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Are you a passenger in life?

N. Thivakaran

HAVE you ever had an experience which leaves you thinking about and questioning the values that you have accepted as true?

I was returning from a weekend holiday with several colleagues in a chartered bus. We were exhausted and a long line of cars made the going slow. Late in the journey, a miscommunication occurred between my group and the bus driver on where to stop. The man lost his cool and later, arriving at our destination, a friend of ours, a young girl, told him that a complaint would be lodged. He became angrier and even abusive before some of us calmed things down and got out.

My friend was extremely angry and minutes later, talked of lodging a complaint with the travel agency, demanding a letter of apology and even holding back payment temporarily. The details of that incident aren't important to the point I'm trying to make. But what follows is.

I was totally taken aback by the aggressive stance of this young girl. What I would have done was maybe lodge a complaint. The first priority was to get all our people out at their stops safely. But I knew she was right in wanting to do something about the incident. I also realised that my own action would have been a more passive one, to avoid confrontation. I was in a muddle, confused and embarrassed.

I spoke with my friend later and the whole thing became clearer. She gave me the reasons why she had been so passionate when most of us would have chosen the line of least resistance.

She had been passive too once and had been accused of being only a "passenger in life". Eventually, she got tough and learnt to speak up when something was wrong, even if it was simply shoddy service in a posh restaurant or some injustice in society. That's why she had voiced her dissatisfaction directly while I was looking for the quietest way out.

"What is the point of Malaysia racing ahead with rapid development and so-called progress when its citizens don't speak up for what is right?" she asked me. We see an accident victim and drive past, assuring ourselves that someone else will help him or her.

A family keeps quiet for months, even years, while a father sexually abuses his children. People are getting hurt while the rest of us feel it's safer not to get involved. If a public servant is rude, we just curse him or her and get on with our life. We think nothing of correcting it.

When an injustice occurs, and no one dares to speak out against it, then it will happen again. How many victims will it take before we say enough is enough? How much pain could have been avoided if someone had acted earlier. How many lives would be without scars?

Somebody is being beaten up and a crowd gathers to watch the spectacle. Sound familiar? It happened to an old friend a few weeks ago. Each person in the crowd was gutless to act alone and worse, didn't want to get involved in other people's business.

What hope is there for a society if no one is willing to speak out against wrongdoing? "What has happened to the belief that an individual can make a difference, however small it may be, in making this world a better place?" she asked me.

Does any of this sound familiar? It did to me. Believing that an individual can make a difference, that concern for a fellow human being, even a stranger, is important, is the core of a truly cultured nation. What happened to the act of making it known that something is wrong,

instead of going about business as usual?

If you find that a forest reserve is being logged, would you write to the papers or alert the TV stations? When you see tobacco companies pumping millions into sports, or the media featuring one-sided reporting on an issue, what did you do?

I did nothing. I'm ashamed to say that, in recent years, since I graduated and had to play a bigger role in caring for the family due to my father's illness, I have completely lost the burning feeling to make a difference, to make my life meaningful and different.

Sure, I still get angry at this or that injustice, but I have not written to voice my anger for a long time. I have stopped speaking out against anything I disagree with.

That's easier and you don't make enemies. I have not taken part in any campaign to further good causes. It's great that Marina Mahathir spoke at the UN and is inspiring AIDS education in Malaysia. But am I doing anything about it? No.

The list goes on and on. The bottom line is, I'm too wrapped up in my life to give a damn about our lives. How many of you can say you're not like that? How many can say that you've done something, spoken up when there was a need to be heard?

The saddest thing that hit me after the conversation with my friend was that once, several years ago, I believed in the same things. I wrote about issues which sickened me. I really cared about the environment, hated its indiscriminate exploitation and believed in a thing called justice.

I also believed that an individual could make a difference. That no matter what, I gonna be would not just be another face on this earth who came and went by following the crowd.

Years ago, when I was a teenager, I was afraid that as I grew older, I would lose the fire and eventually become another face in the crowd, minding my own business, not having the guts to speak up when people try to take me for a ride, whether they're rude cab drivers or elected politicians.

Suddenly it hit me - I had become just the thing I had been afraid of. I had become an apathetic, self-centered human being. I had believed in the same ideals as my friend, feared that society would eventually suck me into its passive cocoon, and down the road, without realising it, that is exactly what had happened. And I'm just 27.

I wrote this article to prove to myself that after all this time, I still can care about society and the environment. This is to remind myself of what I had lost and now have found again, thanks to that friend of mine. To remind myself that I still can make a difference, however small it may be. Not to be just another face in a brainless crowd, swallowing all the garbage we're fed, chained to our comfort zones, selfish creatures thinking always in terms of I, me, mine.

We can't be a great nation if we're all passengers, content to fatten ourselves but unwilling to become involved in what happens around us, having lost our guts to speak up and ask for what is right. The day we become afraid to ask for truth and justice, is the day our society starts dying.

Malaysia has many great humanitarians and leaders who touch us and guide this nation. But at the very heart of this country, what kind of person is the ordinary Malaysian? Are we not afraid to speak out against something, to become involved when strangers and even friends are done wrong? Or are we all just passengers, content to get to our destination and to hell with the next person and his problems? What we are individually will determine what this country becomes eventually.

I've decided to get back to the ideals and beliefs of my youth and learn

to speak again when I need to be heard without fear. How about you?  
(END)