

## EDITORIAL

Too young were we, heading daily towards the venerated Mosque of the Prophet, carrying writing tablets much heavier than we on which some verses of the holy Quran were writ. On our way we passed through neighborhoods and shops, and once we passed al-Majidi Gate (the fourth gate of al-Madinah city on the northern side) we came head on against the wall of the Mosque with the windows of the "scribes" flung wide open. It was there and then that a feeling of depression would overcome us. Yet, we still made haste to the small basin to drink the water that stagnated overnight. It was where we washed the Quranic verses off the tablets. To drink the water afterwards was to us nothing less than receiving the Quranic bless: we had the firm belief it made memorization much easier.

Recitation then began separately in front of three different Sheiks; those were Muhammad bin Salem, the Prefect (that was his title of fame), Sheikh Adul-Hamid al-Masri, and Sheikh Muhammad Saqr, may God bestow on their souls His Mercy and Blessings. Bin Salem the Prefect was the Sheikh of all "scribes," and we used to spend the whole day there, up to the afternoon prayer.

As time passed on, pilgrims would arrive for the Noon (Dhohr) prayer. At that moment, Sheikh Bin Salem used to raise his voice, a hint for us to raise ours in turn with our recitations of the holy verses of the Quran. By so doing we attracted the attention of the pilgrims who used to stop by and throw in some Halalas (penies). We then collected and cherished those scanty sums. After the prayer, it was time for nourishment. For lunch we ate what we had brought with us in the little baskets that were colorfully decorated with all sorts of wool threads. Our lunch usually consisted of half shrika (a special baked bread) and a handful of fresh yellow dates in summer or dry red dates in winter.

Right after lunch, the Sheikh used to take his siesta, and we took turns comforting his nap with hand-fans. When the Call for the Afternoon ('Asr) Prayer was sounded, our much anticipated release finally arrived; we would leave as if liberated from a prison. However, at times we did enjoy ourselves while going back to the Mosque to sun-dry the tablets; that was an opportunity for us to play. The Mosque guards (the Aghas) used to chase us for the disturbance we often created at the back of the Mosque. When the tablets dried, we went back to the scribes to have our new lessons written down.

At home, my mother (may God bless her soul) used to ask me to take off my dress (thob) along with my other clothes to clean them. Having done with this ritual, I used to go down to the alley. It was not the block were people went and came; rather, the alley was simply what was outside the house, and that was another chance to play games with other kids. Both girls and boys were there, and we all played games suitable to both sexes. Girls did not set themselves apart nor did they hide until they were adults. Young men, therefore, had been acquainted early on with all females in the neighborhood, an experience that most often proved to have positive future values.

That was an era of its own; it saturated my spirit and mind with great many memories rich enough to fill volumes. One incident of those would illustrate the sense of many others. At one point I felt fed up with scribe-schooling, and hurled my writing board down the road that led to the school.

Every time I was asked about it, I would say “I do not know; stolen, perhaps!” However, as I daily passed the point where I threw it, I glanced at the spot only to see it right there staring back at me. No one took or even touched it. At length I submitted to the will of God and reluctantly picked it up.

Time ran its course and I enrolled in a private school of theology, but did not stay long. I joined the Nasseriya Public School which was one of only two in the city of al-Madinah. The other was al-Najjah Public School. Those two, however, had graduated batches of al-Madinah young people. Those graduate who wished to pursue high school education had to travel to Makkah to attend what was called the School of “Scholarship Qualifying” where young people were prepared to travel abroad for education. Later the Ministry of Education established in al-Madinah two educational facilities: a Saudi High School and an Institute of Theology. Against my wishes, I was forced to attend the second. Having been one of the top three when I graduated, I was sent on a scholarship to Egypt.

To find oneself in Egypt was a transforming experience! We did read, from a distance, about Egypt and knew many things about the country’s leading figures, events, and archaeologies. But to be in Egypt, among its people, was something altogether different. We now were part of what we used to read about; we enrolled at Cairo University, became fellow-students of girls of whom our knowledge in our old alley used to end at a certain early age. Now we were colloques with females of our own age; we went to movies; we watched live plays in the theater; we browsed books in libraries, attended lectures, visited Salons of famous men-of-letters, etc. That experience was quite a shock, and it could have been much stronger; however, our earlier readings about the country and our own closely knitted Madinah-community seemed to have mitigated its force.

Despite all difficulties, our Madinah community never forgot al-Madinah, nor did we forget the importance of al-Madinah woman. In Cairo, all Madinah students grouped together and created our own association and funded it with our own little money. Each of us contributed a full Egyptian Pound (at the time SR12). When we returned to al-Madinah during our summer vacations we used to rent a house or borrow a school building to ready younger students of all educational grades to re-take the final examinations of the public curricula courses if they failed the first trial. And to promote female learning, we used to contract female teachers (especially wives of expatriate teachers) to teach women in al-Madinah. Later female education sprang from that early movement. When the Presidency of Girls Education was formally established during the reign of King Faisal (may God Bless his soul) our school for females was then annexed to that official institution. The annexation paid no acknowledgement to al-Madinah scholarship students who launched and funded the school; instead, the credit went to Master al-Ayyobi whose assistance we solicited to manage the school during that regular academic year.

When we finished our education in Cairo, we returned home. A select group of us was appointed TAs at the University of King Soud, ready to leave again for graduate study in England, our ultimate desire. Political relations at the time were severed with both England and France owing to the 1956 Suez war, the infamous Tripartite Aggression. Yet England granted us educational visas whereas France denied us even tourist visas. That fact reflected the political wisdom of the two countries.

In England, not only did we learn our special fields of study, research methods, and scholarly work. We learned in addition the meaning of homeland, commitment to work ethics, determination,

freedom of opinion, and respect of the "Other."

1966 (1386H) was a crucial year in the history of the College of Arts, and in the history of the University of King Saud. We were the first highly qualified generation to return home. And our homecoming did change the face of the College. Over the period of our absence, the College of Arts remained a lifeless institution, having recruited and sent abroad very few graduate students. Its twin College of Sciences had over that very period sent more than 30 students, the credit of which was gratefully owed to the Dean of the Science College Ridha Obaid. Hard work lied ahead for us, the returning pioneers, and demanded inflexible commitment. We had to take up the challenge.

As Saudis manned the rudder, scores of students from all departments were sent abroad for graduate studies within a short period of ten years. Along with that went other academic activities: creation of new departments, formation of scholarly associations, and launching of scholarly publication outlets. Of departments, three we launched: Department of Mass Communications, Department of Social Studies, and Department of Archaeology and Museums. We also created the Association of History and Archaeology and the Association of Popular Heritage. The period also witnessed the initiation of the first academic, refereed journal: the Journal of the College of Arts. Students' activities were also promoted and the University's scholarly forums were established, crowned with the international symposium of the History of the Arabian Peninsula which took place within the first decade of our return.

Of all events, the most significant for us was our audience with Al-Faisal, who did not know who he was: the far-sighted and sharp-mined King who had steered this country during one of its most dangerous periods. The audience was paternally welcoming. We walked into the Royal Court, each of us was jubilant at the prospect of being in the presence of the King and leader of the country.

We greeted him in a small office right after the Afternoon Prayer. He turned to us and said words that inspired each one of us. He said, "Sons, the welfare of this nation is in your hands; like dough, you may mold it the way you wish: if you choose 'goodness' every one will enjoy plentiful living, but if you choose otherwise, hardships will spare no one." One of us was fast to say "We assure you," and as he finished his pledge the King interjected: "Do assure yourselves, not me." As we left, we realized the gravity of the trust our King had placed on us. Yet, we held fast to that and served it as best as we could in every step we took. That was Al-Faisal and that was the march, the march of bountiful goodness, learning, and knowledge.

The distance that generations and generations took between the image with which I started and the image with which I concluded tells a partial story of success. And we should thank the grace of God for the plenitude, peace, and security we now enjoy..

**Editor -in-Chief**