

WE CAN MAKE

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COLUMN

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ABOU BEN ADHEM

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase)

Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace

And saw within the moonlight of his room

Making it rich, like a lily in bloom

An angel writing in a book of gold.

Exceeding peace had made Abou Ben Adhem bold

And to the presence in his room he said

"What writest thou?"

The vision raised its head

And with a look of all sweet accord, answered:

"The names of those who love the Lord."

"And is mine one?" said Abou.

"Nay, not so," replied the angel.

Abu spoke more low

But cheerily, still, said: "I pray thee then

Write me as one that loves his fellow men."

The angel wrote and vanished.

The next night it came again with a great wakening light

And showed the names of whom love of God had blessed

And lo! Ben Adhem's name led the rest.

— James Henry Leigh Hunt
(1784-1859)

A RETIRED diplomat friend of ours sent this poem — part of the syllabus in English classes in the 1950s and 1960s — out to all on his mailing list, wishing us Christmas and New Year cheer.

May we all, the children of Adam, our friend wished, have our names in that book of gold, together with Abou ben Adhem.

How we wish it could be so.

Before we get lost in a dream of Utopia, perhaps we should take a reality check.

That wish will never come true. Why? Because...

- God made us all different.
- The world is not ideal.
- Our environment shapes us differently.
- We're selfish.
- Self-preservation is a natural instinct.
- It's easier to be emotional than rational.
- It's difficult to love another human just for the sake of humanity.
- Human beings are imperfect.
- And because we are what we are.

But to wish we could all be like Abou Ben Adhem is a good wish and to dream that our world could be ideal is a good dream.

In the pessimism that surrounds us, such wish and such dream gives us hope. What would we be if we had no hope left?

I had the good fortune to be given the book *The Reluctant Politician*, a biography on Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, one of Malaysia's greatest leaders and founding fathers, fresh off the press on Christmas eve.

Dr Ismail's son, Tawfik, a long-time dear friend, flew in from Johor Baru to pass me



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the book and took the next flight back.

More than a decade ago, Tawfik and I spent days in Johor, going through Tun Ismail's letters, diaries and notes.

They were from his early years as a medical student in Australia, during the negotiations for independence, and to the last days of his life when he was deputy prime minister of Malaysia.

Those who have lived through this era have always revered Dr Ismail. He was hot-tempered and impulsive, but he was also righteous and fair.

He was feared for his inability to suffer fools and the corrupt, but he was respected for being a man of principles and one who kept his word.

His private correspondence and personal journals only confirm that he was what he was — the private and public persona were one and the same.

The range of tributes to him in the book, from the builders of newly independent Malaysia to people like the great civil servants of that time, Tan Sri Ramā Iyer, Tan Sri Abdullah Ali, and people like Tan Sri Philip Kuok and Robert Kuok, and his friendship with great Malaysians such as Tun Suffian Hashim and Tun Ismail Ali, show the kind of man Dr Ismail was.

The accolades by young and upcoming leaders of that time — Tun Musa Hitam, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi — and the great warriors such as Tan Sri Ghazali Seth and Tun Haniff Omar show how he had an impact in shaping their lives so that they could be better leaders of men.

Although Tawfik inherited all the journals and notes when his father died in 1973 of a heart attack, he was reluctant to publish the memoirs of Dr Ismail to avoid embarrassing some stalwarts who were in prominent positions.

But 33 years later, although some of

those who are indicted by Dr Ismail's scathing verdict are still alive, Tawfik collaborated to have the memoirs published.

It is a revealing book, though not exhaustive, and though perhaps a little sanitised. And there will be those who would be unhappy to read their names in the book and see what Dr Ismail thought of them.

For those who have forgotten history, do not know, or choose not to remember, it is a book that should be read, especially as we stand on the threshold of a Malaysia going into its 50th year of independence.

It talks about the struggle for independence, the underlying principles of the social contract which has been debated so much in recent months, the heartbreaking moments of separation with Singapore, the confrontation with Indonesia and the racial riots of May 13.

Dr Ismail, who was Home Minister during May 13, gives his views on why it happened. And his letters and notes tell about the trying years of building a nation as envisioned by the founding fathers.

Sure, there have been many books and articles written about all these events and seen from the eyes of other witnesses of history.

Sure, there will be those who disagree with some of Dr Ismail's conclusions and find his observations disturbing, especially current day politicians from all spectrums.

Yet, from a man who was honest, who served his country and people selflessly, who was fair and believed in doing the right thing, Tun Ismail's thoughts and experiences could perhaps steer some of today's politicians, civil servants and younger Malaysians to the path that the founding fathers envisioned we would take as a united people in a united nation.

I may not have been privileged and not old enough to truly understand what it feels like to be colonised and to build a

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nation from scratch, but to me, Dr Ismail was one of Malaysia's Abou Ben Adhems and I am glad Tawfik decided to allow his father's memoirs to be published.

The year 2006 has not been the greatest year for Malaysia and it ends miserably with the big floods which have destroyed thousands of homes and claimed so many lives.

But perhaps what would have disturbed the founding fathers like Dr Ismail, and what disturbs most right-thinking Malaysians, is the continued antagonism and debate on issues which we should no longer be debating into the 50th year of our independence.

Certainly, it is not all doom and gloom. The economy is sound and the policies and programmes, if properly implemented and executed, will take us to the next level.

Two fundamental issues that need to be addressed are security, particularly in the urban centres, and the education system, which, by any account, has deteriorated over the decades due to myopic policies and political expediencies.

Malaysia has always been fortunate to have the right leaders at the right time and the police force has indeed been very lucky to have Tan Sri Bakri Omar and his successor, Tan Sri Musa Hassan, both of whom have shown great determination in reforming the force and improving security.

And both Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein and Higher Education Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed have announced plans for reforms of the education system.

Yet, one cannot blame a Malaysian public that may be sceptical because they have heard it all before.

Our hope is derived from the personalities and strength of character of people like Bakri and Musa.

But perhaps, the greatest underlying issue we have is the fragility of the race and religious relations today.

It could have been easy to resort to the familiar response that all is well because all races have a place in the power structure; that if all races are not happy, then we are doing something right; that our greatest strength is our diversity.

But it took courage for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to acknowledge, at a dinner earlier this month that ethnic relations were indeed fragile.

In a speech where no one listening doubted his passion, sincerity and desire for a Malaysia as envisioned by the founding fathers, Abdullah related his personal experiences of the early days of May 13, and of a history that many have forgotten.

So many things were said and so many things happened this year. If only level heads had ruled and if only historical perspective had prevailed, then we would not have had so much angst.

In most of the issues relating to ethnic and religious relations raised this year, culpability lies with politicians from both sides of the scale.

When we choose them to represent us — whether they are from DAP, Pas or Barisan Nasional — we expect them to champion our cause and to make this country a better place to live for *all* of us.

Yet, when the occasion arises to be statesmen and to show true leadership, many of them let us down, accentuating our differences instead of furthering and expanding on the common values and the love of the country that we share.

It is easy to be a champion of one race and to raise emotions of one ethnic group.

The true test of leadership in a multi-racial country like ours is to be accepted and respected as a leader and champion of all Malaysians.

The Reluctant Politician tells of how Dr Ismail and leaders of his time desired that Malaysia move away from the communal-based political party but the window passed and events took place that perpetuated the system we have.

Is there a truly multi-racial, multi-religious political party in the country, after 50 years?

The DAP claims to be one as does Gerakan. But neither is truly multi-racial or multi-religious. In both parties, one race dominates. Pas? Far from it.

The closest semblance still remains the coalition of parties within the Barisan Nasional but even then, individual race-based parties, when it suits them, play to their gallery because inevitably, there are powerful individuals who are afraid to lose support from within their ranks.

And we have seen enough of it this year, whether at a Gerakan, MIC, MCA or an Umno general assembly.

A purely commercial business deal can become a race issue. An inoffensive cartoon can be made into a religious issue. A keris can be used to send shivers down the spine of a nation. The death of apostates becomes a tug-of-war in which the nation is dragged into.

That is why it is such a pleasure to go back to the small towns, villages and rural areas because the real people, the pulse of our nation, are generally not like that.

When May 13 happened, it was confined to the urban centres like Kuala Lumpur, and in Penang and Perak, and the larger part of the country, though living in fear, was unscathed.

When Kampung Medan and Kerling happened, the rest of the country was unaffected.

But race and religion are very emotive issues and if they continue to be raised and exploited, the country could pay a heavy price because there is no telling how far and fast the flames can spread.

That is the reality.



We have the foundations, much better than most. And every day, we do see little things happening before our eyes which warm the heart and give us hope.

For those who remember 1987 was a very bad year. Racial tensions escalated, culminating in Operasi Lalang — again, because of irresponsible politicians and media — and we came this close...

We have to change. The politicians have to change, the media has to be more responsible, NGOs and businesses have to realise that lip-service alone will not do.

The way we lead our lives and manage our organisations will determine our country's future.

We are fortunate to celebrate 50 years of relative success next August. Most of us will not be around in 2057 when our children and grandchildren prepare for Malaysia's centennial celebrations.

What kind of country will they be living in? Will race and religion still be a recurring issue?

Would we have a new breed of politicians, media, businesses who are more sensible and rational?

Would a non-Chinese be allowed to become CEO and editor-in-chief of the MCA-owned *Star* newspaper? Would a capable Malaysian be allowed to head the *New Straits Times* editorial operations without some powerful agitators raising the race issue?

Will some of the Chinese language newspapers start believing that they are part of a society that is multi-racial? Will some of the Bahasa Malaysia newspapers start believing that?

I don't know, really. I believe that it is easier for some people to be one-race heroes than to be Malaysian heroes because then, you don't have

to think or try too hard.

Some people say we are a young nation and we shall come out of this.

After all, they argue, the United States had a civil war 70 years after it proclaimed independence and there continued to be official and widespread discrimination and persecution of blacks until the 1960s.

Discrimination is still prevalent in countries like Britain, Germany, Holland, Japan and other more developed democracies.

So what, I say. Are they our teachers that we have to learn to be like them?

Malaysia is a great country but we can make it so much better if only we try just a wee bit harder; if only we weed out and shame the irrational ones in our midst.

We have the foundations, much better than most. And everyday, we do see little things happening before our eyes which warm the heart and give us hope.

Like the Chinese girl in a skirt holding the hands of a "tudung-ed" and *baju kurung*-ed Malay girl with a leg handicap and helping her cross Jalan Sultan Ismail.

Like the non-Malay girls wearing *baju kurung* and walking to lunch with their Malay friends who are wearing *kurtas* and *cheongsam*.

Like my youngest daughter Lei and her inseparable Chinese friend Adora who take turns sleeping over at each other's houses and planning their overseas studies together.

Like my friend Vincent Cheah's long-time business relationship and friendship with Haji Jiran.

Like *Edge* editor-in-chief Ho Kay Tat and his family, who lived in Kampung Baru, and were sheltered from the rioting crowds by a Malay family during May 13.

We see things like this everyday, if we care to look, and we wonder why, still, people who should know better, don't.

In the *Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote: "Everywhere, in these days, people have, in their mockery, ceased to understand that the true security is to be found in social solidarity rather than in isolated individual effort."

"But this terrible state of affairs must inevitably have an end, and all will suddenly understand how unnatural they are separated from one another."

"It will be the spirit of the time, and people will marvel that they have sat so long in darkness without seeing the light..."

"But, until then, we must keep the banner flying."

"Sometimes, even if he has to do it alone, even if his conduct seems to be crazy, a man must set an example, and so draw other souls out of their solitude, and spur them to some act of brotherly love, that the great idea may not die."

Here's to hoping we all have a happier and better 2007; and as we start to celebrate our 50th year of independence, we pray that the Almighty bless us with another 50 years of even more glory and continued peace.