

THE POWER OF EDUCATION

JEREMY HENZELL-THOMAS



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Foreword

The Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS) project was borne out of a recognition of the problems and many challenges facing education today. Following intensive meetings, a Two-Day Symposium on “Reform of Higher Education in Muslim Societies” was held on 9-10 December 2013 in Washington, jointly with the Wilson Center. Concentrated meetings were next organised in the UK in 2014 by the IIIT London Office and resulted in two papers produced by Professor Abdelwahab El-Affendi and Dr. Jeremy Henzell-Thomas. These were later synthesized into one combined paper by Professor Ziauddin Sardar entitled: “From Islamization to Integration of Knowledge: Rethinking Reform in Higher Education”. A second conference on “Reform of Education in Muslim Societies” was held on 18-19 March 2016 in Turkey, organised jointly with the Faculty of Theology, Istanbul University, and MAHYA. A number of roundtable meetings have taken place between 2015-2017 in London, Istanbul, Konya, Washington, Brussels, Cape Town and elsewhere.

As part of the publication series of the AEMS Project, *Rethinking Reform in Higher Education* by Ziauddin Sardar and Jeremy Henzell-Thomas was published in 2017 followed by a companion abridged edition in 2018. *The Postnormal Times Reader*, aspects of which focuses on education, is being published in cooperation with The Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies. Another publication, *Teaching Children: A Moral, Spiritual, and Holistic Approach to Educational Development* by Ann El-Moslimany is currently in production.

An educated mind is a powerful one, hence the title of this paper, *The Power of Education*. The nature and characteristics of that education therefore have an importance far beyond that of gaining knowledge for its own sake. In other words education is essentially more

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than mere intellectual development – it forms an invaluable part of societal makeup, and lays the groundwork for much that impacts on the future progress of individuals, society, and humanity at large. Because of this it becomes a vital area for continued rethinking, regeneration and development.

By exploring these elements the AEMS Project seeks to give value and context to intellectual development, and take knowledge beyond passive reception, and routine learning, to application that ultimately seeks the betterment of both the individual and humanity. In doing so it considers many aspects of education, most importantly the aims of education itself. Essentially, what matters is to restore universal values, ethics, morality, and vitality to a system ever focused on material advancement, and personal progression, as the aim of all that is learned and considered useful.

It is vital to give students an appreciation and understanding of what the greater altruistic purpose of education actually is, to infuse a moral outlook of mutual respect, compassion, and social responsibility. This may require rethinking existing disciplines, innovating new ones, as well as working in conjunction with current knowledge(s) and discourses by taking effective account of the ethical and moral norms of society, the guiding principles under which it operates, and the underlying basis of its makeup and spiritual identity.

Rather than exclusivity and narrow-minded outlooks, the AEMS recognizes the plurality and diversity of the modern networked world and global communities, and seeks to replace sterile and uniform approaches to knowledge with a broader and more creative understanding of reality as lived in different lands and different cultures.

This paper first appeared in the April-June 2015 issue 14 “Power” of *Critical Muslim* magazine. Although the ideas and thoughts offered are those of the author, it is being published in relation to the AEMS Project as a discussion paper with the aim of stimulating discourse and debate on the issues raised.

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SOCRATES AND THE POWER OF QUESTIONING

As I was writing this essay, a World Exclusive appeared on the front page of *The Times* reporting that the British Museum had allowed part of the Elgin (Parthenon) Marbles to leave London for the first time by lending one of the sculptures to the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. Further articles on successive pages explore the implications of the surprise appearance of the artwork in the museum founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great to enable Russia to participate in the European Enlightenment. Of course, the venue is highly symbolic at a time when there are growing fears of a new Cold War between the Kremlin and the West. Neil McGregor, the Director of the British Museum, believes strongly that the relationship between museums as an example of the power of culture to build bridges between nations is all the more important in times of political stress and rupture.

The god-like figure loaned to the Hermitage is thought to represent the River Ilissos, one of the streams that flowed near Athens in ancient times. It was here, according to Plato (as Macgregor describes) that “Socrates conversed with Phaedrus in the cool shade of the plane trees that grew along the banks, discussing the value of beauty and the morality of love.” As such, “it embodies the central values of dialogue and discussion which underlie today’s ideals of intellectual inquiry and political freedom, and is ‘an eloquent symbol of the key values of both Ancient Athens and of Enlightenment Europe.’”

Now, I do not want to carp or undermine McGregor’s essential point about the sanctity of dialectic. On the contrary, I want to take is

as a fundamental axiom in what I have to say about the power of education. Nevertheless, it is well to remember that Socrates was executed for being, in Plato's words, the "gadfly" of the state, the irritant which stings the horse into action, the thorn in the flesh. I am reminded of Ziauddin Sardar's opening essay in the recent issue of *Critical Muslim* on "Dangerous Freethinkers" "Freethinkers", he writes, "are seen as dangerous simply because freethought challenges the conventional, the orthodox, and the dominant perspectives." To be shunned and exiled, he goes on to say, is the unsurprising consequence of ruffling feathers. In the case of Socrates, prominent Athenians were made to look foolish by his paradoxical wisdom, and one of his capital 'crimes' as a philosophical, social and moral critic was judged to be 'impiety' (not believing in the gods of the state).

But we need always to bear in mind that Socrates was not simply a self-promoting *agent provocateur* captivated by his own wit and cleverness, or the creative and radical obliqueness of his own insights, nor had he turned freethought itself into a dogmatic ideology through which it masquerades as a supposedly 'progressive' force against religion and 'superstition'. If he were with us today we would not see him in uncritical and servile genuflection to the triumphalism of 'Enlightenment values' or 'secular humanism' or 'scientific materialism' or any other 'fundamentalism', whether secular or religious. Socrates would also have been the last person to indulge in the narcissism of a selfie, for not only did he have not the slightest interest in status or popularity, but he also recognised the depth of his own ignorance. As Sardar affirms, "the knowledgeable know that humility is a prerequisite for true understanding." What unsettled the grandees of Athens was the way in which Socrates came up with a paradox in the face of a pronouncement by the Delphic oracle. Asked if anyone were wiser than Socrates, the oracle had responded that no-one was. Since Socrates himself believed that he possessed no wisdom whatsoever, he interpreted this as a paradox, and proceeded to test the riddle (in order to refute it) by questioning prominent Athenians with a reputation for wisdom. He concluded that while so-called wise men thought themselves wise and yet were not, he himself knew he was not wise at all, and this, paradoxically, made him the wiser one since he was the

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only one aware of his own ignorance. The oracle, he realized, had therefore been correct.

Plato's *Apology* eloquently describes Socrates' defence at his trial before 500 jurors. This 'defence' is actually not an apology at all, but, in the words of Russell Bosworth, a stirring affirmation of "the merits of a life consciously dedicated to the care of the soul, the discovery of wisdom, and fidelity to the truth".

Thomas Merton, the influential Christian contemplative, political activist, social visionary, and literary figure, writes with great depth, insight and personal realisation on the need to embody what we think and what we know in the conduct of our lives: "The activity proper to man is not purely mental, because man is not just a disembodied mind. Our destiny is to live out what we think, because unless we live what we know, we do not even know it."

If you 'google' the phrase "Power of Education", one of the top ten hits of the resultant one and a half billion results delivered in less than half a second is a manifesto on the website *Deutsche Welle* which tells us that "Education means more than acquiring knowledge. It empowers people to develop personally and become politically active. That's not always in the interests of rulers..." It adds that education is a fundamental human right and an emancipatory force for political development, democracy and social justice, empowering people to contest the abuse and misuse of power by authoritarian rulers and governments and to gain access to uncensored perspectives.

The key here is the juxtaposition of personal development with resistance to authoritarianism and action for freedom and social justice. The Qur'an makes it clear that the transformation of society and the wider world must rest above all on personal transformation: "God does not change men's condition unless they change their inner selves" (13:11). The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "He who knows himself knows his Lord", and also (though not in the authoritative collections) to have described the greater jihad (*al-jihād al-akbar*) as the struggle against one's lower self. The Ancient Greek aphorism 'Know Thyself' (*gnothi seauton*) was one of the Delphic maxims inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo and a guiding precept of Plato's Academy.

Merton warns of the dangers of activism which is not rooted in self-knowledge and personal transformation: “Those who attempt to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening their own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. They will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of their own obsessions, their aggressiveness, their ego-centered ambitions, their delusions about ends and means, their doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.”

The top hit in the web search I conducted was a quote by Nelson Mandela: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. Other sites in the top ten include one which emphasises how education confers the power to “change one’s view of the world and how to live one’s life”, and another which explains how the “transformative power of a great education can change everything”.

Now, the resources we derive from web searches are littered with quotations often taken out of context and reduced to little more than clichés endlessly replicated and reinforced across countless websites. Once something is attributed to someone on the internet it tends to be endlessly proliferated as Gospel Truth. This is of course one of the problems with a mode of instant learning which, despite the inestimable value of the immediate access to knowledge which it provides, can also favour the truism and mantra, the slogan, platitude or significant-sounding sound bite. It can also cement the popularity of a corpus of quotations through a self-fulfilling rating system based on the number of ‘hits’. Yet, it would be mistaken to quibble with the idea running through the core of most of the maxims encountered in the top hits, a simple idea of the greatest importance – education has the power to change oneself and the world.

The Indo-European root *poti* which generated Latin *potere* (‘be able’), the source of the English words ‘power, potent, potential and possible’, also generated Sanskrit *patih*, ‘master’. To become master of ourselves enables (empowers) us to serve others.

First and foremost, the best education should confer the power to examine, know and change ourselves, so that we might transform the lives of others.

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OPEN INQUIRY AND LIFELONG LEARNING

That transformation is also a never-ending journey of open inquiry and lifelong learning rooted in the premise that there is always so much more to know. And that is true, of course, not only of the intellectual domain but also of the spiritual path. With each step taken towards a greater understanding of the truth, new paths continually unfold in all directions, for such is the infinitely generative power of the Creator. Such tastings bring ever-stronger certitude (*yaqīn*), but, paradoxically, also perplexity, for spiritual certitude is not the same as the false certainty bestowed by the closed mind in its narrow understanding of the closed book. A mystical parallel to the never-ending process of education can be found in Ibn ‘Arabī’s description of the state of divine bewilderment (*ḥayrā*) arising from the opening of the door of the Heart through the process of cumulative “Self-manifestation”. Here, he describes how one’s awareness of the revelation of the nature or activity of God in the world is a continually unfolding discovery of new implications, and through this one comes to realize, in his words, that “this matter has no end at which it might stop”. The Qur’an tells us: “And if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea [were] ink, with seven [more] seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted...” (31:27).

We might find a partial analogy to the process of continual ‘unfolding’ in the opening of those nested Chinese caskets from the Song Dynasty, in which successively smaller caskets were placed one inside the other. The last and smallest of these caskets (the precursors of the later Japanese and more famous Russian *matryoshka* nested dolls) traditionally contained a single grain of rice. Now, there is of course a definite end to the unwrapping in the discovery of the smallest casket or doll which can be made to fit (given the obvious physical limitations of space and materials). But to take the analogy further, we can liken the single grain of rice in the final container to the Singularity, that is, the essence, the original dimensionless point, from which the ever-expanding boxes emanate, and from which ‘this matter has no end at which it might stop’.

Education should confer the power to keep on inquiring and learning. Beyond that, it opens our minds and hearts to the source of all knowledge and its infinitely generative power.

WHOLENESS, FRAGMENTATION AND
SELF-TRANSFORMATION

The physicist David Bohm, regarded by Einstein as his successor, defined what he called the “implicate order” as an underlying and undivided whole that physical form constantly unfolds out of and enfolds back into, such that “every part of the universe is related to every other part”. This is William Blake’s holographic vision of “seeing the world in a grain of sand” and it is not just a poetic fancy. The unity and interconnectedness of all things is also at the heart of the discoveries of John Stewart Bell. He showed that every particle in the Universe has a memory of every other particle because they were all originally “entangled” within the Singularity. The diversity of forms is infinite and ever-changing but there is an immutable essence which is the source of everything, and our own point of arising and return. “And of every thing We have created pairs” the Qur’an tells us (51:49), and yet there is unity in multiplicity.

Bohm points to the pressing problems caused by our fragmentary form of thought which fails to see that underlying unity and connectivity. It generates unending chaotic and meaningless conflict, and a wide range of crises – social, political, economic, ecological, psychological – in the individual and in society as a whole. If anything, the fragmentation lamented by Bohm has only increased since his book was published in 1980. And of course Bohm might also have included religious conflict, as well as the rising tide of xenophobia. We do not have to look very far in the world today to see the debilitating and even devastating outcome of exclusivism, tribalism, triumphalism, and narrow identity politics in the distortion and misappropriation of doctrines and values for cultural, ethnic, religious, national or civilisational superiority, whether in the East or the West. Unity in multiplicity is not uniformity, any more than the Absolute can be equated with the crushing absolutism which obliterates all context.

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Ibn Khaldūn used the term *‘aṣabiyyah* (tribal partisanship, ethnocentricism) in both positive and negative senses. It can be a source of solidarity and social cohesion, but in its negative form it is that crudely jingoistic and smugly ethnocentric mentality which endorses tribal prejudice and parochial self-interest. The Prophet’s reaction to boasts of ancestral glory was to warn those steeped in the arrogance of pre-Islamic pagan ignorance (*jāhiliyyah*) that Islam had abolished such tribalism, and that all human beings are descended from Adam. We are advised in the Qur’an (49:13) that there is no superiority of one over another except in *taqwā*, that consciousness and loving awe of God which inspires us to be vigilant and to do what is right. This verse is an implicit condemnation of all ethnic/racial, national, class or tribal prejudice, a condemnation which is made explicit by the Prophet Muhammad: “He is not of us who proclaims the cause of tribal partisanship, and he is not of us who fights in the cause of tribal partisanship, and he is not of us who dies in the cause of tribal partisanship.” When asked to explain what he meant by tribal partisanship, the Prophet answered, “It means helping your own people in an unjust cause.” Disapproval of tribalism is also germane to the Pact of the Virtuous (*ḥilf al-fuḍūl*), struck when Muhammad was a young man, and not yet a Prophet. In this pact, tribal leaders and members pledged that it was their collective duty to intervene in conflicts in the cause of justice and side with the oppressed against the oppressors, whoever they might be and whatever alliances might link them to other tribes. The Prophet’s approval of the pact, in which he saw nothing that contradicted the values of Islam, confirmed that principles of justice, morality and the common good of society are not the exclusive domain of any one community, faith or ideology.

Education should confer the power to arrest fragmentation, resolve conflict and transcend narrow definitions of identity.

THE EXPANDING HORIZON OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

I remember as a boy of twelve borrowing a three-inch refracting telescope from my local public library and spending six months mapping the night sky. I believe my parents were happy that the gargantuan task

I had set myself would at least keep me out of mischief. I remember with awe when the planet Saturn swam into view. I could see clearly the three main rings with my amateur instrument, but large telescopes reveal 8 rings, and orbiting spacecraft like Cassini can now bring 30 rings and the gaps between them into view. The total number of rings is actually unknown.

As the discovery of new rings illustrates, human knowledge advances and expands, and one of the most important factors in that expansion is the inestimable value of pluralism, cross-cultural encounter and exchange. Ahmed Moustafa and Stefan Sperl have demonstrated in their recently published *magnum opus* on sacred geometry and the science of Arabic penmanship that three centuries had to elapse after the death of the Prophet of Islam before the invention of the Proportioned Script by the Abbasid *wazīr* Ibn Muqlā and the master scribe Ibn al-Bawwāb in 10th century Baghdad, because the horizon of knowledge encompassed by Islamic culture (and with it the scientific terminology of the Arabic language) had to expand sufficiently to include and absorb the advances of other, earlier civilisations. And this process of growing awareness is suggested in the Qur’anic verse: “We will show them Our signs in the furthest horizons of the universe and within their own souls so that it will become clear to them that this revelation is indeed the Truth” (41:53). Here, as I understand it, the term horizons (*āfāq*) refers both to the expanding range and maturation of human consciousness and to the varying domains of human knowledge, whatever their source may be. The first verses of the Qur’an to be revealed urge us to “Read – for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One who has taught mankind the use of the pen – taught man what he did not know!” (96:3-5). Muhammad Asad notes that the pen is a symbol for all knowledge recorded by means of writing, and that man’s unique ability to transmit, by means of written records, his thoughts, experiences, and insights from individual to individual, from generation to generation, and from one cultural environment to another endows all human knowledge with a cumulative character.

And let us be very clear that cultural exchange is a process that works in many directions. If Islamic civilisation owes much to Greek

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philosophy, ethics and geometry, so Western civilisation owes much to what Muhammad Asad has eloquently described as the insistence on “consciousness and knowledge” which permeates the Qur’an and which engendered “that splendid era of learning and scientific research which distinguished the world of Islam at the height of its cultural vigour”. It is refreshing to have seen a series of books in recent years rectifying the hitherto pervasive occidental bias that has studiously ignored the contribution of non-Western cultures and civilizations to the development of Western civilization.

As Asad explains, the Qur’an gave rise to a culture of “independent inquiry and intellectual curiosity” which “penetrated in countless ways and by-ways into the mind of medieval Europe and gave rise to that revival of Western culture which we call the Renaissance, and thus became in the course of time largely responsible for the birth of what is described as the age of science: the age in which we are now living.” I am reminded here of the novelist Sebastian Faulks’ dismissal of the Qur’an and Ziauddin Sardar’s delicious riposte in *The Guardian*. Faulks had described the Qur’an (a subject, as Sardar states, that “demonstrably exists well beyond his grasp”) as “very disappointing”, “one-dimensional”, “barren”, a “depressing book” with “no ethical dimension”. As Sardar points out, if that were the case, “how could it motivate the believers to develop science and learning, promote reason and experimental method, establish universities and research-based hospitals, and advance philosophical inquiry?”

Education should confer the power to discern and appreciate the many sources and strands of human knowledge and their confluence in the development of human civilisation.

OPENNESS TO THE TRANSCENDENT

The dynamic impulse derived from the Qur’an was at once intellectual and spiritual. The civilisation it fostered encompassed the discernment of truth which, at its highest level, is knowledge of God, for no higher civilisation is worthy of the name if it fails to distinguish between disorientated intellectual curiosity (no matter how ‘open-minded’, ‘original’ and ‘creative’) and that quality of intellectual

endeavour which is grounded in the highest ethical and spiritual values and which is itself a reflection of the transcendent.

With that in mind, it could not be more appropriate to refer to Pope Francis's address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 25 November 2014. He spoke of Raphaels' famous fresco, "The School of Athens", in the Vatican. Plato and Aristotle are in the centre. "Plato's finger", he said, "is pointed upward, to the world of ideas, to the sky, to heaven as we might say. Aristotle holds his hand out before him, towards the viewer, towards the world, concrete reality." (What a marvellous image, I thought, of a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: "I have two sides, one facing the world and the other Allah"). The Pontiff went on to say that the fresco struck him "as a very apt image of Europe and her history, made up of the constant interplay between heaven and earth, where the sky suggests that openness to the transcendent – to God – which has always distinguished the peoples of Europe, while the earth represents Europe's practical and concrete ability to confront situations and problems."

How visionary is his conclusion that the future of Europe depends on the recovery of the vital connection between these two elements. "A Europe which is no longer open to the transcendent dimension of life is a Europe which risks slowly losing its own soul and that humanistic spirit which it still loves and defends."

The Ancient Greek word *anthropos* (human being) may well have had the original meaning of 'he or she who looks up at the sky'. Our erect posture gives us that upward vision, that higher aspiration which reaches beyond the earth to the heavens, and positions us as a bridge between the two realms. We have within us, in our essential nature, a criterion (*furqān*) or compass that orients us to our origin (for both English words come from the same root, Latin *oriri*, 'rise', and the verb 'orient' originally meant 'turn the face to the east', the direction of the rising sun) – a touchstone that shows us the way to be fully human. If the Pope is the Pontiff, all humanity has the function enshrined in the root of that word, Latin *pontifex*, the 'bridge-maker', one who negotiates between God and man.

Education should confer the power to reach for the sky, and to join heaven and earth, the transcendent and the immanent, in the love of God and 'all that moves on the face of the earth'.

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PLURALISM AND DYNAMIC OUTREACH

Many of us will know some version of the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel from the Book of Genesis (11:1-9) and even those of us who do not may be familiar with the metaphorical application of the word 'Babel' to denote a confused medley of sounds or the din of mutually incomprehensible speech. According to the Genesis account, the Tower of Babel was erected by the descendants of Nūḥ (Noah) in a presumptuous attempt to reach up to heaven. As a punishment for their arrogant hubris, God confounded them by making the builders unable to understand each other's speech; hence, according to legend, the fragmentation of human speech into the various languages of the world, and also the dispersion of mankind over the face of the earth.

The Qur'an, however, does not support the idea that the diversity of languages and races is a punishment or a burden placed on mankind. On the contrary, it ordains unity in diversity, not only in terms of culture, language and race, but also in religion. Pluralism, quite simply, is an aspect of the *fiṭrah*, the essential nature or primordial condition of the human being. In the words of Mahmoud Ayoub, human diversity is "not due to the gradual degeneration of human society from an ideal or utopian state. Nor is it the result of a lack of divine guidance or human understanding. Rather, religious diversity is a normal human situation. It is the consequence of the diversity of human cultures, languages, races and different environments." "Revelation", writes Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "is always an accommodation to the capacity of man. No two minds are alike, just as no two faces are alike. The voice of God reaches the spirit of man in a variety of ways, in a multiplicity of languages. One truth comes to expression in many ways of understanding." And Nancy Kline is spot on when she asserts that "Diversity raises the intelligence of groups. Homogeneity is a form of denial."

Recent research suggests that one of the factors which contributed to the extinction of the Neanderthals was their lack of outreach. More of the Neanderthal brain appears to have been dedicated to vision and body control, whereas modern humans deployed more brain power for maintaining complex, extended social networks (useful for

competing for scarce resources) and the more complex language this would have required.

The verses of the Qur'an which ordain pluralism are well-known but they cannot be repeated enough: "We... have made you into nations and tribes so that you may come to know one another" (49:13); "If God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community, but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you..." (5:48). The Qur'an also tells us that the diversity of human tongues and colours is a sign for people of knowledge (30:22) and Muhammad Asad notes other verses which uphold that, in his words, "the unceasing differentiation in men's views and ideas is not incidental but represents a God-willed, basic factor of human existence". The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "The diversity of my people is a blessing (*ikhṭilāf ummatī rahmah*)".

It is important to distinguish between pluralism as an active process of learning and the unchallenging mediocrity of mere 'tolerance'. Omid Safi reminds us that the connotations of 'tolerance' are deeply problematic, rooted as the word is in medieval toxicology and pharmacology where it marked how much poison a body could 'tolerate' before it would succumb to death. As Diana Eck has eloquently argued, pluralism is not the mere existence of "plurality" or "cosmopolitanism", an array of isolated encampments or separate enclaves. Without real engagement she says, they are simply "icons of diversity" not "instruments of relationship". Neither is pluralism a kind of wishy-washy or contrived syncretism devoid of commitment or a dose of comforting platitudes about common ground served up at an interfaith breakfast.

It is a truth-seeking encounter, a process of mutual transformation which goes further than simply trying to understand the 'other' but reaches out to a new level of mutual self-understanding.

The fostering of relationship is at the core of that encounter. One of the most important ways to develop the capacity to form and sustain relationship lies in a broad and balanced holistic education which gives adequate space for the arts and humanities. This is especially important in view of their progressive marginalisation in the curriculum of mainstream schools. In educational systems at all levels within

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Muslim societies, such neglect may be even more evident. An education rich in the humanities would foster the development not only of critical and creative thinking skills, questioning, and open-minded inquiry, and effective communication skills through discussion and debate but also a range of other opportunities: engagement in the creative arts as a means to engage the soul, kindle the imagination, develop aesthetic awareness and stimulate the connectivity of the brain; multi-sensory exploration and direct experiential learning, especially in the beauty and majesty of natural settings; understanding the human condition through the study of history, geography, languages, literature and the social sciences; the cultivation of an open-hearted and compassionate outlook which values and respects diversity and actively fosters intercultural awareness; and the development of character, virtue, altruism and ethical values, whether applied to personal conduct, relationships, citizenship, business practice, charitable service, or the care of the environment, which is now such a pressing concern for us all.

Education should confer the power to relate and to know the 'other', and by so doing to enrich and improve ourselves.

THE SCHOOLING REGIME

I have given some attention here to the importance of the related concepts of pluralism, diversity, cultural exchange, relationship, and the expanding horizons of knowledge because there is a clear connection between all of that and the role of talk, discourse, discussion, dialogue, dialectic and polylogue as lynchpins of any powerful and transformational educational process – that is, one which confers the power to change oneself, society and the world. Within the Western discipline of developmental psychology, Karl Riegel identifies the ability to accept contradictions, constructive confrontations, paradoxes, and asynchronies as the highest stage of cognitive development, and James Fowler associates dialectical thinking with the development of faith. It goes without saying that the dialectical process is not one either of compromise or loose relativism, but one of creative tension which ultimately transforms contradictions into complementarities,

releasing the open-minded thinker from ingrained habits and conditioned patterns of thought, established affiliations, fear of change and instability, and reluctance to approach anything which may be threatening to one's sense of 'self'.

So, is there a talking culture in our schools? Roland Barth reports the estimate of John Goodlad and others that 85 percent of lesson time in American schools is taken up by a prevailing pedagogy based on teachers talking and students listening, occasionally interspersed with teacher-directed discussion. It might be hoped that with the same preponderance of teacher talk in our own schools in Britain, a good proportion of it might be directed towards the development of creative and critical thinking. Not so. In fact, a wide-ranging survey of British secondary schools has revealed less than ten percent of teacher talk is concerned with the development of higher order thinking skills. The vast majority of it is directed to control and management, including keeping order and giving instructions, and low-level transmission of facts and information. Most questioning of students is only geared to seeking recall of 'right answers' in relation to prescribed content as required by an intrusive testing and assessment regime rather than promoting discussion through which alternative viewpoints or other higher-order processes of inquiry or reflection might be explored.

An educational process that is disproportionately focused on teacher-centred transmission of information (what the Harvard educationalist Roland Barth calls "Sit 'n Git") cannot encompass the awakening and nurturing of the full range of human faculties. In the terminology of Islamic education, over-emphasis on the instruction and training of the mind and the transmission of knowledge through teacher-centred instruction (*taʿlīm*) at the expense of the broader nurture of the whole being (*tarbiyah*) compromises the integrity of the educational experience. The good teacher is not only a *muʿallim*, a transmitter of knowledge but also a *murabbi*, a nurturer of souls and developer of character.

There is a pressing need for the revival of genuinely holistic and qualitative principles in the face of debilitating utilitarian approaches derived from target-driven managerialism which reduce human

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beings to compliant consumers in the service of crushing materialism, unsustainable economic growth and environmental devastation. This modern schooling regime has been the object of various critiques, including John Taylor Gatto's powerful indictment of the assumptions and structures which underlie modern state schooling in the USA. Gatto exposes the same deadening utilitarian agenda which also informs British educational policy – an agenda geared to turning children into cogs in an economic machine, children who are dependent, conforming, materialistic, and lacking in curiosity, creativity, imagination, self-knowledge, powers of intellectual inquiry and reflection, and capacity for solitude. Neil Postman, the prominent American social critic, has also lamented the way in which today's schools promote the 'false gods' of economic utility and consumerism.

One of the most vital powers of education must be to enable us to resist indoctrination of any kind. Let me give a telling example. A report by the Professional Council for Religious Education has revealed that amongst secondary school students aged 11 to 18 those who enjoy Religious Education and see positive benefits for their own lives from studying religion outnumber by four to one those who are negative about it. The report also gives examples of statements by students which show that many students also like the subject because of the opportunities it gives for expressing opinions, improving communication skills, acquiring knowledge of other faiths, developing inter-cultural awareness and sensitivity, developing the skills of philosophical inquiry and reflection, and pondering the meaning and purpose of life. There may be very few other opportunities within the curriculum for such enrichment. This evidence contradicts the vocal ideological prejudices of those who categorically oppose religious education as 'indoctrination', such as the 'philosopher' A. C. Grayling who once described religious education as "intellectual abuse" and faith schools as "ghettoes of superstition". While indoctrination and lack of critical/dialogic thinking may characterise certain aspects of the educational process in some faith schools, it is grossly misleading to equate such deficiencies with religious education in general. Such generalizations not only exhibit a disregard for evidence which is

surprising in self-appointed champions of critical thinking but also an authoritarian disrespect for the experience of young people themselves.

While the association of indoctrination with religion may be mechanical and formulaic within certain culturally conditioned mindsets, we need to understand that indoctrination to some degree is embedded in the mainstream educational system which we characterise as broadly ‘secular’. In *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing writes: “We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination...Those of you who are more robust and individual than others will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourself – educating your own judgements. Those that stay must remember, always, and all the time, that they are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society.” Hannah Arendt, the social philosopher, puts it like this: “The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instil convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any.”

Education should confer the power to ask searching questions, root out our own prejudices, and resist indoctrination.

NARRATIVE FALLACIES, CONDITIONED MINDSETS,
DICHOTOMIES, AND MISPERCEPTIONS

We might add to the general category of ‘ingrained habits and conditioned patterns of thought’ the allure of ‘narrative fallacies’, those flawed but simple and compelling stories of the past which arise from our continuous attempt to make sense of the world. It is well attested that even the very ‘rational’ scientific community is susceptible to confirmation bias. In the same way, we know from the psychology of perception that the human mind tends to see what it wants or expects to see. Perceptual preferences are of course necessary and understandable. Without the rapid automatic routines generated by top-down processing we would not be able to function in the world, for we would have to analyse everything laboriously from the bottom-up as if we were encountering it for the first time. The survival benefits of rapid processing are obvious, and dichotomisation is itself embedded

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in us to some degree as a means to judge and act decisively. By contrast, the armchair philosopher who scrutinises the logical minutiae of every proposition, absorbs every qualification, respects every position, and agonises over every minor dissonance and nuance may never get out of his chair. But we surely have to distinguish between the positive dynamics of familiar ‘stories’ which help us to bestow coherence and order on the world and their negative repercussions in the ingrained human tendency to espouse one-sided tribalism, bigotry, and prejudice.

Challenging the mechanical perseveration of one-dimensional thinking and divisive ‘scripts’ must be one of the most important functions not only of thinkers and researchers at the cutting edge of academe but also of responsible journalists, commentators, and cultural critics wedded to the disinterested pursuit of truth and the excavation, marshalling and critical evaluation of evidence. And this function is always greater than a merely adversarial one which seeks to subvert for its own sake or defend a position at all costs, but is rooted in that intellectually honest critical engagement with alternative views, competing arguments and contradictory evidence in the service of the cumulative refinement of human knowledge. One of the founding principles of Western civilisation rests on Plato’s affirmation that the process of philosophical dialectic is utterly distinct from and immeasurably superior to rhetoric as a means of persuasion, and that holds true today as surely as it did in his Academy.

One of the top ten hits on my ‘Power of Education’ web search refers to the oft-repeated aphorism attributed to the 17th century English philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon that “knowledge is power”. The Latin in which he actually expressed this (*ipsa scientia potestas est* - “knowledge itself is power”) is found in his *Meditationes Sacrae* of 1597, where he clarifies the equation of knowledge with power by going on to say that it (knowledge) is “not mere argument or ornament”. In other words, as a consequence of his frustration with the established tradition of Scholasticism, Bacon wanted to reconnect knowledge with action, to produce practical knowledge based on empirical principles for “the use and benefit of man”.

To that end, Bacon upheld, we must purge the mind of prejudice, conditioning, false notions, and unanalysed authority – what he called the “idols of the human mind” which distort and discolour the true nature of things – and rely instead on direct experience, perception, observation, and “true induction” as methods of gaining sound knowledge. Amongst the more specific examples of hindrances to understanding included in Bacon’s “idols” are: trying to make things fit into patterns, seeking evidence to support preconceived notions, seeing what one expects to see, believing what one wants to believe, generalizing, favouring one outlook or perspective over another (e.g. antiquity over novelty, the part over the whole, differences over similarities, or *vice versa*), and failing to understand that words may have more than one meaning. This is a remarkable list which has such a modern ring to it, converging as it does so strikingly with many of the key modern findings in cognitive psychology and related disciplines about the nature of conditioning, prejudice, confirmation bias, and other impediments to learning.

As for the dichotomising tendency, it is as ingrained in educational contexts as in most domains of human thought and activity. Obvious examples include the common misconception that memorisation is somehow inimical to thinking and comprehension, or that creativity is somehow independent of existing knowledge. Another is the false notion that specialisation, the accumulation of a detailed body of knowledge, is somehow opposed to the breadth and cross-connections gained from interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary learning. Great polymaths (including those who have been an inspiration to me) are not dilettantes skating on the surface of many ponds, any more than specialists are necessarily suffering from tunnel vision which prevents them from seeing the bigger picture.

Let us turn now to another of the false notions highlighted by Bacon – the distorted perceptions of reality generated by fixed ideas and expectations, and the concomitant disregard of evidence. A poll recently published in *The Times*, and appropriately subtitled “The ignorance index”, came up with striking overestimations in various categories, including the number of immigrants and Muslims in 14 countries. American respondents, for example, believed that Muslims

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made up 15% of the population of the USA, whereas the true figure is only 1%. People are constantly fed sensationalized messages in the media about what worries them and this induces a mindset prone to overestimation. Another example of gross misperception of reality is the overestimation of violence motivated by religion. It is worth noting that, contrary to the widely held misconception that religion has historically been the chief cause of violent conflict, it is estimated that, at worst, religious causes actually account for less than 3% of the 248 million deaths caused in the ten worst wars, massacres and atrocities in human history.

Education should confer the power to amass a body of knowledge, to marshal evidence, and to resist conditioned, biased and one-dimensional thinking.

REALISING HUMAN POTENTIAL

I take it as an axiom that a truly qualitative education can only be based on a mature understanding of the full range of human powers and faculties – physical, sensory, cognitive, perceptive, imaginative, affective, moral and spiritual – bearing in mind that from a spiritual perspective all such powers and faculties are divine endowments and “there is no power nor strength save in God alone” (*lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā billāh*).

The concept and practice of holistic education is also integral to the comprehensive vision of human faculties in Islam. There are repeated exhortations in the Qur’an to use the faculties given to us to attain knowledge and discern the truth. These encompass the senses, which enable us to learn by direct observation and experience, as well as through instruction; the language-based deliberative or rational faculty (*‘aql*) which enables us to think, inquire, analyse, define, discriminate, conceptualise, argue, and engage in the process of dialectic; the capacity for relationship and empathy which is the ground of that active engagement with the ‘other’ ordained in the Qur’an; the higher faculties of ‘intellection’ which combine mind and heart, including reflection and contemplation (*tafakkur*); the creative imagination which engages the faculties of inner perception and insight; the moral

faculties anchored in a criterion (*furqān*) which enable us to distinguish right from wrong, and assume personal responsibility and ultimate accountability for our actions; and above all these, the super-ordinate faculty of consciousness or mindfulness of God (*taqwā*), that sense of loving awe and awareness of the omnipresence of God, and the desire to conduct one's life in the light of that awareness.

This is an integrated vision of human faculties which never separates the rational powers from that of direct experience, moral valuation and spiritual consciousness.

The English word 'develop' is derived from Old French *des- + veloper*, 'unwrap', a concept consistent with the sense of 'lead or draw out' in Latin *educere*, the source of English 'education'. The concept of 'unwrapping' points to an educational process that includes remembering, activating, awakening, eliciting, or bringing to light innate capacities that reflect the essential nature with which the human being has been imprinted by God and which endows him or her with the potential to become His vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on earth. The origin of the English word for 'character' is from Greek *kharakter*, instrument for marking, from *kharassein*, to engrave. One of its meanings is still a mark in writing. The etymology excavates a conception of innate human character as being engraved, stamped, impressed, or etched on the soul, having been created by God, as Qur'an 95:4 tells us, *fi' aḥsani taqwīm*, "in the best of moulds" (Arberry) or "in the best conformation" (Muhammad Asad). The development of character is thus the unfolding of the divine imprint, the realisation of potential, the expression as far as man is capable of the Divine Attributes.

Sticking for the moment with this concept of God-given human 'power' and 'potential', if you google "Human Powers", the top five of the resultant 258 million hits include the following four sites: 16 People with Real Super Powers; 18 Mutant Superheroes; 9 Humans with Real-Life X-Men Mutant Super Powers, and 3 Ways to develop Powers. The latter, intended "for those who being a normal human is just not enough", includes seeing in the dark, running over walls, jumping like a cat, shunning the need to breathe, becoming an expert at detecting lies, persuading others with subconscious techniques, reading auras, and developing clairvoyance, clairsaudience, astral

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projection and psychokinesis. The impact of mass media and popular culture is only too evident here, but the fascination in super-heroes and super-powers is also indicative of a deep recognition of human potential. At the same time, one can argue that this is bound to flourish in an age when the full potential of the human being and the full extent of human faculties are largely unrecognised in the pervasive culture of generally low expectations that exists both in our education system and in wider society. Unconscious of the full extent of our potential, we can only project that unconsciousness onto imaginary and sensationalized powers and beings.

Education should confer the power to recognise the full extent of human powers and faculties and to enable us to take conscious control of their development within ourselves.

EXCELLENCE WITH A SOUL

In the movie *Under Siege* starring Steven Seagal, Tommy Lee Jones plays a rogue ex-CIA agent who had been involved in covert operations with special forces, and who hijacks a US warship. He is a totally amoral nutter, but the CIA, when asked why they had employed him, explain that he was, in their words, the kind of “creative thinker” who can be especially useful. Here we see the disconnection between ‘creativity’ and any higher concept of human character. Here creativity, instead of being an aspect of human excellence, is conceived as mere ingenuity, with no thought for the purposes for which it is used.

In 2010 I found myself in the rather surrealistic situation of giving the keynote address at the annual Eid celebration at Goldman Sachs in the City of London, an event held under the banner of their ‘diversity’ programme. I titled my talk “Islam and Human Excellence” and based it on their own stated business principles, which included (in addition to diversity) professionalism, creativity and integrity. I began by saying that everyone present would doubtless know that the movie *Wall Street 2: Money Never Sleeps*, the sequel to the 1987 movie *Wall Street*, was about to hit our cinemas. Who could forget Gordon Gekko played by Michael Douglas in the original movie? Some of Gekko’s infamous statements include: “Greed is good. – I create nothing. I own. We make

the rules, pal. – It's all about bucks, kid. The rest is conversation. – What's worth doing is worth doing for money." I referred to an interview with Michael Douglas the previous month in which he related how at the time of the first film in 1987 young business students would flock to meet him and tell him, "Gordon Gekko! You're the man, Gordon! You're the reason why I got into this money business!" Douglas shook his head and said: "I'm sitting there saying, 'No, no - really, no. Look at the film. I'm not the man you want to be like. I'm the villain.' The guys didn't get it. 'Yeah, Gordon! You're really great!'" Douglas continued: "Now I wonder just how many of those young MBA students back then who thought Gordon was such a great guy are at the head of those very same companies now."

There is an important distinction between professionalism and excellence. After all, we can talk about a professional hit man, but would it not be rather strange to say that Mario is an *excellent* hit man, unless we were members of the Mafia. The difference is that the heart of excellence is not simply about personal mastery of a skill or effectiveness in accomplishing a task but includes excellence of human character, and that has a moral and ultimately a spiritual dimension.

This is a fundamental concept in Islamic tradition. The vision of 'excellence' that is expressed in the Arabic word *iẖsān* is in fact inseparable from goodness, beauty and virtue. In the domain of Islamic art, a pivotal distinction can also be made between two concepts of beauty: one which is subjective and ephemeral (*jamāl*) and the other (*ẖusn*) which encompasses not only the aesthetic sense of beauty in its homage to the 'due measure and proportion' invested in creation, but also the intimate equation between what is beautiful and what is good. Beauty is thus inseparable from the attributes of Divine Perfection, and from the moral virtue, spiritual refinement and excellence of character which are the human reflections of those holy attributes.

In the Qur'an the higher faculties are always intertwined in a holistic vision of what makes a fully human being. That completeness is the underlying meaning of 'integrity', which comes from Latin *integer*, 'whole, complete, entire'. From this perspective, thinking for instance, is not just an analytical, logical and target-driven activity that goes on in the head and through which the end can even justify the means, but

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it is inseparable from an innate moral and discriminating capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood and right from wrong. True excellence is therefore embodied and actualized in principled conduct and beautiful behaviour (*ādāb*) as well as skill and effectiveness in mastering a domain of activity. At Goldman Sachs, in the heart of Fleet Street, I might have referred to a saying by that 18th century luminary of the City of London, Samuel Johnson – poet, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer, and arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history. He had lived in Gough Square, a stone's throw away. “The supreme end of education”, he wrote, “is expert discernment of things, the power to tell the good from the bad, the genuine from the counterfeit, and to prefer the good and the genuine to the bad and the counterfeit.”

This definition converges strikingly with Muḥammad Asad's translation of the Arabic word *furqān* – “a standard or criterion to discern truth from falsehood and right from wrong.” The sense of moral valuation is also present in other Arabic words in the Qur'an which denote the faculties of discernment and insight. The word *al-aʿrāf*, translated by Asad as “the faculty of discernment”, carries the same connotation of ‘perceiving what is right’, as does the word *rushd*, ‘consciousness of what is right’. The word *baṣīrah*, denoting the ‘faculty of conscious understanding based on insight’ also includes that moral compass which provides the essential orientation for perceiving the truth. The ‘intellect’ (*ʿaql*) encompasses not only the language-based rational and deliberative faculty (Latin *ratio*, Greek *dianoia*) but also the higher organ of moral and spiritual intelligence and insight (*intellectus*, *nous*). In a detailed study of the concept of *ʿaql*, Karim Douglas Crow has noted the re-appearance of the term “wisdom” in recent descriptions of human intelligence to connote “a combination of social and moral intelligence, that blend of knowledge and understanding within one's being manifested in personal integrity, conscience, and effective behaviour”. He concludes that one of the key components of the concept of “intelligence” expressed by the term *ʿaql* was “ethical-spiritual”.

Discernment also goes far beyond what Guy Claxton has labelled as “d-mode” (deliberation mode), the sort of intelligence concerned

with “figuring matters out, weighing up the pros and cons, constructing arguments and solving problems, a way of knowing that relies on reason and logic, on deliberate conscious thinking”. Claxton himself points out that growing dissatisfaction with the assumption that d-mode is the be-all and end-all of human cognition is reflected in various alternative approaches to the notion of intelligence, such as Howard Gardner’s “multiple intelligences” and Daniel Goleman’s “emotional intelligence”.

One might add to these alternative approaches the work of scientists such as F. David Peat, who have synthesised anthropology, history, linguistics, metaphysics, cosmology and even quantum theory to describe the way in which the worldviews and indigenous teachings of traditional peoples differ profoundly from the way of seeing the world embedded in us by linear Western science.

In conclusion, I will refer to Harry Lewis’s book, *Excellence Without a Soul*, a robust critique of higher education in America by the former Dean of Harvard College. One reviewer reports the judgement of many scholars and experts that higher education in America is in crisis. “College campuses”, he claims, “have become perpetual parties and many people blame the students themselves, suggesting that this generation is lazy, entertainment driven and doesn’t care about anything other than themselves.” According to Lewis, colleges in America (Harvard included) “have forgotten that the fundamental job of undergraduate education is to turn teenagers into adults, to help them grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings”. Lewis believes that because colleges have failed to offer students reasons for education – which forces students to wrestle with deeper questions of meaning and purpose – they are failing students and a country that desperately needs a well-educated citizenry. “The old ideal of a liberal education” he writes, “lives on in name only. No longer does Harvard teach the things that will free the human mind and spirit.”

Let us be clear about the status of Harvard College. It is one of two schools within Harvard University granting undergraduate degrees. Founded in 1636 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it is the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States. Cambridge University in

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England, founded in 1209, is of course much older, but much older still is the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fes, Morocco, founded in 859, and often cited as the first university. For 2014/15, Harvard came 4th in the QS World University Rankings and 2nd in the THE (Times Higher Education) rankings, while Cambridge came 2nd and 5th respectively. The top university in both rankings was an Institute of Technology in the USA – Massachusetts in QS, and California in THE. The top university in the Muslim world, according to this ranking system, was Universiti Malaya (UM) in 151st place, and there was no university in the Arab world in the top 200.

Such statistics are often marshalled in lamentations about the intellectual stagnation and dearth of knowledge production in the Muslim world, even though justifiable reservations about the validity of the rankings have also been voiced. Despite those reservations, the rankings are a widely recognised measure of the quality of education at university level and an indication of a profound crisis within Muslim societies. Even so, critiques such as Lewis's are important correctives to the assumption that the panacea for education in the Muslim world is the uncritical emulation of Western models, as if the main criterion for 'success' in 'catching up' amongst 'lame-duck' Muslim institutions is improvement in their global standing as defined by international ranking systems and criteria.

One of the powers of education itself is to give us the depth and breadth of vision that enables us to see that the advancement of human knowledge is not a one-way street. It is not the assimilation of one culture or worldview into another. Rather, it is the integration of the best there is in every culture and civilisation.

Education should confer the power to reach for a universal vision of excellence which encompasses truth, meaning, purpose and what it means to be fully human.

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On education, I have distilled here and there various ideas I have expressed in other works of my own, including the following: Foreword to Zahra Al Zeera, *Wholeness and Holiness in Education: An Islamic Perspective* (Richmond: International Institute for Islamic Thought, 2001); “Passing Between the Clashing Rocks: The Heroic Quest for a Common and Inclusive Identity”, *The Journal of Pastoral Care in Education*, 22:3 (2004), pp. 35-44; “Thinking Skills: Engaging the Intellect Holistically”, *Islamica*, Issue 15 (2005); “Thinking Outside the Box”, *Islamica*, Issue 16 (2006); “Key Elements of Holistic Education”, *Islamica*, Issue 17 (2006); “Muslim Youth and the Renewal of Core Human Values: The Centrality of Education”, keynote address, AMSS Conference, *Muslim Youth: Challenges, Opportunities and Expectations*, University of Chester, 2009; “Islam and Human Excellence”, keynote address, Goldman Sachs Eid event, London, 30 September 2010; “Islamic Education: Cosy Corner, Lane Duck, Model of Compliance, or Beacon of Excellence?”, presentation incorporated into the section on education in *Contextualising Islam in Britain II*, a report compiled (with Professor Yasir Suleiman) for DCLG (University of Cambridge, 2012).

'Knowledge is Power' – a statement commonly attributed to an eminent English philosopher and scientist in 1597, still highlights today the importance of knowledge in the modern world. Education forms the basis of our knowledge and its development, from our earliest experiences at school through to Higher Education. Individuals use their knowledge in their professional and personal lives, and society as a collective of individuals shapes the world in which we live. Therefore the power of education is one of the keys to developing a successful society and benefits humanity at large. But things have gone very wrong! Society, values and morals are all in decline. How has education lost its power to build an effective and fair society? How can this decline be reversed? In *The Power of Education*, the author goes back to first principles and asks: what is education, and what do individuals and society need from education? Reconnecting education with the 'heart and soul' of humanity, and finding that great purpose of mankind is paramount. This is distinct from a 'knowledge factory' that merely develops individuals for material advancement and personal progression. Values, morals, compassion, empathy, gratitude, mutual respect, fairness and social responsibility are all essential traits for individuals that collectively form a successful society, and these traits need to be instilled during the entire educational experience. By rethinking and developing an effective education methodology one can work towards building a better world, based upon equality and fairness for all.

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