

Goodbye, teacher

■ By Sulaiman Dufford

Professor Syed Hussain Alatas passed away with dignity in late January, while sitting on the side of his bed. His heart simply stopped, around nine in the evening.

The next day, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed, his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasma Mohd Ali, former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his wife Datin Seri Azizah, and countless others from all across the Malaysian and Singaporean intellectual communities visited the Professor's home to pay their last respects.

The *jenazah* prayers were led by the Professor's close relative, Imam Habib Hassan of the Ba'alui Mosque in Singapore.

The Professor's son, Professor Farid Alatas, also residing in Singapore, was host. Datin Zahara, the Professor's beloved wife, was in tears much of the time.

The man was interred in the Mount Kiara Islamic Cemetery.

This passing was not unexpected, of course. Professor Alatas had often confided in me his various medical troubles and the heaviness of his physical existence, although few were aware of this as he kept it to himself. He might have asked, what was the use of advertising pain?

To me, he was probably the most extraordinary mentor I have ever known. Quite a few years ago, I mentioned to him that I really was hurting for the old "ansar/muhajir" equation that doesn't much function anymore in the Muslim Ummah.

We do not emigrate to Medina Munawarah, we emigrate to countries and governments other than those of our birth and find laws and attitudes there reflecting western secular ideals rather than Islamic ones.

Professor replied: "There must be some *Ansar* around somewhere." And then he proceeded to become mine, guiding me through the tortuous Permanent Residence process (without paying a single "gratuity"), as well as the composition of my PhD thesis in Islamic aesthetics.



And then, he helped me navigate through those countless times of setback and discouragement, when I was ready to chuck the whole thing and return to the USA.

Once, when someone was requiring me to do something I considered inappropriate or even demeaning (the bureaucrat's stock-in-trade), and I threatened to give up, he advised me curtly, "If they ask for dry grass, give them dry grass."

The Professor was a Survivor. He was rarely caught in other people's traps. And he was determined that I should be one also. I am humbled that less than one month after my successful graduation (at age 66) and the final approval of my PR, he passed away.

Could I have been among those for whom he was "hanging around" to assist and help along life's way? I am humbled to feel so.

My mourning the few days after his

passing has been absolutely unique. I have never had such experiences.

The orthodox Tahlilan at his home were no real part of it. Instead, I have been flooded with dreams and apperceptions, such as when, within the first half hour of my arrival at the side of his body, I was only barely holding back tears when I distinctly heard his voice order me, "Cut that out!"

During my do'a after Zuhur later that day, my face actually began to smile, not very orthodox for a Muslim prayer. What did it mean?

I felt very strongly that the Professor was absolutely delighted to be where he was, having cast off his "mortal coils" at last, and that he was giving me a small glimpse of his delight. *Insha Allah*.

That night, I awoke with a simple melody ringing in my ears similar to one composed by the Beatles — The Ballad of Eleanore Rigby.

I had been dreaming about a group of Chinese Malaysian students, teaching me how THEY would observe the Professor's

passing. It went like this: "Goodbye to the recent teacher! Goodbye to the recent teacher!" The melody was not a sad one, yet with these dream-words, it brings tears to my eyes even now.

Is THIS what it means to be a real TEACHER? To depart the world like this? What a blessing this country is, to have a cross-cultural funeral observance in my dreams! And what a blessing to have known this man, whose integrity was absolutely impregnable.

And to have just possibly been given a tiny vision of that reward which Allah sw has promised to bestow upon those who have gained His Pleasure during their short life on earth!

The Beatles asked in their song, "All the lonely people — where DO they all come from? All the lonely people — where DO they all belong?" We Muslims are blessed with a simple answer — "Inna lillahi wa ina ilaihi roji'un". ■