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On the vital importance of selective amnesia

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THE thing is, I never write my own speeches. When commencing a two-hour talk to my favourite audience - pre-university students - my preferred intro is: "Any questions?"

It's the most efficient way I've found to instantly figure the house. If I'm going to be addressing a paddock of tree stumps, I would wish to know right at the outset. That happened in America distressingly often, but I'm happy to report it hasn't yet happened here.

Here, the smart ones ask me to talk about myself, thus displaying a precocious knowledge of the universal truth that everyone's favourite subject is themselves. The brilliant ones, though, ask me what's going on outside.

Then it's mush the huskies and off we go on a discursive, not to say rambling, dialogue (or monologue-with-interjections, anyway) on writing, journalism, politics, history and national identity, with the latest Tom Cruise movie thrown in for effect.

But, even immediately afterwards, I can't recall a thing I said. I suspect there's something sub-consciously wilful about this amnesia. I can pass polygraph tests denying everything if necessary. The trouble is, sometimes they remember. Worse, sometimes they even write it down.

Umno Youth's up-and-coming (or going, not quite sure which) Khairy Jamaluddin, now special assistant to the Deputy Prime Minister, attended and wrote up a talk I gave to Malaysians at the London School of Economics in 1996 as "The Rashid Integration Model". (It may still be out there on the Internet somewhere.)

In so doing, he did me the inestimable favour of providing not just the funky title but the only written evidence of an idea I laboured at for years in the hope of beating it down into a book, but no, the vain thing kept insisting on an audio-visual presentation.

Talking, as we all know, is the undoing of thinking. It's impossible to do both at the same time. And what is unthought, obviously, no matter how glibly uttered, can't be remembered.

At the last Umno general assembly, a reporter from another newspaper approached me and asked if I remembered the talk I'd given their cubs nine or 10 years before. On anxious dredging I un-earthed a murky image of a dozen or so unsmiling people with folded arms and crossed ankles in a windowless room in the rank premises her newspaper occupied back then.

She asked me if I remembered what I said, and the only thought I could discern in the dead blank of my mind was: "Oh s\*\*t, here it comes."

"You said," she said, "you're too young to be cynical."

She asked if I still thought so, and I said I supposed so, but now that we weren't so young anymore it might be okay to enjoy the occasional cynic; heck, life oughtn't be without some hard-earned indulgences.

At least, that's what I meant to say. What I actually said, of course, I have no way of recalling, so I hope she doesn't hold it against me in another nine or 10 years.

When it came to the students of Taylor's College's American Degree Program earlier this month, all I can remember is them. Good-looking, bright, fit, healthy, well-fed, brought-up and turned-out young men and women; young enough to be my children, had I not known at their age what I've since forgotten.

Young enough, at any rate, to have been born under the Mahathir

Administration and for this to be the only Malaysia they've ever known. It doesn't seem to have crippled them. They were attentive and alert, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed and curious. They're going to clean up in America, which will hold far fewer surprises for them than they hold in store for America, as well as for themselves. What the US offers them will be all the space in the world to unfold.

Because they did seem kind of crumpled up, a little, some of them. A certain hunching of the shoulders and constriction of the voice; a restraint of expression. They needed to reveal something. They were not really oppressed, prevented or intimidated from doing so, and they had the language; it was more that they seemed to lack the mechanisms for it; the templates, the techniques.

They wanted to contend with words like "censorship", for example; big bad brutes of words the generation before had learned to shy away from. (Hush, child, lest the Kraken wake!) They had been born and raised programmed to a default-setting of sensitive issues and no-fly zones established in their grandparents' time, and although their parents might have held the key to it, the children had hardly even a notion of the lock.

Raised on the Discovery and National Geographic channels, they seemed irritated by parents and families who scoffed at dreams and counselled traditional common sense. No, they saw ample common sense in doing oceanography or theatre, making music or swimming with whales or writing, and generally following their bliss. (I encouraged them mightily, of course, subversive that I am.)

What did it mean to be Malaysian, or a Malaysian, they asked. Who were they, really? One young woman passionately asked: "What if I find out I'm not what I am?" - a question that might give a Zen Master years of pause. I strongly suspect they weren't asking to be told, however, but to be enabled to tell.

I obviously had a good time. I was particularly moved by the e-mail one of them sent me the next day, reminding me that she had asked what it took to be a journalist, and I had replied: "Compassion and curiosity."

Now she wants to be one too, oh dear, what have I done.