

Personal Development - EDUCATIONAL LITERACY 16.12.07

INTRODUCTION – the precedent

Today we are looking at another goal of CJ's City – Educational Literacy. Now, I know that the word 'education' can send shivers down the spine for some of us! But I hope that by the end of the session we come to learn that education does not necessarily require a formal learning environment and that it is something that EVERYONE – that's right everyone – can take part in and even *ENJOY!*

To explore this a little bit further we are going to need to examine our characters, how we are built, and we shall be looking at intelligence, education and how these things apply to us.

Firstly, let's explore who we are? Where do we come from?

Well, the Bible explains in the book of Genesis (and elsewhere) that we are made by God 'in His image.' Now this is key. Clearly that does not mean that when we get up in the morning and look in the bathroom mirror we are going to see God staring back at us – though some people like to think so, I am more of a realist! No, the Bible is speaking about God's qualities and character being reflected, or recreated, if you like, in his handiwork.

So, what is God like? Again, accounts of how He created the universe and all that is in it are revealing:

By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,
by understanding he set the heavens in place;
by his knowledge the deeps were divided,
and the clouds let drop the dew.
Proverbs 3:19-20

Do you know how the clouds hang poised, those wonders of him who is
perfect in knowledge?
Job 37:15-17

Now, I am afraid to say that I have a confession to make. I am reading a book by Dan Brown the 'controversial author' of 'The da Vinci' code. It is called 'Angels and Demons'. I would be the first to say that this is not exactly Shakespeare but the first pages of the book really opened my eyes to God's incredible work in creation.

The book describes in some detail the work that is carried out by 3,000 of the world's leading physicists at CERN – the European Council for Nuclear Research which straddles the French/Swiss border. Now, I can see you all getting pretty excited as we are going to be talking particle physics - yeah!

Now the scientists here have been able to recreate similar conditions to the early life of the universe and are discovering the smallest building blocks that make it up. Now these things are tiny, if you look at the edge of a 5p piece then you could fit about

100,000,000,000,000 (one hundred thousand billion) of them across the edge of it – just that tiny bit.

So, we're talking small.

Now let's look at the other end of the scale. Last week I was up in Norfolk for my brother's stag week-end and it was fantastic. On the Saturday we went down to the beach and as dusk came down we made a bonfire and just chilled out. It was wonderful to be out in the countryside as it is so much easier to see the stars at night out there – and there are so many of them.

I was reading about an interplanetary space probe called Voyager II that set off from Earth on the 20th of August 1977 to explore various planets in space. It set off travelling faster than the speed of a bullet — that is 90,000 miles an hour. Travelling at that speed, it took just over twelve years to reach the planet Neptune — 2,700 million miles from the Earth.

Our star, the Sun, is one of 100,000 million stars, approximately, in our galaxy. And our galaxy is one of approximately 100,000 million galaxies. And what the writer of Genesis says in a throw-away line: He also made the stars — 'just like that!' Billions and billions of stars.

So, pretty BIG!

Just imagine how many of those tiny particles there are in the whole universe. God has arranged them all in their permutations and combinations to make up everything that we can see and so many things that we can't.

Do you think that it is fair to say that God is infinitely creative, that he is infinitely knowledgeable? Or perhaps someone could have advised him on how to do it better? I think this passage in Romans sums this up well:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?"
Romans 11:33-34

Now you, and I, are made in His image. We are imbued with those same qualities. God didn't miss any of us out.

MAIN BODY – the purpose

So we clearly see infinite knowledge and creativity played out in front of us. God is the fount of all knowledge.

I guess many of us will be familiar with the following scripture:

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,

and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
Proverbs 9:10

which is expanded upon in Psalm 111:9-10:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts
have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.

But maybe we are not so familiar with this one:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.
Proverbs 1:7

So, this points to two things:

Humans are encouraged to pursue wisdom and knowledge – but within the context of pursuing God. There is a whole load of knowledge out there and some of it is profitable and worth knowing and some, well, it isn't!

Now, of course, we are not able to comprehend everything. We are not God. God is infinite, without limit, and we, as part of His creation, are finite. We have our limitations. Now some people would like to imagine that we are also without limits – that humanity is able to set the agenda. They are forgetting that the source of all their discoveries is God Himself and that they are merely scratching the surface in uncovering their handiwork. We are merely the pursuers or receivers of the knowledge that God has pre-ordained.

So, 'Education' – is this school all over again?

In a word – 'no'. I would maintain that school is important and that it is vital in this day and age that all people have a working knowledge of the basic skills of communication; literacy and numeracy as this acts as a bedrock for not only future education but our day-to-day life. However, schools have historically tended to focus on certain aspects of intelligence which seems to be being addressed with a broader approach these days. You see, something that I had not realised until relatively recently is that there is not simply ONE type of intelligence – there are NINE! Something for EVERYONE!

So, let's go for it:

1. Naturalist Intelligence (“Nature Smart”)

Designates the human ability to discriminate among living things (plants, animals) as well as sensitivity to other features of the natural world (clouds, rock configurations). This ability was clearly of value in our past as hunters, gatherers, and farmers; it continues to be central in such roles as botanist or chef.

2. Musical Intelligence (“Musical Smart”)

Musical intelligence is the capacity to discern pitch, rhythm, timbre, and tone. This intelligence enables us to recognize, create, reproduce, and reflect on music, as demonstrated by composers, conductors, musicians, vocalists, and sensitive listeners. Interestingly, there is often an affective connection between music and the emotions.

3. Logical-Mathematical Intelligence (Number/Reasoning Smart)

Logical-mathematical intelligence is the ability to calculate, quantify, consider propositions and hypotheses, and carry out complete mathematical operations. It enables us to perceive relationships and connections and to use abstract, symbolic thought; sequential reasoning skills; and inductive and deductive thinking patterns.

4. Existential Intelligence

Sensitivity and capacity to tackle deep questions about human existence, such as the meaning of life, why do we die, and how did we get here.

5. Interpersonal Intelligence (People Smart)

Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand and interact effectively with others. It involves effective verbal and nonverbal communication, the ability to note distinctions among others, sensitivity to the moods and temperaments of others, and the ability to entertain multiple perspectives.

6. Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence (“Body Smart”)

Bodily kinesthetic intelligence is the capacity to manipulate objects and use a variety of physical skills. This intelligence also involves a sense of timing and the perfection of skills through mind–body union. Athletes, dancers, surgeons, and craftspeople exhibit well-developed bodily kinesthetic intelligence.

7. Linguistic Intelligence (Word Smart)

Linguistic intelligence is the ability to think in words and to use language to express and appreciate complex meanings. Linguistic intelligence is the most widely shared human competence and is evident in poets, novelists, journalists, and effective public speakers.

8. Intra-personal Intelligence (Self Smart)

Intra-personal intelligence is the capacity to understand oneself and one’s thoughts and feelings, and to use such knowledge in planning and directioning one’s life. Intra-personal intelligence involves not only an appreciation of the self, but also of the human condition.

9. Spatial Intelligence (“Picture Smart”)

Spatial intelligence is the ability to think in three dimensions. Core capacities include mental imagery, spatial reasoning, image manipulation, graphic and artistic skills, and

an active imagination. Sailors, pilots, sculptors, painters, and architects all exhibit spatial intelligence.

Now I am 100% sure that that list covers everyone here in one way or other. It's amazing how diverse these intelligences are, isn't it? I should imagine that everyone here in this room relates to this list in a different way with different strengths.

So what are the purposes of education – why do we need to bother?

Again, the Bible gives us many reasons to obtain knowledge, not simply for its own sake, but with a greater purpose.

A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength;
Proverbs 24:5

Did you know that the most marginalised and disenfranchised members of our society – and here we can look at either our local area, our national society, or even looking around the globe we can see that the people who have received least education are also those who are the powerless and helpless. A majority of those in prison are those who for one reason or another dropped out of the educational system. No matter the circumstances surrounding these events it is a tragedy.

It is therefore important that we excel in all that we do and continue to grow in our areas of expertise. Develop widely and broadly, stretching ourselves and using others' experience. The Bible tells us that God has a plan for each of our lives and will empower us to carry out the things he has called us to do to help bring change to the world we live in. We all have passions, we all have gifts. Isn't it just possible that God will want to develop these gifts, these skills to be even more effective in the things He has called us to do in our lives: both for our own good but also for the good of others. To go further, to reach higher....

We are called to help others develop their skills and strengths, too. And I believe that all this can take place in a nurturing and encouraging environment rather than simply a formal, academic setting. Of course, we need to start at the beginning with the simpler stuff and then move on to the more complex things. If for example, a person has difficulty reading and writing then I would encourage them to attend an adult literacy course to develop these skills before they embark on a more involved aspect of education. Almost anything else would require a certain competence in literacy.

However, there are of course other avenues that present themselves once these are mastered. The workplace is ever-changing and there is continual scope to develop oneself by going on a training course to open up greater opportunities in our jobs, for example.

CJ's city aims to make a difference at the heart of the local community so that everything that we have heard about so far – our relationship with God, our knowledge of the Bible, the use of our resources, the way we relate to others and so on - goes hand in hand with Educational Literacy; numeracy, literacy and IT skills.

So what happens when this happens, when these qualities come together?

CONCLUSION – the result

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

As it is written:

"He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever."

2 Corinthians 9:8-9

Once people are empowered then they can more done. This can lead to widespread improvement in society.

Now, I don't know what you're thinking. Maybe you're thinking, 'Yup, great! That sounds fantastic – I think I'm going to go and do a course in computing, accounting, law... whatever and then I will develop in such and such a way and be able to serve God with what He has called me to and see great change in society!'

Maybe some others are thinking, 'Well, that sounds pretty good. I haven't had that great an experience of education so far but I'd like to give it another crack. I reckon I could do better second time round and I really see that if I do a, b or c then God could use me to do such and such.'

Perhaps, too, there might be someone here who's thinking, 'Well, that's all very well Piers. I'm sure that's fine for everyone else. But you don't know about me! I'm a special case!...' and so on and so forth....

Well, to encourage everyone here I would like to read extracts from a newspaper article that appeared in The Independent newspaper on Thursday. It's about a chap called Sammy Gitau from Nairobi, Kenya, and it's entitled 'A Miracle for Christmas'.

Born into a life of crime and poverty in a Kenyan slum, Sammy Gitau was foraging through a rubbish dump when he found a prospectus for Manchester University – and his dream was born. For years he studied hard, and fought for the right to come to Britain. On Wednesday he received his Masters degree.

When Sammy Gitau, a child of one of Nairobi's most notorious slums, discovered a Manchester University prospectus on a rubbish tip, he kept it as a talisman and reminder of what life could be like. Like thousands of other children in the Kenyan capital's oldest slum, there seemed little means of escape. But today, Mr Gitau (35), who spent almost a decade gazing in hope at the precious booklet, becomes the university's most remarkable graduate.

Despite just two years of formal education, he has completed an MSc in international development project management (IDPM), and even receive a merit for his dissertation, which focused on his community projects in Nairobi. Today, as he steps out in his gown and mortar board, he will carry on his shoulders the hope of thousands of Kenyan slum-dwellers who never believed such a leap possible.

"It feels amazing as a personal achievement but also as a message to everyone – that it is possible to succeed, even when you are from a community that nobody thought anything good could come from," he said.

Attracted by the colourful crest on its cover, Mr Gitau could never have dreamt of the fortune the discarded prospectus might bring. Looking through the cardboard folder, he grew excited by leaflets advertising a development course which mentioned Kenya. But faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, he dismissed it as a pipe dream.

With only the bare bones of an education behind him, Mr Gitau became the family's main bread-winner at 13, when his father was murdered in a gang attack. His parents had run an illegal liquor outfit, making moonshine, but after his father died, the young boy turned to drug dealing and theft to bring money home for his mother and 10 siblings.

Despite being entrenched in a life of crime, Mr Gitau turned his life around in 1997, after falling into a coma induced by a cocaine overdose. When he came to, he said he felt a duty to change, and decided to begin helping slum children who were going through the same struggles.

"When you are dying you make a deal with God," he said. "You say, 'Just get me out of here and I will do anything. I will go back and stop children going through the same kind of life as me'."

Given Mr Gitau's education history thus far, it would have been remarkable for him to reach high school, let alone a postgraduate course. For the few years when he was in school, his time was torn between the family business and his books. He would try to do homework on the same table that punters came to drink the illegal alcohol. His studies were interrupted by brawls and running errands. "I ended up sleeping in lessons, because I was up so late, and I couldn't concentrate on work", he explained.

The discovery of a course that could lift him out of poverty was one he found difficult to keep to himself. "People thought I was crazy," he said. "I felt like a crusader because I didn't know anyone who had done this. I learnt not to share my dreams with people after a while, though, because they only took away from it."

Now 35, Mr Gitau has managed to swim against the tide of what seemed like an inevitable fate. His projects, which were helping 20,000 children to find a path out of poverty, caught the attention of other organisations in the area, who then helped him to transform his own life. His community resource centres for young slum children addicted to drugs cost just £50 a month to run. With three volunteers, Mr Gitau taught carpentry, tailoring, computer skills and baking to those who would otherwise never have had a chance. At the heart of his plans was a library. "I wanted to offer these children what I could not get," he said.

Other charities were impressed by the imagination and ambition of his home-grown charity they were able to provide not only resources but the vital advice that led to Mr Gitau's Manchester adventure. Through various contacts donations were made to sponsor his living costs in the UK and Manchester University agreed to pay his fees.

However, his first application for a visa was refused in 2005 as immigration officials, who saw his lack of previous education, refused him a visa because, as they saw it, he could not be a serious candidate. It took another seven months before a judge overruled this decision, calling it "thoroughly unsatisfactory and insupportable".

So last year, Mr Gitau arrived in Britain to start the course that had fuelled so many years of daydreams. Once he arrived in Manchester, however, the work was far from over. While his spoken English was good, he had no experience of essays or research, so a tutor was brought in to support him.

Mr Gitau puts his achievements down to hard work. "After all the goodwill, at the end of the day it's just you sticking to your books," he said, adding: "For the past few days I haven't been able to sleep – I've been too excited. So many doors had been shut in my face because I didn't have this or that. Now, finally, I can think big. Now I can go back to my projects and make sure they do well."