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My mission

Like many of you here, I am engaged in a quest to help drive a renaissance in Africa.

The question of transformation in Africa is a question of leadership. The problems confronting Africa can only be solved by enlightened Africans; and it is my contention that the manner in which we educate our people has a lot to do with forming such leaders.

I will illustrate my point by sharing some stories with you.

How experience shapes our perception of Africa's Leaders

Early this year, an American friend of mind served as a volunteer nurse in Ghana over a period of three months and came to a conclusion about the impact of leadership in Africa that I had taken more than a decade to reach.

Twice, my friend was involved in surgeries, when the hospital lost power. Emergency generators did not start on either occasion. There was not a flashlight, not a lantern, not a candle available. Pitch black. Twice. The first time, it was a C-Section. Thankfully, baby was out before the power failed. Mother and child survived. The second time, it was a procedure with local anaesthetic. Anaesthetic wears off. Patient feels pain. He is screaming, he is crying, he is praying. Not a flashlight, not a candle. The hospital could certainly afford to purchase flashlights, but it didn't do so. On another occasion my friend watched in horror as nurses sat by and watched a woman die because they did not want to administer the oxygen *they had*.

Just before my friend's return to the United States, nurses in Accra started a strike. Her recommendation to a senior nurse who asked for advice: "Take this opportunity to fire everyone and start all over again."

Why? Because she believed that Ghanaian nurses were doing far too little with the resources that they had; that they did not care about their patients; that their character was not sufficient to the job.

What does this have to do with leadership? You see, the folks at the Ministry of Health, the hospital administrators, doctors and nurses in Ghana are among only 5 percent of their peers who get the benefit of post secondary education. They are part of the elite. They are among our leaders. Their decisions and actions matter a lot to the citizens of Ghana; and when they fall short, a nation literally suffers.

An Early Experience with Leadership

My own first pointed and memorable experience with leadership occurred when I was sixteen, shortly after a military coup in Ghana. Soldiers were a pervasive presence in our lives.

One day I went to meet my father at the airport. As I walked up a grassy slope from the car park to the terminal building, I was stopped by two soldiers armed with AK-47 assault rifles. They asked me to run up and down the embankment, along with a crowd of people who were already trudging up and down the rather steep slope. "Why?" It turns out that the path I had taken was off limits; but there were no signs indicating this fact.

As a teenager, I was horrified by the taunts I might face in school if any of my colleagues observed this event. I was especially concerned about what the girls would think. So I set about arguing with these two men. I was a bit reckless, really. I was sixteen.

In the end, I got lucky. As I stalled and tried to argue my way out of this mess, a Ghana Airways pilot stumbled into the same pickle as the rest of us. Because of his uniform, the soldiers spoke with him differently. They explained that they were just following orders. So he got their radio, spoke directly with their commanding officer, and through his intervention, got us all released.

What lessons would you take from this event?

I took several lessons from my experience. One was leadership matters. Those men were acting on the orders of a superior officer. I learned something about courage. It was important not to focus on those guns. I also learned that it can sometimes be helpful to think about girls.

College Years

Several years after this event, I left Ghana to pursue a college education in the United States. At Swarthmore College, where I went, I experienced a completely different model of education than anything I had encountered before. Our professors wanted to know what we thought, and they very decidedly did not subscribe to the teaching method of memorizing and repeating information that I was familiar with in Ghana. It was a breadth of fresh air.

And in my Economics classes I began to understand why Ghana's economy was in such disarray. My professors gave me high marks for my understanding of economic theory; but I learned something far more profound than basic Economics, and it was this: that the leaders –the managers– of Ghana's economy were making breathtakingly bad decisions that had brought my country to the brink of economic collapse and deepened poverty.

So there was that lesson again: Leadership matters.

The value of properly educated leaders

My deepest understanding of my transformation at Swarthmore, however, did not come until after I had graduated and gone to work at Microsoft Corporation.

At Microsoft, I was part of what I called a thinking learning company. We spent a lot of time learning about advances in our field, designing solutions to complex problems and creating new software. This ability to confront complex problems and the create, is the most empowering thing that can happen to anyone.

During my time at Microsoft, that company's revenue grew larger than the GDP of Ghana. Today, that gap has widened. It is staggering, if you think about it ... that a relatively small group of men and women could create an economy larger than the Republic of Ghana.

I have already spoken about one of the reasons for this phenomenon: the people at Microsoft who were passionate and persistent about their jobs, and who were able to confront complex problems.

This phenomenon was also a result of several external factors such as free markets, the rule of law, and good infrastructure. These things were provided by institutions run by people that I call leaders. And those people did not emerge spontaneously; they were shaped by their education.

Re-engaging with Ghana and Africa

Well, I became a parent in 1995 and for the first time in my life, I started to think about what the world meant for my children. And it occurred to me that Africa's condition would matter a great deal to my children.

As I went through what I now call my pre-midlife crisis, things didn't look so good in Africa. Somalia had disintegrated into anarchy, and Rwanda was in the throes of a genocidal war. Africa did not represent the kind of world I would want my children to inherit.

So I started to re-engage with Africa, in the country I knew best: Ghana.

My approach to deciding what to do was to return to Ghana, to observe and to listen to what Ghanaians felt about the situation in the country. Three things kept coming up as the root causes of many of the problems we see on the continent today: corruption, weak institutions and poor leadership.

Growing the Right Leaders

This, of course leads to the question, "How are Africa's leaders formed, and how can it be improved?" Our educational system is heavily committed to rote learning. From Kindergarten through graduate school, students are trained to memorize facts and repeat those facts to their teachers.

The manner in which we have educated our people in Africa, has had an impact on the kinds of leaders we have. There have been other reasons, of course, but education has played a very big role. What do I mean by this?

Education, at its best, should seek to develop *skills* and *enlightenment*. By skills, I mean a toolset of cognitive, learning and problem solving skills, as well as knowledge that can be productively applied in society. And by enlightenment, I mean that our schools should instill in students a deep and enduring commitment to integrity, concern for society, and the drive to live more excellent lives. The didactic approach to teaching that is currently so pervasive in our educational system does neither of these.

Ashesi University

The project that I am currently working on is a committed effort to bring my Swarthmore experience to Africa. I wish every African country had a strong liberal arts college. We must have the confidence that if we involve students in their education and encourage them to ask the right questions and be creative, magic will happen.

I admit that some days I wake up and think that this is Mission Impossible, but I am encouraged by the results we are getting.

Just one month into our first year, a student sent me an email that read: "I'm thinking now." Such a simple statement, but I was moved almost to tears, because I understood how he felt. It is an awesome feeling to know that I have played a part in empowering that young man.

This year, we invited our students to consider crafting an honor code for themselves. There is a very vigorous debate going on campus about whether this is necessary. One of our students asked a question that I found especially heartwarming. She asked, "Can we build a perfect society?" Her understanding that a student-created honor code constituted a drive towards perfection is absolutely great. They cannot create a perfect society, but by reaching for it they can achieve excellence. I don't know what decisions our students will eventually make, but it is delightful to hear debate what **their** good society should look like.

I am very excited by the fact that all of our students do community service before graduation and that so many of them have found the experience life changing. These future leaders are not just thinking for the sake of it, but are applying their skills to solve problems in their community. Best of all, they are beginning to understand the real business of leadership –the real privilege of leadership– which it to serve humanity.

I am even more thrilled by the fact that last year, our student body elected the first female president of a university student government in the history of Ghana. It says a lot about her, it says a lot about the emerging campus culture, and it says a lot about her peers. She was elected with 75% of the vote.

It turns out that Corporate West Africa appreciates the results of our work too. Of the members of the two classes of students who have graduated so far, every single

one of them has been successfully placed in industry -all of them on the continent. And we are getting good reports from our graduates' employers. They are especially impressed by our students' work ethic and their ability to confront new problems.

Africa's Future

There is tremendous hope for our Continent. Our current and future leaders confront an incredible opportunity to drive a major renaissance in Africa.

I believe that Africa has reached an inflection point. With the march of democracy and free markets across the continent, we stand at a critical moment from which we can build a great society within one generation.

This bright new future in Africa will require inspired leadership; and it is my contention that the way we educate our leaders will make all the difference.

Thank you and God bless.