

## Messages Sent from a “Flattening” World to P-12 Education and Society

Beheruz N. Sethna

The University of West Georgia<sup>1</sup>

bsethna@westga.edu

In September of 2004, a group of higher education leaders<sup>2</sup> gathered at the University of Oxford in England to debate the issues of global ethics and the role of higher education. “The Oxford Conclave” developed a Statement of Beliefs and Responsibilities, of which the first one was:

“We believe that higher education has the responsibility to

- Increase access to quality education for all citizens of the world; ...”

Even before the proverbial ink was dry on this statement, however, it became increasingly probable that a major item on the legislative agendas of several state legislatures across the country and also a ballot issue in November of 2006 was going to be the cessation of educational benefits to undocumented immigrants to the U.S. and their children. I mention this not in any evaluative or political sense – I do not judge or even comment on the arguments in favor or against of such a move -- I simply raise the point that there are serious challenges along education’s path in the creation of ethical leadership; starting, interestingly, with the *very first bullet* on the Oxford Conclave’s Statement of Beliefs and Responsibilities: Increase access to quality education for *all citizens of the world*; (emphasis added).

---

<sup>1</sup> The author is a Professor at the University of West Georgia, and President of the University. This piece is written in the author’s private capacity and does not represent the views of any institution to which he belongs. The approach of this paper is similar to, and draws heavily upon, another work of the same author: Beheruz N. Sethna, (2006) *Ethical leadership in a global society -- (how) can universities lead?* In John C. Knapp (Ed.), *For the Common Good: The Ethics of Leadership in the 21st Century*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006.

*All citizens of the world? How about some within sight of our own institutions?*

Friedman (2005; 173-200) talks of ten factors and events that made our world increasingly “flat” – and by that he means factors that are leveling the playing field for many countries that had until recently been essentially left out of the economic opportunities that America and parts of the Western world had enjoyed. These include: 1) the Berlin Wall coming down and so too the walls of intense governmental regulation in countries such as India, closely followed by Microsoft 3.0 which created a global computer interface; 2) the advent of Netscape which gave us all the ability to “browse” the World Wide Web; 3) the ability of one computer application to “talk” with another (which had hitherto been almost impossible); 4) “Open-sourcing” which consisted of “thousands of people around the world coming together on line to collaborate on writing everything from their own software and operating systems to a dictionary, to a recipe for cola;” 5) Outsourcing – moving some part of a company’s operations to another company (many times in another country – most often associated with India); 6) Offshoring – moving an entire production operation to another country – most often associated with China; 7) Supply-chaining – a continuous information and production operation which allows for the production of one more widget in, say, China, the moment you buy a widget at the local Wal\*Mart store; 8) In-sourcing – companies like UPS – after they pick up your computer to be repaired, instead of shipping it to the manufacturer, will repair it themselves (with the manufacturer’s permission, of course) and then return it to you; 9) In-forming – search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, MSN Web Search, etc.; and 10) “Steroids” – Voice over IP, Wireless, iPqqs, PDAs, etc. – what Freidman says is “engines talking to computers, talking to people, talking back to the engines, followed by

---

<sup>2</sup> Including the author.

people talking to people – all done from anywhere to anywhere. That is what happens when all the flatteners start to get turbocharged by all the steroids.” (Obviously, since I have just condensed several pages into one paragraph, I have left out many important parts of his analysis of these ten flatteners.)

A few notes on these flatteners: Note the date on the first flattener – this happened at the end of 1989. All of the others followed incredibly rapidly in a span of approximately 12 years – about one-tenth of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century! Essentially, all of these flatteners occurred in a blink of an eye. Furthermore, Friedman says, “the convergence of the ten flatteners begat the convergence of a set of business practices and skills that would get the most out of the flat world” – also of professions with different skill sets. Finally, with the advent of China, India, and other countries into this new world, almost 3,000,000,000 people who had been left out of the business climate were now in. So, it is a “triple convergence” that we in America have to deal with – a convergence of 10 flatteners in the blink of an eye, of many diverse skill sets and professions, and of three billion new people in the global market.

These global changes are essentially unstoppable. So, how do Americans fit best into this new world? How do we prepare our children and young adults to survive and succeed in the new flat world?

Education is the key – if we do it right.

Let me shift to another important part of Friedman’s (ibid, 256-75) book – he calls these the “Dirty Little Secrets” of which we need to be cognizant:

1. *The Numbers Gap*. Since the time we won the race to the moon, the number of scientists and engineers has steadily declined in America. Most of our scientists

and engineers are 40 years old or older, and the inflow is not keeping pace with retirement. Friedman refers to a study at Boston College that showed that 44 percent of eighth graders in Singapore and 38 percent in Taiwan scored at the most advanced level in math tests, but only seven percent in America did so. He estimates that it takes about 15 years to create an engineer (from interest to graduation); so, we had best get started now.

2. *The Ambition Gap*. Friedman (2005) writes, “Here is the dirty little secret that no C.E.O. wants to tell you: they are not just outsourcing to save on salary. They are doing it because they can often get better-skilled and more productive people than their American workers.” He adds, “When they send jobs abroad, they not only save 75 percent on wages, they get a 100 percent increase in productivity.” People in China and India are hungry for American jobs and business opportunities.
3. *The Education Gap*. It shouldn’t be the call centers going abroad that worry us – today, many of the high-end research jobs are going abroad. As Friedman says, they are not racing us to the bottom; they are racing us to the top. In 2003, Leslie Stahl of *60 Minutes* did a story on the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). In that story, she said, “IIT may be the most important university you've never heard of ... This is IIT Bombay. Put Harvard, MIT and Princeton together, and you begin to get an idea of the status of this school in India.” In Lesley Stahl's *Notebook* (Jan. 9, 2003), she said her story was “about a university that may be the hardest school in the world to get into. It's called IIT- Indian Institute of Technology. A stunning percentage of CEOs and innovators in the American high tech industry were graduated from IIT.” As Friedman claims, “Remember, in

China when you are one in a million, there are 1,300 other people just like you. The brainpower that rises to the Microsoft research center in Beijing is already one in a million.”

People in India and China are hungry for the great jobs. The youth are motivated to work, and they do indeed work much harder.

The implications of the changing world for America are many and varied. First, we need to have adequate preparation -- in curriculum, attitudes, work habits, etc. -- at the middle school, high school, and college levels, to prepare America for the intense competition which results from a flatter world. We need to step up our advocacy for education at all levels. India and China have realized that education and higher education are the keys to success. They are rapidly increasing their emphasis and budgets as a percentage of public expenditures, as we, as a nation, may be decreasing ours.

Let us also briefly examine some implications of a flatter world for industry and society and general. A significant result of a flatter world is with regard to the awareness of what is going around in the world outside us. Partly tongue-in-cheek, it almost seems that Americans never got over the European “flat world” theory of the sixteenth century when the prevailing opinion was that the world was flat and that Columbus would fall off the surface of the earth.. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even continuing in the 21<sup>st</sup>, it’s almost as if many Americans (obviously not all) believed that *they* would fall off the surface of the earth if they ventured (mentally or physically) outside our shores. Kids in China, India, and the rest of the world know a great deal about America – when I was a kid in India, I studied American history and government (and movies and comic books

taught me about American culture). How much do American kids know about other countries? How much do American adults know about other countries?

We cannot ignore other countries and cultures any more – we are already way behind the game. We cannot maintain global leadership without a global-looking culture. How global is our culture? Even more importantly, what are we doing about it? As an exercise, if one were to examine the legislative agendas of the 50 states and the federal government, would we find a high percentage of legislatures debating actions and bills to help us be more globally aware and competitive? Or, is more legislation being proposed that is making us more insular and less welcoming to others? Are more legislatures looking forward and planning for the complex and diverse world of 20 years from now? Or, are more of them looking backward and doing their best to preserve old ways and old habits -- because they are afraid of the impact of more diversity, or perhaps because they blame diversity for all the ills of modern America? As one of Friedman’s oft-quoted sources, Jerry Rao, says, “Cultures that are open and willing to change have a huge advantage in this world.”

Friedman (ibid, 382-84) tells the story of the last national election in India when the ruling party which had presided over good economic growth was swept from power largely because of the discontent of rural voters. Here’s the point: Rural India was not saying, ‘Stop the globalization train, we want to get off.’ They were saying, ‘Stop the globalization train, we want to get on, but someone needs to help us by building a better stepstool.’ Rural India, living in poverty and with low levels of education, ‘gets it’ – they *want* to embrace the rapid changes going on the world. Does rural America get it? Do

they want to embrace the rapid changes going on the world? Do our leaders – at all levels and of all types – get it? Are we willing to change?

Or, are we too afraid of the new world that comes from change?

Let's briefly look at the performance of Asian kids who live in America to search for clues about cultures in other countries. A review of winners of the Annual Scripps National Spelling Bee competition reveals that four Spelling Bee winners over the past seven years have been of Asian Indian descent (2007 Scripps National Spelling Bee, 2006). In the 2005 Spelling Bee, the top four winners were of Indian origin (Scripps National Spelling Bee, n.d.)). Nor are these occurrences restricted to spelling bees – as recently as May 24, 2006, at the National Geographic Bee finals in Washington, D.C., the winner, the second and third place winners, and six out of the top 10 finalists were of Indian origin (Harder, 2006). People of Indian origin constitute a small, perhaps miniscule, percentage of the U.S. population – some estimates state that, in the year 2000, there were approximately one million such individuals (Infoplease, 2007) out of a U.S. population of 281 million ( U. S. Census Bureau, 2007), which works out to about one third of one percent! So, the question might be asked as to what factors might be responsible for such success, so disproportionate to the number of Indian Americans in the U.S. population. One school of thought is that these skills are indicative of intellectual development and training. Another school of thought is that these successes are a result of a belief in rote learning, which is not the typical form of instruction in the United States, but is not unusual in the Indian system in which their parents grew up.

As another example, the National Foundation for American Policy, which focuses on immigration, trade and education issues, analyzed the 2004 student finalists in the

Intel Science Talent Search, the U.S. Physics Team, and the U.S. Team for the International Mathematical Olympiad. They found that 60 percent of the science competitors and 65 percent of the mathematics competitors were from immigrant families. "There's a very strong emphasis on education as a way to get ahead among [immigrant] families ... (to focus on math and science) as a guarantee of strong job prospects in the future," said Anderson, the foundation's executive director (National Alliance of State Science and Mathematics Coalitions, 2004). Tom Friedman also reports similar results (ibid, p.270) about the culture of immigrants in the United States. It's up to us to examine how much of that we wish to emulate.

In conclusion, I don't believe that the sky is falling. I do believe that the dangers are an incremental, but constant, erosion of our relative strengths. I do believe that America's world leadership position could be severely impacted if we don't get serious. Here's the bottom line -- Friedman asks: Are we preparing our children for the race ahead? And he answers: No.

*The Messages We Send: What's Cool and What's Not*

If we believe that education is a critical need for the future, I would venture to say that the ethical thing to do is to send this message. Conversely, *not* to send such a message for reasons of "going with the flow" with our children, our students, our neighbors, our communities, and our funding partners, is not indicative of true ethical leadership in our society.

I would respectfully suggest that "we" (used in the broadest sense) do not consistently send the right messages to our constituencies. If this is so, it is doubly problematic. For an entity to have the ability to send the right messages and yet not do so

does not represent true ethical leadership. If we (P-12 or P-16) have access to tens of millions of students every day, and yet we miss the opportunity to convey the important messages to them, I would suggest that we are not being true leaders.

We are sending the wrong messages to our kids. Think of it this way, how many messages each week from all personal and mass communication sources do they hear saying “Life is real, life is earnest, and you better work hard – really hard – to succeed. Go to College; Graduate from College.” Contrast this with the number of messages they hear saying, “Life is a ball. How can we make it more enjoyable for you, with more alcohol, more and faster cars, more expensive stuff (which means more odd jobs to pay for them and, therefore, fewer hours in class and studying)?” Then, why are we surprised that American kids don’t pay more attention to academics and intellectual activities?

As Friedman (ibid) says: “Here is the dirty little secret that no C.E.O. wants to tell you: they are not just outsourcing to save on salary. They are doing it because they can often get better-skilled and more productive people than their American workers. ... In China today, Bill Gates is Britney Spears. In America today, Britney Spears is Britney Spears -and that is our problem.” Friedman is right; I grew up in India and spent 25 years there before I came to America; I know that Bill Gates has star quality there – kids want to be like him. Not just as rich as he is, but smart and successful as he is.

I sometimes speak to groups of elementary and middle school students and ask them what they want to be. A large proportion of them want to be star athletes. This should surprise no one. The vast preponderance of images they see and stories they hear glorify athletes; they do not give equal emphasis to the valedictorians, the science stars or the math whizzes. There is the occasional blurb about these students, but if each news

medium in the country did a rigorous and honest count of the number and length of academic and athletics stories for emphasis, I would bet on the way the scale would tilt.

Almost every newspaper and television news program has a sports segment. How many have an equally regular academic section or segment? There are at least two major differences between sports sections and the few academic sections that can be found. The first is that the number and length of athletics stories are an order of magnitude higher than those of academic ones. The second difference is that the athletics stories are generally brag stories, while those academic stories that do appear typically are about how bad things are.

Most stories in sports sections are not about scandals or serious issues confronting the future of athletics. Instead, most of them are about college or high school sports – they are about wins and losses, and one school doing better than another

Perhaps a few times a year, U.S. print and television media report how poorly American children fare on standardized or comparative tests relative to children from other developed countries. About as often, stories appear about poor SAT scores in one state or another. On a few other occasions, the news media publicizes survey results demonstrating that many Americans, usually adults, cannot identify their home states or answer the most rudimentary questions about national or world affairs.

*The Times of India* (by some accounts, the largest English language newspaper in the world), has a weekly supplement or insert of four to eight full-size pages, called *The Education Times*, devoted to stories about education, higher education, math problems, hints on college application and readiness, and so on. How many American newspapers do the same?

If news media covered academic accomplishments with equal fervor as sports stories, they would send more balanced messages to our young people. Is the coverage of the local debate competition or the science bowl the same as that of the local football game and the detailed description of the touchdowns?

There is no claim that the *entertainment* value of a science competition or debate is the same as that of a football game. The claim is that the news should go a little beyond pure entertainment value – and give approximately equal time (or some reasonable fraction thereof) to coverage of positive occurrences in academics. Nor is there a claim that stories about academic successes will, by themselves, improve classroom teachers and test performance.

Just as it would be naïve to imply that a significant increase in media reporting will make up for shortcomings in the educational system, it is also naïve to imply that images in the media have absolutely no effect on the minds and priorities of our children and those who influence them. Nor is the media entirely responsible for sending the right or wrong messages. The adults in the child's life parents, teachers, counselors, coaches, professors, family members, and the public - play an even greater role.

Let me share my own personal example. I grew up in India and spent 25 years there before I came to America in 1973. The family income of \$ 14 (admittedly unadjusted for inflation, exchange rates and cost of living) would be well below the poverty line in the U.S. I have no recollection of any 'cool stuff' in my childhood. I went to a school which had very simple school uniforms and in my early period there, used hand-me-downs even for those. But, here's the kicker: Even at that level of income, in all the years I lived at home, *there was never even one conversation, never one question as*

to *whether I would go to college and graduate from college*. It was not a topic up for discussion. No matter what untold sacrifice it took on my parents' part or on mine, no matter how much hard work it entailed, and no matter how many 'cool' things I would do without, I was going to college and was going to graduate from college.

My mother and father and teachers sent the right messages. Today, I am in my 14<sup>th</sup> year as president of an excellent American university and I owe it to my parents, their values, and their messages of hard work and perseverance.

Of course, there was parental pressure and years of hard work. Let me address each of these.

Is parental pressure a bad thing? I would suggest not. I did not want to go to IIT – I did it because of parental pressure. Today, I thank my parents – again and again – for that pressure and that decision. When I decided to go to IIT, I was about 18. My parents were in their 50s. Is it unreasonable to expect that 'Father and Mother (with a combined experience base in excess of 100 years) know Best?' Why do we, in America, assume that the quality of decision-making at 18 (or younger) is superior to the knowledge base and rationality of parents in their 40s or 50s? Shouldn't decisions that determine the course of one's life be advised by the experience base that exists in the family and the (older) adult environment? Junior executives in industry defer to senior ones with more experience. Yet, for some reason, we believe that junior family members do not need to defer to senior ones with more experience!

Is hard work a bad thing? I would suggest not. There were periods during my years at IIT that I have no recollection of going to sleep – I simply fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion. Red and bleary eyes are not the end of the world. Those work habits serve me

in good stead even today. Besides, we need to understand that people in China and India, and in other parts of the world, are used to hard work. They are hungry and eager – for American jobs and American business. If we are to compete, we need to be well used to hard work, too.

In addition to hard work, there is an attitudinal difference. Recollect the Friedman quote, “In China today, Bill Gates is Britney Spears. In America today, Britney Spears is Britney Spears -- and that is our problem.” In my opinion, we are sending the wrong messages to our kids. We should be working full time on an alternative definition of ‘cool.’ What’s cool is not the cars they drive and the clothes they wear and the stereos they have. What’s cool is having choices later in life, the ability to learn, and the ability to have an ‘untouchable’ career in today’s changing world.

Many readers, when they read of my recommendations in favor of much more hard work, in favor of the benefits respecting the experience of parents, parental pressure, and the “Father and Mother know Best” phenomenon, in favor of postponed rather than instant gratification, and other such values and strengths (which might be labeled as ‘Chinese’ or ‘Indian’ or ‘outdated’) will believe that I am entirely out of touch with mainstream America. If so, consider this: if you have an 85-year old or a 90-year old person in your family, talk with him or her, and ask what life was like in America of the 1930s and 1940s. I suspect that they will claim – legitimately – that these were all ‘American’ values and strengths. So, why look back at that time period, when this entire article has been devoted to looking forward? One reason is that those were the days when America built the nation that rose to a leadership position in the world. Another reason is that those values are what the competition is using!

Let us understand that there is a battle for the hearts and minds of young people. Images and stories do help determine what's cool and what's not. If we choose status quo and refuse to glorify academic accomplishments with the fervor we promote athletics, then at least let us have the honesty not to wail and moan on the few days of the year when the academic stories appear about our poor performance.

Children learn what they see. So do adults.

#### References

2007 Scripps National Spelling Bee. *Champions and Their Winning Words, 1925 through 2005*. Retrieved April, 2006, from

<http://www.spellingbee.com/bwg/statschamp.shtml>

American Council on Education. (2006, March). *Poll reveals eight in ten voters believe vitality of America's colleges and universities critical to future economic success*.

Retrieved April, 2006, from

[http://www.acenet.edu/solutions/media/Microsoft\\_Word\\_-\\_Poll\\_results\\_Narrative\\_Graphs.pdf](http://www.acenet.edu/solutions/media/Microsoft_Word_-_Poll_results_Narrative_Graphs.pdf)

Atlanta Regional Council for Higher Education. (2005). *What does Georgia gain by investing in its colleges and universities?* Retrieved April, 2006, from

<http://www.atlantahighered.org/archereports/cpsreport.asp>

Friedman, T. (2005). *The world is flat - A brief history of the twenty-first century*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. (Original work published 2005)

- Harder, B. (2006). Illinois eighth grader wins National Geographic bee. *National Geographic News*, May 24, 2006. Retrieved October 2007 from <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/05/060524-geographic-bee.html>
- Infoplease. *Countries of birth of the foreign-born population, 1850–2000*. Retrieved April, 2006, from <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0900547.html>
- National Alliance of State Science and Mathematics Coalitions. (2004). *News Brief # 2652. Immigrants' Children Inhabit the Top Ranks Of Math, Science Meets*. Retrieved April 2006 from <http://notes.nassmc.org/NBSfile04.nsf/aca9ba8d753f684685256b3f00684989/72ca053f1c05be3585256ee0006bad3e?OpenDocument>
- Scripps National Spelling Bee. (n.d.) *2005 final rankings*. Retrieved April, 2006, from <http://www.spellingbee.com/05bee/2005FinalRankings.htm>
- The Oxford Conclave. (2005, September). *Ethical global leadership: Preamble and responsibilities*. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the The Oxford Conclave, The University of Oxford, Oxford, England.
- U. S. Census Bureau. (2007). *The population finder*. Retrieved October 2007 from [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFPopulation?\\_submenuId=population\\_0&\\_sse=on](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFPopulation?_submenuId=population_0&_sse=on)