

Take a Close Look: Then Work to Change Wrong Views and Actions

Donald W. Mitchell

Our daily lives are filled with reports of tragedies: Children are abandoned, parents are murdered in senseless crimes, terrible tenement fires kill whole families, and children die of starvation with horrible frequency. People often wonder why these things happen, but they keep happening.

Wouldn't it be great to find ways to avoid some of these tragedies? That thought first got my attention as a college senior. Shocking assassinations changed the American political scene in 1968 when first Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and soon after Senator Robert F. Kennedy was also killed. Two great leaders were removed at a time when new trails to social justice and international peace needed to be blazed.

As upsetting as those killings were, I was almost as shocked when my university invited the Shah of Iran to speak at my college commencement exercises where he announced an international peace corps. Even in those days, the Shah was well known for stifling his political and religious opponents, even to the point of spying on dissident students enrolled in American universities. Rougher tactics were employed against opponents in Iran.

Fortunately, my class was also allowed to invite a speaker. We chose Ms. Coretta Scott King, Dr. King's widow, to address us on Class Day, the first woman ever invited to do so. This was one small step in her achieving more prominence in the non-violent search for civil rights.

Recently reviewing the events of 1968, I was struck by how often the "official" actions support injustice. As a result, it's good to think carefully about how far we should support "official" positions as opposed to looking independently for the truth and then acting on it.

My thoughts turned to those long ago days while considering the path towards social justice followed by Dr. Hossein Sheykholya, a former Iranian Air Force fighter pilot who later became a political prisoner in Iran. As a child, Dr. Sheykholya lived in a tough, violent working-class neighborhood in Iran. Around him were frequent reminders of the Shah's social and political repression. At the same time, poor people didn't get the medical

attention they needed . . . despite the country's great wealth. Great prejudice existed against the poor; favoritism, corruption and crime were among other social ills.

Convinced that the "official" approach was wrong, Dr. Sheykholya became a social activist, a dangerous thing to do in Iran at that time. He also decided to use social science to find the causes of oppression, poverty, prejudice, drug addiction, and other ills. This determination went against the grain of what many believed at the time: these social ills were predetermined by biology or mental illness.

In examining these problems, Dr. Sheykholya learned something else: Prestigious universities often encouraged thinking about these problems that came no closer to finding causes for these afflictions than did believing in the prejudices of the uneducated. As an example, he reminded me of Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs, long considered to be one of the world's leading authorities on how to help poor nations to improve their circumstances through economic policies.

Professor Sachs noted the following reservations about his past advice around the world: "It has taken me 20 years to understand what good development economics should be, and I am still learning." Clearly, earning a doctorate alone wasn't enough to equip Dr. Sachs with the best solutions; only getting his hands dirty in country after country provided his real education.

When the time came to earn his own doctorate, Dr. Sheykholya wanted to avoid the pitfall of studying under those who only knew the "official" answers to problems of social justice. Instead, he looked for a university that emphasized building new knowledge through independent study.

He found what he was looking for at Rushmore University (an online school) where all courses are conducted as individual tutorials in which students work one-on-one with a world-class faculty of experienced practitioners and scholars. Students are also permitted to design their own courses, majors, and degrees. Such flexibility provides the opportunity to gain new knowledge from wherever it is needed.

Dr. Sheykholya did exciting work at Rushmore and earned his doctorate from that university, based on much field study of the causes and cures for

the social ills he first observed in Iran as a youngster. He now uses his new knowledge to help provide those cures in a country outside of his native homeland.

When asked why he didn't return to Iran, Dr. Sheykholya observed that the country still suffers from oppression and injustice . . . but from a different "official" source. He observed, "I decided for self exile again. I shall struggle for a free society and an advanced country that will promote freedom, democracy, and social justice in its society."

Education has value to society as well as to the individual. But no educational method can hope to instill a strong desire to do the right thing in seeking and applying important new knowledge: Universities can only hope to encourage independence of thinking and action that lead to making better decisions.

Has your education equipped you to seek out the truth in new ways and to advance the application of that truth to avoid tragedies?

If not, perhaps you should seek out new forms of learning that better prepare you to challenge the "official" views.

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