Communities of Learning by Pearl Mattenson

What would our schools look and feel like today if they were truly communities of learning? Imagine if all the stakeholders in the school community truly identified themselves as learners. All of us, administrators, parents, teachers, board members, and of course our students, acknowledging that what we don't yet know is a more powerful motivator in our lives than what we claim to know. What would the conversation sound like in our staff meetings and our board meetings? What approach would we take to a phone call with a dissatisfied parent or a child who has been sent to the Principal’s office? How would we present our ideas in our professional associations? How would we respond to the ideas of others?

When I declare myself a learner and live my life that way, I am committed to ongoing reflection and consideration of new ideas and approaches in light of what I have already learned. I am a listener and know the value of developing good listening skills- if I can't listen I might miss critical learning. I am a keen observer, aiming to describe what I see even before I try to make sense of it in the context of what I think I already know and believe. As a learner I am thirsty for any and all sources of knowledge. As a Jewish learner, I am sensitive to the complexity and multiplicity of meaning and that sensitivity humbles me. But to play on Hillel's statement in Pirkei Avot, 'if I am only a learner what am I?'

I am not sure that learning can really take place in the absence of community. Although some of us might wish otherwise, Gan Eden is not a secluded island filled with books for Adam to pore through for the rest of his life. Each of us is unique and endowed with divine capacities. As Rav Kook has taught[1] ‘True peace can only come into the world through multiplicity...when all sides and approaches are revealed and it will become clear how there is a place for each.' We have much to learn from each other, and a true community of learning is structured to honor that assumption. Professionals learn from their lay leaders and vice versa. Teachers have opportunities to collaborate and learn with and from each other. Students are not only learning with each other but are exposed to a broad range of people and ideas.

May we all be inspired to create and contribute to communities of learning and perhaps give voice to that which Resh Lakish taught (Shabbat 63a):

אמר בר כ søע נחקק שיש מנחים חכמים ומשתיעים זהله רב חובל ועדת ביאים📺ופנימיו

Resh Lakish said, "When two scholars attend to each other in the course of debating the law, the Holy One Blessed Be He hears/listens to their voice. Partnerships rooted in a serious intention to learn and understand one another will cause even God to sit up and take notice!"

[1] Author's translation: "לשלום إحא, צוותי מתבגרו gdk, עם על חכמים,因为他们 ית出入 ל-svgים של רבים הלומדים...натיב בר סומימם לכל השמות וברבור במלא שתר_warnings מנוס

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