

EDUCATION CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

Peter Henriot

There are just too many things to write about this week – things that need a lot of careful thought. Media harassment (including arrest of Father Frank Bwalya), riots in Kitwe, denials of any “tensions” in the country, appointment of Cabinet (including a rather disturbing nomination of a Chief Whip), continued high prices of mealie meal and other basics, etc.

So, let me have more time for reflection on those big issues, and for this week offer you a talk I gave on Saturday at the graduation celebration of a very good local Lusaka school.

PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

Driving over to your campus this morning to join this celebration, I passed through the Kalingalinga “Multi-Purpose Construction Industry” site – that’s the fancy name I give to the place where hundreds of people, women and men, old and young, are involved in stone crushing, steel welding, block making, sand shoveling and furniture building. It’s a very busy place, every day of the week. What often strikes me when I drive by this site is the number of young people working away there on school days. Not in school, but sitting on piles of rocks, hammering away for the chips used for the foundations of the new buildings going up around Lusaka these days.

These are children – like so many of you here in front of me – who are the future of this great country of Zambia. But they are not like you, because they are not in school. They are like so many of the people of Zambia – living, working, surviving, in conditions of impoverishment.

Why do I begin my brief remarks here this morning with this comment? Because I believe it sets the context of your celebration today of educational achievement in this school. Those of you who are deservedly receiving awards for your distinguished academic work, those of who are finishing up Grade 12 and preparing to move on for further studies, yours is a privilege and a responsibility given to very few of your peers here in Zambia.

And so it seems good to recall that education has a two-fold purpose: one, the improvement of each of you, individual students, and, two, the improvement of your country, your beloved Zambia. Surely you are experiencing the fulfillment of that first purpose, personal improvement, on this day of awards and graduation. But will your country, Zambia, experience the fulfillment of that second purpose, the improvement that we call integral human development?

If it does not, if Zambia does not develop in the years ahead through your putting into practice the information, skills, values and dedication that you have learned here in this school, then I am afraid that even the first purpose of your education has not been achieved.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Why can I say that? Because I remember this morning one of the first African proverbs I learned when I came to Zambia twenty years ago. It is the proverb that sums up the African wisdom, the Zambian traditional wisdom, called “*ubuntu*.” You know the proverb, I’m sure: “I am because we are, and we are because I am!” Or, in other words, a person is a person through other persons.

This rich bit of African wisdom so beautifully expresses the ideal of community, of solidarity, of unity and harmony. And therefore it is very important to recall as you celebrate this day of your academic achievements. One of the glories of Zambia, one of the many glories, is this appreciation of community, this spirit of *ubuntu*.

I originally come from a country – the United States of America, or as we now might be referring to it, the United States of Obama-land! -- where this strong spirit of community is not the number one value. Rather, individualism or unique independence is so greatly acclaimed and reinforced in the economy and culture of the USA.

I recall many years ago giving a talk like this before an audience of well-educated and hard-working USA citizens. One of the men stopped me in my discourse about community and solidarity and proclaimed: “I’ve got this” and he waved his hands, pointed to his head and pounded his heart – “and I don’t need anyone!” Now, I can’t imagine any good Zambian ever saying such a thing – “I don’t need anyone!”

Yes, it seems to me that this spirit of *ubuntu*, of togetherness – even with all its difficulties and drawbacks – is so very important to emphasise to you well-educated students gathered here for this celebration. That is because of the second purpose of education that I have stressed: the improvement of your beloved country of Zambia.

POTENTIALS OVER PROBLEMS

You know as well as I do that Zambia is blessed to be one of the richest countries in Africa, so very rich in resources of minerals, water, land, agriculture, tourist sites, peace – 44 years of 72 tribes living in harmony, “one Zambia, one nation.” Truly, the envy of our neighbours!

Yes, one of the richest countries in Africa, with some of the poorest people in the world! The United Nations statistics tell us that on the *Human Development Index* Zambia ranks 166 out of 177 nations in terms of the all-important human development measurements of life expectancy, literacy, and families’ ability to meet basic needs.

Such a contrast, such a paradox: one of the richest countries in Africa, with some of the poorest people in the world! But as we say again and again: in Zambia, the potentials outweigh the problems! We have the potentials here to overcome the problems, to meet those famous Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and to fulfill the government’s Vision 2030.

But whether that will occur or not is very much in the head, the heart, the hands of those of you in front of me – students, parents, family, friends, and wonderful staff of this wonderful school. For you are among the privileged minority here in Zambia, the educated elite. And as Jesus reminds us, “From those to whom much has been given, much will be demanded.” Yes, the clear challenge is: education has improved you, but will you improve Zambia?

Will ten or fifteen years from now, when you are raising a family, you are employed in the mining industry, you are a civil servant, you are teaching in a school, you are working for an NGO, you are a Member of Parliament, will this country be different? Will you be contributing to making this country different? Will you be enabling the potentials to be applied to the problems, and will Mother Zambia be a place where the daughters and sons of those children who today are crushing stones in Kalingalinga can be students in good schools like this one?

YES, WE CAN!

Now perhaps some of you, students and friends, may say, well, we really can’t make that much of a difference, in Zambia, can we? And I say, to borrow the campaign phrase of a son of Africa who is now moving into the White House in the USA, “Yes, we can!”

Can you make a difference? Yes, we can! Can you put into practice the excellent education received here in this excellent school? Yes we can! Can you use this education to draw upon the many potentials of Zambia to overcome its many problems? Yes, we can!

President-elect Obama empowered his audiences with that slogan. I pray this morning that it might empower you also. Then in the near future you all can look back on this day and honestly and courageously say, Yes, with the education we received here in this school, we improved ourselves, and now we are improving Zambia!

phenriot@jesuits.org.zm

[1260 words]

Peter Henriot
 Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection
 Lusaka, Zambia

Prepared for THE POST, Lusaka, 18 November 2008