

5/2/07

A Country of Twenty-Five-Million Kings

Yesterday was fairly uneventful. In the morning mom and I went to PARSA to finalize the plans for their grand opening of the new building in the Marastoon compound. Though many Americans would not understand the significance of the type of organization my mother has created, I am truly impressed. Though there are a couple of international workers, it is primarily an afghan run organization. Men and women are working side by side; there are female directors and male directors for the different projects. This often puts men under the direct control of women, which is not often found in such a male dominated culture. But everyone seems to know their place and fits well within the system. If they didn't they would have been fired.

One of the more funny moments occurred when Asef came back with some prototype table designs for one of the crafts sales departments. The tables had a good overall design, but were inconsistent in height. Some were the right height, and could be sat around with chairs, however others were too tall to be sat around on cushions and too low to sit around with chairs. Mom said, "Asef, we need a 'table program', so that we have consistency". It may not translate well here, but it was quite humorous.



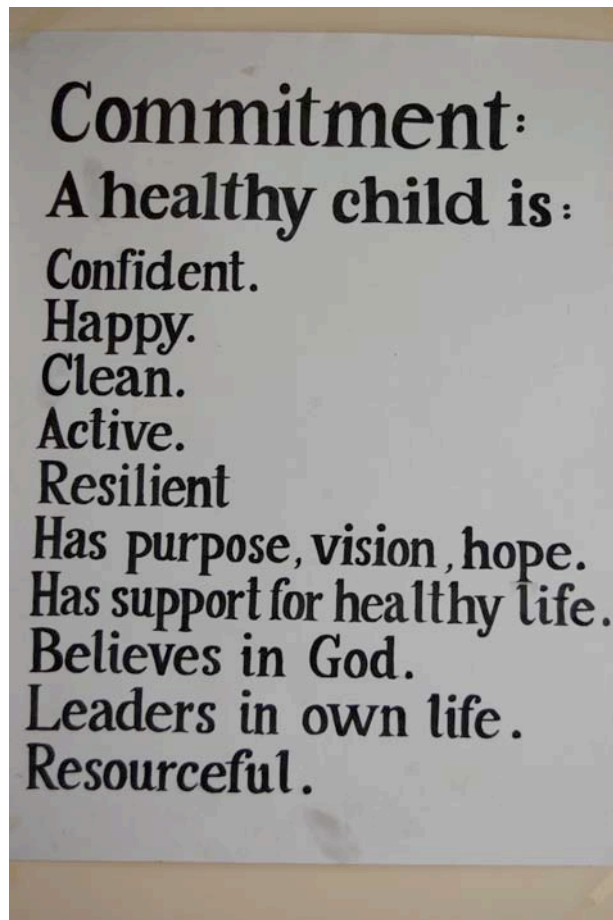
This scenario illustrates the type of managing that has to be done in Afghanistan. If not overseen directly, the workers often, no usually just go off on their own and do what they think should be done, regardless of what they have been told. They will listen to what you tell them, nod their head in agreement and then go off and do what they think is best. Mahbouba introduced me to a saying that runs true.

She said that Afghanistan is a country with 25 million people, each of them kings.

Mom runs into the same problem with her servants. Her cook, gardener and house keeper each have their own idea of what a good house should look like, what food should taste like, what a garden should be comprised of. She is constantly fighting small battles with her servants, where she confronts them on an issue, they agree to do something and then go about it their own way. Mahbouba said, and I agree, “afghans make terrible servants.” She compared them to Indians, who make wonderful servants and this makes sense given the cultural and religious differences that exist. Indians understand and have no problem with their place when subservient. Their belief system allows for them to be subservient without feeling inferior. I don’t think that Afghans have the cultural latitude to allow them to feel this. I think it’s an interesting contrast.

Today was the official opening of the new PARSA building at the Marastoon compound. What mom and her staff are trying to create is a model system for Afghanistan and the third world in general. Its simple, in the third world you can’t educate people if they are going hungry and have no job, you can’t improve a person’s position without addressing the basic needs of the person first. PARSA addresses the whole person, she first deals with the Well Being of the individual, with her Well-Being department, a psychosocial and physiotherapy focus addresses these concerns. They assess their people on a physical level, and then start in on the Economic programs. She has artisans and craftspeople working in this department, as a way to make money and support their families. She has a program that teaches widows to create self-sustaining gardens. After the physical well-being and economic concerns are addressed she can then attack the Education of the individual, with English lessons, and other basic educational concerns. I’m not the best person to outline what her organization does, but I do understand that what she is doing is approaching the problem of poverty by dealing with the whole person, and all the problems that the person has. From what I’ve seen, this is an innovative approach that not many charities/ngos ever try. It’s ambitious, but I believe will become a model for the dealing with poverty in the third world.

The opening went extremely well. It was a short, succinct ceremony, beautifully presented, and moving. The guest of honor, a woman named Fahtma, that has worked hard for her country, and is very well respected for her work and her family here, gave a moving speech. Most of it was in pharsi, so I didn’t get the details, but the sentiment





needed no words to be understood. At one point she said, “ it doesn’t matter which national flag the person who wants to help Afghanistan waves, it is the flag of humanity that is being presented”. This was wonderful to hear, as I believe many international workers are quite sensitive to the fact that often the indigenous people resent the help of foreigners as somewhat “condescending” in approach. For those of people in the field, this is a validation of the work that is so hard to do.

This ceremony was a transition of sorts, from the old PARSA that existed before my mother took control, to the new PARSA. My mother has won the love and respect of her staff. She is truly loved by all. All of the staff that had been there for the earlier times appreciate the approach and dedication that mom brings to the job. She has taken an organization that was failing, going bankrupt. When she arrived on scene there were staff members that had worked for months without pay. I believe they are relieved to have someone that

they can count on and defer to. My mom is truly great at what she does. She is loved by many Afghans who recognize the dedication she has to improving the lives of their people. They are starting to see her as one of their own. I believe it helps that she lived here as a child, otherwise they might have wondered where her motivation comes from. She works so hard for them, often at the expense of herself. After the ceremony Yasin came up and thanked my mom, almost in tears, essentially saying that he considers her his American mother and greatest mentor. He is such a wonderful, sincere and dedicated man.



This evening my mom said that when she and Norm have had trouble with being in Kabul, have wanted to go home and pack it in, it is Yasin that keeps them here. She has found a wonderful man that will become a strong leader for his country under the guidance of my mother. Though at this point he has much to learn, I hope he gets into politics eventually. His country needs people like him to lead it into a prosperous future where all components of his people are taken care of. He neither acts like, nor desires to

be a king, which is exactly the type of leader that is needed in Afghanistan.

