



AWARENESS AND CONSIDERATION FOR BETTER LIVING

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In a recent leadership workshop of the deans of various faculties in the different universities in South Africa, when she was addressing us, Ruksana Osman (Professor & Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of the Witwatersrand) said something that preoccupied me considerably for a while. What she said, among other things, is that it is more important to ask, “what are you good for” instead of asking “what are you good at.” Answering the question “what are you good for” helps in how to handle oneself and how to relate with others.

Although there is no formula to live well, to relate properly and to lead ably, there are sufficient insights to guide those who desire (or aspire for) meaning and impact. I deliberately focus on (1) living well, (2) relating properly and (3) leading ably because these three aspects of life matter greatly in who we become or choose to be. These three aspects are also related. Life can be challenging, and indeed it is harder for some people than it is for others. However, as Desmond Tutu acknowledged, “suffering can either embitter us or ennoble us.”

Living involves, essentially, relating with others. Indeed, one can choose to relate with as few people as possible but it is not always within one’s control who interacts with you. You go to buy groceries. You go to work. You sometimes have to attend certain events. It is within your control how you relate or react. In his latest book (*Talking to Strangers*), Malcolm Gladwell makes a point that “whatever we are trying to find out about strangers in our midst is not robust...the thing we want to learn from a stranger is fragile. We need to accept that the search to understand a stranger has real limits. We will never know the whole truth. The right way to talk to strangers is with caution and humility.” Gladwell emphasises that “don’t look at the stranger and jump to conclusions.” He cautions that we must not think that we know others and we need to be alert that the wrong assumptions and blind spots can at times be catastrophic.

We have come to appreciate that courage, humility, empathy, integrity, forgiving, integrity and emotional intelligence are critical in life and especially for those in leadership roles. These are arguably virtues that we should all be harnessing. Emotional intelligence is probably the most important of the characteristics that can assist in living well, relating properly and leading ably. It includes other attributes that literature and experience confirm to be critical in life. For instance, social skills, empathy and self-awareness as well as self-regulation are part of emotional intelligence. If we can achieve about half of these critical attributes in life, humanity will go a long way. As argued elsewhere, forgiving has to be the most powerful act particularly when facing adversity that threatens your being. And, most importantly, forgiving oneself is as important as forgiving the person/s who caused harm.

Brad Meltzer, an American author, says what most of us believe in but we take for granted: “Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always.” Kindness does not require much and it can do so much good, but some people decide to be unkind. The importance of kindness is cemented in various religious texts, as an example. For instance, in the Bible it is said that “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another” while in the Quran it is said that “do good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of good.” Kindness should be for everyone and to each of us: be kind to yourself too.

Fundamentally, as Malcom Gladwell confirms in his latest book referred to earlier, judging is a problem. Defaulting to truth (which Gladwell takes from Timothy Levine who is an American communication studies professor), mismatching and coupling are major problems that face us. We make (wrong) assumptions in various contexts and especially when we deal with people we do not know enough. We sometimes incorrectly think we can read facial expressions or we wrongly assume that someone is telling the truth. People end up being victimised simply because they are mismatched and or they find themselves “at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

We know enough to live well, lead ably and relate properly. As Ruksana Osman advises: what are you good for? This can be work in progress, for no one is completely perfect or completely imperfect – there is some good and some bad in all of us. Remember to try to put yourself in another person’s shoes, so to speak. Remember that you could be wrong in how you view a particular context or person. It is better to try to consider various possibilities in the different encounters we experience. It might very well be that what happens or what another person does is a blessing in disguise or it is better that way. We often spend too much time on things we shouldn’t be worrying about, especially things we cannot change.

Rising to and living in greatness can be challenging. In the *5AM Club* (Robin Sharma’s recent book), we are taken through that (among other things). We are reminded that “everything we go through as we travel through life is designed to introduce us to our truest talents, connect us with our most sovereign selves and deepen our intimacy with the glorious hero that lives inside each of us.” Each of us have something we are good for (instead of being good at). A teacher can be good for pupils. A lecturer or an academic can be good for students. A parent can be good for children. A nurse can be good for a patient. And so on and so forth.