

Upohar Mela 2012

I bring you greetings from the Arlington Public Schools and the Arlington School Board.

Although I was privileged to serve as a diplomat in Bangladesh, I would like to speak to you tonight as an official of the Arlington Public Schools, where I have worked since I retired from the Foreign Service.

The sesquicentennial of Rabindranath Tagore's birth has come to a close, but since his views on education are so important, I wanted to take just a moment to highlight some of the ideas he expressed and raise them up for us to consider tonight.

By his example and through his words, it is clear that Tagore believed that a school's curriculum must be connected to the cultures of the wider world and should revolve around nature, with classes held in the open air under the trees to provide for an appreciation of the outdoors.

Here in Arlington, the School Board has adopted a new Strategic Plan that includes as its fifth goal that we MEET THE NEEDS OF THE WHOLE CHILD and that we nurture students' intellectual, personal social, and emotional development with services and strategies that support students and their families to enable students to learn and develop their potentials.

In addition, most of our elementary schools have developed school gardens and outdoor classrooms that help students learn more about the natural world.

I think Tagore would have been very proud of the Arlington Public Schools, don't you?

Another point that I would like to make is that Tagore recognized the value of interaction between cultures and the importance of having a common medium so we can communicate with one another. But he also stressed the importance of maintaining our own cultures.

In a conversation with H.G. Wells in 1930, Tagore said, "I believe the unity of human civilization can be better maintained by linking up in fellowship and cooperation of different civilizations of the world."

He went on to say: "Rapid communication makes for a common language. Yet, this common language would probably not exclude national languages. There is...the curious fact that just now, along with the growing unities of the human mind, the development of national self-consciousness is leading to the formation or rather the revival of national languages everywhere."

In the Arlington Public Schools, we celebrate the various cultures that are reflected in our students and their parents. Approximately 26% of our Elementary School Students and 10% of our Secondary School Students speak a first language other than English. Among elementary school students, the fourth largest group of students speaks Bangla! 93 countries are represented among speakers of other languages at the elementary school level.

Among secondary school students, the fifth largest group of students speaks Bangla. 72 countries are represented at the secondary level.

So, you can see that we take a very multicultural approach in Arlington Public Schools!

I would like to congratulate those of you here tonight who are celebrating the Bangla culture while contributing to life in the United States. It seems to me that that is exactly what we want to happen - and what Tagore would have applauded.

Before closing, I would like to note something about Tagore's visits to the United States.

Tagore made five trips to the U.S. starting in 1912 and ending in 1930. He came for the first time to visit his son who was studying at the University of Illinois. That in itself is an interesting subject. I suspect there are some people in this room whose first introduction to the U.S. was attending school in the U.S., and you may even have had some pushback from your parents and friends when you said you wanted to study in the U.S.

But Tagore was always in favor of bringing thinkers and scholars from the East and West together, whether it was in his home or at Santiniketan. The purpose, as he put it, was "to realize our common fellowship" and to break down what he called "the puny who with their petty vanities set up barriers between man and man."

In nine assignments overseas, I was responsible for administering the Fulbright program between the United States and other countries. You can well imagine that I heartily agree with Tagore. Our goal was, and is today, to foster mutual understanding.

What I wanted to stress was that in his five trips to the U.S., Tagore learned much about the U.S., and in lectures, conversations, and, indeed, in arguments, shared with thousands of Americans his ideas and his perspectives.

Americans and Bengalis who hold strong opinions can engage in vigorous arguments and yet can remain friends, and that tradition remains with us today here in the Washington D.C. area, I am sure.

Congressman Moran would agree that the same holds true with Republicans and Democrats today.

Let me conclude with a famous poem by Tagore that captures his approach to international exchanges and international education:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high

Where knowledge is free

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments

By narrow domestic walls

Where words come out from the depth of truth

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way

Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit

Where the mind is led forward by thee

Into ever-widening thought and action

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

Thank you for inviting my wife and me to share this wonderful evening with you.

Dr. J. Michael Korff

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