

My Recollections **Farouk Hosni, Egypt's Minister of Culture**

I remember an incident that took place during my mentor Josei Toda's last years. We were riding a train on the Tokaido Line, and he met a man across the aisle who was a noted authority on road building, a sort of "Mr. Highway." They were soon talking as if they were old friends.

When Mr. Toda heard that the engineer was designing a road from Aomori to Osaka, a distance covering more than half the length of the main island of Japan, Honshu, he praised him for his daring but then offered a further challenge: "Yes, indeed, that will be the finest road in all Japan. But Japan's not the only country in the world. If you're going to design roads, why not extend your horizons and build one from Japan to Korea, Korea to China, and China to India?"

"A road connecting the entire world?" asked the engineer speculatively. "I was proud to be working on the best road in all Japan, but I never thought beyond that. You think on a far grander scale than I do, my friend."

Then Mr. Toda explained that he had devoted his life to blazing a spiritual road that would one day lead to the rest of Asia, to the world and to all humanity. The engineer listened intently, then replied: "I see now. I will leave the construction of the metaphysical road to you, and I will take care of building the physical road."

That meeting took place 39 years ago in the autumn of 1957. The struggle to make Mr. Toda's ideal into a reality has been my life.

On a visit to Alexandria, Egypt, in June 1992, I said to Egypt's minister of culture, Farouk Hosni: "When I was young, Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.E.) was one of my heroes. I wrote a novella about him titled *Alexander's Decision*. I am deeply moved to be here in Alexandria, the city he founded. After his death at age 32, his body was brought back here. Is it known where his remains were buried?"

"In fact, one theory has it that he is buried beneath this very Ra's at-Tin Palace where we are now sitting," Mr. Hosni replied.

This exchange took place just before my meeting at the palace with Egyptian President Muhammad Hosni Mubarak. While Mr. Hosni explained that there were other theories concerning Alexander's final resting place, his remark nevertheless profoundly affected me.

I was reminded of the heroism of Alexander, who pressed ever forward from West to East. "I find Alexander to be one of the great leaders who changed the world, together with King Ashoka of India," I told Mr. Hosni. "Both of them loved culture. The wonderful feat of bringing Eastern and Western culture into contact with each other is one of Alexander's enduring achievements."

Plutarch wrote of Alexander's ambition to link Europe, Asia and Africa, viewing Alexander's purpose as that of a great philosopher. Alexander did not venture forth for personal wealth or ambition, the Greek biographer maintained, but to teach the virtue of cooperation to all who lived on earth and to make them understand that all humanity is one big family.

It is said that Alexander first came to realize this revolutionary truth — that all humanity is one — in Egypt, a land from which a monumental civilization sprang. Even today, Egypt remains a country where racial or ethnic prejudice is almost nonexistent.

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Minister Hosni also shared his ideas about Alexander the Great when we met in Japan in March of 1992. He said: “I feel that Alexander was more of a philosopher than a political figure. What did he find in philosophy? One, a method of meditation; two, a dream.

“That dream was the greatness of the human spirit — that we are something more than this small, individual self. People can indeed acquire power over others, but Alexander believed that we possess a power higher than that. And he wanted to carry that message to all humanity.”

Perhaps Alexander wanted to test his potential and leave a record of how much a single individual can achieve. He rushed onward at full speed, reaching as far as India. His drive and energy left his followers breathless trying to keep up. Alexander never had the lazy, irresponsible attitude that things would somehow work out by themselves or that someone else would take care of everything. This was not his spirit.

When he left on his expedition to Persia, he distributed all his wealth among the families of his soldiers. One of his retainers was puzzled by this action and asked him, “If you give away all your treasures, what will you have to take with you?”

Alexander replied, “I take with me only the single treasure of hope.”

When I asked Minister Hosni about this famous episode, his reply revealed a deep understanding of humanity: “What Alexander meant to say, I think, is that he would go equipped only with himself. All human beings are great, he was saying. If you are truly in possession of yourself, you have everything there is to own.”

Alexander was a person of indomitable courage. He never gave up. The essence of hope lies in such spiritual strength, and such faith in humanity is the heart of culture.

Mr. Hosni was born in 1939 in Alexandria. He is one of Egypt’s leading painters, and his work is highly acclaimed in Europe and around the world. “Everything has rhythm,” he said. “Music is the rhythm of life. My abstract paintings are my attempt to express Egyptian music on canvas.”

Mr. Hosni clearly seeks the fundamental rhythm that pulses through both humanity and the universe. He said: “I think that all art flows from the same source — and on a plane transcending such categories as music, painting and poetry. I also believe that the finest civilizations of the world all share a common source.”

That source — the desire for the eternal — surely also gave birth to Egyptian civilization on the banks of the Nile.

“I hold the position of minister of culture,” Mr. Hosni said, “but I have no idea what will happen to this seat tomorrow. I am by profession a painter and above all a human being. Many things are swept away by the inexorable passage of time. But culture and art transcend time and last for all eternity. They are more lasting, more profound bridges to the future than politics or economics, which are always changing.”

When we spoke of the pyramids, the culture minister interpreted them in terms of their eternal nature. “When I have something deep to think about,” he said, “I stand before the pyramids. That allows me to come into contact with a feeling that transcends this world and the entire universe and is quite separate from everyday life and its concerns. I am convinced that there is some link between the pyramids and the universe.”

Recently, the theory that the position and size of the three Great Pyramids of Egypt correspond to the position and brightness of the three main stars in the constellation Orion has attracted much attention. Perhaps the Pyramids are a paean to the law of the universe and a physical expression of a prayer of sorts, a longing to manifest here on earth the eternity of the stars in the heavens.

A search for something that lives for eternity, transcending time, something

undying, an invincible power that triumphs over death — that is the search that has given birth to religion and to art. At the base of all cultures is this passionate search for the eternal. That is what separates us from other animals, and that is why it is culture that links humanity, one person to the other.

If all that mattered were power and military might, human history would be one long war. If only wealth mattered, everything would be measured by profit and loss. As humanity is being unified at last, isn't "cultural power" the force that needs to be strengthened in the 21st century? Culture must be the rising tide upon which government and economics ride and which gives them the right direction.

When I voiced these sentiments, Mr. Hosni replied: "I agree completely. Only culture will save humanity. We must begin true and lasting spiritual exchange between nations, not just a brief exchange of goods." I believe that is precisely the task facing any modern Alexander the Great. And we SGI members gladly accept that as our mission and are eager to accomplish it.

I asked Mr. Hosni whether he thought the Pyramids of Egypt, regarded as one of the wonders of the world, were designed by one person or several. He immediately replied, without hesitation: "Great ideas always originate from a single individual. And I think that the original concept of the pyramid also came from one person." History is created when a single brave individual stands up with a strong sense of purpose.

In times past, Alexandria, known as the "bride of the Mediterranean," was a world capital of civilization and culture. Scholars such as Archimedes studied at its Mouseion, an institute of learning that housed the largest library in the ancient world; Euclid lectured on geometry there. People came from all over the world, many traveling across the sea, guided by the port-city's famous lighthouse, the Pharos of Alexandria.

The city was a crossroads that drew even emissaries from King Ashoka in faraway India. Here, the turbulent tale of Cleopatra and Caesar — a tale of love and dynastic upheaval — unfolded. Napoleon, proud of his designation as a member of the Academy Francais, stepped ashore in this city founded by his beloved hero Alexander.

It was a moonlit evening. The waves of the Mediterranean caressed the shore in their soothing, timeless rhythm. As their song stirred in my heart a palpable awareness of life's eternity, I gave myself to thought: Those who created the colossal civilization of Ancient Egypt have been called "people 100 feet tall." Now it is time again for such "giants" to appear — people of creativity who, imbued with an eternal spirit, will boldly transform reality. They and they alone personify a great culture. When such giants emerge from the earth and unite humanity, the golden age that all have waited and longed for since the dawning of civilization will at last materialize.

Mr. Hosni is a dear friend and comrade working in the sphere of culture to build an eternal, imperishable spiritual road linking all the world.

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