

Education: Who needs it?

By Gene Wright

Lately I have been pondering the world's response to the terrible death and destruction left in the wake of the Tsunami tragedy in December of last year. I have found myself questioning my usual knee-jerk reaction to catastrophes that devastate communities—make a donation to the Red Cross or UNICEF.

I am certainly not opposed to giving aid, and I am touched that it was school kids who really got the extent of the disaster before the politicians and were out selling cookies to raise funds almost immediately. I am touched that the spirit of Bob Geldoff is alive and well in Canada: at the time of writing, Canada's musicians are planning a benefit concert titled Canada for Asia. However, our attention has been turned from areas of far greater suffering, notably Africa. No one is selling cookies for African relief. In our concern for the victims of the Tsunami, let us not forget the plight of the many people in Africa whom Stephen Lewis has been begging us to care about for years.

Do we care only when the media tells us to? It is a mystery to me why the whole world has mobilized to aid South East Asia but has been unable to spend more than a pittance to supply anti-viral drugs to Africans. If we put the same energy and resources into Africa, we could alleviate a great deal of its pain. How should we respond adequately to both these disasters and to other future disasters that will undoubtedly come along? Part of the answer lies in our own education.

I believe that if we and our leaders were properly educated in the humanities and had the ability to think critically about important events in the world around us, we would deal with tragedies such as these more effectively and compassionately. Unfortunately, we are too naïve regarding South East Asia and too callous regarding Africa because we have forgotten or never knew the lessons of history and the wisdom of the ages.

First to South East Asia and the Tsunami. The rush to raise money from every conceivable source inevitably leads to an extremely complex and confusing financial situation. With so many collectors and distributors involved, how do we ensure that the funds actually reach

their target? Past experience has shown that much will be lost in the shuffle. High-priced advisors, management fees etc. on the supply side will claim much of the money. On the receivers' side, food, clothes, medicine and fresh water will be lost to the black market.

If the people at the top are dishonest; if the rest of us are too lazy or too trusting to find out which organizations are most likely to deliver aid efficiently; and if there are no controls to prevent corruption, we will feel chagrined, disillusioned and generally made fools of. Unfortunately, we are being very naïve if we think some of this corruption will not occur.

I think our indifference to Africa and our gullibility regarding aid to South East Asia have their roots in our lack of grounding in the humanities (philosophy, history, literature, art), in our preoccupation with the trivia of daily life, and in our unwillingness to keep on educating ourselves.

In the drive to train highly skilled workers to keep the machinery of our industrialized societies in motion, the advanced nations like Canada are losing the wisdom naturally generated and nurtured by a broad and liberal education.

Education is not skills training. We have lots of highly skilled doctors, chefs, dentists, engineers, nurses, lawyers, plumbers etc. but they are not necessarily well-educated. Webster's Dictionary defines *training* as "a department of education in which the chief element is exercise or practice for the purpose of imparting facility in any physical or mental operation." It defines *education* as "not so much the communication of knowledge as the discipline of the intellect, the establishment of principles, and the regulation of the heart." So *education* has a much broader meaning and engages our minds, our belief systems and our emotional lives.

Of course, we need both. We need a skill to earn a living, but we need an education to know how to live responsibly and with integrity. Our skill should not be the sum total of our education, and how we earn our living should not be the sum total of our lives.

Education is a powerful tool in designing a nation's domestic and foreign policy. Blind ignorance can lead governments into making horrendous mistakes, as with America's disastrous pre-emptive strike on Iraq. If George Bush were wise and well-educated, would the neo-

conservatives in Washington find him so easy to control and manipulate in promoting their dangerous right-wing agenda? If the American people were well-educated, would they vote for these policies?

Well-educated people are the linchpins of civil society. They contribute enlightened ideas to the court of public opinion. They bring a knowledgeable perspective to the issues of the day and a commitment to their society. They can think rationally. They are informed voters who are not easily swayed by shallow political arguments. They are open to new ideas and proponents of human rights.

However, lack of education on the part of citizens always plays into the hands of ruthless politicians. They can cater to ignorant prejudices and tell 'their big lies' until the unthinking mass of people go along with the lies. Unfortunately many of us are sitting ducks for such demagogues because we are so ignorant about the issues that matter today.

A public that is composed of efficient and skilled workers, but is ignorant of history, social issues and world affairs is highly malleable in the hands of skilled and unscrupulous politicians. (Just think of the reasons the Bush administration gave for invading Iraq! And, how he got away with it.) What informs the voting decisions of ignorant citizens? The image spin doctors want them to see. How easy in those circumstances for a latter day Hitler or Stalin to con his way into power.

If we were well-informed we would know that Indonesia has the manpower and financial resources to help its own and that India has rejected aid saying it can cope with the damage in its territory. We would insist that the major beneficiary of our help be Sri Lanka, which will have trouble dispensing aid because of its ongoing civil unrest.

Then we would research the organizations that provide aid in that part of the world. How long before the current disaster had they been there? What was their track record? What is the ratio of money that goes into administration to the money that goes into aid.

We would also inform ourselves about the ongoing crises in Africa. There are millions of AIDS orphans in Africa being raised by

grandparents whose communities have no one twenty to forty years old---all having died of AIDS. At the beginning of 2004 there were approximately 4.2 million refugees in Africa displaced by conflict. It is estimated that 6,000 Africans die every day. Three hundred thousand have been killed in the current war in Sudan alone, more than the number killed in the Tsunami. Knowing these facts, we should be giving at least as much to Africa as to South East Asia. As educated citizens of the world, it is our duty to be aware of tragedies like these as well as the spectacular 'photogenic' tragedies like the Tsunami.

It is not too much to say that the future of the planet depends upon honorable people acting courageously for the good of the whole human race. Education is the best route for developing such courage and foresight. Continuing education must be a vital factor in our lives whatever our ages as long as we have the strength. Every one of us should make a firm commitment to expand our knowledge of how societies function—why some succeed and others fail. History and philosophy are our greatest teachers, providing not only knowledge of but also perspective on the past.

It should be said that having a university degree does not necessarily mean a person is well-educated. You do not have to go to university to read great literature, study history or learn philosophy.

There are many ways we can educate ourselves and maintain a commitment to lifelong learning. CBC has radio programs like *Ideas*, which are informative and engaging. On television, there are many educational stations such as **The History Channel, TVO, CBC Newsworld and so on. We really don't have to confine ourselves to mindless sitcoms. The Internet is a source of information and opinions across the spectrum, which we can use to balance the mainstream media we are constantly exposed to. There are school board, college and university courses offered through Continuing Education departments, which can expand our knowledge of the past and the present.**

In my fifty plus years on this fragile and volatile planet, I have witnessed a hundred catastrophic events, either man-made as in war, or the result of nature's unbridled fury. I've noticed the same sequence of suffering, heroism, folly and criminal behavior, and I've wondered what can be done to ensure that the generosity of the average person

is not mocked nor wasted. Furthermore, I've speculated about how we can be our brother's keeper—our planet is now a global village after all—on a continuing basis and not just when a disaster strikes. The answer seems to lie in keeping ourselves well-informed, making judgments based on solid information and acting upon those judgments.

I will always be grateful for the sound education in the humanities I received at university, and I sincerely hope that others will continue to have the opportunity and the will to gain the wisdom to guide them through whatever problems their world presents to them.

Maintaining a quest for knowledge throughout our lives gives us the confidence to think independently and question popular assumptions. It enables us to contribute to our society by challenging prejudices and outright deceptions. In fact, this knowledge and wisdom—not wars and threats of war—will preserve our democracy and set an example to other countries, who are carving out their own style of democracy.

January 2005