

Excellence is not a Luxury

By Mañanita Ochoa

Excellence is a necessity, not a luxury, not only for the individual and his community, but even more so for its leaders. In many Latin American countries we are always willing to help the hungry and the sick, but we do not feel the same obligation to support the gifted, who excel in some profession or vocation. If we see good students, bright kids, pianists, mechanics, or soccer players that stand out between childhood and teenage years, we abandon them to their precocious destiny, as though those youngsters endowed with excellence do not need our support! We tell ourselves, they don't need our help because they were already born gifted.

In contrast, those countries that have stood out because of their high rates of economic and institutional growth behave very differently with respect to their most valuable assets. Brazilians stand out in soccer, because the minute their children stop crawling and learn to kick a ball they begin the selection and training process to see who will be the next Pelé. The Chinese, North Americans, and Singaporeans identify their geniuses at an early age and nurture and help them like the national treasures that they are. But so many in Latin America distrust excellence as though it was a bad habit of banal and decadent elites. What confusion! And what a waste.

Excellence does not respect social classes (thank God). Excellence appears like a genetic miracle among all social classes and enterprises, but if we don't support it, it gets distracted and lost. Our intellectual, political and industrial leaders leave so much to be desired, because we don't even pay attention to whether their conduct and goals fit into the concept of excellence or if they are merely mediocre salesmen peddling false promises. Excellence is not a luxury; it is one of the least satisfied necessities in the Latin American continent. Access to excellence should be a universal right for all of those that search for it. Recognizing excellence is quite easy. Excellence is noticeable in a child that respects sensible instructions, wants to do good things, in parents that make sure they improve their children's education, in bosses who nurture the professional and personal development of their employees, and in politicians that do not make wild promises or lie with brazen cynicism, like a frivolous guffaw in an expensive restaurant. You can see it in the respect with which we treat our family members and our fellow countrymen. You can see it in the time we take to learn and do our jobs well instead of trying to see what dirty little business we can concoct with the politician in office. Excellence can be observed in how balanced our actions and ambitions are. Excellence is restrained and it does not brag about its greatness, because it is always demanding and leaves us short and humbled.

Recognizing and supporting excellence does not require great resources. It requires a will and appreciation for the extraordinary contribution that excellence makes towards our social and economic evolution. Prizes for excellence are one way of imparting the message of its importance and motivate us to follow its purpose both individually and collectively. Excellence is rewarded in triumphant societies with good grades, admiration for good deeds, public recognition, respect and appropriate compensation for responsible

work, and free and conscientious votes during electoral processes. Mediocrity is reprehensible and corrosive because it destroys the individual and the collective that condones and rewards it. Respect towards excellence should be one of the most important human rights and should even be guaranteed in our constitution. Mediocrity, at a minimum, should be punished with votes against our leaders each time we can elect those that govern us. Societies that elect corrupt and mediocre regimes are just as mediocre and corrupt as their leaders. It is hard to escape the grasp of mediocrity once it exercises its stronghold on our surroundings, but it is possible. The search for excellence is the gate to freedom and sustainable growth.