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I want it all

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WHEN I was younger I had envisioned myself as a pillar of society, upholding all that was right and good in my various imaginary worlds.

I would achieve this in different guises: as a Ninja secret agent, using martial arts to battle evil-doers (I was still too young to appreciate the rewards of rescuing damsels in distress). I would be Ultraman (I've always lacked originally, even as a child) fighting an alien-durian monster, overcoming its deadly carapace and resisting its comely perfume.

My most inventive fantasy was where I was commander of an elite army, somewhat like a potent United Nations, quelling wars around the world by pure use of force: I blew up everyone's tanks, ships and planes so they wouldn't fight each other. In addition, my troops would use alternative renewable energy sources to sink whaling ships, rescue endangered species and force the perpetrators of heinous crimes against the environment to plant trees. This was no doubt a legacy of having a marine biologist sister who was an active member of Greenpeace.

This was, I suppose, a noble dream. My intentions were laudable even if the means of reaching them were a bit crude (but fun!). It may explain my instinctive belief in a suspension of democracy to reach a particular social goal (though I sometimes shudder when I visualise an eight-year-old me in a Chairman Mao worker's commune suit crying: "Armed forces of the world, unite to save the environment!"). It made sense to me at the time.

Later, in my mid- to late teens, realising the intricacies of the issues, such ambitions evolved to ones with a degree of sophistry. I dressed in black when I wasn't in school uniform, and would have worn a beret, smoked filterless cigarette and drunk espresso if I could.

Unfortunately, being in public school, I settled for having my hair gelled back (quite trendy still!), smoking a friend's mum's menthol cigarette at the nearby padang and trying to look profound while having the odd coffee-flavoured milkshake when mum gave me extra pocket money.

I did manage to listen to jazz and African music which I thought was quite Bohemian (I'd always wondered where Bohemia was) as well as reading Marx (I do recall understanding it once but flicking through it now, it's all German to me).

My ambition at this point was to become a renowned thinker, a shaker and mover, a leader... I wanted to be a Marx, a Mao, a Lenin, a Trotsky (before you label me a totalitarian), a JFK (or a socialist), a Gandhi (before I'm branded an Anglophile), an Aung San Suu Kyi (or a chauvinist). I wanted my personal causes like TAR College's Merdeka, our PM's Wawasan, or a certain Singaporean Senior Minister's ability to strike fear into gum-chewers.

Some element of benevolence was still there but a stronger recurring theme became obvious: the craving for recognition. I wanted recognition that I was an individual, that I was a bright spark, that I could make a difference in the world.

I wished people to know that I could quote Shakespeare, that I had read the forbidden Rushdie and the obscure Giuseppe Di Lampedusa. I wanted to set myself apart from the masses and their "hankering for a voluptuous immobility" (credit to Giuseppe).

I wanted to boast that my parents had spent a disproportionate sum to educate me - and they had got more than their money's worth. And a thread of this egotistical theme was a lust for immortality - that I as an

individual lived beyond this fragile body of mine - if not as a direction in humanity's mind at least as a footnote in history. Oh, yes, I had airs! It was probably because I wasn't very popular in school that I was such an intellectual attention-seeker.

So how did I justify such selfish motivations? I was convinced that the substance of my beliefs were grounded in a sense of propriety and obligation; and so long as I channelled my efforts to do good in the world, maybe I'd be forgiven for appeasing my ego with fame. Or even fortune. I thought that individual ambition could be consistent with collective welfare. Sounds like a very Malaysian way of thinking, doesn't it?

But how fickle a teenager's ambitions are. It wasn't very long before I discovered college life overseas. The zaman mengganas had dawned on me and my capacity for fun was unquenchable.

My attention span was reduced from volumes to chapters and then to the labels on beer bottles; my idols, from great men of history to cartoon monkey-spankers on MTV (funnily enough, like Beavis & Butthead, I never scored).

This was also reflected on my bookshelf: Hawking's Brief History of Time, Anags Nin's Under a Glass Bell, Esquire magazine's free lift-out "How To Succeed With Women in 10 Easy Steps..." The most dire vacuum was the absence of any common sense in my exam papers.

Consequently, the complaints of the shareholders (mum and dad) on the mismanagement of their investment (that is, me not becoming a lawyer and providing them with a secure source of income for their retirement) led to some serious financial repackaging (a cut in pocket money).

Being the amazing management consultants they were - mum's a retired teacher, dad's an ex-servicemen - their advice resulted in my passing through university first time.

Here I am now in a limbo between academia and working life. Possibly on the threshold of a career in a dauntingly serious profession.

You may wonder what has happened to all the ideals along the way. A return to the earliest dreams of upholding and protecting justice in society? Using my job to save the environment? As a means of infiltrating establishment and exacting revolution from above? To support my incurable penchant for social life?

The answer is: I want it all.

I've learnt along the way that dreams and ambitions change, the way heroes have done in Hollywood movies. There aren't that many good and bad guys with incorruptible principles as in Batman and Star Wars anymore.

The heroes of our age have weaknesses and failures as in real life. Nicholas Cage's character in Leaving Las Vegas was an alcoholic. Jerry Maguire's problem was a lack of commitment as was the Saint's. Reservoir Dogs' Mr Black was a bank robber and an indiscriminate killer (so much for real life). I guess my weakness is my ego. And I accept it.

Alas, at the moment I've surrendered to the primal instincts of my Chinese mercantile blood. I want a job with stock options, a handphone, an apartment in central KL, a Miss Malaysia girlfriend, and a BMW with built-in karaoke and a licence plate with a lot of eights in it. I want fame, recognition, wealth and immortality.

And if I do some good for society along the way... you'll just have to forgive me for that. - ethos