

Where is discernment in all this? Leadership – Research – Living

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Extended abstract

Being a leader in any educational institution can be an extremely lonely and often disconcerting experience. Such are the current pressures and preoccupations that job specifications appeared to have morphed in recent decades to such a degree that many individuals are expected to be more a blend of politician, general, firefighter and accountant than any role remotely associated with education. In some quarters institutional leaders have been reduced to being mere bean counters, who at times are reminiscent of the cynic described by Lord Darlington in Oscar Wilde's play Lady Windermere's Fan (1893); as "a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." A whole series of expectations coupled with the prevailing orthodoxy would appear to have not only narrowed the room for manoeuvre, but also the ability to look as well as see. Whilst there is unlikely to be a radical change of approach anytime soon, there is at least one area that can be focussed on that has the potential to prove beneficial for leadership, research and for living – and that is the unsung virtue of discernment.

Interestingly discernment as an area of focus that has largely been left to theologians, which is in itself is both interesting and yet somewhat surprising. After all, discernment is fundamental to decision making, and the quality of decision taking surely hinges upon the quality of our discernment. The ability to judge well and with perception can not only improve our ability as a leader, but also as a human being. Sadly, it would appear that all too often we assume that discernment will be absorbed as if by osmosis. So what can be done to raise both the awareness and appreciation of discernment? As in most human endeavours it all comes down to knowledge, experience and the accumulating of wisdom. Leaders appreciate the importance of being an autodidact, and all that they accrue from such self-learning. Equally, everyday experience enables the processing of heuristic learning, something that is integral to improved discernment and sagacity. Occasional forays into the unconventional and the left-field enable us to recalibrate and assess values in such a way that make us more likely to appreciate the importance of connectivism. It is a fact that the discerning have a far greater capacity to see through the sophistry and semantics that is often employed both those championing flawed schemes and arguments. Discernment is not only desirable, it needs to be a state of mind, one that can infuse a person and their leadership style, but also given the right encouragement, an entire organisation.

It has not gone unnoticed that many academics, managers and those that walk the corridors of responsibility are fond of demonstrating their prowess with new technology. They and their researchers take great delight in deploying gismos and gadgetry as tools to engage colleagues, the voter or ensnare the media's interest. Websites, Twitter-feeds and subtle and not-so subtle 'selfies' are being churned out in such quantities that it is enough to make some of us to choose to live a hermit-like existence. When not checking mobile phones or iPads even the most superficial queries appear to result in the stock reply of; "I'll google it". Google – or rather the search engine of that name has become as revered by some in the Modern World as the likes of Bayt Al-Hikma (The House of Wisdom) in Baghdad were in earlier times. Google - our repository of knowledge is dipped into and its 'treasures' deemed veritable pearls of wisdom. Equally Wikipedia and the like do our bidding and furnish us with all at the click of a mouse and yet for all this I sense that there is something missing.

Down the ages mankind has amassed magnificent repositories of knowledge, some like the Ancient Library at Alexandria have near fabled status, others even more influential have been largely forgotten. Who now speaks or writes of the library of Caliph Al-Hakam II at Cordoba in Spain? Al-Hakam amassed a collection of in excess of 400,000 books and manuscripts, for a time Europe's finest collection of writings on history, literature, mathematics and science. Mention of books and they seem so old hat, especially in this era of the Kindle. Yet books, especially in their bulky physical form have extraordinary power, for they embody knowledge and are rich with cultural associations, something which some find intimidating or are suspicious of. Those who mistrust and fear books and what they represent seek to censor, control, and expunge.

So fearful are some people of the power of knowledge that they have no qualms in burning great libraries. History is littered with examples of biblioclasm. Within a few years of the death of Caliph Al-Hakam his magnificent library was purged and broken up on the orders of a fanatical successor. In England King Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell caused the loss of countless priceless tomes during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. In Nazi Germany bigoted ideologues made night-time ceremonial for the newsreels out of burning the works of newly proscribed Jewish, Left-Wing or supposedly degenerate authors. Whilst as recently as 1981 the Jaffna Library of nearly 100,000 treasured books and manuscripts was deliberately targeted and torched by Sinhalese gangs during the Sri Lankan Civil War. Sadly, in various parts of the world such wanton destruction and cultural barbarism continues to this day.

Books and the ideas they contain have the potential to be transformative, hence why have always been those who have sought to censor, suppress and destroy. Down the ages thankfully there have been individuals and their works that have illuminated the path to greater discernment, or at the very least extolled discernment as a virtue. The German polymath, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) spoke volumes when he said the following; "A great deal may be done by severity, more by love, but most by clear discernment and impartial justice."

It behoves us all to equip the young so that they are better able to sort out the wheat from the chaff in the course of their studies and academic research. This winnowing process has never been more important, especially in an era when we are all bombarded with a veritable embarrassment of information and disinformation, whether it be from the Internet or Social Media. The Google generation desperately need discernment and key research skills to enable them to find and discriminate between that which is relevant or of worth and that which is flawed, bogus or smacks of cod philosophy or worse. Value can always be gained from revisiting 'old quarries' and encouraging independent thought and the confidence to question in a constructive manner. Such skills are not only integral to academic performance, but are essential for the world of work and life in general. Naturally, some of us feel somewhat reticent about discernment, especially if we apply it to colleagues and friends as we often fear that this will result in us making inferences about overall ability and thus seeming judgmental. Whilst it would be foolish to deny that such a risk exists, in actuality true discernment is anchored in objectivity and a subtle sense of detachment that enables a measured appraisal, hopefully free from prejudice or the desire to rush to condemn. Whether we like it or not, the simple fact is that leaders are composite beings, who if they overlook or neglect discernment impoverish themselves and those around them.

Integral to any refocus will be the importance of changing the iconography and lexicon of leadership. If there is precious little emphasis on discernment, it should come of no surprise that discernment is neglected and under-appreciated. By making a conscious effort to recognise and cherish discernment's value as a virtue in leadership, research and living we might well all improve our insight, erudition and percipience.