

Punctuality is the Politeness of Kings

by Lesley Dawson

The above saying is reputed to come from Louis XVIII, obviously looking at the topic from his own royal standpoint. A republican take on the saying comes from Benjamin Franklin who said, "Lost time is never found again" and of course, any administrator might say "Time is money."

Westerners do seem to have an obsession about time, especially those of us from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, where being on time is the ultimate sign of respect; where being punctual indicates reliability, conscientiousness and discipline.

Being on time is not valued very highly in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East. There, I had to learn a different attitude to time. In the first six months of my time working with Palestinians, I went through three stages in relation to time. Initially, being very British, I was always on time for meetings and expected everyone else to be on time too. This led to feelings of frustration as I reflected on how I was wasting my time sitting in the café at Notre Dame Centre and what I could be doing instead of this. In my letters home I complained bitterly and found myself writing "I wish that I learned to smoke because I need something to hold onto to keep calm as I wait, for what seems like hours for meetings to begin."

Fortunately, I began to relax and although still being on time myself, I did not expect anyone else to be on time and enjoyed drinking hot chocolate as I waited for meetings to begin. I was told that I had stopped being quite so British when eventually I felt no guilt being late myself and assumed all my colleagues would also be late.

Time was not only an issue for meetings, when classes began and when breaks were taken were often viewed elastically too. Halfway through a two-hour practical class, I desperately needed a cup of coffee and decreed a fifteen-minute break. Having been used to working in hospital clinics where patients were booked in every thirty minutes and I had become expert in swallowing hot coffee quickly between patients, I was back in the classroom on time. However, there was no sign of my students. When they eventually sauntered back into class, they were very surprised at my irritation with them.

We finally came to a compromise of sorts and I when I said “OK let’s take a fifteen-minute break” they would ask “Is this a British fifteen-minute break or fifteen Palestinian minutes?”

When we began the upgrade programme, I had another lesson on time. The upgraders were already working as physiotherapists who had diploma level education. As we wanted these very senior people to supervise our younger students on placement in their workplaces, we offered the carrot of upgrading their qualification to degree level.

They came from all over the West Bank, from north to south and a handful came from Gaza, and they all attended university one day per week. They often had to leave home very early in the morning to negotiate the checkpoints they had to cross. Invariably they were held up by Israeli soldiers who did not believe that they were students and held them up unnecessarily. Arriving late for a workshop in the UK, late comers would usually quietly slide into a seat at the back and whisper their apologies without interrupting the class. Not so if you are a Palestinian. Every late comer had to be welcomed by all their classmates and the reasons for their delay examined in great detail. There was no point in trying to continue with the class until all this was completed.

If I found differences in time keeping hard to learn, you can imagine what it was like for Palestinian students studying in the west. It probably took them months, perhaps years to learn to be on time, despite feeling that this emphasis on time was difficult to understand. On returning home, they expected to slip back easily into their relaxed Arabic approach to time. To their horror, they found they had become very British and expected everyone to be on time.

A Jordanian colleague who had done much of his post-graduate studies in the UK could not cope with staff meetings on his return to Amman. He complained bitterly that staff meetings were arranged for certain times, even when it was well known that the Head of Department was not available until an hour later. His colleagues felt that he had become half British. He had previously laughed at my comments about Arabic and British attitudes to time but now agreed with me that he wished he had learned to smoke as he needed something to hold on to as he drank his Arabic coffee and waited and waited.