

Learning to Live with Less¹

Subramani

I want to begin by saying that in Human Resource Empowerment the Fiji Principals' Association has found a very timely subject for its 104th Conference. Globally we are witnessing an economic disaster described widely by financial experts as an economic meltdown. The politicians, as well as some economists, euphemistically explain it away as financial institutions over-reaching themselves. In plain terms, it really is human avarice or greed reaching extraordinary proportions driven by the philosophy that 'more is better'. This ideology that has always worked towards widening the gap between the rich and the poor, now the same ideology is bringing down both the rich and the poor alike. Unfortunately it is not just a couple of banks in the United States that are responsible for bringing about this catastrophe; there are also a host of CEOs and corporate executives, with enormous salaries – that include some of the sharpest minds-- together they are bringing misery to millions of people across the world through inappropriate financial activities. The scandal surrounding the IT company Satyam in India comes to mind as an illustration. There is no better illustration of dismal failure, indeed the bankruptcy, of secular education in the world.

The recurring word in Fiji for the last few years has been corruption. Here too financial institutions, government departments, and even higher education institutions, have been tainted. The failure in governance gave justification in 2006 for the military to intervene in order to set things right. The whole world at present is engaged in trying to put things right; however, we get the distinct

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sense that we haven't really come to terms with the deeper issues that are connected to human motives, our ecological environment, the nature of capitalist economy, and the gap between the haves and the have-nots. The financial institutions and governments are doing what is most convenient for them to do. They can change policies and pass regulations. For instance, the banks are now enforcing stricter lending policies which means the needy cannot borrow from them easily; for the rich of course it's business as usual. There are numerous regulations being passed by governments to prevent mismanagement and misappropriation; in time the sharp minds will find ways to circumvent these regulations. It is just like viruses on the Internet; you deal with one, another one pops up.

The main argument in this paper is that there is a clear need for a radical change in the way we think about human life on this planet. This is an enormous undertaking, but the problems human beings have caused are also huge; therefore the remedy has to be equally profound. There are fundamental changes that are being brought about on human life by forces that are at work in the natural world. I will touch on this later in this address. Let me focus first on our great human invention called education. As an ex-colonial country, Fiji's education has been entrenched in the materialist philosophy of our former colonisers. In spite of various attempts at curricula change, we haven't really extricated ourselves from the basic goals and values of that colonial education—not in any profound sense. A good example of this is the English language itself that still dominates our education, and we continue to think in the academic disciplines we inherited from the British system of education. In our pursuit of national development since political independence, we have further entrenched ourselves in the materialistic philosophy of the West that is repeatedly proving to fail that civilization. That failure is exemplified in the discontent with excessive materialism shown by many enlightened individuals; some have turned away from Western materialism by espousing the philosophies of Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism and Transcendental Meditation. In most cases, this has proved to be only a temporary diversion. We know that to find spiritual upliftment we do not have to turn to exotic religions—we simply have to retrieve what is empowering in our own religion and become better practitioners of our own faith.

At the Fiji Institute of Technology, we are trying to address the issue of corruption by implementing courses in ethics, values and governance, and all students regardless of their academic disciplines

are required to take the course. This is just a simple attempt to address a complex problem: we hope that courses of this nature will also be taken by business managers, professionals and trades people. In my view, such ethics courses are relevant and timely for the modern world. There is always the danger though that they will degenerate into another academic subject. We should not allow that to happen. How can we make human values education a living experience so that ultimately there is fundamental shift in the way we think about work and our responsibilities towards fellow human beings?

I cannot offer you an educational program here. I can only point towards educational directions for innovating such a program. Let me try a couple of suggestions. First we have to gradually extricate our education from the underlying philosophies of materialism of Western education. This is very important. The way we can decolonize our education is by allowing more of the living cultures and values of our main communities in Fiji to flow into our education system. There is an exemplary quality in the Fijian community that has relevance to the theme of my paper, 'Living with Less'. I believe that quality is derived from the long experience in the past of living at ease in the natural environment without harming or damaging it too much, and finding joy in small things of life in that environment. While I do not want to reinforce the old romantic stereotype of Fijian laughter, however I do believe that there is such a thing as Fijian humour and sense of laughter that has deeper origins. It has a lot to do with being able to find enjoyment and a sense of fun in work, play and living in general. From a writer's eye, I often have glimpses of what looks to me like humanity at play. As I write I constantly observe this everywhere -- that lightness of being. These days many inspirational gurus travel the world with that message of laughter and humour as a liberating force from the burden of living in a world weighed down by materialistic pursuits. Laughter and fun is that missing vital ingredient that should energise and revitalise not only our education but also our life in general.

The Indians who were brought to Fiji as indentured labourers came with very few material goods. We often over-play the hardship angle. The suffering was there, no doubt, but they also managed to create a relatively contented and meaningful life in a very confined and limited world. They made living frugally a great virtue. There was also that philosophy of detachment, which gave them the outlook that this world was a mere illusion, and the resources for true salvation were inside us. But Indians as plantation workers were

also very much an integral part of in the materialistic agenda of the colonizers. Along the way, as free people, that Indian philosophy of detachment was gradually lost, and we became fully entrenched in the capitalist culture of the colonizers, definitely more so than the Fijian people who continued to live in their old culture as the protected Indigenous people. The difference in the economic status between the two communities that was produced has become a divisive factor in the political life of this country.

How can the Fijian sense of enjoyment of life and the Indian philosophy of detachment be brought into our educational practice? Both are relevant to my overall argument in this presentation. The answer is through language. It is a great loss to Fiji's education that the local languages haven't still found their proper place in the curriculum. I do not mean teaching a smattering of Fijian and Hindi in the schools and tertiary institutions but employing these languages for thinking and feeling, and as medium of education. It is when we become acquainted with the deepest resources of these languages that the philosophies embedded in them become part of our consciousness. The present approach to the three languages do not make students fully competent in any of the three languages—Fijian, Hindi or English. As a language teacher, I am made aware of this fact everyday. One of my own great regrets is that I came out of secondary school without any knowledge of the Fijian language, and now as a creative writer I have to frequently ask my Fijian friends for the names of flora and fauna, and the meaning of names of places and people. How could I know the Fijian environment adequately without knowing the Fijian language?

That brings me to the theme of this Conference—human resource empowerment. Human resource development, like the development of the natural resources, has been high on our political agenda since independence. Human resource development meant training local people in meaningful skills in order to meet the manpower needs of the country. Independent Fiji needed bureaucrats, book keepers, teachers, engineers, doctors and economists; this is what was understood by human resource. The stress was on knowledge and skills. The most vital aspect of education was left to chance; human resource consists of not only skills but also attitudes, imagination, innovative powers, and the meaning-making faculty. Human beings have never been able to develop a suitable curriculum to educate the inner life of emotions and feelings, and the sensitivity to discriminate what is right, just and fair. I don't think it will

be a gross exaggeration to say that some of the most vital part of human resource has never found adequate educational expression.

To give you a short relief from my philosophising, I want to provide an example of poor attitude that, I am sure, distresses many of us. There is a piece of paradise where many of us go for jogging or just for a walk in Namaka; it is the quiet road winding alongside the Nadi airport runway. It is a perfect place to walk early in the morning and late in the afternoon when it is cool. During the weekends families bring their children for a picnic, and to see the planes taking off. On Monday morning both sides of the road is littered with crushed coca cola bottles, Styrofoam cups and lunch boxes, and plastic bags: all part of a throw-away culture whose ways we have adopted. You only treat a place like that if you think it doesn't belong to you. For me it's not just an instance of simple littering, it symbolizes disdainful disregard for one's natural environment and one's country. The families who come here are owners of motor cars and are relatively well-educated; one thing they haven't learnt is to assume ownership of the country and its natural surrounding. One has to say, the distance between this sort of lack of affection for one's land and various categories of corruption is not too great.

The second concept in the theme of this conference - empowerment - has become a trendy buzzword, and therefore has lost much of its potency and force through overuse. It is used by women's groups, workers, the handicapped, the gay community, and environmentalists, and many others to express self-assertion. It is also a popular word in modern corporate culture. In order to examine the concept afresh, it might be better to say what empowerment is not: it has nothing to do with negative attitudes or actions, and is the opposite of oppressing, dominating, malice, or discrimination. True empowerment is an inner quality of ease and serenity, peace and energy that comes from self-knowledge and self awareness, and it is reflected in a balanced, creative, inspired and full life.

I do not want us to be vague about this concept of empowerment, its too important to be left ambiguous; therefore I am going to list four attributes that I think constitute empowerment: first, a deeply positive intelligence; second, high self-regard or self-respect; third, inner calm; and fourth, a strong spiritual connection. These are the energies that fuel our inner life. They make up the real wealth in our life. As to how these attributes can be structured into a curriculum for schools and colleges, I leave that to curriculum designers. They can take cues from teachers of human values programs. I try to

impart these values to my students through my literature and creative writing courses. And I am sure others do the same in their own way. One thing is certain: education must go on innovating, and find effective ways to educate the most important part of our being or else it will continue in its dull, repetitive way without taking us forward in our emotional and spiritual evolution.

And when we give human resource and empowerment the meaning I have tried to attach to these concepts, you will find that it amounts to putting on a new pair of lenses to view the world. Human resource empowerment in the sense in which I have used the term would mean enhancing our innovative, imaginative, and meaning-making faculties, and creating for oneself inner harmony and energy so that we aim for a balanced, inspired and full life whatever the social, economic or political circumstance. It also implies assuming ownership of our world, and being a leader in whatever we do. The most empowered organization is one where everybody assumes leadership regardless of one's title or status, and excels in whatever one is doing. This is being recognized by the most successful organizations the world over. I know this is very high ideal indeed, but it is better to fail working with a high ideal in our heart and mind than to succeed in a world that doesn't give us a true sense of worth and is bereft of meaning.

Learning to live with less is a philosophy that nature itself is trying to impose on human beings. The civilization that is built on materialism and affluence, and wastage, is beginning to come to an end; it is already running low on food stock, water, arable land, fuel, marine resources and nutrients. Those who are fully aware of the situation - the experts - are forecasting more instability, more global and regional conflicts, driven by disputes over land, water, fuel and marine resources. It is not just the West that is responsible. In terms of wastage, it is not a simple dichotomy between the West and the East. What could be a more appalling instance of wastage than depleting our forests to make disposable chopsticks? Millions of chopsticks are made and disposed everyday, and we know that chopsticks are not made from any sort of wood; they are made from select, clear, straight-grained wood that have to meet exacting market standards. Nature has been telling us for a long time that there is enough in it for everyone's need in the world but not enough for everyone's over-indulgence and greed. There is a consciousness in nature that is older than any civilization. And now there is mayhem in nature itself in the form of destructive storms, protracted

droughts, unpredictable climate change, depleting natural resources, greenhouse emission, global warming, rising sea level, and global health catastrophes. We have had a bit of experience of the mayhem I am referring to in the devastating floods we had last year, and the new diseases that have started to visit us.

Human beings haven't been able to resolve the old dilemma of human welfare versus ethical responsibility towards the environment. While this debate rages on, human beings continue their destructive domination of nature. The interconnectedness of nature demands that we quickly become good global citizens. How can humans who haven't quite become good model citizens of the nation state be expected to become great global citizens?

There is another side to the disturbing scenarios that I have alluded to. There are now governments and corporate leaders, as well as intellectuals and educationists, who are talking about honourable ways in which to conduct business and affairs of the state and other institutions. Just this week, a summit has concluded on world climate change and hopefully many positive things will come out of that summit. The fact that the summit was held is an indication of the urgency in dealing with this almost insurmountable problem.

I would like to conclude this address by describing an experience of working in an institution in India that is dedicated to producing honourable citizens who regard service to others as a way of self-empowerment. Last year my wife and I had the privilege to live at an ashram in India. It was an ideal way to learn to live with less. Living in an ashram meant leaving behind most of our worldly luggage. The experience increased our awareness that living with less doesn't have to mean depriving one's self of the richness of life; that richness which can come only through inner well-being. Affluence is never a guarantee of that inner state of well-being. A lot of money is not necessary to enjoy nature, music, friendship, people and spirituality. I was attached to a unique type of experiment in university education. In my estimation it comes closest to a total education of the human person—a genuine effort towards empowering students and teachers alike. Education at the university was totally free, there was naturally a great competition to find a place, and some of the best students across India came to the university. Besides learning their usual academic subjects, the students were exposed to music, sports, performances, inspired teaching and speeches by powerful speakers from all over the world. Spiritual growth and learning to live a disciplined life came naturally in that spiritually uplifting en-

vironment. One of the most empowering experiences was a service program whereby students and staff were given the opportunity to travel to nearby as well as remote villages to offer gifts of food and new clothes to the rural people. At first I regarded this service program as a symbolic gesture: giving food and new clothes to the people once a year hardly solved the nation's problem. But I couldn't ignore the fact that it was a truly moving experience, this giving and receiving of food and clothes. Actually the new clothes did mean a great deal to the rural people; for many this was the first new clothes for the whole year. More important than giving and receiving food and clothes was the human contact: for the villagers it meant somewhere, someone cared for them, that they weren't a forgotten people. For the staff and students the love and gratitude of those who received the gifts was simply overwhelming and a never-to-forgotten experience. After witnessing how majority of the people lived in the country-side, how could one think of a life of affluence and self-interest? The experience offered a challenge to turn to one's inner resources, and to find a way to make a difference. That is precisely what an empowered individual does—he or she discovers a way to make a difference to the world that is given to us by God to live and cherish. The greatest achievement in life is to feel that world is slightly better because you have been here.

The venue of this Principals' Conference reminds me of that university in India: attractively maintained buildings, surrounded by rich natural environment, and moral precepts to guide and inspire the students daily, and above all a leadership that is spiritually empowered.

Thank you for asking me to speak here.

Subramani is a Visiting Professor in Literature at the Fiji National University. Email: subramani@fnu.ac.fj