



Letter from Lost Prairie –March 15, 2011

A healthy working Community

A few of you are aware that I spent my adolescent years in Egypt. My father was a British diplomat in Cairo and I was schooled in a boarding school in Wiltshire, going back and forth for holidays with my parents approximately 4 months of the four years that we were living there and then spending nine months of my gap year studying Arabic at the American University in Cairo. These were formative years for me, aged 14-18, as they are for all young people, and I have remained deeply interested in the affairs of that country, as well as those of the wider Middle East, and have maintained several close friendships from that period of my life.

It is not surprising then that I spent much of February focused on the sudden and powerful demonstrations which took place over an 18 day period in Tahrir Square – the venue of my first driver's test. My stay in Egypt took place during the regime of Gamal Abdul Nasser and I have watched events over the more recent decades only from a distance. In some ways it appeared that little had changed. Cairo had grown, of course, and become even more crowded, if that were possible to imagine. The rich had built substantial walled ghettos out in the desert and the bureaucracy had further increased and stagnated – also hard to imagine. Women who were emancipated in their dress during my time took up the veil – whether out of Islamic conviction or in order not to stand out, I am not certain. When I lived in Cairo all my Egyptian friends talked about leaving the country and those who were able to do so did exactly that. This brain drain has continued apace over the decades. This was a society rotting from the inside, held together by scare tactics and ripe for change. Yet everyone that I know and the many articles that I have read suggest that no one had any idea that change would come in such a dramatic and cataclysmic manner. It appears that a burning ember flew from the conflagration in Tunisia on the wings of various social network media and ignited the rotten fiber of Egypt. The revolution was startling not only in its suddenness, but also in its breadth and depth across classes and social groupings. Everyone united in the wish to remove Mubarak, the symbol of a corrupt regime out of touch with the needs of its people. They succeeded and I experienced a vicarious sense of jubilation. I do not wish to speculate here about what will happen next. Instead I want to focus on the image of Egyptians joining together to clean up Tahrir Square after two weeks of occupation, removing trash, barricades and piles of rocks. Today the Egyptian people are holding their heads high and taking care of their country. They have a renewed self respect.

Why should this be of any interest to our community here in Montana? These events are far away and taking place in a world foreign to most of our students. Yet, even in Montana, we are now part of a connected world and, with or without constant access to social media, we are not immune to events taking place far off and can learn something from them.

I have noticed that there is now a branch of social science devoted to the subject of contagion and social networks. A recent book by Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler *Connected* focuses on this phenomenon. They cite a curious study about obesity in which it appears that obese people tend to be friends with other obese people and similarly thin people tend to be friends with thin people. Digging further into this the authors have found that obesity, or its reverse, spreads by contagion, even across vast distances. This phenomenon holds true for sexual practices, suicides and even happiness! Therapists have long been aware that when one suicide occurs in a high school it is likely to provoke a rash of similar attempts. Here at Montana Academy we have had occasion to notice that runaway events tend to be contagious.

The research on happiness suggests that it can spread like an infection but is largely confined to people who live within a mile of one another and is greatest amongst those to consider themselves to be mutual friends. Unhappiness also appears to be catching albeit not as strongly. An unhappy connection increased the chances of being unhappy by about 7 percent on average, while a happy connection increased the chances of being happy by about 9 percent. When one person in a network became happy, the chances that a friend, sibling, spouse or next door neighbor would become happy increased between 8-34 percent. We are all part of a “hive like network that shapes our decisions.” Researchers speculate that emotion may be important on an evolutionary level by helping people cooperate. “Laughter and singing and smiling tune up the group emotionally,” says Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, “They get them on the same wavelength to that they can work together more effectively as a group.” Some of this was evident during the demonstrations in Cairo. The Egyptians are known for their sense of humor and I like to think that this contagious attribute helped them to bear up under the exhausting pressure of these daily demonstrations and helped weld them into a remarkably effective work group.

Wilfred Bion, a British psychoanalyst trained at the Tavistock clinic, and worked in the immediate post-war period managing rehab for a psych unit, wrote a short, but seminal, book, *Experiences in Groups*, now hard to obtain. He delineates various kinds of “basic assumption” groups based on the emergence of primitive group impulses: **fight – flight** – a not uncommon mass group behavior which certainly could apply to many countries during times of war where the group needs to preserve itself at all costs and demonstrates aggressiveness and hostility to non-members; **Pairing** groups are those in which the group is hopeful with anticipation and generally obsessed by the potentially reproductive activities of some couple. Examples of this would be the hyper focus on the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana or the prurient interest in the nature of the sexual transaction between President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. **Dependency** groups are a common everyday phenomenon in which people take little initiative for themselves and rely heavily on an omniscient leader. These are exhausting groups to lead because they are intensely needy and a sink for the energy of their leaders. The most effective short or long term group is one which is a **Work** group with a particular task to accomplish. Such groups are sophisticated and rational and their behavior is goal focused.

There are surely thousands of examples of Work groups that must come to mind and even on our small campus we have several different Work groups representing teachers, team leaders and therapists who must all function effectively in their roles. Each team is, in effect, a more or less successfully functioning Work group. And the community as a whole, when it is functioning well, is also another level of this same type of group. Any

of such groups can quickly deteriorate and turn into a Dependency group or a Fight-Flight group or even a campus Pairing group if not closely monitored and held on task. One of the key tasks of leadership is to prevent dysfunctional breakdowns in the community. Our staff keep their antennae up for any signs of shift in community attitude and we hold periodic community meetings to monitor and tune up the whole community. Most days when I watch our students during their social time after lunch, or between activities, I experience a pleasant hum of positive social interactions between students and with their staff and can leave at the end of the day feeling that they are happy and well cared for. I like to think that new students entering our campus, however wary and anxious, will soon begin to belong and experience its beneficial effects.

I believe that the Egyptians, who have for so many decades been a frustrated and demoralized Dependency group, managed to maintain a remarkably strong. Work group over the period of demonstrations leading up to the ouster of Mubarak. Now that this task is over we must wait and see whether they can translate this new found sense of national self-esteem into sustained work and support for a new constitution and fair elections. Currently it appears from the news from Libya, a country where I also lived for 4 years as a young child, that another long-standing Dependency group is devolving now into a Fight-Flight group and cannot organize itself adequately around the task of deposing their paranoid leader, Muammar el-Qaddafi.

And so the world turns. We can only hope to manage our small community and its wider social network in an exemplary fashion. When you arrive on campus shortly for our parent workshops we hope that you will help us to join in productive Work groups that will strengthen our campus community and foster both happiness and accompanying resilience in your children.

Warm regards,

Rosemary McKinnon