

29/06/2003

Open your minds to dialogue

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IN 1996, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released the Jacques Delors Report entitled The Treasure Within.

The book was well received and until today is an inspiration to educators and scholars throughout the world. The simple but profound pillars of learning which are expounded are: "to know and understand", "to do", "to learn and live with others" and "to be".

Almost a decade earlier, Samuel Huntington had written the Clash of Civilizations.

Then, Harold Bloom sent psychological shock waves throughout the United States when he discussed The Closing of the American Mind. Bloom also elaborated on the neglected literacy - "cultural literacy."

In Malaysia, since The Malay Dilemma by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was published years ago, controversy over the ideas raised in the book continues.

Delors provided a vision for education in the 21st century. Huntington alerted people on the need to understand differences in the "manifest destiny" of civilisations and to be conscious of civilisational clashes. Bloom emphasised the need for "cultural literacy" and warned against "the closing of the American mind".

Mahathir, in The Malay Dilemma, advocated self-reflection and encouraged the Malays to be engaged proactively and constructively in the transformation of their society.

People who are in monologue mode do not listen to anybody else. They are not interested in one of the four pillars of learning - "learning to live with others."

People who are prepared for dialogue are interested in searching for solutions to all kinds of problems - political, religious, social or personal. People who are engaged in dialogue listen to other people. They may not agree to the arguments raised, but they will listen.

The act of listening is the act of learning. It is an act of the open mind and the open heart. When a person listens, he receives a feedback of emotions, ideas, thoughts and beliefs.

Trying to understand different points of view is an enriching experience which equips a person with the skill of living with others. Listening to differing points of view is not easy as it may be difficult to accept that other people may have views and beliefs that are as strong as ours.

For those prepared to engage in the art and science of dialogue, the state of being "disturbed" or challenged is the precondition to greater understanding and enlightened insights.

Those who are bold enough to attempt to discover themselves and their humanity have to step out of their enclaves and look at the world afresh. The sincere and serious learner will hold dialogue in high esteem.

There are typically several attitudes towards dialogue. First, there are some who believe they have the monopoly over Truth and, therefore, need not engage in dialogue.

Others engage in little dialogue for the sake of courtesy and maintenance of a relationship, but are hesitant to explore new ideas.

A third group favour or even initiate dialogue on their own. They are confident because they have honed their skills in communication and command respect. They have the tendency, however, to assert the rightness

of their beliefs whether political, economic, religious, social or cultural.

A fourth group engages in political-ideological, inter-faith or race-related dialogue as a matter of normal discourse. Such people may not have any expectations from dialogue and do not want to assert their beliefs. They merely enjoy peer bonding or friendship.

The best attitude to adopt in dialogue is when one regards it as a challenge, in expectation that dialogue will lead to new insights. Such understanding will lead to greater cohesion and fewer conflicts among individuals and societies.

There are many reasons why people engage in dialogue. Therapeutic groups converge so their members may help each other heal and develop. Groups also get together to foster mutual understanding, share experiences and engage in community building.

Other groups engage in dialogue to foster understanding among people who have different opinions, world views or perspectives.

Mature and serious individuals and groups study the methods and strategies of dialogue to explore the notion of shared meaning construction. It fosters an understanding of the past and anticipation of the future, and generates solutions to problems.

As the world becomes more of a global village and as people of different beliefs, cultures and opinions encounter each other at every turn, the destructive element of intolerance rises.

Ongoing creative dialogue can prevent people from being drawn into the quagmire of irreconcilable differences. When people apply the strategies and tools of critical and creative thinking in dialogue, it opens up new vistas of trust, friendship and mutual respect.

The art and science of dialogue will then enable us to "(learn) to live with others who are different in peace, harmony and sincere respect." Those involved in inter-faith, inter-racial, inter-civilisation and inter-disciplinary dialogue should be given all the support they deserve. They are the ones who lead us to higher levels of "mindfulness."

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