

Jurji Zaidan, the Cultural Entrepreneur: His Values, Beliefs and Attributes

George C. Zaidan

Oral presentation

We spent the day discussing Jurji Zaidan's contributions to Arab thought and literature. It has been said that Jurji Zaidan was "many men in one man". He was a journalist, historian, linguist, social and educational reformer, political scientist and more. My task is now to try and describe his values, beliefs and attributes in a way that explain his ability to contribute meaningfully in so many fields.

Jurji Zaidan was my grandfather, but he died in 1914, some twenty five years before I was born. I therefore had to rely on various indirect sources to describe the personal and professional qualities that explain his success:

- first and foremost I relied on family reminiscences of his children. The value system and principles he instilled in them guided their private lives and enabled them to build Dar-al-Hilal into one of the biggest publishing houses for periodicals in the Middle East;
- second I relied on his Autobiography. It covers only the first twenty years of his life because of his untimely death. But it is invaluable in understanding his formative years and how he himself explained the reasons for his success;
- third I relied on the recollections of his literary and journalistic peers who knew him well; and
- last on his own writings, mostly in articles in al-Hilal.

A few comments on the early influences that shaped Zaidan are useful in understanding his values, beliefs and attributes. In his autobiography he describes how he rose above the class in which he was born into a “third class” that emulated the Victorian values of the European middle classes. He says quote:

“At that time the people of Beirut consisted of two classes, *tabaqatan*: the lower class, *al-'amma*, which means the riff-raff, the artisans, all the other people with menial occupations, and the small merchants. The people of the government and the rich constituted the upper class, *al-khasa*. But the social norms were basically one and the same as far as family life, manners of speech, eating and drinking were concerned. Obscene expressions were predominant in the speech of the rich as well as in that of the poor.”

He goes on to say:

“After the unrest of the sixties, there developed a third class amongst the people of Beirut educated in the Christian missionary schools, especially the American, English, and German ones. This third social group was determined to change the social norms, so that the contemporary morals of Beirut became comparable with the most advanced habits and customs of the Europeans... I began to form my own opinions and to express independent views. When I met Sawul and his friends [*members of the third class*] I found myself able to follow them, and I imitated them successfully in their virtuous ways.” End of quote.

In making the transition to this new class Zaidan was strongly influenced by a book he read in his formative years -- namely Samuel Smiles's Self-Help – a book translated by Yacoub Sarrouf as *Sirr al Najah* (The Secret of Success). In many Victorian homes Samuel Smiles's book Self-Help had a status second only to the Bible and was considered a classic display of Victorian values. Smiles packed his book with remarkable people to give some idea of the vast range of possible models of success. But all these success stories are ingrained in a philosophy of individualism, freedom of thought and action that makes every individual responsible by himself for his growth.

The socio-political context for Smiles's ethos of self-help was a political and social environment of freedom of speech and action. It is best captured in the philosophy of the British Liberal party of the late nineteenth century – a party that reflected the values and represented the interests of the middle classes. John Stuart Mill's principle of political liberty and Adam Smith's economic laissez faire provide the enabling environment for personal growth. But it is the ethos of self-help that allows the individual to realize his full potential. Zaidan's nation-building efforts focused on educating the middle classes -- getting them to “graduate” from the al-'amma, into which he was born into the “third class” whose values he adopted. Zaidan believed this class was the main engine of progress for the nation. He saw in the trajectory of his own growth and development the possibility, indeed the desirability, that the progress of nations would mirror his own personal experience.

I can't help but reflect that if Jurji Zaidan had been a British citizen he would have voted for the Liberal party and could have become an excellent developer and promoter of its doctrines and philosophy. He was a true Liberal in the traditional sense of the word – not the disparaging way this term is sometimes used today in US political discourse.

Moving to his Personal Qualities the best place to start may be a memorial article written about him by Khalil Mutran. He describes Zaidan in these terms:

“I have not known a man that combined two such antithetical attributes – greatness and modesty. Nor did I see or hear him ever complain about his fate to anyone or wish any ill towards someone with a word or as much as a hint. I never witnessed once from him a desire to avenge himself from a critic of his work that was the source of his income and his fame because of his belief in the honor of his mission and the purity of his work. As for his literary work, he balanced it and dressed it up so that it would appeal to a prince, draw a friend closer and stimulate the admiration of strangers with no affectation or pretense whatsoever and with the utmost simplicity”. End of quote.

I used this description to select from his own writings those articles that best applied to him. I grouped them under four headings which best describe his attributes:

- A. Honesty in Words and Deed
- B. Hard Work and Time Consciousness
- C. Entrepreneurship
- D. Modesty, Timidity and Moral Courage

Let us review each of these attributes.

Concerning the first attribute -- **Honesty in Words and Deed** - Zaidan elaborates at length on the traits marking superior character in an article entitled “Honesty in Speech is a Form of Superior Conduct”. He contrasts the approach of Easterners with those of Westerners. Regarding Easterners he laments their tendency to tell the listener what he wants to hear rather than what the speaker truly believes out of a misguided sense of “politeness”. For example, a writer that reviews a book or an article or a poem will invariably praise it and flatter the author justifying this in the name of ‘offering encouragement’. But Zaidan takes issue with this and says: "This is a noble aim but if criticism is offered to improve style and to raise standards, it contributes to intellect and is of greatest use to writing and reading. It is a grave error if a person only is allowed to hear praise and flattery for his works and his views, for nothing of human endeavor may truly approach perfection.” End of Quote.

Moving from honesty in words to honesty in deeds Zaidan elaborates on the importance of integrity for success. He takes the case of Salim Saydnawi, the founder and owner of one of the biggest department stores in Cairo and says in an article about him:

“It is a widespread delusion that “wealth cannot be acquired honestly”, or that “trustworthy, honest men are poor during their lifetime and die destitute”, or again that “only dishonest, hypocritical tricksters get rich”. Sayings, proverbs and poems exist on the subject. But this is the excuse of those who fail in their undertakings despite their desire to work, their vigilance and their uprightness. They attribute their failure to their honesty and good intentions, whereas it is due to their lacking some of the prerequisites for success, such as intelligence, knowledge,

perseverance and the like. For honesty alone is not enough even if it is accompanied by efforts and vigilance." End Quote

Moving to the second of Zaidan's attributes – **Hard Work and Time Consciousness** – I would like to preface my remarks by reminding you of Zaidan's phenomenal output. It was nothing less than astounding. He edited Al-Hilal and wrote most of its articles for almost twenty two years (1892-1914). He also wrote a large number of books, in particular twenty two novels; some ten books on history including the five volume History of Islamic Civilization; and three multi volume books on the history and philosophy of the Arabic language; as well as other books including his autobiography.

Zaidan produced all this in the span of only some twenty two years **all by himself**. To quote Ahmed Hafez Awad: "If we, as his contemporaries did not know with certainty that our departed friend and colleague wrote with his own pen all these works, organized their structure, thought of their subject-matter, and supervised himself the way they were edited and published – all alone without the ability to call on hired writers, or rely on the contributions from literary figures – had we not known all this with certainty, then we would have had very serious doubts that he was able to accomplish all this by himself. Because the quantity of his work is so monumental as to defy being the product of just one individual." End of Quote.

How was he able to accomplish all this? Zaidan learnt from his youngest age to put in long hours of work. He would study late into the night after helping his father from sunrise to sundown to manage his restaurant. He retained this habit throughout his life – starting his working day at dawn. He also learnt to organize his time effectively by putting a high premium on punctuality and, to quote his eldest son, my uncle Emile, "not delaying until to-morrow anything that could be done today as it might never get done". Finally, Zaidan was most economical in the use of his time not wasting a minute – literally – by what we would call today "multi-tasking". He tells us in his autobiography how he learnt this quality from his teacher: "We would study some lesson, and when my teacher left me to do some experimental work by myself, which would take two minutes, he used to turn to a book which he was in the process of translating and would occupy himself with it. He would translate two lines, or three, or a page, rather than sit idly by while I

was finishing my work. I acquired this virtue from him and it was of great use to me”. End of Quote.

In short, Zaidan mastered all the elements of time management and credits this quality as a major cause for his success. As he says in his Autobiography: “At the root of my success were my consciousness of time and perseverance.”

We now come to the third of Zaidan’s attributes: **Entrepreneurship**. On this Zaidan explained his views in several articles, the most important of which was one entitled Management is The Master of the Mind’s Attributes (in Arabic *Al-Tadbeer Sayed al-Quwa al-Aqila*). In it he argues that worldly success is much more the result of management rather than the knowledge of facts or abstract intelligence. Zaidan describes the particular management skills needed for success in running a family, a business, a government administration or a country; singling out marketing skills as especially important in all these areas.

Regarding the craft of the writer, which is of particular interest to us here, Zaidan identifies three attributes of a successful writer or journalist:

First, he must provide his readers with subjects that are of interest to them. On this he says: “Some of our newspapers are very well written - yet they have few readers, because circulation does not only depend on an excellent style but it demands a choice of subjects which readers need or enjoy reading about.”

Second a journalist must write in a simple, understandable, style – the so called “*al sahl al mumtaneh*” – that is a “simple but difficult to replicate” style. Zaidan was disparaging of those that used flowery words or complicated ways of expressing thoughts to impress their readers. (We had a running family joke: we would poke fun at the man who said after reading a particular article: “I loved it so much because it was so well written that I could not understand what it was all about!”).

Finally to gain the trust of his readers a journalist must be objective. In Zaidan's own words: "writers should display truth and frankness without inclining to any affiliation or party". Journalists should always stick to issues – never attacking persons or questioning intentions. This was neither common in those times nor even today in the east where strong emotions often inhibit the rational discussion of issues. Zaidan took principled positions that he argued on the merits of the case and gave equal space on the pages of Al-Hilal to opposing points of view.

Finally we come to the last of Zaidan's attributes – **Modesty, Shyness and Moral Courage**. Modesty was a hallmark of Zaidan's personality—one emphasized to me on so many occasions by my father. An article in which he describes in great detail the difficulties and therefore limitations of writing a history about the Arabs before Islam is an example of how conscious he was about his own limitations. This made him highly receptive to criticism. He viewed criticism as a means of self-improvement and a way of advancing knowledge.

Zaidan was also shy by nature, shunning the limelight. On this he says in his autobiography: "I like to avoid the cause of enmity – from my childhood I noticed this natural disposition in me – therefore, I would avoid anything that would infuriate the teacher or would cause him to rebuke me or beat me".

Zaidan's modesty and shyness, however, masked an inner strength born from self-confidence. This explains the great moral and intellectual courage that he showed in promoting highly controversial views. The two most telling examples of this are his views on the Arabic language and the pre-Islamic history of the Arabs. Arguing that the Arabic language was a "living being" that needed to be modernized he clearly questioned the premise of religious scholars that the Koran represented an ideal and static model of that language. And contrary to the then prevailing view by Muslim historians, his book about Al-Arab Qabl Al Islam established a glorious history of the Arab nation long before the rise of Islam, the impact of which he was keenly aware. The Arabs' history and culture was related to and yet independent of the Islamic one and could disengage from Islamic history in the future.

For these revolutionary views Zaidan was attacked throughout his life – sometimes rationally in measured tones but also viciously by religious dogmatists, as much because of **who** he was as because of **what** he said.

In **conclusion**, Zaidan, born into the lower classes of Beirut, joined a new westernized middle class. He believed that character -- willpower, integrity and rectitude – was the key to personal growth. His life's work can be read as providing the middle classes with knowledge and education to help them replicate his own personal trajectory of growth and development. He credited his success above all to hard work, time consciousness and perseverance. And also to entrepreneurship, management and marketing. His honesty in word and deed won him the following of a wide readership as well as the trust of many friends. His shyness masked an inner strength of character that gave him great self-confidence and moral courage. But his non-confrontational nature; his belief that writers should “display truth and frankness without inclining towards any affiliation or party”; and his Christian-Syrian heritage all kept him in the realm of writers, educators and cultural activists but away from political activism.

Thank you