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CHANGING TIMES

As representative of Library of Alexandria, I shall start my talk there when knowledge was geographically dependent, where the SITE mattered and the ancient Library had its role in history as part Academy and part Library, where science was exchanged and developed, where religious beliefs and deities were tolerated. All these made Alexandria, city of the Ptolemaic, great and gave the world its greatest knowledge up to Newton.

This state of affairs did not last long and Alexandria was ultimately destroyed, earthquakes, fires and war. We are all too familiar with the story of Hypatia, the mathematician who was persecuted and killed for her beliefs, when emperor Theodosius gave the order to destroy all aspects of paganism in the Roman empire.

Today, with modern means, the geographic site is no longer important. You can get your information anywhere in the world provided you are “connected”. Google has a pattern for most of us, our habits, where we go, the way live, our buying pattern etc.... I foresee in the near future that someone will receive the following message: *“According to your age, sex and habits of going to the lavatory, you should have your prostate checked.”*

Not long ago, population numbers mattered to achieve strength; today knowledge is power. The essence of our civilization was dependent on the family, its beliefs and traditions. Now families sit together but do not talk to or communicate with each other. Every member of the family is practically “on line” with his/her own social media in a different sphere or cocoon. The “sacred bond” which used to be the power of our societies is rapidly losing ground. The family, the nation, the do’s and don’ts are becoming a thing of the past. The idea itself of patriotism is dwindling in some parts

* Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria

of the southern Mediterranean. The last century has brought changes in ideologies, the emergence of extremes e. g. right or left.

The post war eras in the Euro- Mediterranean regions needs forgiveness and acceptance of others, for example France and Germany who had so many wars between them now lead the European union.

Religions are not anymore in the North of the Mediterranean the major players in societies but they should have a role. It is better to exploit common grounds than to maximize divergences.

Global financial interests play a major role in policy-making and market-oriented economies govern more decisions that should be in emerging nations.

We are also witnessing robotics replacing humans in manufacturing like automobiles, packaging and containers for transport etc.... and pretty soon Artificial Intelligence (AI) will also take its toll from the workforce. It is estimated that AI will create over 30% new jobs and dispense with 25% of the actual workforce. But these 25% are not the 33% needed. Serious re-training is needed.

The same social media are also the ones that helped ISIS (Daech) recruit volunteers to serve as extremists. (This is the other side of the coin). Internet hacking and disinformation also make their way into the social media and protecting our children from them is important.

The Southern and Eastern Mediterranean regions are in turmoil and instability. Syria has been in war since 7 years with no end in sight; their refugees (external and internal) amount for more than one half of its population. Iraq is not very far behind. Libya is trying to resolve its problem but its southern region is still a major concern. Algeria is held together by an ailing man and so is Tunisia. Egypt is still battling against terrorist groups in Northern Sinai. Finance does not seem to be a problem to those terrorist groups (irrespective of their ideologies). You sometimes wonder why friendly nations support protagonists, their interests are often hidden and far from clear.

Democracy as a way of living does not solve many problems; China for example has never been a democratic state and has become the second economy in the world. What is good for one place, with its beliefs, is not necessarily the ubiquitous solution. As an example, it is difficult in the MENA region to accept LGBT "rights" as it confronts celestial beliefs and that rejection of these so called rights would be undemocratic (imagine slaughtering a cow in India). The transition from land- dependent societies to industrialized mechanized ones with new agricultural techniques and crops (hybrid or GM) did not proceed as planned. Yet migration to cities change

basic customs and habits make people more apt to accept new ideas unthinkable in rural areas.

Populations increase and water scarcity will be major players in the next few years and will profoundly influence behaviors.

Alexandria was reborn again at the end of the 19th century and pretty soon became the intellectual capital of Egypt. Multiple nationalities were present, British, French, Greeks, Italians, Syrians, Lebanese, Turkish, Yugoslavs, Cypriots, Cretans, Maltese, Tunisians and Moroccans. Again the tolerance of Alexandria was exemplary. All the religions were present side by side. The number of synagogues in Alexandria in the first half of the 20th century per population was unequaled anywhere. Lawrence Durrell wrote his famous *Quartet* and Cavafy his poems. There was also a cemetery for free thinkers (*Libres penseurs*).

Above all this, is education and its changing strategy. Do we have the schools, universities and teachers? We all know that “Siri” can answer in a split of a second what took us some tedious work.

The next curricula will be completely different from ours as we shall have to compete with TV and YouTube.

Virtual reality will soon allow students to interact in a virtual environment and thus strongly increase student’s engagement and learning. For example, virtual labs can provide simulated hands on experience to students. Also, students can be virtually transferred to Rome to know more about ancient Rome rather than just reading or browsing about it.

In this context, the role of teachers has radically changed. The teacher is no more the main source of knowledge but rather a guide through the learning process. He should provide relevant learning sources, create conditions for exploring and collaborative learning and support students inside and outside the classrooms.

Restructuring education and educators will be the most challenging endeavor for the next 10 years. The tools we are using today were not invented or imagined when we were at schools. What we are teaching our children will be obsolete by the time they grow. We can, however, train them to certain disciplines through which they will be able to adapt to the challenges of their times. This change entails specific criteria and goals for various disciplines, monitoring the change, its values, establishing its indicators, proper feedback and evaluation will be required.

Storytelling will be important in humanities, philosophy and morality as “generation next” is not as assiduous readers as we were. Knowledge comes to their doors and we should guide them to distinguish what is essential and what is accessory.

The violence that is present in the media is too much; we are all aware of it. May be we are old fashioned, some romantic stories are needed.

Moreover, important items as dialogue and tolerance should be part of basic teaching with orientation towards community and definitely NOT EXTREMISM under the cover of religious beliefs.

One example is that of Omar Khayyam whose verses on wine drinking were so famous. He was not jailed or chastised in the same country which would call him heretic today.

On the other hand, there are things which will not change much. Multinationals are here to stay. The rich will be getting richer, the poor poorer and the shrinking intellectual middle class will have plenty of time to dialogue and polemicize.

We may be living longer, in a more comfortable way and getting a better healthcare, in generally wealthier but are we happier? Yes, times are changing, for the better to some happy few and worse to others; Our responsibility is to pave the way for future generations as our fathers did for us.