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Remembering the good old days

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Knowledge accumulates in the universities, because the freshmen bring a little in and the seniors take none away - Anonymous
EVERYTHING had changed. Yet nothing had changed. Both had happened at the same time. We had grown. Yet we had remained the same. Yes, that is exactly how I felt about my university alumni at our class reunion, last Saturday.

The last I saw my university mates, was on graduation day years ago, where we bade goodbye at the crossroads of our lives. At that time we could not even afford to exchange e-mail addresses or cellphone numbers.

We had nothing then, only hungry ambitions to make it in life. However, I have carried my fellow students' names in my memory all this while.

That seemed like 100 years ago, and I had not dreamt that I would ever meet any of my friends again. But now, thanks to Monica, who has managed to diligently and single-handedly track down almost the entire class, we celebrated. We relived the past, updated each other on the present and planned our next reunion.

Earlier, as I felt deja vu for a fleeting moment, at the door of the private dinner room, years fled by hurriedly, taking me back to my university days. I felt whisked back in history, where I was standing outside the canteen, with dwindling cash in one hand and undone assignments in the other.

Right now too, our excitement was transparent as Malays, Chinese and Indians blended into uninhibited Malaysian chatter. Also, as we talked about the past, the present was submerged. It was like we never left university.

We were products of the present education system and had survived its various reforms, trials and experiments. Like chameleons we accepted any changes, not because we did not know better, but because we were more committed to a paper chase that could shape our future.

Or, perhaps like Mark Twain said: "We did not want our schooling to interfere with our education." Perhaps he was right. It is not formal education that shapes our lives. In today's world, with access to information and knowledge, one can get a degree even by sitting in front of a computer.

But what we cannot get is the university culture that lays the foundation for the future. More importantly, it is the social interaction among the students, from the different backgrounds, the different ethnic groups and religions and various personalities that shape our personality.

In my case, much of my small group consisting of Bibiana, Monica, Ivy, Surya Soo Thian, Christina, Hassan, Hamzah, Guna, Chin Teck, Chee Kock and many others were almost the only people I knew then. My expectations in life were based on the social, moral or academic standards they had set.

Right now, so much has happened that has enhanced each one of us. Our lives have a shape and size now, especially since our practical education in the real school of experience.

And it is with this experience and adult hindsight that I revisited history. Now I can see each of my friends in different light and can recognise their kindness, the richness of their characters and most of all, as pieces of my life that made sense now.

Many of these I might have missed then, as I scrambled between one lecture hall or another, or, even when I was loitering at the canteen.

Now as I looked at each face, I remembered not the days but moments I had shared with each of them.

The stories of university life leave an impression; early memories which cannot be traded for another set. Some of my memories were crammed with images, dreams and failures. They were scattered and uncatalogued.

As usual, my good friend Bibiana was quick to analyse it and return it to order, just like in the old days. Like I said, nothing has changed.

Interestingly, I attended my reunion dinner just after I wrote my column on multi-racial clubs in the university last week. I had mentioned that there was more ethnic consciousness when I was a university student.

Just the same, I now realise that I had also been part of a small group who had become very close, regardless of race, religion and sex. We must have grown closer without even being aware of it because as students we had too many growing pains, examination pressures and even financial constraints to take time for soul searching.

Right now we have formed our own multi-racial reunion club, retrospectively legitimatising what the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mohamed Mahathir envisions for the present university students to diffuse racial segregation.

Last Saturday during the reunion, I wanted to stay on longer as a student or to reminisce over our past, on how we had initiated adulthood with teh tarik in the wee hours of the morning. The only problem is I have less time now and so much more of everything else. In the university, time was all we had.

As things turned out, the evening was filled with non-stop laughter and proved a great success. So congratulations to Monica, who had mooted the idea and spent almost a year looking us up, and to Soo Tian for organising such a memorable and thoroughly enjoyable evening. This too will become a memory that will go quickly but I was able to catch it and write this for all of you.