

What the Malaysian Family needs

The Star - 7/12/2021 Pg. 11

A family can come together and stay together by incorporating four characteristics.

IF our leaders are serious about forging what they are calling the “Malaysian Family”, I would like them to consider four fundamental characteristics that I believe are the hallmarks of a real family. These characteristics exist in all good families, and I have tried my best to ensure they exist in mine throughout my learning curve of 36 years of marriage and family life.

I will firstly elucidate the four characteristics and then present four ideas on how to rethink the pedagogy and objectives of teaching in our public schools and religious institutions so that the four characteristics can be incorporated in the Malaysian Family. If we as a nation do not have any one of these characteristics, no amount of money or PR events will ever create family togetherness as a nation.

The first characteristic of a sustainable family is that whatever happens is a shared responsibility among all family members. The wife blaming the husband or the husband blaming the wife or both blaming children should not be practiced. Children blaming parents cannot be helped because they are children and don't know any better yet. As a parent I am used to my children blaming me or my wife or both of us for their “problems”. *Biasa-lah.*

But the key thing is that all good things and all bad things that happen must be seen as a shared responsibility. No blame game, please.

Secondly, there must be a sense of

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Over the top

interdependence among all family members. When my wife is sick, I help her and vice versa, and when the children have issues that need sorting out, we are both there for them. And when we both need help, some of the children would come to our aid as they grew older.

There cannot be any sense of arrogance in feeling that we're completely independent and would never need the help of others. Only God is independent, humans always need others for help and humility in spirituality.

Thirdly, there must be acceptance of the “other”, not just tolerance. When some of our children did not agree with the traditional and conservative lifestyle of a Malay Muslim, my wife asked me to be the disciplinarian. When I tried to be, it almost broke the family apart. I had to ask my wife to either accept them as they are or risk losing them forever. Finally, she accepted their choices and now the ones who “gave us problems” have become the anchors of the family in many matters. There was much blessing

in acceptance.

Fourthly, there must be a feeling of humility, a feeling that one family member is not better than the other. I have a PhD and read much, much more than my wife. But when my daughters have problems with their husbands, I ask my wife to talk to them first; once she has understood the issues, she shares them with me and together we try to suggest solutions – but mostly the solutions come from my wife.

As a nation trying to forge a sense of family togetherness among the people, do we, as citizens of many faiths and races, have a shared sense of responsibility for the success and failures of the country? Who was responsible for the May 13 race riots in 1969, for instance? If the history taught in our schools implicitly points fingers by silencing some narratives and making others more prominent, then we will be stuck forever in 1969 come 2169 or 3169. As I have said and written many times, the history we teach our children must provide a shared narrative of the success and failures of Malaysia.

The subject I hated most in school was geography. It is full of statistics, percentages, tonnage of exports like rubber, tin, oil palm and petroleum. So bloody boring! It's all centred on products, services, governance and climate. I wish this subject would focus more on the people that drive the economy. Many civil servants do not know that their salary comes from taxes paid by businesses, among others. They don't under-

stand that when there is a call to boycott the business conducted by one race, there would be less tax collected if such businesses go under. This interdependence between races and people of different faiths must be highlighted. Then and only then can we have team spirit that will build family togetherness.

Religious education is always said to be a sensitive subject. It has been strictly noted that the subject should never be discussed by those who are not “experts”, “anointed” or appointed to be teachers of religion.

Well, sorry guys, but I have seen how certain messages in teaching religion have been destructive to nation-building. For instance, some religions forbid their adherents from drinking alcohol and eating the flesh of swine. The prohibition should be understood as a position of faith. But some adherents add on to this prohibition by overstressing the idea that drinking alcohol may lead to evil, immoral acts and eating swine is a filthy act that pollutes the body physically. This idea then is extended to non-adherents who eat swine and drink alcohol, thus forcing a wedge between the peoples of this country.

Religious teachers must emphasize that these prohibitions are a test of faith and not a condemnation of those who don't observe them. The others have a right to live their lives and must be respected as such and not judged morally or physically.

Another characteristic that many religious adherents fail to understand is humility. Many believe, and are taught, that if they practice certain rituals, refrain from moral infringements and pray to God often, they are a shoo-in for heaven! This is what we teach children as an easy way of encouraging doing good.

But when we become adults, we must increase our knowledge of spirituality and understand that even if we adhere to all the requirements, there is still no guarantee of heaven because we do not control God's prerogatives and decisions. We can only hope but not determine. However, many religious teachers lead their flock on by declaring themselves to be perfect and that others are not, so they – and the students they teach this to – have a holier than thou attitude that does not allow them to even tolerate, what more accept, people of different faiths.

Our schools and religious institutions must ensure that their pedagogy and syllabus are framed around these four important characteristics of shared responsibility, interdependent relationships, respect for one another and spiritual humility if we are to have any hope of creating a peaceful nation that can be called a Malaysian Family.

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