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Dr Merican: Lighter of lamps

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I WOULD like to pay tribute to a friend and a public figure. His death on July 1 extinguished a powerful beacon in Kelantan.

Datuk Dr Ahmad Ezanee Merican had always been a guiding light for people in distress, injecting them with hope and even dipping into his personal coffers to steady their rocking boats.

Who in Kelantan has not heard of Dr Merican? There is even a road in Kota Baru called Jalan Merican. He was more than a man - he was an institution; he was a prominent landmark in Kota Baru; he was the most remarkable man I had ever met in my life.

Our close association goes back to 1963 and I am therefore able to describe, with some accuracy and objectivity, the greatness of a man whom I had always regarded as an elder brother.

Dr Merican had an incredible sense of righteousness, even to the extent of quarrelling with other close friends and me over what he thought was fair and just.

He was able, effortlessly, to insulate his thoughts from his sentiments, even when it involved people who had done him injustice and those he liked less or even disliked, and arrive at a most unbiased opinion, thus teaching us what impartiality is.

He would have made an excellent High Court judge.

Although financially he was well off, having been for many years the leading general practitioner in Kota Baru, as well as the royal physician, he did not enjoy a life of good health.

The "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" time and again hit him. He was attacked by cancer in his early life, but aside from the treatment, his will and determination combined with the encouragement of his devoted wife, Jeanne, saw him through that crisis.

However, several years later, the effect of the treatment began to take a toll on him. He was beginning to lose his eyesight. For about 12 1/2 years, he was obliged to use a special lens, not unlike that of a gemologist, to read documents or even the large print of the newspapers.

One of his great pleasures had been reading, and when this handicap robbed him of that delight, he resorted to using "talking books" to add to his already incredibly high literary attainment.

Although Dr Merican was a very busy doctor of medicine, there were not many people who could measure up to his immense literary attainment. He could talk intelligently on almost any topic. How many of us can dream of such an achievement?

Then, gradually, he became blind. But he soldiered on with uncanny cheerfulness and incredible determination. He even continued attending Rotary Club meetings regularly and, despite his physical condition, was certainly not a passive member.

On top of that, he had figured out a unique way of remembering telephone numbers and addresses of close friends and acquaintances so that he would not have to depend on someone else to contact them. Dr Merican hated having to depend on others for anything.

One of the most remarkable things during his period of total blindness was when a close friend of his, another eminent Datuk of Kota Baru, had suddenly been affected by an eye disease that had reduced his sight to a very blurred vision and had resulted in his withdrawal from society and immersion in despondency.

Dr Merican began to ring up his friends, yours truly included, to see if they could cheer him up a little and get him to attend parties and meet friends in order to dilute his despair.

What does this tell us about the capacity of Dr Merican's heart? It was capacious; his concern for others is legendary. All through his life, people had gone to him for help but he had not turned anyone away.

Some he had helped more, some he had helped less, depending on the urgency of their predicament, but no one had been sent away without some form of assistance.

During his early period of total blindness, our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who happened to be in Kota Baru on a political mission, on hearing about Merican's plight, made an unscheduled visit to his house, which stunned the entire neighbourhood, for they had not known that our Prime Minister and Dr Merican had been university mates, the former having been the senior.

It was indeed magnanimous of our Prime Minister, who had such a crammed schedule, to have set aside some time for a friend. That visit must have invigorated my departed friend and given him an impetus to ride the storm that was ravaging him.

Despite his blindness, Dr Merican continued to visit his clinic against his wife's advice because he was told that there were patients who would rather be attended by him in that condition than by anyone else. Such was their faith in him.

It would be appropriate to mention at this juncture that his insistence on continuing to work in spite of his blindness had little to do with earning money.

Dr Merican wanted very much to keep doing something useful to keep himself continually occupied. Besides, a considerable number of his patients received free treatment.

As time went by, the "sling and arrow of outrageous fortune" directed at this great man was at his stomach; cancer had attacked it. The operation that followed resulted in a large portion of the stomach having to be removed.

When he returned to Kota Baru after the operation in Kuala Lumpur, although he had shrunk a great deal and appeared weak, he was his usual unbelievably cheerful self, always more concerned about others than about himself and looking forward to our periodic get-together dinners at all sorts of places, some of them fairly sophisticated joints and others dingy and dusty eating houses where the fare was nevertheless palatable.

Dr Merican had never ever been a snob. He rubbed shoulders with the entire cross-section of society - from the humble labourer to the highest dignitary.

After some time, Dr Merican began rapidly to lose his sense of hearing. Even high-tech hearing aids ultimately were of little help until a devoted friend, whom we called Ah Chiu, attached a microphone to his hearing aid so that he could roughly make out what we were trying to say to him. That helped a great deal.

By this time, this great man had shrunk to skin and bones, was physically very weak and confined to bed much of the time. The support of his devoted, stoical wife, and his wonderful children cannot be described in words, but it was apparent that he was gradually sinking despite his determination and incredible optimism.

He had a steady flow of visitors. Of special mention are two: Her Royal Highness, the Raja Perempuan of Kelantan, known for her generosity and concern for her friends and subjects, called on him and even had some of his favourite dishes sent to him.

Another visitor who deserves special mention is Datin Bashimah, who had

lost her husband to cancer very recently and was still in a state of mourning. She was a devoted friend and visited Dr Merican twice daily to recite Quranic verses through the mike to give him that boost to soldier on.

Bashimah will, undoubtedly, be blessed for her wonderful gesture of selflessness.

Then Dr Merican had to go to Kuala Lumpur a day before his scheduled trip for follow-up treatment as well as to spend some time with his children.

My wife was in time to see him off at his house but I was not at home and unaware of his untimely departure. When I finally received news of his leaving, I dashed to the airport but Dr Merican, his wife and daughter, Dr Shahnaz, a neurologist at the Kuala Lumpur Hospital, had already gone into the departure lounge.

It was through the kindness of an airport security guard that I was allowed into the lounge. Dr Merican did not have the mike attached to his hearing aid, so I had to almost shout what I wanted to tell him. It was basically that I loved him very, very much and wanted him back as soon as possible so that we could continue with our informal get-together dinners with our mutual friends and get on with our discussions at our usual intellectual level.

Miraculously, Dr Merican heard me and responded favourably, looking forward to a reunion dinner at the Kelantan version of Victoria Station, a restaurant situated in Wakaf Bharu, albeit less elegantly furnished but serving appetising cuisine.

Dr Merican was then physically very weak indeed but he refused to sit on a wheelchair to be wheeled to the plane which was a considerable distance away.

Such was his determination to be independent despite his shocking handicap. He wanted to trudge to the plane himself. I had to shout into his ear not to be foolhardy but he looked adamant. I was aghast at his obstinacy, but at that stage, I had to leave the departure lounge as the security guard had indicated to me that my time was up.

That was the last time I saw my wonderful friend.

While Dr Merican was in Kuala Lumpur, his loyal friends in Kota Baru regularly contacted him by phone to inquire about his progress. We had planned to give him a very warm "welcome home" reception upon his return to the State that he loved not only for its uniqueness but for the throng of devoted friends that he had here.

However, on July 1 when I rang at 1pm, his sister-in-law, Fatimah, informed me that he had just passed away. The numbness I felt on hearing the news is ineffable and the vacuum that his demise has brought about can never be filled.

He was an exceptional person, a person with unshakeable principles, a person of unbelievable generosity and magnanimity. Throughout his life, he had helped innumerable people in many different ways and brightened, with selfless abandon, their gloomy lives.

In conclusion, I would like to think of Dr Merican as a lighter of lamps who went from one lamp post to another at dusk, lighting the wick, bringing forth much-needed illumination, and, on fading away into the gloom of twilight and eternity, leaving an endless series of lighted lamps.

Such a person as he must have a very, very special place in the hereafter.

May God rest his soul.