

**Daisaku Ikeda's Recollections of World Figures**  
**Necdet Serin —**  
**Former Rector of Ankara University, Turkey**

I HAVE the most profound respect for elementary school teachers," declares Dr. Necdet Serin, former rector of Turkey's Ankara University. Elementary education builds the fundamental framework for a child's character and as such is the most important level of education, he believes.

When I asked what he thought was elementary education's key role, he replied: "To develop children's creativity and self-confidence. Helping children to develop confidence in themselves, to trust themselves, enables them to grow in their capabilities. Once their creative powers have been unlocked, children will study on their own. I admit, however, that when it comes to how this is best achieved, I'm not really in a position to offer any insights. It is a very challenging task. That is why I have so much admiration for elementary school teachers."

Being a university professor doesn't necessarily make one superior; on the contrary, he believes, those who are tackling the most challenging task of elementary school are the ones who are truly commendable. Dr. Serin's brief remarks reveal his profound perspective on people and on education.

I understand that he himself was blessed with a wonderful teacher in the first grade of elementary school.

Dr. Serin's observations may seem very simple, but they contain a humanism that shakes Japan's hierarchical society, its distorted values, to the core. Amazing as it may seem, a certain educational specialist in Japan has come up with a paired ranking of IQs and professions, which he divides into six levels. He suggests that those in the highest IQ bracket are suitable for such professions as university professors, high-level government administrators and attorneys; those of the next IQ bracket, for doctors and secondary school teachers; and those of the third bracket, for nurses and elementary school teachers!

THIS type of pyramid hierarchy, in which each person is assigned a rank and a place, is firmly rooted in the minds of Japanese people and in Japanese society. We even rank our universities in order of their prestigiousness and then rank our high schools according to how many of their students manage to enter the most elite universities. This ensures that all but the select few, who reach the very top of the pyramid, are fated to be frustrated in their ambitions and left with only a bitter sense of defeat and a profound loss of self-esteem. It is not surprising, then, that people's basic values, their very humanity, should grow twisted and misshapen.

The end product of such a hierarchical society is a country in which the majority, void of confidence and esteem, is dominated by a small elite that is poisoned by feelings of superiority toward their fellow human beings. A hierarchical nation also ranks other countries, fawning on those it regards superior to itself and acting arrogantly toward those it regards inferior. Such behavior is truly deplorable.

What we see at work here is a fundamentally flawed view of humanity. How can it be possible to assign any rank to this precious, irreplaceable treasure called life?

I first visited Ankara University — which also happens to be Dr. Serin's alma mater — three years ago in June 1992. Ankara, the Turkish capital, extends across the slope of a mountain rising to more than 3,000 feet above sea level. As I stepped out of the

plane at Ankara's Esenboga Airport after our flight from Istanbul, the air was dry and the skies clear, reminding me of the Japanese island of Hokkaido.

We passed through the old part of the city, with its many historical sites, and entered an orderly modern city, where the university and its many different departments are located. I paid a visit to the Atatürk Mausoleum, which stands on a rise overlooking the city. It is a magnificent monument to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the founder and first president of modern Turkey. Towering marble columns stood proudly under the bright, clear Anatolian skies.

Kemal Atatürk embarked on a momentous reformation of his country — well described in the words of British historian Arnold Toynbee as an endeavor corresponding to “the Renaissance, the Reformation, the secularist, scientific, ... the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution ... telescoped into a single lifetime...”<sup>1</sup>

What made such an undertaking possible? The answer lies in the fact that the Turkish leader's first task was to restore the people's faith and pride in themselves. For several centuries, the ancient Ottoman Empire had continued its steady decline. The great powers hovered at Turkey's borders, ever ready to devour its riches and territory. The nation's rulers conspired with the invaders to protect their own interests. For too long, the Turkish people had been scorned, exploited and oppressed.

Anyone's confidence would be undermined if they were ignored or told for a long enough time that they were inferior. Anyone would lose the energy and courage to demonstrate their true potential. Atatürk called out to the Turkish people to hold up their heads, to be proud of themselves. You are the nation's most valuable treasure, he said. You are its rulers. You are its hope. You are its light.

ONCE, when a general of one of Turkey's allies disparaged Turkish soldiers as being cowardly, Atatürk replied in anger: “A Turkish soldier never runs off. He does not know the meaning of the word retreat. You, general, if you saw the backs of Turkish soldiers, it was because you yourself were running off! How dare you blame a Turkish soldier for your own cowardice!”<sup>2</sup>

His heart a raging sea of love and trust for the people, he was adamant: The soldiers are not to blame; their leaders are. Because you, the leader, are cowardly, the troops do not follow you.

Atatürk also dared to oppose those who used religion to dominate the people and for his activities he was excommunicated by the religious authorities. He was not in the least perturbed, however. He once said: “To be disowned, ridiculed, crucified, what does it matter.... Yet one must be a man ... yes, one must be a man, stirred by a deep faith and strengthened by these beliefs.”<sup>3</sup>

The focus of the Turkish reformation was the creation of such confident individuals. Atatürk's goal was to instill fresh pride in the Turkish people whom he loved so dearly.

This was also evident in his ambition, once independence was achieved, to “establish a new school every day.” “Teachers and educators are the sole salvation of the nation,” he declared. He devoted himself to giving people access to new knowledge and building a new society in the process. He personally even devised a new alphabet corresponding to the colloquial speech of the people and taught it to them. He went from town to town, village to village, chalk and blackboard in hand. In one of those villages, the president taught a farmer to write his own name. “I can write!” cried the farmer in excitement and joy, and the president embraced him and congratulated him.

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“I can do it, if I try!” — the joy of people savoring this realization is the starting point of all true education. Isn't it the very purpose of education to make that joy available to all?

Dr. Serin has a personal warmth that puts all who meet him at ease immediately. He is forthright and sincere without the least pretense or arrogance. He says: “What is the source of my strength? It is my friends. I don't want anything for myself. I've always thought only of being of service to others. Life may be fine today, but we never know what tomorrow will bring, and that is why it is important for people to help each other.”

When he was university rector, Dr. Serin established an Ankara University Fund to provide assistance to students. Among its many contributions, the fund also made it possible for one student to have liver surgery in the United States and another to have brain surgery in Sweden. “My message to young people,” says Dr. Serin, “is to help others. We mustn't be self-centered. I would like young people to grow up to exert themselves for their families and their society, viewing things from the long term rather than pursuing only temporary desires and concerns.”

DURING our talks together in Japan, Dr. Serin illuminated the Turkish national character for me by sharing one of their proverbs: “If you have a loaf of bread, give half to those in need.”

What type of human being is really superior? Isn't it the person who has the compassion to share another's pain and suffering? This is the mark of true excellence as a human being.

I'd like to share a story I heard from a Japanese acquaintance. When he was an elementary school student, his family was very poor, and he dreaded the day each year when his teacher made the customary home visit to meet with his parents. They were so poor that they didn't even have a decent cushion for the teacher to sit on, so his mother had to borrow one from next door. She even went to the trouble of preparing some sweets for the guest, even though the family could never afford to eat such delicacies themselves.

But in spite of all her efforts, the teacher didn't even deign to sit on the worn cushion or try even one of the sweets. As the visit came to an end, his mother wrapped the sweets up and gave them to the teacher. But once outside the door, the teacher tossed the small package to the ground. The young boy saw the whole thing. After the teacher had gone, he started to pick up the sweets to eat, but his mother shouted, “Don't touch them!” She refused to allow him to taste them. My friend still remembers the angry and bitter tears his mother shed that day, though it was decades ago.

How can a person who is so unconcerned with human feelings, with a child's sadness, be responsible for educating others?

A society in which people have become machine-like existences, incapable of heart-to-heart communication and indifferent to the feelings and emotions of other human beings, is a frightening thing. The underlying values of contemporary Japanese society are now being called sharply into question. □

1. Arnold Toynbee, *The World and the West* (London Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 28.
2. Translated from French: Jacques Benoist-Méchin, *Le Loup et le Léopard: Mustapha Kemal ou la mort d'un Empire* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1954), p. 171.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 194.