kids most likely are not going to send their kids to the Bishop's School either. And given the fast rate at which our population is growing, this observation clearly doesn't bode well at all for our common future in the City of Peace. But I guess some of you might say, well, what's new? Tell us something we didn't already know.

I think what's new –and I realize even that's not entirely new- is that, comparing my own and those of my peers' school upbringing in the same city with theirs, the conclusion almost speaks for itself that we as children seem to come with open minds into the world, whereupon our mentors immediately begin to build walls and construct borders.

Does that sound a bit like Rousseau? Maybe. But what I am talking about is how we are trained to see the world around us.

Take black, for example.

Last week my university helped print a second run off of a short essay written by a black Palestinian in the form of a letter addressed to his son. Ali Jaddeh had spent some sixteen years in jail, as a convicted member of the Palestinian resistance, to finally come out in the prisoner-exchange deal of 1984. He was born in the Old City, where he grew up, and he joined the PFLP after Jerusalem fell under occupation in 1967. He was in his late teens when he went in, and in his early thirties when he came out. But imagine how his Palestinian idealism, for which he had paid so dearly with the best years of his life, must have crashed on the rocks of primitive racism as soon as he came out and discovered, to his horror, and through different confidence-shattering experiences he went through, including, perhaps, a failed love affair, that his Palestinian compatriots don't count him after all as one of them, simply on account of the color of his skin.

His letter is a must-read to every self-respecting Palestinian, even if only by way of shock therapy, to help us begin to break down those borders that our elders etched in our minds.

Indeed, even well into this century, some still refer to the compound where Ali was born and spent his childhood days "The slave market". And on account, perhaps, of the fact that an old kindly black lady used to sell delicious warm peanuts as a street-vendor just outside of the Damascus Gate, those peanuts were often referred to –and probably still are, by some- as "Slave nuts"!

Ali now walks the streets of the Old City feeling that he inhabits a space full of borders. He has recoiled into his own shell, a space whose boundaries are defined partly by the African community itself, and partly by the surrounding Arab community. When he wants to make contact with someone on the other side of the border, it probably feels like he has to cross the border, or the barrier, much like having to cross those soldier-manned barriers that are sprawled around the West Bank. Becoming disappointed with Arabs is not the same as coming to like Israelis. That's another border. Anyway, we can be sure that Ali's son will not join the Palestinian resistance. Neither his home environment, nor his school, will train him to protect the open space in his mind he was born with.

And that's one great loss for humanity.

Some of my teachers at schools, foreign or Arab, were exceptionally good in the subjects they taught, and I certainly owe much of my appreciation to some subjects in later life to them -just as I owe my dislike, almost hatred for other subjects, then and in later life, to others. Maybe I underestimate immeasurably the academic imprint on my mind from my school experience in saying what I am about to say, but I shall say it notwithstanding, namely, that I often tell myself that, much of the learning I had to go through in fifteen

years, chemistry and math and history and all, could well have been fitted into my last year at school, or even at some later point in my life, far more advantageously. In other words, or phrased differently, I don't feel in retrospect that I would have lost very much if my school had somehow devised a curriculum which totally ignored those subjects, in their meticulously worked out, inch-by-inch measurements. And, as indeed I have come to learn since then, school education has undergone a radical transformation in this respect, and fun, that much maligned, and underestimated pedagogy, has finally begun to be taken seriously. But in retrospect again, it is those other parts of my school experience which I think are irreplaceable, fun of course being included at the top of the list, but the preservation, or maintenance of the open space in my mind being the most valuable.

But what do schools need to do to preserve the openness of minds?

Minds without borders were not, needless to say, what the churches had in mind when they set out to open their schools during the 19th century in Palestine or the Arab World. Nor is it what the Muslim governments have in mind today as they open schools in various locations in Africa and elsewhere. So in many ways we were especially lucky that, by the time at least I went to school, our Christian administration couldn't have been more gentle or discrete. This gentleness, or kindness, maybe even softness, goes a long way perhaps in explaining how the open space in our minds was preserved. But the naturalness of difference, which seemed to permeate the air, must have played a primary role. The *naturalness of difference*! How does one teach school-children not to lose it?

Of course I must say that, had this open atmosphere been confined to within the school-walls, its effect on us would have probably been limited. In my case, I was lucky enough to have had parents who seemed naturally to be open-minded. Our house seemed like a public-meeting place, often full to the brim with visitors, many of them foreign, who either were friends with my older sisters and brother or diplomats and journalists stopping by for cocktails- in addition, of course, to family members and family friends, doctors, lawyers, engineers, politicians, always engaged in the liveliest, and most entertaining of arguments and disputations, and always full of exciting rumors about impending cabinet changes, royal plots, invasions, secret affairs, the whole gambit. Moving between the school and where my parents lived -a distance in any case not exceeding 100 metres- therefore felt like moving from one corner to another in the same open cultural space. School and home thus reinforced each other.

Then there was travel. For that, my parents encouraged my elder brother and myself to join the scout movement at school. In no time, we began to make camping trips by ourselves to other towns and countryside spots, and, eventually, in groups, to neighbouring countries -Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Morocco. You can imagine the dazzling effect all this travel must have had on our nubile minds, making us simply overawed with appreciation and respect for –and, yes, enjoyment of the richness of different habits, tastes, smells, accents, languages, nature beauty spots, and, of course, bazaars and markets, to name but some of the strange wonders we experienced in our travels. The world indeed felt like a magnified Disney Land, a limitless place of excitement and adventure, where the only sign of a finale seemed to be when those dreary lessons in Chemistry would be starting all over again.

Perhaps, in addition to all these conducive factors I should add a mention of the fact that Jerusalem itself presented us with a rich mosaic of different cultures -Syriac, Ethiopian, Greek Orthodox, Latin, Armenian...you name it - we even had a home-grown Palestinian white Russian among us. These, by the way, were not like sets on the stage for us to view as audience. they were very much part of our territory, of our lives, to enter homes, eat with families, play basketball in church compounds, in addition, of course, to having the glorious mosque piazza as idyllic places to meditate or rest. I can honestly say I don't believe I knew the difference between being a Christina and a Muslim until much later in my school years –and even when I became aware of it, the difference just seemed to be a natural, and exciting part of my identity's landscape.

At the end of the day, I want to say, it was the lucky conjunction of all these dimensions and experiences –foreignness, armchairs and sofas, piano recitals, travel -that helped me appreciate the naturalness of difference, and encouraged me therefore to incline not to be prevented by borders, but to try to dissolve them every time I came across one. One major such border, of course, is the Arab-Israeli border. This is a border whose existence is, par excellence, primarily in the mind, not in matter. If anything is a paradigm of that peculiar Platonic doctrine that it is the realm of Ideas that constitutes reality, while the realm of matter is but a shadow of that, this surely is the physical border between Israel and the Arab world. Do you remember how Sadat described it on his historic visit? It was, he said, a psychological barrier he had to cross. It is a border one needs to keep the faith of having to try to keep crossing on a daily basis, to keep dissolving, to wipe away from one's pristine landscape.

And if one thinks about it, it is less the dry facts of science or the humanities one learns at school as it is the love for this naturalness of difference, along with other skills and virtues, of course, that at the end of the day endows the student with the capability of contributing what is best to the world, thereby also to themselves. And if you think some more, this skill or capability is really one we need to have at our fingertips all the time, because we have to cross borders of different kinds every day, each morning -with our husbands or wives, with our children, our friends, our colleagues at work...

A shudder suddenly went through my body as I stood last year at the graduating ceremony of the university where I am President handing degree certificates to one student after another as they all filed past me -dentists, doctors, economists, physicists, you name it. Their self-gratified faces sent chills up my spine. Were these the faces of human beings now ready to contribute their best to the world, of givers? Or were they the avaricious faces of takers, snatchers? And have we, as an educational institution, really done our part during their college education to make sure they come out with borderless minds, appreciating the naturalness of difference, ready to hold hands with everyone across the world, or have we just produced soulless experts?

We all say - I don't know how seriously- that a teacher's mission is that of a saint, for an educator's object of concern is the most precious of all that exists, namely, the human soul. Looking around in my own region of the world, I am not sure that our educational institutions are on the whole carrying out their mission successfully. Apart from other things, I believe maybe the entire system of education needs to be restructured- I can't tell you how. But one thing is sure: if one could find a way to reconstruct or invent a system that

would imitate that lucky conjunction of all those different factors that seem to have contributed to preserving the open space in my mind, I would strongly counsel that that be used as a base-line for the new educational system- a system without borders

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