

Racing forward to Know Thyself

NST- 26/11/2006.

WE should stop fooling ourselves. Unity, like Utopia, will always remain a dream, a direction. We will not achieve it in 2020 or later.

But the good news is, if we learn to celebrate our diversity while understanding the underlying unity, we will do marvelously.

For diversity is the very scheme of life. Celebrating our rich variety while anchored in awareness of our common destiny should become a national agenda.

We should also celebrate our sense of being part of the human panorama; of being part of this inter-related cosmos.

In any multi-racial, multi-religious society, there is bound to be tension and the occasional collision. If this nation is doing well it is because of the elasticity and vibrancy of this tension which acts as a delicate balance.

Look at some of the countries where only people of a single race or one religion live. They are battered by constant strife or gnawing poverty.

I daresay Malaysia has not seen the open strife and destruction that has bludgeoned many nations mainly because it is not a one-race, one-religion nation. And because it has this equivalence.

The government's role is to manage this tension; to transform collision into collaboration. No one should be made to feel he or she is a second class citizen. Everyone should feel equal ownership of this nation.

A government which discriminates gives the wrong message to both those who are being discriminated against and those who benefit. One side feels it is being treated unjustly. The other side comes to believe it is an inherent right.

Under certain circumstances, as part of maintaining this fine balance, adjustments — such as affirmative action — may be required. But these should be carried out in a way that does not antagonise and marginalise one segment or create dependency in the other.

It will be easier for citizens to remember their responsibility in maintaining this balance if they have a sense of gratitude. This is, after all, a country blessed with natural resources; a country rarely visited by massive natural calamities; a country which is free from bomb blasts and civil strife.

We have a tendency to expect others to do something about

problems and issues. This must change. What are we, as individuals, doing to make Malaysia a better place? There are many small things we can do to engender closer relations. Smiling, for instance. Or being polite. Or reading up about another culture. Or even, and especially, managing anger.

The race forward must include encouragement to discuss problems and issues openly. It is better to discuss frustrations openly and seek solutions than to suppress them or allow them to fester and simmer. It is better to have verbal eruptions now and then than to have even a single physical eruption.

As always, the best place to start is with the young. Children spend much of their lives in school. They should be encouraged to accept the differences in race, culture and religion.

Students should not be discriminated against because of race or religion. From what I hear, this is not the case in more than a few national schools.

Only last week, one shocked parent complained about an assessment test done by a school for children entering Year One. The results of the assessment were to be used by the school authorities to decide which class the pupils would go to.

The parent said the teachers

went around helping children of a particular race to answer the questions, totally ignoring the other children. What sort of message will this send the young minds?

Teachers must engender an atmosphere of cordiality and goodwill to help students transcend petty separatist tendencies and to narrow group loyalties. They should inspire the students to see beyond race and religion. And they should do it by example. How many such teachers do we have?

Something certainly stinks in our education system. It is not enough to call in the general practitioner. We need to call in the surgeon to excise the cancerous areas.

Some blame it on the existence of vernacular schools. But this is the easy way out. The older generation will tell you that during their time there was hardly any sense of difference among students. And there were vernacular schools at that time too.

I, for instance, had many friends. We never really saw each other as Malay or Chinese or Indian. We saw ourselves as Edwardians (King Edward VII Secondary School) and as Malaysians. We used to call each other "Melayu" or "Hindu" but no one felt insulted or that these were "sensitive" words.

Abdul Aziz Salleh (now Datuk),

Jamil Ahmad, Shahoran, Ong Kim Beng, Jeff Lee, Manavalan, Manogaran, Ma'sood and Zakuan — we celebrated our differences; we celebrated our commonalities.

One reason was that in school we were all treated equally. If there was a teacher's favourite it had nothing to do with race.

I suppose this was because most of my school life was spent before May 13, 1969 and the introduction of the New Economic Policy. At the time I left school, the implementation of the New Economic Policy was in its infancy and had not begun to cause any discontent.

Another reason was that we had mature teachers. Dedicated teachers who wanted to mould personalities and share knowledge.

But I pity today's children. Too many narrow-minded people are masquerading as "guru" and giving that lovely and noble word a bad name. Etymologically, "guru" means "dispeller of darkness". But more than a few blinkered teachers are creating darkness instead.

For the nation to produce towering Malaysians, we need mature teachers. Is the government committed enough to hire quality people and not anyone who needs a job after finishing school? Disciplinary action

should be taken against school heads and teachers who show racial bias. Is the government brave enough to do that?

The teaching profession should be made attractive to quality people by way of better salaries and perks.

The way forward to a happy Malaysia calls for a wholesome and holistic education system that also addresses the need to make children feel wanted; to feel they are an essential part of the national fabric; to feel "I am Malaysian first".

We need a system which teaches them to think, not fill them with information; a system that inculcates a deep sense of awareness of their actions and the consequences; we need to teach them noble values; we need to teach them not to be quick in assigning blame but to look within.

We need a system which does not plant the seed of racial or religious superiority in a young mind. It may be a good idea to keep religion out of the formal school curriculum.

The education system should introduce a key aspect of holistic living: the Know Thyself philosophy.

Know Thyself should be the mantra on every student's lips. It should be inscribed on every wall. It should be on everyone's list of things to do. Politicians, teachers, you and I — we will benefit tremendously by knowing ourselves.

For this will be the starting point to a less violent world and a contented life. It should take us beyond colour and creed.

Seneca's advise is pertinent: "We should every night call ourselves to an account. What infirmity have I mastered today? What passions opposed? What temptation resisted? What virtue acquired? Our vices will abort of themselves if they be brought every day to the shrift."

Most important perhaps, the Know Thyself mantra will help us and our children celebrate our humanity, our diversity of cultures and the diversity that is Nature. I've started on this journey. Will you join me?

We have come to this world to accept it, not merely to know it. We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.

— Rabindranath Tagore