

# Time to regard education as an adventure

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*"Ah but a man's reach should exceed his grasp. Else what's a heaven for?"*  
— Robert Browning

I HAVE an announcement to make. I am pregnant. But before little men in white coats appear to take me away, I hasten to explain that what I meant was that I am pregnant with ideas, inspired by a recent erudite piece in the *Asian Wall Street Journal* about aging.

Yes, there is some mental deterioration that comes with age, but it is confined to the memory function (I can vouch). For the rest, however, longevity brings an improvement in one's faculties especially in vocabulary, problem-solving and, above all, in creativity.

The article brought a degree of solace. One of the most precious aspects of the human experience is the life of the mind.

As a small child, I once went missing. Today, this would conjure up the most horrific premonitions of abduction, rape and worse we read about on an almost daily basis.

My own little adventure ended innocently enough. I was found in a nearby school having infiltrated the *enfants* class. My parents were later inclined to see this as prophetic. In-

## COMMENT

By Paddy Bowie



stinctively, I had found what was to become a main focus and inspiration of my life. I always loved school. It was an exciting intellectual adventure from start to finish.

Today, there are 18,000 jobless Malaysian graduates per year. The issue is not a talent gap but their state of unreadiness for the world of work. Nothing wrong either with their ability. Nor is it just their inadequate command of English. They are just not business savvy.

I was horrified to learn from Malaysian vice chancellors that their students do not ask questions! This was anathema, almost heresy. A university is meant to be all about the spirit of enquiry and intellectual curiosity.

Instead, the system is surrendered to a paper chase and an examination fixation. Education has become learning by rote, the students being

instructed, taking copious notes and regurgitating knowledge in the exam room.

Forgetting that the word *educere* means to "draw out" not to "put in". The corporate representatives concurred. Malaysian graduates entering business don't think for themselves. They want to be told what to do and prefer to work in committees (without personal responsibility).

They are prone to excessive boss orientation — whatever the chairman says at meetings they agree — never mind how they may differ among themselves in the corridor afterwards.

Education should be an adventure. I personally like to explore intellectually. Some people choose to climb Everest or bungee jump or jet ski to challenge themselves. I chose other avenues not so spectacular but compelling me to dare, at times to be different.

Like when I taught in the Law Faculty of Singapore University without being a lawyer. It probably sealed a lifelong propensity to be a corporate freak.

But if I ever commit murder, I will have a stout alumni either side of the Causeway to defend me and half the

judges will have to recuse themselves. They include notables in Singapore like its ambassador-at-large Professor Tommy Koh or Deputy Prime Minister S. Jayakumar and here, former Justice Datuk K.C. Vohrah or for that matter the present Chief Justice.

The trouble is, I knew these former students as 18-year-olds. Today they are at least in their 50s, balding, grey-haired, paunchy and have acquired a degree of gravitas from those carefree years. It is difficult to recognise them.

We can often judge an educational institute by its products. Asked to speak for Oxford at the Boat Race Dinner, I was able to cite a formidable roll call. This one university has produced four British kings and at least eight foreign royals. Raja Nazrin Shah, the Raja Muda of Perak, who has been hitting the headlines lately, was also educated there.

Oxford can boast 47 Nobel Prize winners, 25 British prime ministers, and 28 foreign presidents. Bill Clinton and Benazir Bhutto feature. And for sheer versatility, seven saints, 86 archbishops, 18 cardinals and one pope. It can also claim John Wesley (a founder of Methodism).

My case rests, even without that other impressive list of celebrities in the world of the performing arts.

Being in my anecdotage, I like to tell anecdotes. And now end with one.

It is a Malaysian story of early intellectual daring. The famous English public school Harrow has a yearly ritual. On the first day of school the students all gather in the great hall to hear the headmaster's annual address, including the roll call of British prime ministers, notably Winston Churchill, produced by the school.

The students listen in respectful silence. It was therefore somewhat of a culture shock when a new boy stood up and challenged the great man: "Sir, you are wrong. There is one more."

"You omitted Jawaharlal Nehru. Or do you not consider the leader of a Commonwealth country the equal of Westminster?"

The boy in question went on to become the head boy of the school and the headmaster liked to recount the story as the time he first spotted his potential.

The boy was Malaysian, and it may not surprise you to learn his name was Woodhull (Anjaman).