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A Sign of the Times

by Lesley Dawson

The prospective students staggered out of the room in confusion. They had just faced an interview with two women, one Palestinian, the other, one of the new foreigners. What stupid questions they had been asked, “Why do you think you would make a good physiotherapist?” What did that have to do with anything?

Comparing notes, the boys expressed their disgust and suspicion that these questions should be asked. After all Ali’s father was a good friend of Abu Ahmed, who had just been appointed a teacher on this new programme. Surely that was enough? George had pinned his hopes on his aunt who ran a rehabilitation centre for disabled children in Jerusalem. There could be no better recommendation than that!

There wasn’t time to talk any more, as they now had to present themselves for a practical aptitude test, whatever that was. Was all this really necessary? Why not choose people from good families? Of course, giving priority to the boys.

The final straw came when they were ushered into a classroom and instructed to sit in a circle of chairs and discuss what they would do if they encountered an unconscious man by the side of the road. What did this have to do with working in a rehabilitation clinic?

Meeting up at the end of the day, tired, confused and angry, they determined to use the influence of important men in the community to point out to these foreign women how things should be done.

Next morning there was a knock at the door of Jane's office and in walked an impressive man who told her that he had been Dean of Arts at this university for the last ten years. When this didn't seem to impress her, he said pompously "Ali Hasan is the son of my greatest friend and I promised him a place on this new programme". Controlling her anger and pasting a smile on her face, she explained that competition was so great for this training that they had discussed the best way to select the most appropriate students with the Dean of Education. "Well of course, you choose the people from the best families, that is what we have always done". Smiling to herself, she remembered that Dr Violet had said this is what would happen but had encouraged her to use these more modern ways of selection.

Soon after Dr Walid had stomped out of the office, aware that he had been bested and not pleased with his own performance, Father Dimitri, the Greek Orthodox parish priest pushed his way into the room without even knocking on the door. He didn't need to do that. This was a Christian university and his parishioners had the most right to be students here. Surely this woman, who unlike most foreigners, was reputed to be a practicing Christian, albeit a Protestant, would understand the need to favour Christian students?

When the results of the selection process were published, neither Ali nor George had been chosen. When further enquiries were made, the two sponsors received the answer, "They did not appear to understand what physiotherapy was and their participation in the selection activities was minimal."

This made no sense as they were both good boys and needed important jobs to uphold the status of their families. Complaints went as high as the Vice Chancellor who explained that this was the way things were done in the west and if Palestinians wanted to be seen as modern, they had to accept such methods. He sighed, shrugged his shoulders and said "I am afraid it is a sign of the times."