

Self-confidence a fight for young, 'old'

July 14 , 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

The reason this column did not appear in its usual place on page 4 the past two Sundays is very simple. I was out of the country for 10 days, and the trip extended over two weekends.

Where was I? The answer, perhaps surprising, is the Philippines, Bohol, to be exact.

For a good part of the past school year, a group of 14 indigenous students at my university has been preparing a series of presentations about Taiwan's indigenous cultures — cultures to which they themselves belong — for student audiences at Holy Name University in Bohol, the Philippines. They've been honing their English skills too, hoping to take advantage of an intensive English course that was to challenge them for 3 hour sessions every morning of the week.

I was the lucky guy who got the job of accompanying our students to Bohol for the first 10 days of their program.

When the tragic story of May 9 occurred, and a Taiwanese fisherman lost his life to Filipino military gunfire, it appeared the exchange program might be postponed or, worse, canceled.

I am happy administrators on my campus saw the project as an educational opportunity of priceless merit, and not merely as a poker chip in a political game, besmirched with bitterness and nationalistic fervor.

In recent years we've been hearing a litany of accolades for something vaguely termed “whole person education.” Those three words hooked together have been in the air not only locally, but everywhere in the world. High schools, universities, and academic programs of many kinds have invested valuable resources into helping students grow and mature not only as scholars and thinkers, but as “whole people,” too.

Many of us in the teaching profession have assumed this “whole person” thing is not so much about what happens in classrooms or laboratories with books, lectures, high technology, research and exams. Whole person education ideally finds its heart, we might say, outside of classes and away from our schools, out in the real world of family, business, society, in the real world not of ideas, but of people.

As our days in Bohol progressed, I could clearly see that whole person education demands that we face a single important question: what kind of person do I want to become?

One of the Taiwan students in our Bohol program talked with me between activities one day about a loved one of hers who will soon be a college student. She was talking of a young person like herself, a member of one of Taiwan's indigenous tribes. Suddenly the optimistic smile on her face changed to a look of concern. She dropped her voice and said, “I'm really worried about her, you know? She'll be a freshman next year, and she just has no confidence in herself. She doesn't think she can do anything well in her life.” After a pause and a chuckle, she added, “Besides singing, I mean. She's really good at singing.”

Self-confidence, I later thought. What a battle we all have in life to find those one or two things we are good at doing, to find whatever it is that we so desperately need to be confident of our abilities and personalities.

One of pleasant shocks I've felt recently is that aging has apparently not become an obstacle in my relationships with students and colleagues. In fact, my arrival now at the tender age of 65 has enabled me to see that gray hair and an older appearance can be calming assets to the people around us. A few years ago, I had assumed my confidence as a person would weaken as I got older. That hasn't been the case thus far.

The words of my young indigenous friend about a loved one who lacks confidence stay with me.

In many ways, I suppose our exchange program for indigenous students was a definite confidence-builder. It offered the students an opportunity to assert themselves as indigenous people. It showed them they are highly capable of sharing their cultures in interesting and informative ways. It proved that their English skills, while still developing, really aren't so bad, either.

The link between a healthy pride in oneself, and a deep, abiding sense of self-confidence tugs still at my mind. Surely there is more to contemplate here.

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