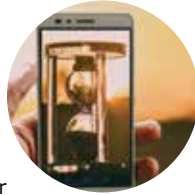


Understanding Our Time

BY GREG PARSONS

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As I noted in the last issue of *MF*, we are each a product of a mixture of influences. The answer to the age-old question “was it nurture or environment” is: *yes* – both. And lots of other things come to mind when we consider what environment means for us. In this issue, I’d like to apply the idea to how we strategize for mission.

When we, as believers, seek to reach others who don’t know Him yet, our underlying values come through strongly. They have impacted who we are, how we think and they feed our vision and strategy.

We are all exposed to leaders as models – good and bad. Some are held up in each culture as those who can be admired as good examples – though not perfect of course. People like Steve Jobs (co-founder of Apple), or those of a previous generation like George Patton (WW2 General), or Lee Iacocca (CEO of Ford and later Chrysler) are just a few examples. These were no nonsense visionaries, strategists and/or managers who pushed hard through barriers of different kinds to accomplish their goals. Phrases like “Damn the torpedoes,” or “So what do we do? Anything. Something. So long as we just don’t sit there,” or “Our job is to figure out what they’re going to want before they do.”

These kinds of leaders and the way they lead impact the cultures that lift them up as examples. So we should not be surprised that some in the western mission world cast vision like a western CEO. We are told that leaders must have a simple, clear, oft-repeated vision, not to mention a focused branding! When it gets down to a local or even national missions event, it can be expressed in phrases such as: “we can do this” ... “get ‘er done” ... “the task can be completed” ... and there is truth in those ideas.

Almost 40 years ago, when I first joined the staff of the U.S. Center for World Mission (now Frontier Ventures),

we began to shift how we talked about our vision. Before, we talked about a massive task, using an illustration of a huge iceberg – where the task was represented by the 2/3 of the ice that is under water – we can’t see it fully. In the 80s we popularized the phrase “Church for every people by the year 2,000.” While there is truth in the idea that we can’t see or understand the task clearly still, as we saw more of what God was doing around the world, we began to be more positive. There were books published such as *On the Crest of the Wave* or *Catch the Vision 2,000*. Even as we reconsidered our approach in those early days, we did not know about the massive growth of the House Church movement in China, for example.

As we grow in our understanding of God, His Word and the work of the Spirit, we must:

1. See our own blind spots.
2. Reflect on how that impacts how we think, and act in relation to the world.

As I reflect, I realize there were events in my own nation which are not part of my “education.” Our treatment of the 1st Nation’s Peoples was a form of colonialism within our borders. It was *real* right here, and, as with other aspects of our background, it has shaped our mentality. We are forced to consider how Jesus approached life, leadership and the powers of His day. He demonstrated love and humility, which flowed in and through His life as He served and appropriately challenged the systems of His day. I find it interesting, that it was the serious religious people for whom He reserved His greatest criticism.

But even if we approach people like Jesus, we must consider that those we are serving expect people from the West to be like everyone else in the West – whatever their stereotype is. Often, that includes a colonial past and a sense that while we are no longer trying to colonize the countries of world, we are still seen as those who come to bring a foreign religion. We know that biblical faith is not Western, but they may not.

As we strategize to reach least reached peoples, we must consider what the people sitting with us think. I’m glad to say that I see evidence of this in an increasing number of global workers today. We come with a mentality of coming alongside as witnesses of what has happened in our lives because of Jesus.

I hope we’ve learned lessons from the lessons we need to unlearn. 