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Reasons aplenty to cheer up

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THE passion that right should prevail has gone. In its stead has come apathy and despair that anything wrong can be put right. I refer to my personal reactions towards events in post-war Iraq and Afghanistan and the certainty that Palestine and Israel can never be at peace unless a bigger power than either of them can be the guiding hand.

Nowadays, I read the headlines and I look at the pictures but I no longer scour every sentence. Despair has sunk in too deeply.

Newspapers should ideally be read at midday, or later even, after we have girded up ourselves, taken a deep breath and are prepared to read the worst that is happening in our own cities and in countries around the world.

I usually read mine when I come groggily out of a darkened bedroom. It is not the best way to start the day.

It torments me to think that the legacy we leave behind for our children, our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren, in fact, for all the generations to come, is constant aggression, war, anger, frustration and despair.

There is too much poverty, too many refugees, too many innocent people maimed and killed. Local news are just as disturbing - we read of murders, rapes, incests, thefts, drug-trafficking, loan sharks, gangsters, and schools that are no longer safe havens for our children.

For the coming National Day, we don't have much to celebrate, do we? Despite everything, I think we do. In fact, we must insist that we have reasons to celebrate. If not for ourselves, then we must do it for those who one day will take our place.

My own despair about world events turned to something akin to optimism when I watched a concert performed by the children and adults of the Johor Special School for Spastic Children.

Because of the coming National Day, they sang Fikirkan Boleh (You Must Think That You Can Do It). One little boy would break out into huge smiles, his arms held high up in the air, whenever he joined with the others in shouting Fikirkan Boleh! - nothing incredible perhaps except he was in a wheelchair because his legs were too thin to support his body.

If a wheelchair-bound little boy has enough belief in those few words, then surely I, too, should rejoice and be thankful. Shouldn't I too lift up my arms high into the air?

The song Fikirkan Boleh is part of the Malaysia Boleh campaign. The song is considered by some as being too corny, too mushy. When I looked closely at the lyrics, they make up a signal for optimism.

The concept of Malaysia Boleh has become something of a joke among the cynically-minded and those of us who consider ourselves as sophisticated, learned people. There are those who scorn the idea: can we really achieve whatever we wish? Or are we trying to impress ourselves or the visitors who come here?

Indeed, do we need to impress anyone? If we forget the hype, the hyperbole, and the "cringe factor", Malaysia Boleh actually carries a positive message.

It encourages us to dream the impossible: that we can achieve recognition, accolades and trophies if we try hard. If for nothing else, the encouragement for us to dare to dream is to be applauded.

We shouldn't shrink and think we aren't capable of great deeds. It's

like the children's story of The Little Engine That Could - a small little train helps carry needed goods through rain and snow, up and down dangerous mountain slopes, but finally reaches the train station and delivers the much-needed supplies to the little town.

Malaysia's history has taken a similar sort of route as the one that the Little Engine took: it has been marked with celebrations as well as with dangerous, frightening times. Then, towards the end of the last century, we were given a vision of a better future.

Forty-six years since Independence, we have had our share of glories and scandals, of noble acts and ignoble people, of highways that link the north with the south, and the east with the west, as well as roads that lead to nowhere, and abandoned housing projects that remind us of greed, and of ambition gone wrong.

It is a fact that we are an imperfect country. But it is these very imperfections which make us love our dear, little country more. Of course, it would be wonderful to have an efficient machinery at work, but then such a machinery would reduce us to robotic figures - unable to feel, unable to voice out either our gratitude or, more importantly, our discontent.

As for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who will be retiring soon, he has earned respect from unexpected quarters: Australians I met (of course, they spoke for themselves, not as official representatives of their country) said they respected him for not bowing down to the more powerful nations of the West.

An Indian Muslim man in Singapore said he has shown courage while facing mightier powers, and there should be more leaders like him. That should be a cue for us as Malaysians: that we have it in us to be a great people. But we mustn't confuse being courageous with being arrogant.

Standing up for what we believe in is one thing, but to turn our noses up and say we don't need help from other nations is another. More than ever, in a frightening, violent world, we need to be part of the world community.

And the way to be part of this great, old world we live in is to accept that however hopeless things may seem, there are still many reasons to be optimistic, and to offer our hands in friendship. As the late Indira Gandhi said: "You cannot shake hands with a fist."

All we need to do is to look at our children, the new-born babies, the mentally- and physically-challenged, the poor and the needy, and realise that we have work to do. They need us for help and guidance.

We need them to make us better people - not mechanical, efficient machines, but a people with weaknesses, with needs, and with a great ability to love.

We need not be perfect but we do need to be human.

May Allah bless us all on National Day and in the days and years to come.