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IN LIBERAL DOSES

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Marina
Mahathir



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
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*This book is dedicated to
my father and my mother
who taught me everything,
my daughter Ineza,
the reason I care about
the future of our country,
and Tara, without whose
support I would never
have the courage of
my convictions.*

Foreword

by

DATO' SERI DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

Marina's 'Musings' has apparently secured quite a following. The column has been around for about five years now and the editors of *The Star* apparently consider that it is popular enough to make it a regular feature and even to publish a book. I understand that the column has been reprinted, quoted or commented upon in other papers, including foreign ones.

And Marina has of course been subpoenaed to appear in court as a witness for her comments in at least one case. It was certainly because of her views on that particular case that she was asked to be a witness. But being who she is, it is possible of course that she was asked to be a witness for political reasons as well, for the party which decided to subpoena her was of the opposition. Still if she did not voice her opinions she would not have been subpoenaed.

'Musings' is obviously an independent column. The views do not reflect those of the Government, despite the strong connection that Marina has with the so-called establishment. One is tempted to ask from where she acquired this sense of independence, this urge not to conform, to be critical and not to just cheer on those in power.

Society needs critics. Without them society can go very wrong, complacent with everything it does. Critics are absolutely necessary for those playing a leading role in society. Without criticisms they would not know when they are wrong, and may not even know what is going on around them. Society and leaders of society should therefore not just tolerate critics but should welcome them.

But critics can be carried away by their own wisdom or even their own influence and power. For critics do have power despite not being officially or legally vested with any authority. And power may go to the head. This is something that critics must always bear in mind. They are often right, but not always right. In particular when the criticisms are based on hearsay and are not adequately researched, the hurt they may cause to the subject can be quite painful. This will be especially so when for some reason or other the critic is unassailable.

I have been reading a book about freedom, specifically about the obsession with individual freedom in the West. The writer is an American and for reasons of his own nonconformist attitude is not going to be as well read by the public as, for example, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*.

In brief the writer was trying to say that the Western obsession has brought about the very thing that freedom was supposed to prevent happening in enlightened Western society. The exercise of individual freedom has in fact resulted in the loss of freedom and direction in Western societies.

Even as I was reading the book the Heaven's Gate people committed mass suicide. The writer of the book had in fact made reference to cultists in America who appeared to want to free themselves from the restrictive norms of society, whether it be religion, ideology or family and social values. They did not want to conform. They wanted to do their own thing, to be unique, different and totally unfettered by convention.

As we now know they simply landed themselves in a new society created by them, where conformity was even more severe. The Heaven's Gate people were not allowed to go about alone. They had to check on each other. They had to conform to rules and practices devised by their leader. They had even to castrate themselves in order that they might follow strictly the way of the leader and his problem regarding his own feelings. And finally they had to commit suicide in a precise manner in order to ascend to a spaceship in the tail of a comet.

The degree of conformity to the cult's beliefs and practices are even more rigid than the conformity required by society, in particular by American

society. Only cult fanatics can believe that they have gained freedom by joining the cult. To the rest of society, indeed in this case to the rest of the world, the cultists appeared to have exchanged a more liberal conformity requirement for a more rigid one. Far from achieving freedom they lost their freedom; and lost it completely and forever.

The lesson here may or may not be obvious. The danger of rejecting conformity lies in the possibility of being caught in another set of rules to which we may have to conform. And when that happens one finds one has not escaped at all; one has not gained freedom. One has actually lost it.

We live in an imperfect society. We are all imperfect individuals. This is no excuse for us not to try to be perfect, to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. To know when we are right or wrong we need a mirror. The critic holds up the mirror so we may see ourselves, warts and all.

But the critics too need to look at the mirror if we accept that none of us are perfect. Perhaps when they look at the mirror they would become slightly more tolerant of the faults and foibles of others.

I used to write for the press in my young days. I was not a columnist, merely an occasional contributor of articles. I needed the money but I also felt a need to criticize the colonial administration which so neglected my community. I was too young then to know my own faults. I could not understand why the right and the fair things were not done. I know better now. What I think is right may not seem right to others. Convincing others takes time and patience, which I do not always have. But Allah be praised, some people at least see it my way. And some things at least are done.

Marina is more mature than I was when I started writing. Her observations are more discerning than mine were. But what she writes makes good reading. I do not always agree with her views and vice versa. But it would be a dull world if we always agreed with each other.

I hope this collection of her articles will be well-received.



Mahabub A. Suleman

On Being Malaysian

I was born in the same year as independence so I have a particular sense of my destiny being closely linked to that of our country's. I believe that our future lies in our multiculturalism and I have little patience for the chauvinists of whatever stripe among us.

I realise that it is often politic for some people to play the race card. But I also think that this card is becoming less and less valid. At a recent conference on Vision 2020, many participants of different races said that ethnicity should be made less relevant as time goes on. Some Bumi politicians even stuck their necks out by saying that the days of privilege based on race are numbered.

Our economic prosperity perhaps has a great role to play in this increasing liberalism about race. But often I suspect that our emerging multicultural sense of identity is inward-looking. In place of our diversity, we then unite against the outside world. I worry particularly about our attitudes towards foreigners less well-off than us, especially those who have to come to our shores and do the menial jobs that we don't want to do any more.

One of the nine challenges of our Vision 2020 calls for Malaysians to establish a 'psychologically liberated society, subservient to none'. I think this means that we should learn to think for ourselves and decide what we want to be as Malaysians with no influences and pressures from anyone else. It can be a very liberating challenge. Unfortunately there are those who interpret this in its most negative sense, that is, by rejecting instead of creating. Specifically, we are to reject anything Western regardless of whether such ideas are good or bad. This does not denote an open society, as one that is psychologically liberated must be, but instead a closed, inward-looking one which can be tyrannical in itself.

Others have made much of the concept of developing a Malaysian society 'in our own mould'. But again, there are those who would like to define such a

mould without any consultation with others and then to insist that this be used by all. This would be fine if this image of society were truly one that is psychologically liberated, one that came about from truly independent thinking, but often there are foreign influences involved, albeit not Western ones.

Furthermore those who think up this so-called original Malaysian mould often do not have the creativity nor the imagination to truly design something that is unique and inclusive. They brook neither alternative views nor criticism. Anyone who opposes their vision of things is supposedly shackled to Western ideologies.

I encounter this sort of thinking all the time, particularly when talking to those who govern or make policy. It is worrying that people with such limited intellects can decide on the course our country will take. The patronising attitudes towards non-governmental organisations and the especially dangerous questioning of their patriotism, is but one example of why we should worry. And why we should always fight this close-mindedness when we come across it.

DEFINING MYSELF

October 10, 1992

Here I go trying to define myself again. Female, mother, wife, working woman, thirtysomething, speaks more or less four languages (English, Malay, French, Japanese). I have been educated and lived abroad. I married a foreigner. Am I Malaysian?

My family ranks as one of the most kissy-huggy families I know. As children, my brothers and I routinely kissed (one cheek) and hugged our parents. I remember doing the same for my grandparents and getting a wet lick on the forehead in return. Nowadays we're still at it except that the one-cheek kiss has expanded to two. My little brother and sister have gotten even more elaborate, kissing our parents on both cheeks, and then getting two-cheek kisses in return and then a mutual big hug. Are we Malaysian?

I ask this because there have been a lot in the papers recently which seem to question the Malaysian-ness of anyone who speaks another language more or better than Malay and of people who are openly affectionate with one another. After 35 years, we're still defining people so superficially.

Let's deal with the second one first. The Deputy Minister of Health recently advocated showing more affection towards our loved ones by hugging and kissing them. He sees this as a way of preventing the ills besetting our society including drug and child abuse. This was immediately followed by a spate of protests by various parties saying that this was not THE MALAYSIAN WAY and in fact someone deemed such acts as obscene and warranting arrest!

Here we go, being literal-minded again. For one thing, our well-intentioned minister was talking about affection, not passion. He wasn't saying that every hotblooded Romeo should go out and shower his Juliet with passionate kisses as they strolled down the mall every weekend. He was definitely not saying that every little embrace in some dark private corner should now be moved into the concourse.

He did make clear that he was talking about families, about parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters. I also don't think he meant for whole families to conduct love-ins in public either.

But there is a point to be made there. Families should show affection to one another. There are some families who are constricted by a certain formality and find it hard to show physically their love for one another. But if the whole family is used to it, then there's nothing wrong with it. Affection in Malaysian families is often a felt, rather than demonstrated, thing.

I have heard cases of couples being 'arrested', usually by shopping mall security guards, for displaying affection towards one another. Often times, this is no more than holding hands. There are very few people who actually start necking in the middle of a crowded mall so it seems a bit extreme that certain town councils can actually arrest and fine people for ill-defined acts of affection.

I always thought it was normal for people who love one another to show affection for each other. My daughter and I constantly hug each other. Are we going to get arrested for this if we ever decide to hug each other in public? Or is that 'honour' reserved for me and my son if I ever have one? Why is showing affection for a loved one, even if it is someone of the opposite sex, considered obscene enough to be arrestable?

I still don't understand why showing affection is unMalaysian. We are not cold people. What is the difference between being affectionate in private and in public? Why should it offend other people? Why are our people so embarrassed by outward displays of affection? Are there hidden connotations

in these displays among family members? Is the father who likes to hold his teenage daughter's hand in public a deviant of some sort? If that's the case, my dad should have been thrown in jail long ago.

I see young couples and their families these days more expressive about their love for one another. Perhaps this generation is more exposed and can clearly see what sort of affection is permissible and what isn't. Perhaps it is the result of some Western influence but if it is, so what? Better they learn to love than to hate. Besides I'd rather see a man being openly affectionate with his wife than saving it all up for someone else.

Another supposed indication of unMalaysianness is the inability to speak Malay as well as other languages. Or even, it seems, the ability to speak any other language. This is silly beyond belief. If all it takes to be a 'true' Malaysian is the ability to speak Malay perfectly, then a heck of a lot of people are going to lose their citizenship. My Malay is far from perfect and I'm not proud of it but I do speak it much better than I do French or Japanese though not as well as my English. I think in many ways being able to speak four languages makes me a more effective person because it makes me better able to communicate with other people. Being able to speak only one language means you can only preach to the converted. If you can speak other languages you are halfway towards converting others because you speak their lingo.

Surely, a person's 'Malaysianness' (which I suppose means patriotism) is something that is in the heart. It does not depend on what language the person speaks, what he wears, drives, what music he listens to etc., etc.. If this goes on, one of these days they're going to say that anybody who owns records in any language except Malay is unpatriotic.

In any case, in everyday life, this Malay or English debate becomes utter nonsense because so many people mix up the two. I asked a well-known local standup comedian what language he does his routine in and he answered 'Malaysian'. And it's true, such a spoken (not written) language does exist and what's more it is interesting and expressive. If you listen carefully to everyday Malaysian, you will realise that basically it is Malay spoken in English. That is, we use English words but Malay grammar. What else is 'Can or not?' but '*Boleh tak?*' or 'How can?' but '*Mana boleh?*' Or the ubiquitous 'Isn't it?' but '*Bukan?*' There are many more examples.

I don't think it is a bad thing to speak Malaysian. People identify with it much more than speaking perfect English or Malay in everyday situations.

I don't mean that we should all not learn to speak Malay and English fluently; of course we should. And we should certainly speak proper Malay and English when the occasion warrants. But otherwise, Malaysian is a more living, breathing language than either of the other two and probably reflects what is going on more accurately than either Bahasa or English.

And who says it can't be sophisticated? The other day I met a bunch of bright young men who go by the collective name of KRU, a new rap group. They presented me with their new CD and when I finally got down to listening to it, I was astonished to find not so much that the three boys had written all their own songs and lyrics but that their lyrics were a sophisticated mix of rhyming English and Malay! Purists may tear their hair out, some people would say none of their lyrics can ever be considered part of the Malaysian national literary heritage or whatever but hey! they communicate really well. And they're very much in touch with what's happening around them. Ultimately that's what matters.

LIFE'S LITTLE IRRELEVANCIES

May 27, 1992

As some wit said, nostalgia isn't what it used to be. I'm as sentimental as the best of them but there are some things in the past that I don't care for too much. One of them was the preoccupation that the older generation had with long hair.

I remember as a child when the Beatles and the Rolling Stones were groovy, there were endless debates on the demerits of long hair and tight pants. Even then I thought this was singularly boring. Since neither the Beatles nor the Stones had the sort of faces that I found at all inspiring, I thought it was better for them to have the hair to hide their features. As for the tight pants, eventually they gave way to even more hideous baggies, bell bottoms and platform shoes.

What it might serve us to remember is that things like long hair, drainpipes, fringed vests, midskirts etc. are just fashion and eventually they make way for other fashion trends. Such is the nature of the modern world. Where once a Stones song was deemed to be 'revolutionary', now it's pretty

much mainstream. Who has not heard a familiar Beatles or Stones number in some elevator?

It strikes me as inconsistent that when long hair was in fashion, it was condemned and when it was followed by short hair as the new trend, short hair was not. If our wise authorities regard the following of Western trends as a danger to our society, then they should condemn all trends, not just some. Why should short hair be any more desirable than long hair for men? I always equate very short hair with Skinheads, that group of racist violent neo-Nazi Neanderthals that once raged around the UK (and now are appearing in Germany).

What takes the cake are the leaps in logic that some supposedly learned people have taken in their fervour to prove the badness of long hair. Long hair = Western influences = drug addiction = homosexuality = lesbianism. Try as I might, I cannot see the connections, not least because I thought people were worried about men with long hair and as far as I know, there are no reported cases of men becoming lesbians. Does this mean that my daughter with her waist-length hair has to cut it in case it turns her into a Western-influenced drugged lesbian?

I would consider my upbringing to have been fairly Western by Eastern standards. I call my parents 'Mum' and 'Dad', speak English at home, learnt to eat with a knife and fork fairly young and wear Western clothes most of the time. But when I first went to England to study, I quickly found that my so-called Westernisation was very superficial, that in my heart and soul I am as Eastern as can be. My attitudes towards many things—family, relationships, money—were profoundly Eastern no matter what I wore. They have not changed that much to this day.

What I learned was that it takes more than window-dressing to make a person follow certain values. I am willing to bet that in my current 'middle-aged respectability', my so-called nice and proper look, I am probably a lot *less* conservative than the average *kutu* with his long hair and jeans. When it comes down to real issues, this *kutu* and his Western long-haired counterpart are not going to be able to agree on much other than the fact that they are probably both alienated sections of society whose needs are too often ignored.

The other day I witnessed a very interesting phenomenon. I went to Zainal Abidin's concert to see him in action for the first time since he became a big star. The concert hall was full of fans and what a mixture they were:

Malays, Chinese, Indians, even Mat Sallehs, young, old, the *tudung'd*, the uncovered and yes, the long-haired. Everybody greeted him with loud applause and shouts and sang along with him, much to his delight. Then he brought his guest artist Dato' S.M. Salim, the veteran *asli* singer who was greeted with a huge roar. The audience sang along with him as well.

Now this raised a lot of interesting questions in my head. Zainal, this talented and charismatic young man, has long hair and therefore he cannot perform on TV. I know he's not a drug addict nor a homosexual (and definitely not lesbian). As for being Western-influenced, he not only sings in Bahasa Malaysia but his songs are unique in the amount of traditional Eastern instruments and influences that are incorporated within them. Plus he writes songs about the environment and that's a pretty universal concern.

On top of that, he invites a veteran singer of great respectability, as traditional as traditional can be, on to the stage to sing a duet. They looked like they were having fun and certainly the audience enjoyed watching and listening to them.

It beats me how someone like Zainal could be called a bad influence just because of his long hair. If anything, a Zainal concert is the very essence of what we should be hoping for in our Malaysian society, a meeting of people of different races, backgrounds, generations, all enjoying themselves harmoniously together. What anybody looked like was irrelevant. In fact, in the quest for a harmonious society, isn't it a matter of getting rid of life's little irrelevancies?

If you were really to look at drug addicts, gay men and women, you would find that they come in all shapes and sizes, all colours, all different backgrounds. Some of them may or may not have long hair. Many of them deserve our sympathy. But when we insist on worrying about irrelevancies, it only reflects back on the depth of our own thinking. And such lack of depth does not bode well for the future.

RACISM

February 17, 1993

This piece was inspired by a book of photographs of African-American women called Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women who Changed America (published by Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1989). The text which accompanied the wonderful black-and-white photos taken by Brian Lanker was evocative and moving and gave me a distinct idea of how race was and still is a major factor in the life of a black woman in America.

I was reading a book about the struggles of black women in America and could not imagine that skin colour can have so much significance. Then a friend tells me about a conversation he overheard where two Datins discuss the worst thing that could happen to their daughters overseas. Worse than being on drugs or getting pregnant, she could be living with a black man!

In Europe I read that hooligans are booing black footballers at matches even though the footballers are superb goal-scoring athletes. It is shocking and disturbing. Is colour prejudice no longer politically incorrect?

I grew up possibly unusually aware about injustice because I have very special parents. They would not allow me to have penfriends from either South Africa or Israel. When you learn at age ten that apartheid and Zionism is wrong, it stays with you all your life.

This awareness has made me very sensitive when I encounter any form of nascent racism. And it exists in many subtle ways, sometimes even in people you thought you knew so well. I remember when I first returned to Malaysia and began to get into living here again, my best friend in England complained that I was becoming more and more Malaysian. I replied frostily that I *am* Malaysian and what is so bad about that? Bless her heart though, she realised her error and we have remained friends ever since.

We like to think that because we are brown and yellow people that we do not have colour prejudices. But we do and we have always had. In our culture, we have always preferred the fair-skinned. The prettiest girls are always the fairest. My mother's middle sister was the first to get married because she was the fairest. Dark women are termed *hitam manis* which is not enough compensation really.

I know lots of people would rather their children did not marry anyone dark-skinned. If your kids hooked up with anyone overseas, oh please let it be a white person, never a black one. They're ugly, they're coarse and they smell. Gee, where did we know this from? The movies? (Made by white people yet!)

I have heard stories of black visitors to our country, us of the multiracial, multiethnic society, not being allowed to try on clothes in boutiques for no good reason other than the unspoken one that they might be 'dirty'. Yet white people are waited on hand and foot.

Mind you I have also experienced reverse racism. For instance local women who go out with European men are often assumed to be of dubious nature. This is because white men are supposedly only after one thing and these women must be supplying the same. This is insulting to just about everybody. Local men and non-white foreign men do not have the monopoly on virtue and local women do not depend on their bodies to keep men. Some of us have an awful lot of brains. I cannot count the number of times I have been asked why I married a white man by a local man. I usually answer it's because white men don't ask me this question.

Even then it's demeaning to have to answer. People marry one another because they like one another as individuals. Ultimately if the marriage fails or succeeds, it is also because of the way the two individuals get on. Yes, culture plays a part, yes, commonality of interests and goals play a part but the success or failure of the marriage relies entirely on how the two people involved handle their similarities and differences. I do think what matters more is commonality of values rather than ethnic or social backgrounds.

But people insist on generalities and now we see around the world how this view of people is taking hold and taking over. Never in our lifetimes have we seen so much inflamed passion over ethnic background and national boundaries. We used to hold up South Africa as the worst example of racism and injustice. Now South Africa is having to face reality and slowly creep towards democracy but in other parts of the world racial/ethnic/religious hatred is blowing up as never before. In the former Yugoslavia, in Germany, in India, in the former USSR. It is frightening because it seems to be hardly containable anymore.

I would like to believe that racism comes from ignorance and frustration. My worst nightmare would be to meet someone who is well-educated, well-

travelled and well-off but also a racist. And even worse, that this person turned out to be my neighbour.

It makes you think what this bodes for our country. Racism anywhere must not be condoned because our children must never get the idea that it is ever right. They must never get the idea that it is OK to hold another person back because they are of a different background. We cannot erect subtle barriers, live an unacknowledged apartheid, because one day these barriers may fossilise and then the divisions will be made permanent. We must be aware that sometimes we put up these barriers in the way we speak, in the definitions we use, in the generalisations we make. And our children are always listening and learning.

My mother took my little brother and sister out from their first kindergarten not just because it was monoracial but because they were picking up vocabulary and tones of speaking that were already building barriers. We caught them at an early age and we corrected them but imagine less aware parents who may mean well themselves but have no time to listen to what their children are learning.

I take great pride in what we have achieved in this country, how we have worked towards commonality, of bringing down barriers. Even little things like having *halal* Chinese restaurants contribute towards bringing people together. So many people are of mixed parentage now which is great.

But we need to be vigilant. When you read about Serbs raping the daughters of the Bosnian neighbours they have known all their lives, you realise that racism is a monster that is capable of hibernating deep inside until something simple wakes it up. The monster within ourselves should be killed in its infancy and to do that, we must recognise it.

THE POLITICALLY CORRECT HANDBOOK

September 15, 1993

In the course of my publishing work I have been called upon to be a consultant for a local magazine. In an article about Malaysian architecture, the editor insisted that a photograph of a mosque be made bigger than a photograph of a Buddhist temple because she feared that otherwise this would upset Muslims. This was a striking Malaysian version of PC.

Before I went to the United States recently, a friend thought he would prepare me for the sensitive Americans by giving me a book called *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook*. Although written with tongues firmly in their cheeks, all the examples cited by the authors are genuine, bizarre as some may seem. For instance, you cannot call anyone stupid anymore, they are only 'cerebrally challenged'. A bald white man is now more correctly and supposedly more accurately described as a 'melanin impoverished hair disadvantaged oppressor'. (The politically correct movement, being generally a leftist one, views the white male as the most despicable form of life.) A woman has now, for reasons which mystify me but apparently have something to do with the three letters m,a, and n, been changed into wofem, womban (anatomical, geddit?), woman, womyn (beats me), woperson (gimme a break) and worst of all, person of gender.

There are lots of other real and ridiculous examples but the basic idea is to alter language so that you don't place whoever you may be speaking about at a disadvantage and therefore liable to be oppressed. Hence even animals cannot be termed pets because this implies superiority on the part of humans (they are now Nonhuman Animal Companions) and if they happen to live in America (where else can this happen?), they are to be referred to as Canine-Americans, Feline-Americans, Bovine-Americans, Simian-Americans, etc. I kid you not!!

Since language only reflects the speakers' particular mindset, the need to de-sex, de-race and de-superiorise English says volumes about the type of mentality of the original speakers. Perhaps we should promote Asian languages on the basis that they are non-oppressive languages. After all, did we ever have to de-sex the word *pengerusi*?

All Asian societies know that the only way to live in harmony is to be mindful of one another's space and to try to get along by not offending anyone. So perhaps there is some good in the politically correct movement. But in the States, where they like to do things in extremes, wanting to be politically correct all the time can become oppressive in itself. At worst it can be humourless and not a little bit fascistic even. But they do take these things seriously as I found out in an editing class I attended where everyone was very mindful about terms of references. The average American may not be as crazy (sorry, 'emotionally different') as the examples in this book but the mindset is there—whatever you do, do not offend lest you be accused of being a cerebrally deficient oppressor.

Which led me, as always, to ponder whether we out here are ever subject to being overly politically correct. And I think some of us may be. It is not always a question of language but of ways of thinking. There are differences however.

In the States, the majority feels this great guilt about potentially oppressing the minorities. So in an effort to not incur the wrath of various organisations and lobbying groups, the majority resorts at least publicly to being politically correct. Here, to my dismay, I have observed that the case is the other way round. It is the minority which bends over backwards not to offend the majority.

I think people often spend time agonising over trivial things just in case someone somewhere is likely to have the turn of mind to interpret it as offensive. And no doubt there are a few people out there who make it their *raison d'être* to be perpetually offended since it gets them column inches.

In the creative world for instance, design decisions are made based on only one thing—design. No graphic designer or art director sets out to design a layout, for example, for the sake of offending someone. So it seems more than a trifle paranoid to me when clients make a designer change layouts based on the remote possibility that someone would read the layout (not the text, mind you) and get upset.

This may sound trivial and silly to some people but there are a few points to make. One is that creative people cannot work under this type of pressure. If one has to spend all of one's time worrying about whether a work is going to please everybody, then there is no way that any sort of creative work can be done because the atmosphere is too oppressive.

Secondly, as a member of the majority, I find it just a little bit offensive that I might be considered part of a group that is paranoid and forever looking out for ways in which other people might offend us. It means that we are viewed as a group that is ill-educated and unsophisticated. Most people of any education and intelligence usually rise above petty squabbles so the assumption that we are on the lookout for something petty to squabble about also assumes what type of mentality we have. And that in itself is racist.

I would like to tell people out there who believe that they are in a minority in this country that we are not bullies looking out for opportunities to make life difficult for them. We are supposed to be equal citizens. And equality works both ways— everybody, no matter what status they have in this country, has to be respectful of one another and everybody needs to live in a free and unpressured environment.

THE OIL LAMP

March 8, 1995

Some years ago, a publicity-loving Muslim cleric announced that lighting oil lamps for Hari Raya, undoubtedly a custom brought to us by our ancestors from the Indian subcontinent, was unIslamic, even though it has been a tradition all our lives. This same cleric once declared that those who celebrate Valentine's Day, as commercial a day in Malaysia as anywhere else, were also on shaky ground. More recently he condemned the new greeting 'Gong Xi Raya', coined for the simultaneous celebration of two of our major festivals. For this last he was roundly criticised by all and sundry for missing the point about creating a harmonious society.

Who was it who said that timing was everything? My daughter Neza obviously believes in it. Exactly a week before Hari Raya, we had to rush her into hospital for an appendectomy. I must say that she took it like a trouper, not a whine, not a tear throughout. We got out of hospital five days later and impeccable timing as usual, school holidays started the very next day. Since, thanks to the surgeon and staff at the Pediatric Institute, she is as fit as a fiddle, no doubt these Hari Raya holidays will be celebrated with only

slightly less exuberance than usual.

Hari Raya is of course a great time for children. Lots of food, fun and games and of course the much-anticipated *duit Raya*. I think adults nowadays really enjoy it mainly through their kids. Otherwise it can be exhausting particularly if you are as spectacularly disorganised as I have been this year. For those of you who normally get cards from me, it's in the mail! In fact if I hadn't had that enforced stay in hospital, I would never have got it done at all. Rushing around trying to get money from the bank, picking up clothes from the tailor's, rushing the curtainmaker, getting cards posted, all in an already curtailed space of time.

Still, it is a joyous time. It is a bit sad that there are spoilsports around, like the one who thinks that lighting lamps on the 27th night of Ramadan is unIslamic. This is the same one who tut-tutted Valentine's Day, isn't it?

My best memories of childhood Hari Rayas are of the oil lamps and *tanglongs* we used to hang around the house. Every year our gardener would make star-shaped lanterns out of bamboo and paper to be lighted and hung around the house. Some years we got creative and made a giant moon-shaped lantern and stuck '*Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri*' in bright-coloured paper on it so that every passer-by would be greeted when they saw it. Plus we had oil lamps hung on the entire circumference of the fence around the garden and it used to be a *Malam Dua-Puluh Tujuh* (as we Northerners called it) ritual for us kids to follow Pak Hashim the gardener around the garden as he lit each lamp. Sometimes we got to light them ourselves. Then we would play with fireworks and sparklers, sadly another aspect of childhood now to be dispensed with.

The lights were simply part of the celebrations and watching the glow of the lamps, and the glow of joy on children's faces, are part of what makes Hari Raya special. Nobody ever thought of there being any religious significance to the lamps. If anything there has been a gradual dimming of the lights simply because most people can't be bothered to light up their houses anymore. When I was a child, another Hari Raya tradition was for the whole family to pack into the car and go for a drive to look at all the lights. Another time of happy family memories.

I have always regretted the fact that my daughter is not able to enjoy these traditions as much as I did. A lot of it is my fault because I haven't made enough effort to get the lamps for the house each year although I

always mean to. What she knows about it is from the ads on TV which all evoke the kampung Hari Raya including the oil lamps. Every year though I promise myself I will do it next year.

In many ways I find that I've become a stickler for tradition. I find it sad if the customs and traditions that I enjoyed as a child are not passed on to mine. I always feel that she is missing out on something, a sense of where she has come from which I think is important for her sense of identity. The traditions of Hari Raya are some of those that I would like her to treasure. In the midst of things like Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and all its high-tech robotic wizardry, it's quite nice to have something as simple as an oil lamp to make a child happy.

But some object. Really, what is the reason for being such a spoilsport during a season of such goodwill? Surely if it is to remind us of our faith, we are reminded every day. And if it is to warn us about threats to that faith, surely if a little oil lamp, just like a little romance on February 14, is all it takes to shake one's faith, then that faith can't have been that strong to begin with. Perhaps spoilsports should have more faith in the faithful!

Selamat Hari Raya to everybody!

THE CHECKLIST

April 15, 1995

Teenagers always get a bad rap for being rebellious. They don't want to listen to their parents which means that they are all doomed to wind up in all sorts of trouble. At least that's how conventional wisdom goes.

But if you look at teenagers carefully, it becomes obvious to anyone with even the slightest modicum of perception that in fact teens are very conformist. The difference is who they choose to conform with. Nothing that their parents say goes because that's very unhip. But whatever their friends say becomes cool and therefore everyone strives to be the same.

Within their own social group, a certain form of tyranny applies. To be cool, you have to dress a certain way, talk a certain way, like certain things and behave in a very prescribed form. If you don't do any of these things, you are uncool and you don't belong. And to belong is everything to a teen.

Eventually teens grow up and gain a certain confidence and strike out on their own. They begin to understand that conformity to their group isn't everything, that society benefits from a degree of diversity and being able to stand on one's own two feet is a sign of maturity. It's not the easiest thing in the world to learn but society allows one to have the space to do it as long as essentially what one learns is positive for that society.

I speak a little from inexperience because I've always been overly conscious of peer pressure to conform and a natural rebelliousness has made me suspicious of any attempt to impose uniformity on me. However I don't think I have suffered from it and more importantly neither have those around me. I may make my own rules but the principles I live by are the same as everybody else's.

I don't know if anyone else has noticed but lately a kind of tyranny similar to that of teen peer groups has been weaving its insidious way into our society. Like teen tyrants, followers must prove their loyalty in very specific and strict ways. A kind of checklist exists which you must apply to yourself and if you fail you cannot be part of the group.

The problems with the checklist are many. Firstly, nobody is allowed to question whether the items on the checklist are fair or even correct. Like teenage conditions for coolness, some items can be trivial such as what type of shoe you wear. On this checklist, the way you dress, for instance, determines whether you're in or out.

Secondly, you have to fulfil every single item on the checklist in order to be accepted. The checklist, designed to be elitist, is as long and stringent as possible so trying to tick off everything is difficult if not downright impossible. Maybe, just maybe, if you are friends with the Head Honcho, you might persuade whoever reviews your case to turn a blind eye to a few things but otherwise you do not have a human hope.

Thirdly, this checklist is never very clear. Just like teens who sway to everchanging trends, where baggy pants may be in this year and tight ones a la mode next year, the purveyors of this checklist will never pin down exactly what are the little things that go on this list. Who appointed the purveyors? It is unclear. But because their reason for being is to keep those who pass that list as few as possible, it is in their interest to keep the list vague.

Fourthly, also like teen peer groups, people really want to join the group because they either feel that they are missing out or they are under intense

pressure of being uncool if they don't. However, unlike teenage groups where members eventually find their own paths while learning what it takes to be members of a group, the adult checklist group does not allow for any sort of individuality. Individuality is not only frowned on but regarded as downright heresy and whoever tries it on must be punished.

People who like to make out checklists for group membership forget something important. That is, everybody has a brain and the function of the brain is to question. As checklist-makers frequently adhere to the kind of rigidity where their brains get put on the backburner, they do not like any evidence of thought in other people.

Therefore if someone asks them who made the checklist and who gave them the authority to enforce it, their answer is that The Authority cannot be questioned. That to use the brain is heresy, despite the fact that the brain was bestowed on human beings by the same Authority. Of course, what they really mean is that they, as self-appointed representatives of The Authority, cannot be questioned and you risk severe punitive measures if you do.

Since most people are not very sure what the checklist of life is, they find it very hard to counter the listmakers and the rules that they make. They forget that the point of life is not the checklist with all its small specifics but the principles.

In teenage groups, one learns pretty fast that to get by one has to listen to the others. One cannot arbitrarily and unitarily decide what movie to watch, for instance, the entire group has to agree. If you feel strongly enough about it, you must defend your choice and convince the rest. Similarly if someone else has a better idea.

The checklist makers hold by no such principle. Their checklist is absolutely correct, they say, and there can be no argument. Argue and you're out. Unfortunately some people are so keen to make that list that the principles of life, including honesty, do-unto-others-as-you-would-have-them-do-unto-you, discipline and hard work, gets thrown out the window. I see more and more people being held up to see if they fit every item on this checklist. Nobody ever fits the bill because it is designed so that nobody will. I wait to see who else will be subjected to The Test and given an F.

I hate to think we are powerless because we are not. We must question the validity of this checklist, we must pick holes in it. It's difficult because the checklist makers are not going to allow us to do it but for the sake of our

future and the space to breathe that we have so carefully nurtured since we became a nation, we must have the courage to do it. Otherwise we will remain teenagers forever.

DOUBLE CELEBRATIONS

February 28, 1996

Editor's note: In 1996 and 1997 the Muslim holiday of Hari Raya Aidilfitri and the first day of Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations fell just a day apart (they are both fixed dates in the lunar month). Differences between the Muslim lunar calendar and the Chinese lunar-solar one mean that the holidays coincide every 36 years.

Memories are odd things. Sometimes they remind you of how old you are, sometimes just the fact of remembering reassures you that you are still young.

In all this fuss about double celebrations this year, I remember that it will not be the first time I am experiencing this merging of festivals. When I was knee-high to a grasshopper, back in my hometown of Alor Setar, there were at least two years when both Hari Raya and Chinese New Year fell very close together. As an impressionable child, I remember thinking that it was the normal state of things to celebrate these festivals together. It was a puzzling lesson to later find out that Hari Raya dates change and that we wouldn't celebrate with our Chinese friends all the time.

In those days also there were some people, who, with the benefit of a rather selfconscious hindsight, said that when the celebrations were together, these two major ethnic groups got on very well. Things thus started to go wrong when the dates separated.

As a child, prone to overhearing snatches of grown-up conversations and making conclusions of her own, I believed this little bit of mystique. Race relations determined by the moon no less! As Hari Raya made its way down the calendar, a little anxiety crept in about the state of interethnic relationships. In 1969, those soothsayers really sounded spot on.

Of course, with maturity on my part and on the part of everybody,

these anxieties have been proven unfounded. Harmony amongst us is not based on phases of the moon but on understanding, respect and a determination to be realistic. It has not mattered when the dates of our festivals fall, we celebrate them all anyway. If anything, having festivals fall together has created the small anxiety amongst women at least about whether our dressmakers will be able to fulfil all our orders in time.

The other day I was talking to an Asian-American about what it means to live in a diverse multicultural society. I have heard many Americans beat their chests about the diverse society they live in as if theirs was the finest multicultural society anyone could find on earth. "We have thousands of different ethnic groups in America! You can find any type of food you want!" they declare as if it was unique. And this to a Malaysian no less!

I have been to America many times and while I do agree that it has become an increasingly diverse society, it also seems to me that the multiculturalism is shallow. Yes, you see lots of different types of people from all sorts of backgrounds and yes, you can find all sorts of exotic foods. But no, I don't think they are a real multicultural society.

For a start, there is one overwhelmingly dominant culture, the Caucasian one. You cannot escape it. What is America if not hamburgers, baseball, movies and cars? Political correctness, however, gives room to the other cultures because they are minorities which is a concept I find patronising. With the possible exception of Christmas, the different festivals are celebrated only by each ethnic group, not everybody. I can't imagine someone white in Iowa, for instance, going out to wish a neighbour Gong Xi Fa Cai. Who knows if they've even heard of it?

Their debates on language border on the ridiculous. On the one hand, the politically correct say you have to provide education in people's native languages because they will be disadvantaged otherwise since their English is not up to scratch, if they even have it at all. On the other hand, you have a judge who fines a Hispanic woman for speaking to her daughter in Spanish because, he said, she would be condemning her daughter to life as a maid.

In America, you have to speak English to get anywhere. It's all very well to want to preserve people's cultures by teaching them in their native languages but unless the education system can sustain that sort of teaching to the highest levels, then you would definitely be condemning the minorities to staying at the bottom of society. What is the use of insisting on having education in

Spanish or Korean or Laotian if the available books can only cater up to high school level? If a bright young Laotian wants to go to Harvard, are there courses he can take in Laotian? Of course not, his English has to be of a certain standard. So in being so PC, one actually can keep people down. By all means, cultures should be preserved but what is the point if you wipe people out economically?

A wide variety of languages may seem like an expression of a multicultural society but it is not if the languages are only spoken by each individual group. I once had to contend with an American who was boasting about their diversity and the question I wanted to ask most was how many languages he spoke. Probably two, English and Spanish, at the most.

As any employer in Malaysia knows, if you ask a potential employee how many languages they speak, the smallest number they will answer is two. I have seen application forms which list out six or seven languages if you count each Chinese dialect as a language (as they properly are). We naturally switch from one language to another without missing a beat. To me, that's one of the best indicators of true multiculturalism.

It has also become less and less easy for us to identify anyone's ethnic background by physical attributes alone. Our national airline's crew members are a case in point. How many times have you seen a nametag that doesn't match the face? Either they switch tags all the time or this is really telling us something about our heritage. We are growing a crop of kids who are all half-this or half-that, and it doesn't bother them or anybody.

We are becoming multicultural less and less consciously now. We don't even notice this anymore. But it is very apparent to anyone who comes from a more homogeneous society. When they remark on it, we pause and look around. 'Oh yeah,' we say, then carry on with what we are doing.

This is the true test of a real multicultural society, when it ceases to become remarkable, when we don't have to work so hard at it. In Australia, an emerging multicultural society, they have institutes set up to promote multiculturalism. I suppose when such a society is still in its infancy you have to be more selfconscious about it. The danger is when you try too hard you wind up with a shallow multiculturalism and not a meaningful one.

So I find it a little bit amusing all this going on about how our festivals have occurred together this year and will occur next year and again some time in the next century. I tend to think, so what? Every Chinese New Year,

I have visited friends and eaten *yee sang* and loveletters galore. Every Hari Raya my friends visit me and eat *rendang* to their hearts' content. This year's convergence simply means we have to plan our logistics better (I know people who can do eleven Open Houses in one day. God only knows what stamina they have to summon up this year!). The spirit of our festivals, so uniquely Malaysian, remains the same.

Gong Xi Fa Cai and Selamat Hari Raya to all!

OF CLOSED MINDS AND OPEN DISCUSSIONS

April 24, 1996

The Malaysian Constitution allows the freedom of speech on all subjects except those which may disturb the racial harmony that we enjoy. These include the privileges of Bumiputeras and the position of the Rulers. However, forty years after Independence, I believe that for the most part Malaysian society has matured enough that such discussion can be held without serious consequences. Also the privileges of the Bumiputeras and the position of the Rulers are not etched in stone, indeed both have been challenged in recent times, most interestingly by Bumiputeras themselves.

As a fresh young student in England, I remember being forced to take part in discussions both in classes and dorms. I was a reticent participant because I thought I didn't know anything. My friends however told me that that was not the point and that not contributing to a conversation was in fact selfish. It was frankly difficult and uncomfortable to be constantly challenged and there were times when I retreated in tears. But I learnt a lot about myself. In particular, the experience helped me to clarify my own views, discard what to me did not make sense. And I learnt that there was nothing to stop me from challenging people in the same way, the only requirement being that I had to be sure of my own ideas.

Recently I was invited to a meeting with some officials to discuss how best non-governmental organisations and the Government could work together on a particular issue. The NGOs welcomed this opportunity to have a frank and open discussion about a very important issue so we all

turned up eager with anticipation for the meeting.

Imagine our dismay when at the very outset, we were told that we could discuss everything, except anything that was against religion. We were not told what was meant by 'against religion' but immediately certain rules were set in the discussion which prevented it from being open and frank. Which ultimately meant that no good use could come out of it.

I was disappointed because we were all adults in this meeting and surely we could talk about anything in a businesslike manner in order to find some productive conclusions. Furthermore it gave the impression that all non-governmental organisations ever do is talk about (and do!) things which are against religion. Thus, from the very beginning the odds were stacked against a truly fruitful discussion.

I have often pondered what this hang-up is with Malaysians about talking frankly. No doubt it has plenty to do with the Asian trait of not wanting to offend anyone by having to say things which are difficult. But in this case, the potential offendeé was setting the rules without even knowing if the potential offender was going to say anything that was personally hurtful.

Many discussions in our country are stymied in this way by 'sensitivities'. 'Sensitive' has become a particularly Malaysian code word for 'don't talk about it'. It postulates that there will be material in the discussion that could possibly upset someone so before that occurs, the discussion should not happen or should be severely restricted.

I have seen officials who refuse to talk about something because 'these are sensitive issues', when in fact they mean 'I don't want to talk about it because you all are going to give me a hard time'.

This is just another form of insidious censorship. Censorship of this kind is particularly appalling because it is based on the premise that no adult can be trusted to handle delicate issues sensitively in a discussion so therefore he or she should not be allowed to talk at all. There is no distinction made between sensitive issues and sensitively-handled discussions. I think we ought to be able to talk about delicate matters, particularly involving race and religion, but we should handle these matters with maturity and, yes, great sensitivity.

Even more appalling is the self-censorship that is sometimes carried out by well-meaning people. Sometimes people do not want to talk about something because they assume that it might offend other people or because

they think they don't know enough about it. Again, one need not offend if one knows how to handle a subject. Anyone who gets offended at a calm discussion of ideas has serious problems himself.

The sensitive areas of Malaysian life are spelled out in our Constitution. Even then some of these things have been questioned and challenged to keep up with the times. However there is a tendency to put more things into the 'sensitive' category as a way of clamping down discussion about these things. This does not reflect well on a so-called mature and sophisticated society, able to calmly talk about anything. Yes, some people will get uncomfortable with talking about these things but why should we cater to these few? What is so special about them other than it serves their needs not to have any discussion about whatever it is that they are sensitive about?

We are supposed to become a thinking society. If we cannot talk about sensitive issues, everyone will retreat into their own little minds, boiling over their own opinions with no idea of what alternatives there may be. We thus subjugate ourselves to a tyranny of the self. Hardly what is needed to build up a Malaysian community.

VIOLENT DISAGREEMENTS

November 27, 1996

In 1996, certain people with misguided patriotic zeal disrupted a conference on East Timor. Many local conference delegates were taken to police lock-ups for a few days while foreign ones were deported! The incident was widely reported in the foreign press. In the end, four of the people who disrupted the meeting were convicted of rioting and fined.

We live in a strange country indeed. Not only are we often inconsistent but we can also be downright self-contradictory.

As the 80,000 people who went to see Michael Jackson will remember, before the show commenced, an announcement was made reminding us all to be good little well-behaved Malaysians and not to dance too vigorously or behave in a suggestive way. Specifically we could not kiss anybody, or take our clothes off. It was a bit embarrassing for those of us parents who brought

our young children to have to explain what that announcer was talking about. In any case, as everyone now knows, we Malaysians did our country proud and behaved so well, we could have been called staid.

It says a lot about the prejudices we harbour in this country that we believe that Western artistes are able to incite us to all sorts of unbecoming behaviour while Asian ones will not. Hence the need to issue a cringe-making reminder at Michael Jackson's concert, something they obviously neglected to do at another concert allowed at the stadium deemed too pristine for him, because the artistes came from the same continent as us. The result was of course red faces for a lot of people when the latter audience failed to be quite as restrained as their mothers expected them to be. Strike another point for Asian values!

It has been often noted in the past that while we have almost zero official tolerance for the slightest whiff of sex, we have the toughest skin possible for violence. Hence you can never see two people express their affection for each other on our screens but you can certainly see them chop each other's blocks off in full Technicolor glory. We shudder at the guns and gore of America's cities, rage in righteous indignation at the violence in Bosnia, yet we shut our eyes at the realistic fiction our children get to see on our TV and movie screens, and, worse still, remain mute at actual violence that happen in places near us unless they happen to affect Muslims.

As part of our nice Asian upbringing, we are taught that the word of our elders is always to be obeyed, presumably because their age brings wisdom. As children, the word 'no' was forbidden from our vocabularies. To say it to our parents was to invite trouble. The consequence is that as adults, we find it hard to say no because we have learnt that this invites the displeasure of others, and hurts social harmony.

Unfortunately this sort of upbringing has not prepared us well for an environment where there are many opinions, views, and ideas. Having been allowed so little leeway to have independence in our thinking, we find it hard to accept that others may have this freedom to think for themselves. One of the hardest things for our young people to do when they go overseas is to offer an opinion which is all their own and not that of their parents, or whatever they perceive is the prevailing one of the group they are in.

For those who have been denied this opportunity, accepting that some people may think differently from you becomes a difficult chore. Having

had obedience sealed into their brains since young, they find it is incomprehensible that others may have had the choice to seek different threads of knowledge. People with such limited horizons basically have their minds soldered shut so it's hard for them to accept that people with a broader base of knowledge can come to conclusions which are vastly different from theirs.

Faced with this situation, they feel that they have to react but having had no experience of how to agree to disagree, they look in the shallow recesses of their underdeveloped minds and remember how their parents reacted when they dared to disobey: a whack on the head and loud harangues about how bad they had been.

So it is quite unsurprising that the normally excruciatingly polite Asian man, who never fails to touch his heart after offering his hand in greeting, should react to differing opinions in exactly the same way as his father did, by resorting to violence, both physical and verbal. And better still when he has the supposed moral reinforcement of friends of similar ilk.

This of course fails to take into account that the world has changed significantly from the days of the cowering child. You very rarely hear of mobs where everyone has an IQ of 160 and a degree in Ancient Malay Literature or Advanced Physics. Basically there is a correlation between one's level of education and the way one reacts to people one doesn't like. Usually one displays one's learning by trying to use the law so getting a court injunction, for example, is a favourite tool. But when one resorts to basic things like brute force, then this betrays a rather limited level of education. The Tarzan School of Social Interaction.

Unfortunately in our cyber age, you cannot confine news about such refined behaviour to one's own backyard. Not only can other people hear about it, they can even see it. And it becomes terribly hard to figure out what the purpose of such pure mindless behaviour might be.

Worse still, one starts to wonder what messages we might be providing to our impressionable young. We tell them that they cannot behave demonstratively when they feel affection towards someone else or when they are enjoying themselves. This is bound to make them lose their senses and lead them down all manner of immoral paths. Yet we seem to also be saying that it is OK to lose all sense of perspective and act violently without much engagement of our God-given brains, just to prove that we are supposedly more patriotic citizens than others. And then we should be feted as heroes.

As Yul Brynner said, 'tis a puzzlement'. No doubt our heroes are buried under bouquets of flowers and congratulatory faxes from across the water although they are being uncharacteristically reticent about telling us about them. I'm amazed there haven't been pages of newspaper ads lauding their heroics nor odes penned to them. This should go into our school history books and our young should be trained in this new style of affirmative action. Maybe it should be incorporated into Rakan Muda.

In the meantime, I am going to teach my daughter that it is quite alright to disagree with me as long as she can defend her own views. And if they make sense, I will heed them. God willing, this will make her a decent adult who respects others as she would expect others to respect her.

THE BEST OF MALAYSIA

February 19, 1997

Let anyone thinks all I do is whine about this great country of ours (nods from certain quarters I see), let me this week redress all that by talking about everything I love about it.

I am writing this during Gong Xi Raya weekend and nothing, but nothing, better illustrates all the best things about our country than this. For these few days, like no other, people not only open their houses but also their hearts and welcome everyone in. Even though food, and sometimes *angpow* and *duit Raya* are a great draw, people visit friends' homes to wish each other well for another year.

For a good part of my adult life, I have had the opportunity to witness one of the most extraordinary events in Malaysian life, the Sri Perdana open house. There can be nothing like this anywhere in the world, when anybody can come and shake hands with the Prime Minister and family and partake of food and drink, all with the minimum of security. Every year, despite extraordinary heat and a long trek uphill, through traffic jams and carting young children, I marvel at the Malaysians who have turned up, sweating and breathless, for the opportunity to wish Selamat Hari Raya and shake hands, all of which takes perhaps ten seconds. Most of them feel the queues are worth that infinitesimal time and walk off with a smile on their face. I

guess some wish they could actually sit down and have a chat but understand that they cannot do that at the expense of the thousands more of their fellow citizens waiting patiently outside.

Whenever I get the opportunity, I show foreign journalists this phenomenon. Where else in the world can you do this not only at the house of the head of government but also those of almost his entire Cabinet? Can you imagine Clinton or Major having an Open House? Most journalists from overseas never cover this largely because festival time is the time when everyone says don't come because we're all on holiday (and because we don't want to work ferrying them around). In fact, this is probably the best time to invite foreign journalists to come because this is exactly when the best of Malaysia actually happens.

This year, to me, it was an extra pleasure to watch the faces of Chinese visitors light up when, after they've wished you Selamat Hari Raya, you say Gong Xi Fa Cai right back. It was wonderful to see how some people have tried to incorporate Kongsi Raya in their dress; not just Chinese people who took the trouble to wear *baju Melayu* for Raya but Malays who wore red *baju* with Mandarin collars and frog buttons. I can't wait to see what people will wear when Raya moves down to Christmas and Deepavali! Santa Claus in *baju Melayu*? *Sari kebaya*?

The warmth of this only puts to shame the person quoted in the papers as announcing that we should not say Gong Xi Raya because one was a religious festival and one wasn't. In a season of bigheartedness, there always has to be a spoilsport. That's one person who's not going to get a Milo tin of love letters this year.

And talking about spoilsports, after an extraordinary Ramadan when everyone was trying to outdo each other with righteous indignation over what time nightclubs should close, I was relieved to see finally some saner statements emerging in the end. Firstly, that we should not deny that all sorts of terrible things are happening in our society because denial will mean we'll never solve them. What a change from the old attitude of not talking about bad things because they'll harm our supposedly pure and pristine image. And secondly, the call for religious authorities to be more caring people because otherwise nobody will listen to them.

As someone who's had some extraordinary encounters with so-called religious people who can be exceptionally callous and mean-spirited, I could

not welcome this more. Working as I do in a field that requires great reservoirs of compassion, I have often been dismayed by religious types who blithely say things like since there is no cure for AIDS, let us just concentrate on prevention and let those already infected die. This, without wanting to do anything in the way of prevention education other than condemning those already infected and telling everyone else to avoid Satan. If you ask me, these are the people who give religion a bad name. When people are down, put your foot on them and push them even more. That's sure to win converts. (And don't get me started on those who blame women for every single thing in the world, including men's inability to stay away from karaoke bars!)

I truly welcome the moves by the Government to break the gatekeeper syndrome among our religious establishment where they, and only they, control the meaning of God's word. Sounds like the bad old days of European medieval times when the religious authorities ruled over an uneducated and all-believing laity. Keep everyone ignorant and they won't question whatever we tell them, even when it's blatantly unjust. All in the name of God, the Merciful and the Beneficent. Let us apply that old political adage here too: power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

But all is not lost. I actually was dressed and ready early enough to catch the Hari Raya sermon this year and how extraordinary it was. Be more caring, the imam said, reach out to people. Gee, at this rate, I can just see my volunteer list growing! (How I wish!)

I keep harping about this because I am hoping that the goodwill of this festive season will truly mean that people will become more caring. On the eve of the holidays, I got a call from a friend very upset because she had seen a drug addict with AIDS left alone to die in his hospital bed. Nobody went near him in his last days, not even the staff and it didn't even look as if he was given any food. He died in pain and alone and his indignities did not end with death. The people who had to prepare his body for burial did nothing to hide their disgust, voicing it aloud for all the world to hear. This in the good and holy month of Ramadan.

Yet this is by no means exceptional. Some people even think this is the way it should be, 'to teach them a lesson'. It is hard to be generous of spirit when you hear this, to not repay cruelty with worse. In Ramadan, when you are supposed to feel a little of the suffering of the poor and hungry, you also feel pity for the ignorant and the arrogant and leave everything up to God.

(And in the time-honoured Malaysian tradition of two steps forward and one step back, we are now urged to inform on our neighbours if they are behaving 'promiscuously'. Right, let us now give free reign to every malicious busybody to spite everyone they don't like. How caring and pious!)

RELIGION, WHERE IS THY BEAUTY?

July 9, 1997

Is it the weather, or is it me? Am I the only person feeling depressed about the state of affairs in our nation these days? I think we've hit a new low when the front pages of the newspapers carry a story about women fined for being 'indecently dressed'; they've been convicted for a crime so ill-defined and vague as to be nonsensical.

I have to say that as a feminist I have a problem with beauty contests—they perpetuate the exploitation of women as mere decoration. I have no problem with making women aware that participating in beauty contests demeans them.

However we have to remember that we live in an environment that regularly demeans women in many, many ways: in advertising, in the general attitude of men towards women's problems. On the scale of horrendous ways to exploit women, beauty contests rank pretty low, compared to selling women's bodies in the seediest backstreets of our cities.

But it needs to be said that there is very little difference between the mentality that organizes beauty contests and the one behind the arrest and public humiliation of women. Both are perpetrated by men and both view women as something less than human.

In this case the arresting parties said nothing at all about protecting the rights of these women from being exploited. Instead the women were publically condemned for violating a law that nobody had heard of until now. It is interesting that the *fatwa* now bans participation in beauty contests, but not watching them. And what would be the use of banning beauty contests when you can always go home and watch *Baywatch*?

But this case should send a shiver through all of us, men and women. For a start, why now and why so suddenly? Apparently this was a law gazetted

in 1995. (Didn't anyone notice it then?) There have been countless beauty contests since then, so why did the attack only come now?

Secondly, what does it all mean? Who moved to have this law? Why is it that we did not know about it? Why was there no open debate about it before it became law? Are laws being made in secret, and if so, why?

What worries me most of all is, what next? What constitutes indecency in Muslim women? Not covering our heads? Wearing skirts? Short sleeves? Will there be men patrolling swimming pools and admonishing women for wearing swimsuits? Excuse me, but did the Taliban infiltrate our country?

Who will be targetted next? Models? Singers? Actresses? TV announcers? Sportswomen? Female public figures such as politicians? Will it end when women retreat into the home, never to emerge again?

Why is it that there are laws which place so much more emphasis on the dress of women than of men? The authorities in question have said that men will be arrested if they do not cover themselves between their navels and their knees. I hope that all Muslim athletes in Selangor take note: this means that many of them will not be participating in Sukom.

We should all be alarmed at this because it means there are people out to repress women in our country. They want us to be at home having babies endlessly, covered head to toe because they think that's what good women do.

Otherwise we are out there to tempt weak, sex-crazed men. (Can all these weak men please identify themselves so that we can avoid them?) A friend tried to put a good face on all this. 'These people are dinosaurs,' he said. 'They know they are facing extinction but they are not going down without a fight.' I wish I could be so optimistic.

Still, perhaps he has a point. Perhaps with all our race towards high technology and the cyberworld, there are still people who feel very scared and alienated. These are the people who do not have the education or the skills to make high technology work for them. They can barely type let alone work a computer. They fear the internet because it will expose how small and uneducated they are. They worry that when people are educated, their little power bases will be challenged and they will be exposed for being the charlatans they are.

So they react in the way uneducated people do—get at the weakest people possible for the slightest thing. And women are always a favourite

target, especially since we never fight back for fear of being called uppity, or worse, 'unfeminine'. Never mind that the definition of femininity is coined by men.

Perhaps we should take pity and look at why certain people feel the need to do these things. Never mind that the religious justification can be a bit vague, never mind that the image they convey of religion is one of repression and utter punitiveness, never mind that it simply means that we are governed in our lives by people with small minds.

Perhaps this is just because they feel threatened by the modern world and all the fast changes underway. We should look at this problem and see how we can make them feel included. Perhaps in that way they will feel less marginalised and will make better use of their time.

After all, compared to incest, child abuse, wife-battering, drug abuse and corruption, whether you are dressed right or wrong according to somebody's arbitrary values should rank pretty low on the scale of the concerns of our times.

By the way, has anyone in the state ever issued a *fatwa* on corruption?

In the meantime I think it behooves every intelligent woman and man to protest the unfairness of this. The sheer hypocrisy of it stinks. For a start, whoever went to arrest these girls actually stayed and watched the whole contest, waited for the results to be announced, and then pounced. So did they avert their eyes throughout, or did they have fun too?

The sad thing is that I hear more and more bright young people, the very ones we need to develop this country, saying that they are reaching the end of their tether and they cannot hack this environment where they can hardly do anything without being accused of betraying their religion and their culture.

Suddenly living elsewhere seems very attractive, because they don't have to deal with all these petty things, when there are much bigger things to worry about.

And they are not the usual people who leave for greener pastures. They are the people we have spent all these years giving opportunities to and cultivating, people who are proud of their country, race and religion, but who feel they are being unfairly targetted by the small-minded and the envious.

It is tragic that a growing number of people feel that this country is becoming too small, not just physically but also in its mindset. Newspaper

headlines like the ones about the three girls only confirm what they feel.

If anyone thinks that beauty contests tarnish the image of Islam, they should think about the image derived from actions that constantly punish and are unjust. In other parts of the world, people are turning to Islam because of its emphasis on justice and equality for all people, men and women. Here, we only see the ugly side of it. Where is the beautiful face of Islam?

We should learn a lesson from Prime Minister John Howard of Australia, who failed to nip the political phenomenon of Pauline Hanson in the bud. Now he finds that he has to deal with a monster. Basically we in Malaysia have a different monster growing in our own backyard, one that is bitter, jealous, sanctimonious, dangerous, divisive and authoritarian, and it needs to be slayed right now.

Or else it will eat up all that is good and beautiful about this country.

Marina vs the Censors

Censorship is one of my favourite subjects because apart from pornography and violence, I don't think anything should be censored. Yet our Censorship Board seems oblivious not only to the growing sophistication of Malaysian society but also to the sorts of violence on screen that have now become unacceptable. Our Censorship Board is filled with retired civil servants who seem to have nothing better to do and who seem completely out of touch. Actually we don't really know who they are: nobody admits to being on the Board in case they incur anyone's wrath. There probably isn't any other Malaysian institution that attracts as much ridicule as the Censorship Board.

But what I also object to is the impulse by the Ministry of Information to summarily ban artistes for the most trivial of reasons. Once they banned one of the country's leading songwriters (who is very nationalistic) because a newspaper reported that he had apparently insulted the Prime Minister. Never mind that the PM himself did not take offence but the songwriter got banned anyway until he gave an 'acceptable' explanation. No apologies for not asking him for reasons first before taking action.

The real objection I have to both the Censorship Board and the Ministry of Information's love of banning people is that it is the wielding of power for its own sake. In a country which calls itself a democracy, this power-wielding is completely undemocratic, with a few people purporting to know best about what we should or should not see and hear. The very idea that some unknown civil servants should decide this for me, based on some arbitrary values, really gets my goat. I would never tell them what to watch so I don't see why they should tell me.

Of course all this is really moot now that we have satellite TV and the internet. Our Censorship Board can wield those scissors as much as they want but we can see the worst things possible on the Net in the privacy of our own home.

I'm not saying that having this access is a good thing but for most sensible people, the first few times on the Net, everyone looks for the porn. Then you get bored and go on to more fun things. The point is that we chose to do this ourselves with no fuddy-duddy telling us what's good or bad for us.

KAMI CENSORS, YO YO NO NO

23rd March, 1993

Around this time a year ago I gave myself over to ruminating about power and what a dangerous thing it is in the hands of the unintelligent and the whimsical. I mused about how people, unappreciative of the gift of having power, do not realise the seriousness of the responsibility of that power. They wield it without really thinking about consequences. And that the worst ways of wielding power are often the easiest ways.

We live in a relatively democratic country in a world where there is no such thing as a complete democracy. Our relativity sometimes seems a bit like the fuel gauge in my car: it doesn't stay in the same spot all the time, according to how much fuel I actually have in my tank. Sometimes we're a bit more and sometimes we're a bit less. Travelling around the region in the past few months I've observed that we don't have it too bad, primarily because we usually can yell and shout as much as we want about something we don't like. In some countries the very idea of dissent is alien.

However there are some things which may not affect all of us so perhaps will not care too much about them. These are things which affect only a certain group of people. Now we may think this will have nothing to do with us and therefore we don't have to concern ourselves. But looking at the bigger picture, the concerns of a small group of people may be a test case for bigger things which may eventually affect us.

I'll try to be less obscure because sometimes people need to be hit right between the eyes for them to see. Remember that infamous ban on male musicians who had longer than shoulder-length hair? Apparently the very length of their hair was likely to lead their followers to drugs and other heinous activities. So their music could not be played on the radio, they could not perform on TV and at concerts. Remember this ban was not law passed by

Parliament, it was just a ban arbitrarily put on by those who could.

Some of our more principled musicians stood their ground but it was like being under siege in Bosnia. Gradually they and their families began to see their livelihoods threatened. They had mouths to feed and children to clothe. So they succumbed and cut off their hair, even subjecting themselves to the humiliation of a public lock-snipping. Another trait of unintelligent use of power: wield it through humiliation.

Well I forgot to mention another thing about power in the hands of the less than scintillating: they don't have to be true to their word. So now that everyone's cut off their hair so that they can continue their careers and earn their livelihood, what happens? They still get banned!

I once had the dubious honour of being a guest on a morning radio show. One of the privileges of being on these radio shows is that you get to choose what songs you want played on the programme. My taste is eclectic but I did choose music pretty much on the 'cutting edge' so to speak. Didn't get away with very much I'm afraid although I did get them to play the sexiest song P. Ramlee ever wrote. Still, what was pretty interesting for me was to see all these CDs of local pop music with black marks all over them. The black marks represented songs that cannot be played over the air. I asked why and everybody just shrugged, nobody knows why.

Here's a bit of trivia for you (except that for some people, it's not very trivial): did you know that every Monday a group of people sits down on the Hill, listens to every new record that comes out and decides what we will hear? Isn't this a wonderful job? I'd love to do it. Of course this sort of job is not open to you or me or for any other regular music fan. If you are not young, cannot stand pop music and are tone deaf, then you will probably instantly qualify to sit on this panel. Hence lyrics which are deemed 'improper or inappropriate' (in a language that can be understood by the panel) or music that is 'discordant' will be blacked out.

You can tell these ain't very hip people on this panel since they didn't understand what 'humping around' means. So a song that goes 'Kami rappers, yo, yo, yo!' can't get in even though one that goes 'Yes, I'm bad, I'm bad, I'm bad' did.

After a while you kind of get the idea that rock and rap is OK for foreigners but not for locals. I know the music is foreign in origin but that doesn't mean that the songs written and produced here are not local. When

you write something, even if it's in a foreign medium or language, it's still local because you write about what you know, what is around you. It's akin to saying I'm not a Malaysian writer because I write in English (by the way, there are people who say this). So a bunch of Malaysian kids cannot write rap lyrics because that's a foreign medium of expression. Well, hey, you know, I heard there are now lots of *dikir barat* groups in Singapore. Are they all emigrant Malaysians or just Singaporeans who think that's a fun way of expressing themselves?

A lot of people may not care about what does or does not get played over our air waves. After all you can still go out and buy the records (although usually you wouldn't know about them unless you've heard them on the radio). But people who make the music, they care very much.

Besides the fact that it is their livelihood, and it is as legitimate a way of making a living as anything else (and considering the amount of white-collar crimes these days from people in 'respectable' jobs, probably less harmful), there is also the fact of being able to create something. Just because some people with closed minds do not understand a type of music does not mean that it is necessarily bad. Once upon a time anything the Rolling Stones did was considered 'evil and satanic'. Now you hear them in elevators. If you are creative, not being allowed recognition is one of the most dispiriting blows to your soul. How much worse then, if you are not allowed to be judged by the people you are creating for but instead your work is examined under a microscope by people predisposed to hating everything you do? I can't stand country music for instance so I'm never going to like any country record you play for me. That should instantly disqualify me from anything to do with country music. People who know and like a certain type of music are the only ones who will be able to tell between what is good and what is bad.

If they re-released the Derek and the Dominoes' version of *Layla* it would probably get banned while the Clapton unplugged version would get through. And we want to make *NegaraKu* upbeat....

Do you get the impression that sometimes the music is judged by what their purveyors look like? If Ozzie Osborne decided to wear a Hugo Boss suit and slick back his hair, would that change what his music is? Does music have to be perfectly clear for it to be judged as safe? Jazz is often hard to understand but take a look at Branford Marsalis and see if he's subversive.

If people can arbitrarily decide we cannot hear certain types of music

for no good reason other than they have the power to decide, who knows what will come next? We may not be allowed to think unless our thoughts have been filtered first. Didn't this used to be called Communism?

BROUGHT TO LIFE BY POP MUSIC

February 23, 1994

In early 1994, Malaysian authorities became concerned that young Malaysians were falling into a habit of 'loafing', or lepak, hanging around shopping centres doing very little. There was a rush to identify solutions to this and other social problems among Malaysian youth.

About half my lifetime ago, a pastor in a city in the United States proposed the banning of the song *Love to Love You, Baby* by Donna Summer because it was 'causing a lot of illegitimate babies'. While there may have been a few babies born nine months later named Donna, nobody managed to make the direct link between the song and the babies. The pastor himself could not hold up one baby to say that it was brought to life by a pop tune.

That pastor must have some brothers in our country. I was quite astonished lately to read of a proposal by a group to ban all concerts whether foreign or local on the grounds that they cause all sorts of social evils including loafing, unwanted babies, drug taking and probably even hair-growing.

Obviously they're not out on a recruitment drive among our youth. Didn't help that they got support from a not very-youthful civil servant. Makes you wonder how tuned-in our 'young' leaders are.

I recently had the pleasure of attending two concerts, one by James Ingram and one by Sting. Although the thought of making babies did occur after Ingram's wonderfully romantic concert, I can't say that I really felt inclined to either loaf, abandon my not-so-babyish baby or take drugs. I did feel like cutting my hair but if you've seen my crowning non-glory lately, you'll understand why. At Sting's I did scream rather a lot: I just couldn't believe that I had to wait fifteen years to see my hero.

Seeing two concerts in a row did set me back a bit financially. Which also puzzles me about this connection between concerts and loafers. If people

who *lepak* can afford to go and see these concerts, then please God, give me this day my daily loaf... it surely must be more worthwhile money-wise than what I'm doing now.

Also as far as I know, loafing has been defined as hanging around shopping malls doing nothing in particular (my favourite activity during Ramadan lunch hours). So if they're watching a concert, they can't be, according to that definition, loafing.

As for abandoning babies and drug-taking, gee, if this is true, we should worry about our yuppies since those are the largest group of concert-goers judging by what I've seen. And it will be interesting to see what effect Bob Dylan will have on the ageing (and probably now balding) former hippies who will no doubt be flocking to his (very expensive) concert. By the way, does this apply to Pavarotti's concert too?

The easiest thing in the world is to say that something is evil and ignore any sort of logic. Even easier is to condemn without coming up with any solutions. Why not turn this into something positive?

Put it this way, concert-goers are a captive audience. Once they're in the concert hall or stadium, they're stuck. Therefore they can't escape if you wanted to take the opportunity to give them a few messages—anti-loafing, anti-drugs, anti-abandoning babies, anti-AIDS, anti-anything you want. In the old days, remember how medicine sellers and propagandists used to show movies in the kampungs in order to collect an audience before they hit them with a sales pitch or whatever? So why can't we do the same thing with concerts? I would certainly love it if I could get AIDS messages in at every single concert staged in this country and it would do wonders for the image of the sponsors (sponsoring companies, did you hear that?).

Also it is only too easy and dare I say it, religiously politic, to hit out at concert-goers because they are an amorphous bunch of young people and they don't have any clout. But it is amusing to see how nobody has dared to mention banning that other bunch of youthful louts who collect in groups virtually every week in every part of the country. I mean the football audience.

Who would even dare to suggest getting rid of football in this country because all that screaming and shouting and generally wild behaviour might lead to other social evils too? If you can link concerts with every problem going, you can apply the same logic to football matches (and any other spectator sport for that matter). There are probably ten times more football

fans in this country than there are concert-goers. And cigarette companies sponsor them too.

I would certainly be happy to make full use of captive football audiences to pass on positive messages, especially AIDS messages. Imagine how far we could go with our AIDS education campaign if we could hand out AIDS information to every single football fan?

So here's a tip: if anyone wants to do anything for our young people, the last thing you do is take away the things they enjoy. Instead, see what you can do to turn those activities to your advantage. And most of all, especially if you call yourself a youth group, get hip!

SCHINDLER'S LIST

April 3, 1994

In March and April 1994, I was working as Project Manager for the book A Passage to Vietnam, produced by Editions Didier Millet and Against All Odds Productions. During that time the international press prominently reported Malaysia's ban of Schindler's List, under the pretext that it was Zionist propaganda. Subsequently, a Cabinet decision reversed that ban, instructing the Censorship Board to review the film according to the normal guidelines of censorship procedure. After this review, and review by the Film Censorship Appeal Committee, seven cuts were requested, including one of violence. Steven Spielberg refused permission to screen the film in Malaysia with those cuts.

There's nothing quite like being stuck in a foreign country and finding out that your country has made the front page of an international newspaper with a negative story to put you in a bad mood. Luckily I was sitting alone and not surrounded by the people I was working with, some of whom just happened to be Jewish, when I read about our esteemed Censor Board and *Schindler's List*.

I must admit that I rather guessed that this would happen, only I did not expect it to explode while I was the sole representative of our country working on a book project abroad. I doubt however that my reaction would have been different if I were at home except maybe I would not have felt like

locking myself up in my hotel room shrouded in depression.

Put it this way: I think we really wrong-footed it by banning the movie because our Censor Board, already not exactly intellectual giants, deemed it as propaganda. It was, quite simply, dumb. Especially when it was already well-known that if we tried to cut even a few seconds off it, Steven Spielberg would not have allowed it to be shown. So, if our esteemed Censor Board had any savvy at all, they would have announced that they absolutely had to cut something and Steven Spielberg would have done the banning work for them.

On the other hand, I think that we should show *Schindler's List* simply because it is timely. If every day we agonise over Bosnia, and certainly it has been convenient for various people to liken the Serbs to the Nazis, then we should certainly allow it to be shown so Malaysians can be warned about what could happen if people allow themselves to be led by charismatic leaders with murderous ideas.

It is shallow to think that *Schindler's List* is only about Nazis and Jews because it is really about the sometimes inexplicable ability of some people to cease thinking of their fellow man as human therefore justifying their subjection to all manner of cruelties including murder. Make no mistake, had there been Malaysians unfortunate enough to have lived in Nazi Germany, they would have suffered exactly the same fate as the Jews.

We should not therefore give any latent fascists any reason to applaud us for our supposed support. If we grieve over Bosnia because we believe that one lot of people do not have the right to rob another lot of people of their land and their dignity just because they are different, then we cannot allow ourselves ever to be put into the same camp as Nazis.

Having said that, I do agree with a writer named Claudia Cohen who wrote in the *New York Times* that Spielberg's intransigence about not having his movie cut at all is in fact counterproductive. It is still better for people to see his movie even with cuts than not to see it at all.

Of course the cuts that our Censor Board want to make are also a bit suspect. I'm amazed that they want to cut violence. After all they have let a heck of a lot of Stallone-Schwarzenegger-Van Damme-plus all those kungfu movies through without much conscience-examining. What, in the movie, do they deem violent? The scenes of people being fed into ovens?

And of course there's the nudity. I know that the members of our Censor

Board do not have the sort of broad horizons necessary to understand contextualising but really this is exactly what is needed. I assume that when a nude scene is cut, it is because it is unnecessarily graphic and sensational or because we poor delicate Malaysians need to be protected from getting exotic ideas (like making love in the nude, instead of fully-clothed as all righteous Malaysians do). OK, that's fine.

Although I have not seen *Schindler's List*, I have seen enough movies which touch on Nazi Germany, both fictional and documentary, to know that one of the ways that the Nazis dehumanised their victims, the Jews and others, was to strip and subject them to all sorts of painful indignities. There is nothing erotic about it unless you have a sick mind.

Making people parade around naked is a sure way of degrading them, a final cruel touch before sending them off to a fate that is the ultimate in inhumanity. I would guess that this is the context of the nudity in *Schindler's List* and if the Censor Board thinks that this is going to erotically stimulate Malaysian audiences, then there's something wrong with them and us.

What I would really like to know is if ever someone makes a movie about Bosnia which included the mass rapes that the Serbs have been conducting in order to rob Bosnian women of their honour and dignity, would our Censor Board ban it on the grounds of too much sex?

A METHOD (ACTOR) TO THE MADNESS

April 27, 1994

When I was in school, one of the regular Speech Day activities was the putting on of a play to entertain our parents and friends. My only claim to thespian fame was in playing the third (male) guest to the right at the ball in Cinderella when I wore my mother's *songket kebaya* (because it made a suitable frock coat) and danced a little minuet. It was at the time a major thing for us kids to get up on stage and pretend to be these funny looking eighteenth-century Europeans in a favourite childhood fable.

Later when I went to a very competitive local boarding school, drama was a big thing. We had interclass, inter-house, inter-form and interschool drama competitions all the time. I was lucky to have been in a class and

house which was full of dramatic talents (although I was most definitely not one of them). My class once put up an impressive staging of *Raja Bersiong* complete with neo-Siamese costumes, a strutting Raja and a seduction scene of such suggestion that it had every one of us, all girls, shrieking with panic.

Another time we staged a play which was based liberally on *The Exorcist*. I remember it featured a rather unstable little girl who had a penchant for wandering around graveyards. The plot was not memorable but we had some great scenery including a graveyard as chillingly Gothic as any you would find in the best vampire movies.

It's now been twenty years since those days and all the actresses have grown up to become doctors and engineers and what-have-you. Nobody as far as I know has taken up acting as a professional or amateur and as far as I can tell, our acting attempts have not made any great marks on our characters. In fact Raja Bersiong became an extremely religious mother of seven children but I doubt if playing the role had anything to do with it.

Which is why it mystifies me that some Great Mind should see fit to comment that a local Malay actor could do better than act as a Buddhist priest in a foreign film being shot here. Exactly what is meant to be implied I don't know but I would guess that it must have something to do with the safety of the poor actor's faith.

Heaven knows what, logically speaking, a part in a movie has to do with one's faith. We have some great acting talents in our country but as far as I know none of them subscribes totally to the Method school of acting where you really have to live the role before you can act it. Remember Robert de Niro and the enormous weight he put on for *Raging Bull*? Now that was Method.

I seriously doubt that this particular actor spent much time, if any, living as a Buddhist priest just to prepare for this movie role. In any case, from what I hear, no local has a major part in the movie so Buddhist priest or not, I doubt if it's a significant enough part to warrant realistic acting classes.

What is really disturbing however is the intent behind making such a remark. It probably never occurred to anybody to make anything out of this actor taking on this part, much less what effect playing the part would have on the actor's own faith, until our Great Mind mentioned it. (Did he choose the part or did the director cast him because he looked right?) Now it puts doubts in people's minds about that actor's faith and in this country, that's

no small thing. He knows what he believes in but a remark from an influential person coming from nowhere at all casts doubts on him. I would think remarks like that come close to libel.

Also when you think about it, what's wrong with playing a Buddhist priest per se? I know some Buddhist priests and they are all incredibly gentle people with often a wicked sense of humour that catches you off guard. Surely what matters in the movie is whether the Buddhist priest is a good guy or not and if he is portrayed as a bad guy by virtue of being a priest, then all Buddhists should protest. But then again, it's only a movie role.

It seems that it's okay to play a rapist/murderer/thief etc. as long as the role has the same faith as you but not to play a good guy if that part professes a different faith. How bizarre!

But that's exactly the sort of sanctimonious attitude that starts wars. It also reflects the inability of some people to differentiate between what is real and what isn't and then to assume that everyone else is just as blur. Luckily for all of us, God does not have a fuzzy mind.

THE NAKED AND THE INNOCENT

April 12, 1995

Malaysia has long debated the introduction of a film classification system.

Neighbouring Singapore introduced such a scheme in 1993, though not without considerable controversy.

Visiting a neighbouring country recently I picked up the newspaper and found a local MP there ranting and raving about his country's movie classification system. He reckoned it was the worst thing that they ever did and as a result of these movies, young people were getting wilder and wilder and the values that they were being brought up with were being shoved aside. (This despite the fact that to see a movie there costs quite a bit.) Why, he bristled, there was even a university survey which showed that some university students confessed to having sex two or three times a month, and this definitely must be a result of watching these R(estricted)-rated movies.

In an attempt to be even-handed, this MP undertook some of his own

research by going to see a movie not rated R but PG (for Parental Guidance recommended). To his utter horror, he reported, he found that this movie should also have been R-rated because it contained some 'pornographic' scenes. Presumably the movie also made him want to have sex more than three times a month and this was obviously undesirable since it will probably lead to the spawning of more ranters and ravers.

Spurred by curiosity about a movie that could make such a person foam at the mouth so much (actually it was an incentive), I went to see the movie which was *Nell* starring Jodie Foster. I thought the movie was great but I wound up feeling very angry.

Nell is a movie about innocence. Jodie Foster plays a young woman who had been brought up by her mother completely isolated from other people in the mountains of South Carolina. When her mother dies of old age, she is discovered and in the process, she has to learn about interacting with other people. Therefore Nell is like a child, completely trusting and unaware that human beings come in all shapes, sizes and sentiments. It is a touching movie because you feel the gradual loss of innocence that Nell must undergo in order to be able to cope with the real world and in many ways it is tragic. No human being can stay pure.

There are some nude scenes in the movie but they are discreetly photographed and they are not sexual. In one, Nell takes a bath in the lake in front of her house. Naturally, someone who has grown up in the woods with only a mother and sister for company is not going to understand the need to cover up. It would not have made sense for her to wear a swim suit while she bathed. In another she is duped by a rowdy group of boys to lift up her dress, exactly the way a little girl might do thinking that this was a game. One feels immediately the pain of her exploitation.

Other than that there was no 'pornography' at all and that was why I was angry. Not because I was disappointed in the lack of sex scenes but because the MP raving in the papers was obviously lying to his constituency, knowing full well that they would trust him.

It made me think of whether we in Malaysia were ever subject to the same sort of deception. For instance local movies are banned for various illogical reasons (if sex isn't part of our culture, how on earth do we reproduce?). How do we know for sure that these reasons, bizarre as they sometimes are, are valid? At least, our neighbours have the option of checking

it out for themselves. Whereas we are forced to accept what the authorities say and we'll never be able to know whether such a movie really warrants such a harsh sanction.

Actually I don't understand how this happens. I thought all local movies have to submit their scripts to FINAS before they get approval to be made. Maybe script-vetters are not very literate or scripts are not written well enough to evoke the story line properly. I always find the written word more evocative than the visual image.

I hear that in another country, movie-makers routinely include graphic sex scenes in a movie so that the censors have something to cut. What's left is the movie they really want to make. In this way everybody comes out happy. The censors feel they've done society some good and the movie-makers still get to show their movie.

In our country, we always have to be protected from things which 'never' happen. This is despite the fact that you can read about more sex and violence in the newspapers every day than any scriptwriter could dream up. We don't even get to see the movie. To show it will presumably mean that hordes of people will run amok, having sex more than they already are and invoking non-liquid spirits without prior approval. I don't remember more people than usual wanting to twist strange girls' heads off when *The Exorcist* was shown here.

I know that because the elections are nigh, we are going to be subjected to more nonsense than usual. But saying on the one hand that movie-makers' creativity will not be stifled and on the other hand banning a movie really rankles for its sheer condescension. If movies must be banned because their subject matter does not reflect the culture, one wonders if our masters live in one sanitised culture where everything is always rosy while the rest of us live in another, full of awful things which we have to deal with anyway, no matter how many movies they ban.

WELL, WHICH IS IT?

November 18, 1995

I was never much of a leader in school. I was the one who never got elected class head or prefect because I shied away as much as possible from initiating anything. In boarding school I marvelled at the girls who had a natural tendency to lead, who always said 'Let's do this!'. I admired the confidence that they had.

In adulthood I pretty much carried on the same way until I started being given positions of responsibility. Funnily enough I found that as long as I was given a pretty long leash, taking the lead was not as bad as I imagined. It is possible to get people to do things as long as you are convinced that these things really need to get done.

Then I began to notice that people do rely on their leaders, that in fact, sometimes they depended on them to a surprising degree. A friend of mine termed it 'upward delegation'. We delegate all the thinking and initiative to our leaders because we think that is their job. If they don't okay it, we dare not move, even on the most trivial things.

We don't expect our leaders to confuse us. We expect them to have clear vision and direction and be able to articulate these to us. In short we want them to be better and smarter than we are.

I get confused a lot. For instance I don't understand why some laws, pushed and directed by those in authority, can be passed and then not implemented. Why go through all that trouble and then not take it all the way? We expect leaders to make things happen, not stop short.

Or, in another instance of confused direction from above, after a long and stubborn commitment to censorship supposedly for our own good, our leadership now says that we will have a rating system.

Great, we think, perhaps they will now concede that we are a mature and intelligent people. But no, this rating system will only be implemented after the movies have been censored. Which leads us to the question: what would be left to rate after our dear beloved Censorship Board has been through the movies? So on the one hand, they are pretending to cater to an intelligent audience, on the other hand, they are treating us worse than before.

Throw in cable, satellite and the internet into the equation and more confusion reigns. How do you justify on the one hand having censored and

rated movies and on the other hand having virtually complete access to any sort of movies and information you want? The standard answer is that not everybody can afford to have either cable, satellite or computers so the access is limited. But then again, we are trying to develop this country so that not only will everybody be able to afford these things if they want them but they will also be technologically-capable.

I have never heard so much confusing backpedalling as in this area of information technology. Our leaders rant on about how we must be protected from the rubbish that is floating in cyberspace. Yet, they also coo, we must give our people access to the vast amount of information and knowledge out there in order for us to compete with others. Well, WHICH is it?

Things would be clear if our own leadership were technologically capable and they understood more about the media they are talking about. I bet I'm not the only one who guffawed hysterically at somebody's inane statement that we should be careful because the Western media control the internet.

The beautiful thing about the internet is that it is totally anarchic and nobody can control what's on it, not the West nor the East. It is in a sense a whole different country, a cyber-country if you like, with, right now, no leader at all unless you consider simply the English language as a de facto leader. What keeps it going is the fact that everyone wants to keep it going.

With the existence of the internet, it makes no sense to ban foreign print publications who have the temerity to say uncomfortable things about us because you can always ask someone to e-mail it to you. These days banning anything is very retro really.

Often the fault lies with the led. We like having leaders because we don't want to have to worry about everything. We want them to show us what to do, what is possible, what will make our lives better. But sometimes we expect our leaders to do every single thing because of that upward delegation tendency of ours. We refuse to make decisions without referring upstairs because we want to always play safe. We don't want to take any responsibility. We willingly turn ourselves into sheep.

This is fine if our leadership is completely trustworthy and infallible. But we don't always question the quality of the Head Sheep. Who was it who said that we get the leaders we deserve? That's all very well if we always think about who we are choosing but we don't. Sometimes we wake up and find that we've got the wolf leading us sheep. (At least a wolf has a certain

dynamism; sometimes we get lambs and we don't complain!)

We often shake our heads in horror at the sort of 'over-democracy' that is supposedly practised in the West. But we never think about whether we ourselves are under-democratic or just right. We simply assume that when our head honchos tell us that the sun's shining then they're right. Even when it's raining.

Chapter Three

Malaysia's Social Values

I am always interested in the way people interact with one another, how little things make or break a relationship. I think what keeps these interactions going or not is what decides if society is working or not.

As a society we are now obsessed with social ills, with everyone and his mother offering his or her own often ill-considered opinion. The last thing anyone does is examine what his or her own role in the breakdown of social values is; it's always someone else's fault.

The seventh challenge in Vision 2020 is to establish a fully caring society and caring culture. To do this I think it is important to examine the many ways we are not. Unfortunately I find we fail dismally when we really need to care. Our sense of outrage at injustices being done to others where we ourselves have no stake is incredibly muted. To care we need to feel that anger because otherwise how would we be motivated to act?

MEMORIES AND THE MUNDANE

December 23, 1992

Oh I have been a bad girl. My editor does not want to speak to me any more because I have missed three whole columns. This after having prided myself on never missing a deadline.

Excuses I have galore. I have been extremely busy, with work, with travelling, with my daughter, with moving house. Time-management is not my strong point (I guess I can now expect a barrage of brochures on time-management seminars) but then very few people I know actually love to

spread themselves as thinly as I do. (This is literal: being crazy-busy makes you slim.) So you get to the point when there isn't any time to manage and the low priorities (including the extraordinary sums of money that I earn from this column) just fall by the wayside.

But what have I said before about my love for writing? How can I stay away from it for too long? My fingers itch, my brain cells agitate, my Powerbook calls out to be pounded and a voice deep in my soul says, 'MM, you could do with the discipline!' So here I am again, contrite but also happy to be back. Am I forgiven?

Actually inspiration has been in short supply too, I suppose because I have been preoccupied with the relatively small things in life (car breaking down in the most public of places) and you don't want to hear about these things. No sir, columns are for the grander scenes in the theatre of life.

But it is human and normal to retreat from the macro to the micro, to leave for a while the problems of the globe to those whose job it is (how much more damage can they do if I don't pay attention for a minute?) and focus on the minutiae of everyday existence, no matter how irritating. For a few weeks I have allowed my first ever very own publishing project take centre stage more or less. This however had the misfortune of coinciding with the school holidays and one kid who needs to be kept busy or else she gets too smart for her own boots.

After one longish trip away, my kid, all wide-eyed and angelic smile, says to me, 'Ma, you know, when you were away, every time I hear a sad song, I cry!'

'Oh yeah, which song?'

'Umm...any sad song!' Upon which she confers with her staunch cohort, her eight-year old uncle, and then returns and triumphantly announces, 'Memories!' Do I kill her or do I cry?

Moving house also looms large in my life right now. Having been spoiled by a house that is almost fully-furnished (but nevertheless does not warrant the exorbitant rent the landlord is demanding), I now find myself having to peruse refrigerator catalogues and suchlike. Hardly my usual sort of reading. How would I know if one fridge is better than another? And why do they have to cost so much? I am doing my bit for the environment by eschewing air-conditioning, at least until the mosquitoes get the better of me.

So all these necessary things to worry about endlessly. Then this morning

I get everything put in perspective. I had the opportunity to meet the Bosnian representative to Malaysia, Professor Dr. Mustafa Cerić. And he made me realise how small most of my problems are.

How can I worry about a fridge when the people of Sarajevo are worrying about whether they will be hit by a Serbian missile next? What meaning is there in worrying about my daughter's piano lessons when Bosnian people have had their wives, sisters and daughters kidnapped, raped and murdered? How can I get depressed about my grey hair when people in Bosnia are so despairing that some of them just wish they could die?

We watched a video which although I think it spared us the most graphic details still managed to shock. It stunned us into silence in fact. Here we are in our safe sunny land and on the other side of this very small world, people live in indescribable terror.

But I was most moved really not by the horrors on the television screen but by the generosity of spirit that Dr. Mustafa showed. He made it clear that the Bosnian tragedy is not a religious war, that we should not fall for the Serbian propaganda that this was a war between Christians and Muslims. No religion condones this inhumanity so what the Serbs are doing cannot be religious in any way, cannot even be considered human. That is the truly sad thing about it and why Dr. Mustafa says he is sorry for the Serbs. Surely the worst thing that can befall any people is not to be considered human any more.

It is really very sobering to think of what so-called human beings are capable of doing to one another. I read a story in the *International Herald Tribune* of a Serbian 'irregular' (in other words, not a professional soldier) who had been captured. An uneducated lout, he calmly told of how he had herded Bosnians together and shot them, men, women and children. He even remembered a little girl who had hidden behind her grandmother's skirts just before he opened fire. The most chilling thing about his story was that he did not seem to display any remorse, guilt or even the slightest awareness that what he had done was not normal, not what any decent human being does. To him, it was only 'cleansing'. He could not even say he was only following orders, he actually thought this was the thing to do.

Dr. Mustafa had said the same thing. You can't pin down one person who is responsible for this, like you could Hitler. There is a genocidal hysteria in Bosnia; the Serbs think it is normal and right to kill Bosnians because they

are different. It is as dispassionate as us having an anti-aedes mosquito campaign. When this realisation hits you, then you fully appreciate the horror of what is happening.

I still have to move house, I still have to make sure my daughter gets her books right and all these other mundane things. But I know two things; one is that I will never complain about them ever again and two is that I will appreciate that I, unlike the Bosnians, have the luxury of having minor irritations to worry about.

HIGHLAND TOWERS

December 31, 1993

At 1:30pm on December 11, 1993, the twelve-storey Block One of the Highland Towers condominium toppled over, killing 48 people including my friends Carlos Rashid Musa and his wife Rosie Bakar. For nine nightmarish days, we waited for news of survivors, consuming every radio, newspaper and TV report as well as rumours that went around. I have never been so depressed in my life and when we finally knew they were dead, it was a relief as much as it was still shocking. Highland Towers brought out the best and worst of Malaysians. There were several heroes in the drama as well as several villains. The saddest thing is that to this day, the owners of the apartments, as well as those of two neighbouring towers, have not been compensated for their loss, and, for unexplained reasons, nobody has been found responsible for the Tower's collapse.

I would have liked to have written an upbeat year-end piece but when these past few weeks have been dominated by a tragedy as sad as Highland Towers, it is difficult. However there are certainly things to be learnt and taken heed of from the whole story.

Although my friends and I feel keenly the sorrow of losing our friends Carlos and Rosie in the collapse, I think our grief must only be one-zillionth that of the families of the victims. I was at the site on the third night after it happened and although most of the families were calm by then, I don't think I could begin to imagine what they were going through. It was hard to know

what to say or do except to reach out in sympathy. If there is one thing I learnt it is that being afraid of your own reaction is really quite selfish because it can never equal how it feels to lose a wife, mother, brother or child in so dreadful a way.

But it is amazing how insensitive some people can be. In times like this, which fortunately are very rare in our country, what is required from outsiders is extreme sensitivity and tact. This includes the press who in this hunger for news can forget that there are people's feelings involved.

As I was fairly close to what was happening, I know how much untruth was reported in the press. Many of us have completely lost faith in the news because we have come to distrust what is reported.

There was the story of the infamous note which was quickly explained as a miscommunication. But no explanation nor any apology was ever given for the front-page stories of the three people allegedly sighted alive in a kitchen and the alleged conversation held with a survivor in which he gave a tally of the number of survivors with him. Add that to the reporter who actually screamed at a victim's relative for daring to comment that the press was turning the whole thing into a circus and for not appreciating the press' supposed role in garnering international aid and the excitable TV reporter who actually said that an ambulance was right that minute heading for the hospital with a survivor when no such thing was happening. Surely that was something that could have been verified. Yet it wasn't and as far as I know, he offered no apologies later.

Then when they did finally find bodies, TV3 saw fit to show them on the seven o'clock news in all their gruesome detail. Never mind that there may have been children in front of the TV at the time who would probably have nightmares. Heaven knows it was bad enough for adults, but what about the relatives? How would you like it if your dead loved ones are treated so cavalierly and with so little respect? Where is the line between news and good taste? Is there nobody who decides what is and what isn't necessary? Did anyone think to censure that reporter who kept referring to the '*berita menarik*' [*Editor's note: 'attractive news'*] coming up?

A few days earlier one TV3 reporter had apologised for even having to mention that bits of human flesh had been found. Yet no such delicacy was practised by the cameraman.

Perhaps what we can wish for in 1994 is a return to human decency.

Despite the very many people who showed themselves to be caring, generous and courageous in the face of this tragedy, there are still examples of human behaviour which at best makes us shake our head in wonder and at worst turns us into cynics.

This includes the onlookers who got dressed up and took their children to the site to have a look at the rescue operation as if it was a Sunday outing and the scavengers who went through the rubble brought out from the site to see what they could get, never mind that it didn't belong to them and that their 'luck' came out of someone else's misfortune. I also shake my head at the number of people who saw the high media profile of the tragedy as an opportunity to get their fifteen minutes of fame. And let's not even mention the banks and the insurance companies again.

It's been a rough year and at a time when a lot of people are thinking about holidays and parties, this had to happen. Perhaps it is a sign for us to take stock of all the assumptions that we live under. We pooh-poohed what the environmentalists have been saying and look what happened. Our media keeps talking about caring and compassion and look how they behaved.

Perhaps what we can learn is to not take anything for granted. What is the point of pursuing wealth and material gains when they can vanish almost literally at the blink of an eye? Life, health, family and friendship mean more than anything else. I'm sure the victims' families found out who their real friends were in this crisis. But that is a reason to count your blessings and not something to be bitter about. The smallest gifts are the most precious.

And on that note I wish you all the best for 1994.

SIMPLE GOOD MANNERS

July 20, 1994

I admit there are times when I think that I'm a real fuddy-duddy. Is it cranky age or is it some sort of rebellion? Lately I've noticed how much of a premium I put on simple good manners. Unfortunately it warrants a premium because it is in such short supply. You read more and more these days about bad-mannered people—uncouth taxi drivers, selfish smokers, even unsympathetic nurses faced with patients in need. And it really makes you

wonder what ever happened to the kind gentle Asians we've long been touted to be?

I'm one of those people, curious perhaps for one who grew up with the punk generation, who cannot abide impolite children. I do believe that children should be heard but when they are, they have to be nice. That means that they have to know those simple words 'please' and 'thank you'.

This is obviously terribly bourgeois of me, judging by the number of kids who don't know these words in any language. I once embarrassed myself by automatically correcting a child who had replied just 'No' to an adult offering her something (instead of 'No, thank you'), without realising that it wasn't my child. (I'm still correcting my own child, by the way.)

Then of course I realised that kids are not going to know how to be polite if they are not taught by someone. And of course the best people to teach them are their parents. But when you come across some of these truly awful adults in shops and taxis for example, you really wonder what sort of horrors their kids must be. I have seen parents behave despicably in front of their kids. Once, a parent at the paediatrician's clinic I go to unwrapped a sweet and promptly dumped the wrapper on the floor. In a clinic in front of all these other parents and kids! Was I the only one who was horrified?

I was tempted to pick it up but strangely enough, like that embarrassment at accidentally correcting someone else's child, I was afraid that I was being rude by doing so! Maybe I've really had good manners too deeply hammered into me by my parents.

I just think that politeness really makes life a bit easier for everybody. It's cheap and it keeps everyone's blood pressure down. How many people do you know who have the most appalling telephone manners, especially if they don't know who's calling? I've encountered secretaries who behave as if I was the pauper with the audacity to want to talk to the prince!

My usual policy is that it is much more democratic to be polite to everybody. When I was a novice driver, I was once rushing to office on a wet Friday morning. In my haste to make a turn, I felt my car hit another one and saw pieces of metal flying. I was so worried about the other car that both the other driver and I only examined his car and were patently relieved to find not a scratch on it. Whereupon I drove off and came to the front of the queue at a traffic light. As I waited I saw a rather big-sized traffic policeman walk purposefully towards me.

'Yes, Datok?' I asked humbly.

'Tell me,' he said, 'what is the number of the King's car?'

What a puzzling question! Maybe it's some special occasion and there's a prize for the right answer.

'Um...KING 1?'

'No,' he sighed extravagantly. 'The King has no license plate. Neither do you. Are you the King's daughter or something?'

Well, to cut the story short, he did find out why I didn't have a license plate (the flying bits I saw) and he escorted me safely all the way to my office with instructions to write my car number on a piece of cardboard as a temporary measure. But I bet anything, for the rest of the day he kept slapping his forehead at choosing the wrong time to be a smart aleck!

Of course, that's a pretty mild form of rudeness. But lots of rudeness can really spoil your day. Queue-jumpers of all kinds probably top the list. Then there's the type where Procedure comes before Humaneness and Brains.

My daughter and I once decided to follow a friend to Melaka to spend a day browsing round the antique shops. On the way there, my friend decided to make a rest stop just before Seremban. As we drove in and looked for a parking place, we saw a car also waiting to park. The other car had a choice between a space in front of him and another behind him but quite inexplicably he chose the one behind. So he reversed until he rammed into our car!

No apologies were forthcoming. Instead the first thing he did was to examine his car. He then casually faced ours, which looked like it needed major surgery. He said he had only RM50 on him and could not pay us. After a long haggle we decided that we would make a police report in Melaka.

We arrived at the Melaka police station first and were told that we should report to Seremban police station since the accident happened in that vicinity. Fine, we thought, since we had 24 hours to report, we'll carry on with our trip and do it on our way back to KL.

We finally showed up at 10 pm at Seremban station to make our simple report. Thus began the clash between Procedure and Humaneness. The sergeant was out to investigate another accident so we had to wait. Meanwhile my daughter fell asleep in the back of the car which was parked outside the station in a light drizzle.

Upon returning the sergeant informed my friend that we would not get out of there before one a.m.. Aghast, I went to inquire if this was really

true and necessary. Approaching the sergeant, cap in hand, I was promptly bawled out. I had to get in the queue, he shouted, he had been working since morning and he did not want to talk to me before it was my turn! I was thrown out of the room before I had a chance to explain that there was a sleeping child in my car.

At 12.30 a.m., the sergeant decided that Procedure dictates that my friend and he visit the accident site. Never mind that there was nothing to see. Still, since it was nearby they would be back in twenty minutes and then we could go. So off they went and I fell asleep in the car, waking up with a start at 2 a.m. to find that they were still not back.

Suffice to say that I had stumbled on the Malaysian equivalent of the Keystone Cops. By the time I finally decided to ring someone up in KL for help, they had returned after driving in the wrong direction and having broken down on the highway without any means of communication and flagging down a car to take them back! The only thing the sergeant had to say to me, after my four-hour wait, was that I was reporting at the wrong station!

I know these things happen to lots of people. But I'm puzzled as to what is ever gained by all the unnecessary bile?

THE GREAT UNTHINKING

September 7, 1994

The 'neighbour down south' referred to in this article is Singapore of course which, despite its high-gloss high-tech image, is incredibly archaic in its treatment of women. Near the end, the piece refers to a speech by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew bemoaning the fact that Singapore's highly-educated women did not want to marry and have children. This may be because their choices are singularly uninspiring. It seems that the whole future of Singapore is jeopardised because of the stubbornness of women.

Every year in August I take a holiday. Which is why, dear readers, you don't hear from me for that entire month. The reason I do this is because by the time August comes along I have generally run out of steam, my ideas have dwindled to dust and I can barely string two words together. So rather

than inflict some esoteric nonsense on you, I take off and try and refresh and rejuvenate myself and luckily my dear editor has been understanding.

The deal is of course that I come back with lots of brilliant ideas for columns. Usually it works because August is usually ripe with happenings (anyone who wants to start a war knows to start it in August because people like me are on vacation). This August has proven to be quite the silly season with any number of our illustrious Great Minds mouthing off every kind of ignorant statement you can imagine. I don't need to list them out for you although some of them were so choice that they almost persuaded me to take out my Powerbook even on holiday (what sacrilege!).

The thing is when these things happen I never quite know whether to laugh it off or to worry. The problem is these public figures really carry weight. There are enough people out there who cannot tell when they are saying something sensible and when they are talking outright nonsense. And then when some of the nonsense is irresponsible and dangerous, I really feel I have to do something, to at least give people the choice of an alternative viewpoint.

This is assuming of course that people do look for an alternative viewpoint. Unfortunately most times I don't think they do. We often put so much trust in those who garner newspaper space and headlines that we accept everything they say. Or we get so used to them saying things that everything becomes 'typical' of them and we ignore it. Which is rather lazy really.

For this I must fault the newspapers for aiding and abetting the stream of nonsense-speak that comes from some of our public figures. It has become commonplace among certain newspapers in this country, probably on slow days, to try and get a story going. Some reporters might drop a 'hook' in front of a public figure, a question about a controversial possibility (which may not be true), and the public figure, not wanting to be seen to be 'out of the loop', reacts to it and swallows the bait.

What happens next is instead of the reporter going immediately to the other side for an alternative viewpoint, he or she writes up the story with just that one side and waits until it is published before asking for a comment from the other side. Then they print that comment and wait again for the next. In this way a story which may have had no basis at all gets prolonged for no real reason other than the reporter wanting to have something to write about.

The reporter then thinks that he or she has done a great piece of investigative journalism when in fact all he or she has done is reported an adversarial conversation. He said, then she said, then he said, then she said. In between there is no attempt to understand in any depth the issue being discussed.

I have come to the point when I read the papers and despair at the lack of depth of the people who write the stories. There is no critical thinking at all and a serious neglect to ask the question 'why?' in this country. Perhaps it is the fault of our education system? If it is, it has to be rectified now before this culture of unthinking gets ingrained in us.

It is the unthinking mind which takes up superficial answers to issues which are not recognised as symptoms of a deeper malaise. If young unmarried girls are abandoning their babies, we punish them but we don't ask why there should be so many of them and why are they making babies with men who will not take responsibility and why are they reacting so violently to the babies that they make.

The unthinking mind does not note the fact that there are more and more cases of violence including rape on very young girls perpetrated by men whom ostensibly they should trust. Why is this happening? A lack of moral upbringing on the part of the perpetrators? Perhaps. But why is there such a lack?

It is not enough for us to simply say that because family ties are now loose, we have all these social problems. Why are these ties, once so sacred, now unable to prevent these ills from happening? What are the pressures that are causing them to break?

The thinking mind will inevitably lead to an examination of its own role in the malaise that afflicts us. And the thinking mind will realise that the responsibility to right all these wrongs is within itself. The unthinking mind will always look for a scapegoat: young people, foreigners, women, 'foreign' values, anyone different, anyone except themselves. It never admits that it is part of the problem and therefore it never comes up with a feasible solution. The malaises fester and fester.....

I would have liked to have come back from my holiday in a better frame of mind but reality is so jarring. Down south our neighbour has decided to blame and penalise women for every ill in that society. That's bad enough but what is worse is the lack of outrage and outcry from women there. How

can anyone not feel a chill at this?

My daughter has reached that age when all she does is ask 'why?' Sometimes it is a total pain to have to answer but I do it because I think if I don't provide the answer, she will try and find it somewhere else and who knows what answer she will get. That is called responsible parenting.

We must act like the inquisitive child and continually ask why so that our 'parents' act responsibly.

SO WHO ARE THE DRUG ADDICTS?

October 5, 1994

Malaysia has a very serious problem with drugs. Despite the mandatory death penalty for drug traffickers, drug addiction has claimed some 200,000 victims. Drug users who are caught by the police get sent to government-run rehabilitation centres where they are subjected to a harsh detoxification process and military-type discipline for two years. Then they are released only to find that they have nowhere to go and nobody to turn to. As a result most eventually return to drug-taking and repeat the cycle again.

Unfortunately after more than twenty years of having a drug problem, it shows no signs of going away. Periodically the police are asked to 'sweep' the seamier sides of towns to round up suspected drug users. This has only provided more residents for the rehabilitation centres and again the cycle repeats itself. There does not seem to be a real will to deal with the issues of drug addiction in order to come up with some concrete solutions.

When I was young, I had a cousin slightly older than me whom I thought of as a bit of a hero. I would sit and listen to his stories and wish I was a boy so that I could play the same games. He taught me how to ride a bicycle and he used to laugh at everything with an infectious boyish cackle. It seemed that he took a delight in everything about life.

He had a father whom everybody including myself adored. An extremely jovial and kind man, my uncle died too early of cancer, leaving a widow, a daughter and that son. We all felt the loss but I guess we never quite realised what effect his death would have on his son because soon after, my cousin

became addicted to drugs. And as far as I know, he still is despite having spent years in and out of rehabilitation centres.

I have had reason to recall my cousin because of the endless reports in the papers of late of swoops on drug addicts in the back lanes of KL. Reading about descriptions of 'zombies' and 'the living dead', I feel a hurt inside because they could be talking about my cousin there. And I wonder if the families of all these drug addicts feel the same way.

We have a drug problem in this country, let us not hide that fact. Despite rehabilitation programmes which have been in existence for at least twenty years, our problem has not gotten any better. In fact it has gotten worse and with the spectre of HIV and its relationship to intravenous drug use, the drug situation in this country is more serious than ever.

And yet our reaction to the situation is to arrest and send more and more drug addicts to the rehabilitation centres, which are already so crowded that now there are plans to open even more. I thought it sounded an odd way to deal with the situation until I kept seeing the words 'to preserve the image of the country' in all the reports about drug swoops.

Is our image all we care about? Do we not care about the human beings involved, do we not wonder how is it that so many people can get into such a situation? Why do we insist on dehumanising them by calling them zombies? Do we think that name-calling will prevent more people from getting into drugs?

What does the existence of these multitudes of drug users say about us? It says that there is something terribly wrong about our society and we don't care. Why do we never ask why people get into drugs? Do we think that it is all their fault? Do we think that a once respectable person becomes someone who can be treated like a piece of trash on a whim?

I have met several recovering drug addicts. What has struck me most about them is that they are invariably intelligent, well-educated and articulate. I asked someone who has worked a lot with drug users overseas why this was so and he said one of the reasons is that intelligent people tend to be more conscious about the world's problems, more easily depressed. One way out is to turn to drugs.

So it's wrong to say that only stupid people get into drugs. Obviously bright people do not have a lock on happiness. Whether you have a supportive environment or not is a factor. Maybe we should look at the families that

drug users come from. In these days of less than ideal families, maybe the particular conditions of these families predisposes their members to exposure to drugs.

I know a family who denied their son had a drug problem for the longest time. While they were in denial, there was no way that they would seek help for him and he was left on his own. Luckily someone finally came to their senses and he is now recovering.

I know another friend whose son lived with his ex-wife in another country and who got extremely seriously into drugs. In despair, the father brought his son to stay with him, took him on as his assistant and worked him almost to death 'so that he wouldn't have the time to think about drugs'. It worked but I reckon the real cure was the attention his father finally paid him after all these years. It proved that his father loved him. He is now studying for a PhD in Higher Physics.

The will to solve the drug problem is not there. Our rehabilitation system cannot be said to be working when we have something like an 70% relapse rate. In the centres, the drug users are treated like military conscripts which is all well and good as long as they are inside. But life outside is not like a military camp. It is a bit like keeping someone in a sterile environment for a while to prepare him to live in the germ-laden world.

If the problems that caused a person to turn to drugs are still there when he gets out of rehabilitation centres, is marching around going to help him deal with them? What more when people look down on drug users, refusing even to acknowledge that they are human beings?

I think we should look hard at our drug prevention and rehabilitation programmes. Maybe it is time to take them away from the Home Ministry and place them with Welfare where they rightfully belong. Also maybe it is time that we realise that prevention and care go together and that we should incorporate the services of former drug addicts to help us devise programmes which work. They are the experts so we should use them. I do not believe that some bureaucrat will ever know what it feels like to be called 'the living dead'.

THE PUBLIC EYE

November 1, 1995

I wonder if any of you out there were as puzzled as I was by the whole OJ Simpson trial. Not just by the verdict which was bewildering enough but the entire media circus that surrounded the entire trial. Justice did not seem to matter, character defamation did. Both sets of lawyers seemed bent on proving that each other's witnesses were more sleazy and unreliable than theirs. In the midst of it all, everyone forgot what the whole trial was about, that is, two people who were brutally murdered.

In one of the rare times I caught the trial on CNN, I chanced upon a moving statement made by the tearful father of Ron Goldman after the Fuhrmann tapes were made public, pleading for the case to be put back on track. It was heart-rending.

In moments like that, you wonder how it was that such personal grief could have been brought into your living room. The TV camera is cold and unsympathetic and you feel a sense of shame as a stranger to have to witness someone else's broken heart so publicly displayed.

Last night I happened to watch our local news. This is a rare occasion for me because I have long gotten out of the habit of watching TV. I must say it was instructive. In the first place I had not realised that it now takes one whole hour to give us the news. I could not believe that it was going on and on. But what was there to fill all that time?

There were endless stories about poor unfortunate citizens who have been incapacitated for some reason or other and have to be cared for by their family members. This is all very well and is one way of soliciting assistance for them. But...was there really a need to show these poor souls half-naked in their beds, their gaping bedsores showing? Was there a need to show their urine bags and discuss their problems with disposing of waste matter? Did it really serve any purpose to show these helpless people lying there in their misery for all the world to see?

I know there must have been a good intention to begin with. These people need help so we should tell people about them. But how do we tell people? What is it about our media people that empathy is so much lacking? If you were ill in bed, would you really like a TV camera recording you at

your most undignified for an audience of several million to see?

I think people in such dire straits must be respected as human beings. One does not have to sacrifice dignity in order to gain sympathy. Showing them like this smacks of voyeurism and disregards the human being in the story. Just like OJ's trial.

There were also plenty of gruesome stories from the courts. One major case involved a child who had been allegedly beaten to death. The story of the day was that there was no semen found in the wretched child's private parts. If there was none, why was it news? (I also wonder about newscasters, all dolled up in their smart suits, who can read out stuff like this without any sign of feeling on their faces.)

I think of that poor child and shudder at how her memory had been tarnished by such unthinking reporting. I wonder how her family must have felt at having to listen to this piece of useless information being broadcast for everybody to hear. I felt ashamed once again at being privy, however distantly, to such wanton disregard of grief.

Another story dealt with a woman who had been found guilty of killing her baby. I looked at the face of the woman, young and thin, being led away in handcuffs and wonder why nobody has asked why she did it. There must be a story there.

But then to my astonishment, they showed both her husband and mother also in handcuffs, looking as if they were guilty too! Only if you listened carefully did you hear that in fact both these two were let go.

So why then show them in handcuffs? How could anyone have shown an old woman in handcuffs when they already knew that she had been cleared?

How easy it is to stigmatise people especially those who have no recourse to answer back. At least there were people who could stand up for Nicole Simpson. But who stands up for these people on our TV screens when their privacy is invaded? And what is the effect of constantly showing these sad cases? Everybody becomes desensitised and the sympathy level drops. In the end it is counterproductive.

We worry about what rubbish from the West will be seen on our screens once we allow satellite dishes in our country. I don't think it could be any worse than what we are already seeing night after night on our TV news. Maybe OJ is not just an American phenomenon after all.

RESPECT FOR PUBLIC FIGURES

February 2, 1996

Malaysia's public institutions have long been considered strong and credible. However lately these have come increasingly under attack. Teachers are blamed for all sorts of social ills among youth while the police have been criticised for continual low-grade corruption. But the hitherto strongest institution, the judiciary, has lately come under severe attack after a public spat among High Court judges. The public has become less confident that justice can be obtained through the courts especially if one does not have money. This confidence is yet to be fully restored.

In the old days we used to scare our children into good behaviour by threatening that the police would take them away if they were naughty. Teachers were so well-respected they became community leaders and sometimes even stood for election for Parliamentary seats. And I remember judges as the august personages who resided in big houses and rode around in chauffeur-driven cars, someone no child would ever dare talk to.

Those were the days. Now a sense of skepticism (and dare I say cynicism) seems to have descended on all of us. None of these people are treated with the same awe and respect as they used to be. Is it because we invest so much hope in these people that we expect them to be paragons of virtue? Are we disillusioned because they have shown themselves to be no more than human? Were we wrong to expect so much?

We expect, for instance, the police to protect us and generally they do. OK, just like in the rest of the population, there are a few rogues, some of whom get out of hand. While we appreciate that these rogues are a minority, it does seem odd that the police get so defensive about them. Worse, they do not always seem to deal with the rogues, few as they are, in a manner commensurate with what they have done.

Sometimes we have a penchant for shooting the bearer of bad news. Everyone knows that when you are pulled up in traffic, there are certain 'problems'. Everyone has his or her own tale to tell. (A tip: saying you are a lawyer has the same effect as insect repellent on a mosquito.) Yet not only can't you talk about it in public media, you may get prosecuted for doing so

(did we say we're toning down on the censorship?). You might even be blamed for causing the problem in the first place. As the logic goes, if you don't offer, they won't take. I thought they were supposed to arrest you if you offered, for attempting to compromise the integrity of the police force.

Who can blame the public for getting cynical? If you keep trying to blame the messenger, sooner or later, people will wonder why you keep sidestepping the real issues. You don't sue doctors for telling you your child is sick, you find out why the child is sick and get help. Transparency is the best solution, and an honourable admission of the possibility that things may not be perfect. There may be plenty of valid reasons for this, including lack of financial and human resources. But instead of this admission, which might lead to a solution, we keep getting this sidestepping dance.

In my youth I sometimes thought my teachers were wrong but most of the time I trusted their word. My parents also trusted them. Yet this trust seems to have gone by the wayside. I was shocked, at a recent discussion on sex education in schools, how people kept asking about how to prevent teachers from taking advantage of students. My co-panellists agreed that any likely abuser had no place being a teacher at all but there seemed to be disquiet among the audience that such abuse is happening and little is done about it.

First of all, is it happening? To what extent? The media highlight certain cases, as well they should, but we get very little information from the powers-that-be. We do not know for sure what happens to teachers who are proven to be abusers. Some say they are only transferred to other schools and their new principals do not know their records. Whether this is really true or not we do not know. So the worry is there.

Parents have a right to be alarmed. So have teachers. Once again if we had better information, we wouldn't be so suspicious that things are being swept under the carpet. An internalised feeling of disquiet which isn't helped by the almost adversarial relationship some parents have with their kids' teachers, can only fester until one day it becomes an open sore. We don't need to get that far.

As for the law, once again we assume most times that it works for justice and that we can trust it when we need it. But this entails really knowing it better. Sometimes some judgements can be mystifying. Perhaps it is because we do not understand some points of law. But we very often don't get that chance to really understand why a verdict is made, or why some cases don't

even get to court. We are often discouraged from discussing it in the media even though we may be better educated through such discussion. So much defensiveness is unnecessary.

The crux of the matter is that a fear of openness can lead to suspicion and this affects reputations of whole professions. As an emerging democratic country where we are now confident enough to allow satellite television transmissions uncensored, where more and more of our people are finding out about the world, good and bad, through the internet, where radio talk shows and TV chat shows are proliferating, we ought to be able to have healthy discussions about issues that affect us without fear. Those of us who are on the receiving end of criticism ought to get less defensive and more accepting of our own limitations. After all who knows when we might be on the other side and wanting accountability from someone else?

Meantime I would like to feel that I can have the same faith in our police, teachers and judges, as I have always done. It's not too much to ask these days, is it?

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT?

August 21, 1996

Malaysia suffered two major electricity blackouts in recent years, the first which largely affected Penang and a second one which affected the entire country. The sweltering nation saw it as a national embarrassment and Tenaga Nasional, the now-privatised national energy company was blamed.

As Malaysia develops, its energy consumption has inevitably increased, some 11% a year over the last ten years. It is this growth in consumption that has driven developments like the Bakun Hydroelectric Dam, an enormous project which will clear land in Sarawak the size of Singapore and, most controversially, displace native tribes. But there has been no movement towards energy conservation at all, despite the efforts of environmentalists.

The other night the lights went off throughout the whole country and we went through another round of anguish, embarrassment, and exercises in pointing fingers and assigning blame. As I sat in the sweltering heat, trying

to read my newspaper in the dimming light, I remembered a few experiences I had gone through that had a bearing on this outage.

In 1973, as an impressionable sixteen-year-old, I went to spend three months in California with an American family that my family had become friends with. It was the time of the energy crisis and Americans were being asked to take steps to conserve fuel. You could only get fuel for your car on certain days, depending on your license plate number. You were asked not to use as much electricity as you would normally do. Turn off lights when you don't need them, don't use the washing machine every day, turn the temperature of the heater down a few degrees. I shivered in the cold but added more sweaters and felt endlessly guilty the day I missed the school bus and my American Mom had to make an otherwise unnecessary journey wasting precious fuel to fetch me from school.

That experience, along with many others, left a deep impression on me. To this day I find it hard to leave lights burning when there's no one in a room or to have the air-conditioning on in the daytime. Although it is a battle I will never win, I nevertheless argue endlessly with my home helper about not using the washing machine with less than a full load every day and using up not only energy but far too much soap and water. Unfortunately her argument is that she would rather iron a few clean clothes each day than a huge pile every few days.

My Californian experience instilled in me a deep conservationist streak. My reaction then when the lights went out was to wonder why, rather than blaming the power company for not being able to keep up with our demands, we could not conserve our energy instead. In many countries, conserving energy has become something that is widely accepted. Electrical equipment such as computers have a built-in sleep mode to use less energy when they're not in use. People use timers and energy-saving light bulbs at home. Electrical power is to be used judiciously.

Yet here at home we don't hear one word about energy conservation unless you count how using electrical equipment conserves human energy. My foreign friends can never get over the fact that our national power company advertises itself by lighting up its headquarters with enough power to light up a small town every night. No doubt our power company wants us to use more electricity but it does not really need us to, given the profits it already makes. So conserving energy is not only going to save us some money but

probably makes us use it more efficiently anyway.

Yet we are never encouraged to do so. If anything, we are exhorted to use more and more energy. We are enticed to buy more electrical consumer products and to use them all the time. We build homes which are more suited to cold climates than our balmy one so we have to use air-conditioning all the time to cope with it. We keep all our TVs, stereos, computers and lights on perpetually, all wasting energy together. And we do all of this without any guilt whatsoever.

Perhaps we are spoilt. I know people who lived through World War II who are obsessed with keeping every bit of string that they find because they remember the days of rationing. When you have been deprived once, you appreciate things more.

Three years ago I attended a conference in San Francisco. There was a drought and in the hotel there were notes and stickers all over the place telling you how to conserve water. It made me appreciate how wasteful we can be, just for example, by letting the tap run when we brush our teeth. I know people who flush two or three times every time they go to the toilet, a wholly unnecessary thing to do. Yet we whine with misery every time there is a water cut which is in many ways worse than an electricity blackout.

Basically we have to take some responsibility for causing a blackout too. Our power stations get overloaded because we use so much electricity.

How should we conserve electricity? We have to be taught practical measures to do this. Perhaps this is something else we should teach our children in schools. Perhaps all electrical equipment should come with stickers that remind us to switch off when not in use. Perhaps we should encourage people to use energy-saving light bulbs. We should learn which equipment uses more energy. Simple things should be repeated over and over again: switch it off, don't leave things on unnecessarily. The important thing is to get people to do these simple things without sacrificing comfort.

We should realise that all the things we have are gifts. Although electricity seems man-made, ultimately it depends on nature, whether it is oil or hydroelectric power or even wind-power. Nature is controlled by something greater than us and we have to respect it in order to be able to benefit from it. A blackout is simply a reminder to look at ourselves and to understand that we—not some mechanical contraption—are the cause of our own failures.

IT COULD BE CURTAINS FOR US

September 4, 1996

Malaysia enjoys a robust economy with employment so full that we have to import foreign workers, who make up as much as 20% of our labour force according to government estimates. The price to pay for this is high; contractors do not want to handle small jobs such as house renovations and it is expensive to get handymen over to repair things.

But most of all, because these small businesses can pick and choose, there is no more that sense of pride in what they do. Shoddy work has become the norm and chasing after contractors to redo small things around the house is a chore that householders have become unpleasantly used to.

A little story: not too long ago, with the excitement of buying my very own house, I went into a decorating frenzy. I scoured magazines and books for ideas, could never resist an inviting shop window. Finally I decided that I needed curtains and so called my regular curtain man to come and measure my windows. He obligingly came as usual. Then, with a flourish, I brought out a glossy book all about curtains, found a particular page and said, 'I want curtains like those!'

I had used this same curtain man for a long time and over several houses, I had asked him to make the same sort of curtains. This time, because it was my first real home, I wanted something more creative and interesting and my book had page after page of very beautiful but different curtains.

He looked and shook his head. 'Cannot,' he said.

'Why not?' I asked.

'My girls don't know how to do,' he replied.

'Well, the instructions are here, can't they try them?'

'No, no time,' he said and that was that.

That conversation bothered me for a long time. I could not understand why he was not interested in the designs in my wonderful curtain book. He's a curtain man, why wasn't he interested in these gorgeous curtains? I had thought he would have pounced on the book, even asked to borrow it, so that he could increase the repertoire of curtains he could now offer his clients.

But no, he was not interested. Why take the time and effort to learn

something new when the good old way has been earning him a steady income all this time? What if nobody else wanted curtains like mine, what good would it have done to teach his sewing girls?

I had made the mistake of thinking that a curtain man must surely be passionate about curtains. And since his income depended on pleasing his clients, surely the opportunity to be able to offer new designs would give him an edge over other curtain men. And surely, if you offered people new ideas for dressing their windows, they might go for it. After all, there may be lots of people out there as bored with the same old curtains as I was.

I was obviously wrong on all counts. Worse than that, I found my curtain man not an exception at all. I once wandered into a furnishings shop where they had lovely cushions as well as material to make them. I felt tempted enough by the fabrics to think of making new covers for the cushions I already had so naturally inquired if they could make them for me.

'No,' she said, 'we don't make cushion covers, you have to make them yourself.'

'Wouldn't it be a great opportunity to make some extra money by making them for clients?', I asked in all innocence.

'Heavens, no!' she said, 'Clients are so difficult, they complain and they change their minds a million times. No, we won't make covers for anyone's cushions.'

Needless to say, I walked out without buying anything. What little respect for a customer she had. At the very least, I thought, she could have apologised for not being able to offer the service and then given me the name of the person who was making her covers for her. But again, no.

Are we doing so well that we are spoilt for choice of customers these days? Does service not matter any more? Is it OK to lose one client because there will always be more undemanding ones?

What is this mentality pervading Malaysians? Have our stomachs become so full that we've become lazy? I'm not the only one who has found that to get people to do something different will only be met with a negative response because it is simply too much effort. I once asked a silversmith if he could change the proportions of his brooches so that they kept up with the fashion for larger ones. What, and have to make a new mould? No way.

A friend of mine designs furniture and desperately wants to manufacture them in this country. His designs are new and different and he thinks there's

a good export market for them in Europe and the US. But can he find anyone interested in trying to make them for him here? You guessed it. Worse than that, because he wants to do everything except set up his own factory, he can't get any government incentives. Yet we keep talking about the need for software, for better design, for adding value to our products.

This is exactly why we lose the furniture business to all the countries surrounding us. Just ask anyone who's ever gone to the furniture fairs in Manila where you get to see some of the most creatively-designed and well-made furniture in the world. Just try asking any of our manufacturers to make any of those. The very idea of having to mix rattan, steel and leather in one design is enough to get the thumbs-down. Too much trouble-lah. Can we really blame our people for having boring taste when our choices are so uninspiring?

I am afraid that perhaps we have become too successful for our own good. People who are hungrier try harder to please, so even if someone comes along with a really weird idea, they'll still say they'll try it. We are so sure that our ricepot will always be full that we don't care any more.

But we don't realise what we're doing to ourselves. In the future, what's going to give anybody an edge is creativity and service. Becoming fat and lazy will inevitably dull our creative processes. We get so used to being waited on that we don't know what it means to provide what people want.

In developed countries, it is always amazing how people keep thinking of ways to provide better service. I know an airline that realised that lots of people do not like to eat at regulated times so in case you wake up in the middle of a long flight feeling peckish, they lay out a tray of snacks for you to help yourself to. In my book, that's better service than serving gourmet meals. Another airline I know will pick you up at home in a fancy limo if you're flying Business Class with them. Now tell me, when was the last time our national airline went out of its way to make their passengers' trip just that bit more comfortable?

We have to wake up and realise that we can't get too comfortable in our rut. One day we may look up and see other people walking right over us. And don't count on them lending a hand to pull us out either.

Chapter Four

A Malaysian Looks at the World

I am very lucky in that my work allows me to travel a good deal. Thus I am able to look at our country from the outside and gauge the perception foreigners have of Malaysia. It is almost always enlightening. Certainly we are famous for various things; the Penans, the Bakun Dam, our PM, the Twin Towers, the Multimedia SuperCorridor. I am particularly interested in how the West sees us and vice versa but also how we and our neighbours interact. I had never visited any of Malaysia's neighbours except for Singapore before 1989 but in 1992 I visited each one in the course of a project and between 1994 and 1996 I spent a great deal of time in the Philippines. I truly believe that travel keeps us humble and allows us to appreciate that there is always another side to every argument.

CULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION: CAN WE SHRUG IT OFF?

18th March, 1992

I believe that a lot of the problems we have with the West and vice versa are entirely cultural. Both sides have viewpoints that come entirely from the cultural milieu that each lives in and unless each takes the trouble to understand the other side, there will be a perpetual standoff.

This is a good month and a time to count your blessings. I for one have many to be grateful for: a roof over my head, a family, my health, a job, good friends, enough money to be able to enjoy life to a certain standard. But there are a lot of intangibles which I am also grateful for. For instance I

feel lucky that I have had the opportunity to live among different cultures during various periods of my life. When I was young I was sent to America to live with a family and observe their very different way of life. Later I went to school in England, yet another different milieu. Still later I lived in Japan, a country as far removed culturally from the first two as one could ever wish. And I married a Frenchman and have had the opportunity to observe French culture from the inside on my annual trips to visit his family.

Being able to observe all these different cultures has, I think, given me a strong advantage. You get to realise that there is more than one way of seeing things. And one's point of view is almost always culturally-bound. Facts may be facts but the way of interpreting them is always caught up by the cultural environment you were brought up in.

Take a matter like money. I remember when I first went to school in England being appalled by the way money is treated especially among friends. If I lent money to a friend, I expect her to return it but I wouldn't have dreamt of mentioning it. It was something that was understood. Especially among fellow schoolgirls relying on limited pocket money. But I used to be shocked when, having borrowed some money (usually to buy chocolates) from an English friend, she would ask me immediately when I would return it. Until I understood that there was no malice behind a question like this, I had felt insulted thinking that my ability to pay back was being questioned.

Similarly with body language. In a culture like ours, every little sign, every little gesture, has its meaning. A person being scolded is not allowed to scowl because it would only provoke the scolder even more. An American friend could not understand why the waiter in the KL restaurant we were eating at kept smiling while apologising profusely for the non-availability of a dish that I had ordered ahead of time. It was difficult for me to explain that to have a less than pleasant countenance from the waiter would have been seen as rude and impertinent even by a Western-educated person like me.

When I first knew my husband, one of the things I found very difficult to get used to was the Gallic shrug. To an Asian, a shrug is extremely rude, meaning the person couldn't care less about whatever was being discussed. It took a long time for me to realise that the French shrug at everything; it doesn't mean anything very serious, only that something is inexplicable. Perhaps French babies are born congenitally shruggy. I've finally managed to shrug the whole thing off myself.

Which leads me to a problem we have that we can't seem to shrug off. We have been getting a fair share of bad publicity from overseas lately over a number of subjects, including logging and our policy on Vietnamese refugees. It seems to me that a lot of people are mystified as to why we should get all this adverse publicity when our press doesn't go after other countries.

Sometimes facts do not matter when cultural biases come into play. I read once a Western newspaper report which said that political discourse in Malaysia is so limited. This struck me as odd as everybody I know is ever willing to talk their heads off about politics. People speak their minds, to criticise a government official's tactless spending or some policy or other that seems misguided. As far as I can tell, democracy seems to be pretty much alive. At least the discussion is pretty lively. You don't have to worry, as in some countries, that someone might report you to the police who will come and take you away.

But a Western reporter seems to only judge the democratic health of a country by how much criticism the citizens will level at their government. Which is all well and good until you come to an Asian country. I don't think I'm the exception but I have a great barrier against saying anything bad about my own country to a foreigner. Especially one who I'm not very familiar with. It's a case of not washing your dirty linen in public. It's alright for us to say what we want about ourselves but in front of other people, we present a united good face.

We don't mean to distort the picture (if there is anything to distort at all). But I think it is a particularly Asian trait. The problems of the family are for the family to solve. Therefore a foreign reporter barging in is almost likely to hit a blank wall. The only people they will be able to get anything negative from will be members of the Opposition whose job it is to be critical anyway.

Hence we get all these negative reports which are totally out of control. If we had talked in a balanced way in the first place, we would have been able to blunt the negative report, if not stop it completely.

Of course sometimes we are not given the opportunity to talk at all. This again comes from a cultural bias on the reporter's part. They assume that any Asian person is only able to do a PR job on their own country. Credit is not given to anyone for being intelligent and independent enough to give a fair opinion. It is a very patronising—even racist—view of Asians.

An official I know once asked to meet some European Greenies in order to have a reasonable dialogue about the environment and the many problems in our country. Before he could even introduce himself, the Greens very rudely started to wave their finger at him and accuse him, his state, his country and all its government officials of lying, etc. They refused to have an open dialogue, going so far as to place their hands over their ears in order not to listen. Hardly conducive to civilised communication, is it?

On the other hand, I don't think we are entirely blameless, cultural quirks aside. I know we find it hard to understand why other people would want to bad-mouth us but our reactions are hardly ever objective and intelligent. We tend to react from the skin, getting mad and defensive and therefore never getting even. Only when we take a cool intelligent stand do we win, as we did with the anti-palm oil campaign in the States.

When I was in PR, one major rule was that, in a crisis, one must always keep a controlled communication line open. That is, keep talking but designate one responsible cool-headed informed person to do it. The one thing worse than not talking at all is to allow some loose cannon to mouth off unimpeded. The other rule is, don't lie.

I don't have much time for the fanatical environmentalists and their confrontational methods. They keep going on about this being our earth and then treating fellow-earthlings as aliens. But the basis of their concern, that environmental degradation is becoming a major problem for everybody, is also the concern of every other sane normal citizen.

Thus the truth of the matter must lie somewhere in the middle. Therefore the way we handle these issues in the international arena must be very carefully thought out. If we are perceived as honest and forthright, I think half the battle is won.

FROM MALAYSIA TO MAURITIUS TO LA

May 13, 1992

I spent much of 1993 travelling to Mauritius working with ten photographers on Mauritius: Tempo of an Island, a coffee-table book published in 1994. It is a lovely island and I enjoyed visiting it a great deal, especially to observe the multicultural Mauritians.

If you believe in coincidences, it was one of those. There I was, citizen of one multiracial country, jetting off to do some work in another multiracial country, Mauritius. While I was there, running around this small island meeting all sorts of people, I became cut off from the rest of the world. This isolation is quite normal when I'm on a working trip, but it was even more marked in Mauritius because all the newspapers are in French, a language I do not read. So it came to pass that I knew nothing about the LA riots until I picked up a Malaysian newspaper on the flight from Singapore home, already delayed from Mauritius by eleven hours.

It was one of those patterns you find in life, when seemingly disparate things or incidents have a connection with one another. The connection in this case was for me the question of race.

Malaysia and Mauritius have much in common. It was my first trip to this little Indian Ocean island of one million people. Mauritians I met asked me what was I expecting and I had to be truthful and say that I had not thought enough about it to really expect anything. It was only when I was safely buckled into my seat on Air Mauritius that I really felt that I was going to a new country and a new experience.

I had known it was a multiracial country. Most of the people there are of Indian origin. Then there are those descended from the French who came in the 1700s, and those who are descended from Africans, and the Chinese, who make up about 4% of the population.

You can easily see the different groups of people because many still stick to the customs and traditions of the Old Country. On Sundays, women in saris are seen on the streets walking with their families, lining up to buy hot dhal puris. The Chinese-Mauritians had just had the World Chinese Conference. The French seem outwardly just like the French I see in France

except after a while I began to notice that they share very few surnames.

But if you were a blind visitor to Mauritius, you would not only miss the beautiful and diverse countryside but you would miss the diversity of its people. Because everyone sounds the same! This was the biggest culture shock of all for me. Although faces, dress and religions differed, they all spoke the same languages namely Creole, French and English. They speak French and English when they have to be formal and to foreigners like me but among themselves, in everyday life, everyone speaks Creole, a sort-of pidgin French.

Mauritians don't think there is anything amazing about speaking the same language the way they do. I was fascinated to see middle-aged Indian housewives seated around a hot plate making puris and conversing with one another...in French! And they never thought they were speaking a foreign language, it was their language and has been since they were born.

I met the Minister of Tourism who has the very Chinese name of Lee Chong Lem. A very pleasant man, he looks just like anyone you would meet in KL. Until he opened his mouth when he became indistinguishable from a Frenchman, even when he spoke English.

I had the opportunity to meet the Speaker of the National Assembly and asked him what makes Mauritius so harmonious. He said it was partly because everyone had suffered equally in colonial times and because everyone eats the same food. I had never thought that food had a part to play in racial harmony but come to think of it, it must do. Mauritian cooking is an amalgam of Indian, Chinese and French cuisine. Everybody eats it. When you have even trivialities in common, your chances of living harmoniously together increase considerably.

When I looked at Mauritius, I felt a lot of hope. I thought the only reason that we in Malaysia have not achieved the same sort of harmony is that we have not been around as long. Most of us do not go back more than three generations as Malaysians. Some Mauritians can count back up to ten generations! So I believe that time plus all the other factors do a lot towards binding a people together no matter how disparate their backgrounds.

We are not far off. We are beginning to speak the same languages so we will be better at communicating with one another. We are certainly eating more and more the same food, religious restrictions notwithstanding. And if we can keep people with extremely divisive ideas from gaining any ground, we can certainly pull it off.

But then I looked at LA and wondered, how come? America has been around for over two hundred years. Ostensibly Americans speak the same language and ostensibly they eat the same food. Why race riots then? How come they could not do what the Mauritians have done and what I am sure we will eventually do? I don't know. I think it has a lot to do with economics and a feeling of equality and justice among people.

There are foreigners (Americans even) who have written books advising people against investing in Malaysia because we have a volatile racial situation, implying that we are very close to killing one another, given the right circumstances. They must be living on Jupiter.

We have our problems. Underlying them are everyone's aspirations for a better life for themselves. Race seems to me to be a convenient but not always valid division.

But, forgive me if I'm naive, we do not go around with any deep-seated conviction in our hearts that someone of another race is intrinsically inferior because of colour or religion. At least I don't. I feel safe walking our streets because I know nobody is going to attack me because of my race. I may get my handbag ripped off perhaps, but that's because the thief thinks I have money, not because of my race. I have never felt here the chill I felt once in London when some unknown person spat on me as I walked in a busy underground passageway. I never did anything to hurt that person so the criterion for him or her to have made such a gesture of hate must have been my colour. Yet, it was an old Jewish man, someone I had also ostensibly nothing in common with, who stopped and used his handkerchief to wipe the spittle off my coat. Perhaps we had humanity and human dignity in common and that really was enough.

ARE WE THE GOOD GUYS?

June 10, 1992

The UN-organised Earth Summit took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1993 and Malaysia faced a lot of criticism because of the extensive logging activities in Sarawak and the displacement of the Penans from their tribal lands. We weren't about to cower though in the face of the hostility from environmental NGOs. Nor did we refrain from attacking the developed countries for their part in the environmental degradation of the globe, particularly the depletion of the ozone layer. Since then, Malaysia has tried to control its logging and use more sustainable methods but the same cannot be said for Western countries and their emission controls.

When things are in black and white, as they frequently are in newspapers, there are only good guys and bad guys. Being an obsessive observer of the grey areas in life, I tend to find this good guy-bad guy habit amusing and, more often, frustrating.

Take this great showdown at the OK Corral we are having in Rio. Depending on whose point of view we're taking, it's most definitely a potential shoot-out between the goodies and baddies. From the Western point of view, the Third World are the baddies because we want to cut down all our trees thus not only robbing the West of a natural air-recycler but also flushing out all these natives (they keep calling them Indians which I doubt our tribes find appealing) from their natural habitat. From our point of view of course, the Big Boys just want to make it difficult for us to compete even more with them than we do already.

It does not seem to matter who is wrong or right, it's who has the bigger media fire-power. We have always contended that since the West are the biggest polluters particularly by producing carbon dioxide, they should pay more for any cleanup effort. Makes sense of course. However the 'Environment President' doesn't want to control his own carbon emissions (what? and annoy Lee Iacocca?), killing off a major preventive measure, and doesn't want to pay too much for a cleanup campaign. Not very hip, is he?

Of course, no way are we going to be let off the bad guy tag. Next thing you know, we read that in fact Asia produces more carbon dioxide than the

West these days. Oh oh...until you read closely and it says that the biggest culprit is in fact China which is a substantial part but not the whole of Asia. But how many people will read past the headline ?

We all acknowledge that development is a threat to the environment if it is uncontrolled. This is obvious from just looking at the Western countries which are the major polluters of the world. We have not escaped the spoiling of our environment either. And it is still happening.

But we obviously cannot do without development. If we remain undeveloped, we are not going to escape the bad press either because then we'll be accused of letting our people wallow in poverty. If we develop, as we have into one of the best places to live in Asia, we are still the bad guys. It's a no-win situation.

The whole rainforest situation has always fascinated me because it is so confused. If you ask any person in the street in London or Paris what is the connection between the rainforest, the ozone layer and the Penans, I bet anything they won't be able to tell you. They just know that if we chop down trees, any trees at all, the hole in the ozone will get bigger and the Penans will not have anywhere to live. Which is not quite $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$.

I once had a big argument (yet another one!) with a foreign friend about keeping things in their natural state. As he is in the tourism industry, he was basically dismayed that it was getting more and more difficult to find 'authentic' and 'natural' longhouses to visit in Sarawak, that his clients had to go deeper and deeper into the jungle.

I asked what happened to the longhouses that they used to visit. 'They have electric lights now! And the natives wear t-shirts! Tourists don't want that!' he exclaimed, throwing up his arms.

This was when I saw red. Our indigenous people, I said as calmly as I could, do not exist for tourists. Obviously they have benefited from tourism which brings them cash. Once they had the money, they naturally set about to better their lives, hence the electricity in their homes. Who is to deny their right to do this?

But to complain that they should stay in their natural state in order that tourists may have an 'authentic' experience was, for me, the height of patronisation. The point is that the minute a tourist comes in contact with an indigenous person, a little bit of the native 'naturalness' is always lost. This is because the indigenous person is exposed to something new and

learns something from the tourist, basically that there is a different life out there. Whether this is positive or negative learning depends on what kind of tourist he or she meets but an impact is always made.

Another friend once wrote to urge our country to participate in a festival of indigenous peoples from around the world in America. The festival was to honour the contribution of indigenous peoples to the preservation of the environment etc. I thought this was a very complicated thing because it may be easy to identify the indigenous peoples of North America but in Southeast Asia for example this is not as easy. Some countries including ours have more than one indigenous people. The festival was to be held in the jetset mountain resort of Aspen and organised by a committee that had not one person from the Third World in it. I was afraid it would be another feather and loincloth freak show.

Indigenous people anywhere are not animals in a zoo. If they decide by themselves that they want a different life which seems better to them, you cannot stop them. This is a truism. If people's natural instinct is always to remain as they are, we would not be where we are today. Certainly if my ancestors had not decided to look for a better life outside their native land, I would be a completely different person today probably in totally different circumstances.

It annoys me that the biggest complainers (and self-proclaimed champions) of the rights of native peoples cannot see the impact that they themselves make on the people they claim to protect. I used to be a big fan of Sting until he took some Brazilian Indians around the world to 'publicise' their cause. Firstly I thought it was like a travelling freak show and very patronising to have them all dressed up and exhibited at press conferences. And secondly I would be very surprised if after the trip, Sting does not find his Indians very changed people, probably in ways that he might not like himself.

The point I am trying to make is that when you talk about self-determination, it must sincerely mean allowing people to decide for themselves. Bruno Manser is not allowing the Penans he claims to protect any more self-determination than anyone else he is against. To him, they're only determining their own destinies if they agree with him.

I remember once working on a project for which we hoped to tie up with an environmental group in the UK. They were enthusiastic but only if

we could use all the money raised to buy up all the rainforest in Equador or somewhere like that. This was to stop the deforestation. Not for a minute did they stop to think that maybe the Equadorians would not care for some foreigners coming in to buy up their land. Did they imagine that they could just walk in, place their money on the table and huge tracts of rainforest would be saved? Sometimes I think the colonial impulse is not very far below the surface for certain people.

I found it quite interesting that at a pre-Summit gathering of indigenous peoples from around the world, the main thing they found was that they did not really have much in common with one another. I would have said that the one thing they do have in common is being constantly patronised by everyone else. That includes me here writing about 'them' as if they come from another planet. Hey, once upon a time, we were just as 'exotic' too and who is to say we were better or worse off then?

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO AN IMMIGRATION OFFICER

March 31, 1993

In these days of cheapish and cheerful(ish) jet travel, more and more people are travelling abroad whether for holidays or for business. This is of course very good as it leads to a broadening of one's horizons but also it leads to many potential hazards, most of which can be avoided with a certain amount of travel savvy. So to help everyone along, here are a few tried and tested and hopefully useful travel tips:

1. Immigration officers anywhere in the world are a breed that are not meant to be welcoming or friendly. Watch out especially for those who do not look like natives of that country (because then they may have an extra urge to be 'more native than the natives'). Hence they are going to be even harder on you if you even remotely look like them. Don't, for instance, be like the man who, when faced with an immigrant Immigration officer, and asked how long he intended to stay, replied "not as long as you have". This earned him an extra hour of hassle. Not much fun after a seventeen-hour plane ride.

2. Be alert when you get into immigration queues and watch what type of people go into which queue. Never get into a queue that has Indians, Arabs or Africans unless you have all the time in the world because as everyone knows, immigration officers think that all these people are smugglers, dope dealers, terrorists or job hunters. Try and time your flight not to arrive at six in the morning at Heathrow Terminal Three just when the flights from India get in. Not unless you enjoy waiting in line, tired and hungry.

3. Don't ever try to be funny in an airport. Airport personnel especially Immigration or Customs officers are notorious for not having a sense of humour. Don't be like the joker who, having just been welcomed to Australia, said 'Australia? Australia? But I wanted to go to Austria!' That earned him a short spree in the detention centre and probably a charge for grossly misjudged sense of timing.

4. Try to have the right passport. One of the worst passports you could have is any from an Arab country especially if you're travelling West. I have a friend who had a choice between a French and an Algerian passport and out of a perhaps misplaced sense of heritage chose the Algerian one. Since then, being questioned and searched in American and European airports has become so routine that his wife always brings a thick novel to read while she waits. Once he went for what was ostensibly a short cruise from one Scandinavian country to another which turned into an endless nightmare when virtually no country would let him get off the boat for something like a week. The fact that he still retains a madcap sense of humour about it all is nothing short of a miracle.

5. Also if you're female, try not to be a Filipina and travel to certain countries where the authorities always think you're either a maid or a prostitute. You may be vice-president of a large international merchant bank but if you're Filipina, you only fit into these two profiles, according to the mind-set of people like Japanese immigration officers.

6. If you're entering the American West Coast and bringing goodies for your student relatives who are missing their *rendang* and curry, watch out for the Filipino Customs officers who try and catch you off-guard by speaking to you in Malay. This is guaranteed to startle you so that you blurt out yes, you have some *daging* even when you don't.

7. When travelling in certain neighbouring countries, you have the choice of either making sure that all your papers are in absolute 'perfect' order (as

defined by anyone you happen to show them to) or risk having to work out what and how expensively they mean when the Immigration officers say they can fix everything for you. I usually act totally dumb and then they give me up as a lost cause.

8. The best and safest way to travel is to travel poor because then nobody thinks you're worth anything. Travelling with a whole set of Vuitton luggage only invites trouble even if you did get them in Bangkok. Make sure your luggage is secure but as beat-up as possible because then this makes you seem like a real veteran traveller who doesn't carry all her expensive worldly goods with her. Also nobody dresses up to travel any more — just wear your jeans and tennis shoes. Also don't wear a lot of cheap metal jangly jewellery because they always set the buzzers off.

9. Try not to get on a plane with a lot of veiled and robed Arab women on it because airport security will inevitably take each and every one of them aside and ask them to unravel themselves to make sure they're not carrying submachine guns. As these women usually travel in packs and they take a lot of unravelling, be prepared for even more delay. Of course you only find this out once you get to the boarding gate when there's absolutely no way you can change your flight.

10. Always book your ticket in exactly the same name as the one in your passport. I once made the mistake of booking my ticket in my married name and then had to explain why the last name on my boarding pass and my passport were not the same to this really burly security officer.

11. It's very easy to be mistaken for a terrorist in Paris airport where if you happen to leave your belongings unattended for five minutes they will blow them up. I once almost had my bag with all my baby things blown to smithereens. Already laden down with baby and hand-luggage, and having to move further along when the Immigration counter I was waiting for closed, I did not realise that I had left this one bag on the floor. Of course if you don't realise you've left something, the announcement over the P/A asking you to claim it means nothing. Luckily my husband happened to walk by just as the SWAT team were about to detonate my milk bottles. (Apparently there are a lot of absent-minded tourists: we overheard two Immigration officers talking about the incident and one of them said, 'Oh, just another stupid tourist.') Mind you, the other day I saw a bag left behind a seat at Singapore Airport and got extremely nervous. It makes you think, at least.

12. Don't be impressed by any airport's security measures. I once transited at Frankfurt Airport where they make you trudge out into the snow to identify your luggage before they load it onto your plane. I grumbled then but conceded that this was probably a good security measure. Then a few years later, that PanAm flight left Frankfurt for New York and didn't make it past Lockerbie, Scotland.

Well, hope these tips help you have a harassment-free, hassle-free trip! Bon voyage!

US VS THEM

October 19, 1994

These are the things that have come up in the papers recently: a Malaysian child who was frequently abused by her father winds up in hospital after being beaten by her father again once he got out of jail. An American couple, whose son is killed by bandits in Italy, donates his organs for transplants to Italians who need it. A benefactor offers monthly aid to the family of the same Malaysian abused child so that she, her mother and her six siblings will not have to starve.

A man in New York who plunked down US\$ 27,000 in cash for a leased apartment in the luxury Trump Tower was indicted for illegally collecting more than US\$ 3,000 in welfare.

The stories go on and on about man's cruelty, greed, dishonesty. So do the ones about goodness, generosity and compassion. Both occur all over the world. No doubt newspaper stories often give you the extremes of good and bad. They almost never talk about the lives of very ordinary people and their strengths and frailties. That is a given.

The reason I bring this up is because I have become alarmed at all the rhetoric about Asian and Western values. Those who expound the virtues of Asian values talk as if they are universally good and Western ones universally bad. It is as if the world is a black and white one, with no grey areas at all, where there are only right values (Asian) and wrong ones (Western).

I do get alarmed at this simplistic and yes, chauvinistic, point of view. Where did we get the idea that Asians have a lock on virtue? Yes, we do have

different values from Westerners but some of our values are good and some are bad just as some of theirs are good and the others aren't. In fact if we look at our good values and theirs, we would see that in fact they are probably the same.

For instance, honesty is a value that has universal appeal. Yet, as we can read almost every day in the papers, there are lots and lots of dishonest Americans, Asians, Africans, all happily ripping off their fellow man.

Same with bigotry. Almost everyone can agree that it is no good to be bigoted (does anyone anywhere teach that it is a good thing to be prejudiced? Even if they do, they don't put it that way). But we can see Europeans killing others they don't like (Bosnia), Africans doing the same (Rwanda) and let us not pretend that in Asia, this does not happen either. So pretty much everyone is susceptible to being bigoted, no matter where they come from.

Sweeping statements obviously have great political value even if they are not necessarily true. America for instance is often demonised as a country where people seem to delight in practising every single perversion that may exist and even some that don't. At least if we believe the papers. It's interesting to note that while we keep complaining about the Western press and the awful untruthful things they say about us, we are quite happy to believe every single awful thing they say about their own people.

So if we believe the press, America is a land where everybody is an anarchic atheistic homosexual single parent. Yet today there is a report in the papers that says that Americans are less sexually active than anyone thinks, only three percent identify themselves as homosexual and almost all of them marry, the happiest and sexiest of whom are monogamous couples. Gee, sounds just like us.

We like to think that only Asians consider the family important and Western families have disintegrated into drugged-up single mothers with wild children who shoot each other in the streets. Firstly, these things happen only in certain cities and secondly, I bet anything if you asked them, everyone there wants the same sort of families as we do. Perhaps they can't have them, just as many of our people can't have the ideal families that they would like.

When we keep talking about 'Us' being all so good and 'Them' being all so bad, we perpetuate stereotypes about us and about them in exactly the same way as they used to do about us. Once upon a time, they said Asians were indolent farmers, always smiling and so welcoming that it was easy to

For the Indonesians, the unfairness of the accusation was annoying even while acknowledging that East Timor is an issue that will not die soon. Our Aussie friends with us were mortified and deeply embarrassed by the appalling patronising attitude of their countrywoman. As for me, the relative outsider, I started thinking about why this happened.

It was certainly bizarre that the middle-aged ladies of rural Victoria should set up a support group for an island and a people whom they probably will never visit. But I find that in Australia, East Timor is constant hot news, arousing passions in the most improbable people. Last year I attended a dinner in Melbourne where the guest speaker was the Australian Foreign Minister. When he opened the floor to questions after his speech, a little old lady with a quivering voice got up, wagged a finger at him and said, 'What about East Timor?'

It's not the issue that really interests me here but why people from advanced countries can get so taken up with issues in faraway countries and yet not bother about problems nearer home. A friend told of going to an elegant dinner in Paris only to be attacked about the Penans. An Indonesian-Australian woman told of her secretary fearing for her safety when she went to meet some East Timorese residing in Melbourne because she was 'bound' to get killed, being the 'enemy'. Even Aussies complain of going abroad and getting grilled ferociously on the plight of the Aborigines.

You start getting the impression that the real motivating factor for all this altruism is guilt. The more guilt one feels about one's country's own behaviour, the more likely one is to adopt some other country's causes in order to assuage that guilt and deflect the spotlight from your own imperfect backyard. It never occurs to these self-flagellators (usually American) that maybe there was complicity on the part of these 'poor' foreigners. Nobody has cornered the market on badness in this world, just as nobody has got the goodness monopoly.

It would be fine if someone wanted a discussion in a civilised intelligent manner. And if we are civilised and intelligent ourselves, then we answer the questions asked in as factual a manner as possible. But more often than not, you run into what an acquaintance calls SLFs or Single Issue Fanatics. SLFs will condemn an entire country and people over one issue. That's like saying every German is a Nazi or every African is corrupt. It's insulting and patronising and not worth wasting your breath on.

Luckily we do have Aussie friends who are bright, open-minded and with whom we can have lots of stimulating conversations. So our impression of Australia, which is trying so hard to get in with the Asian crowd, remains favourable. But basically we've learnt that firstly, complicated issues cannot be boiled down into slogans on a poster. Secondly, beware of odd posters in innocuous surroundings. And thirdly, as always, a sense of humour is a very handy weapon because SIFs don't have one.

PSYCHED OUT

June 5, 1995

In 1992 I produced a photographic exhibition called EYES on ASEAN which consisted of photographs of the people of ASEAN taken by ASEAN photographers. The exhibition toured the then six ASEAN capitals ending in Jakarta where it is on permanent exhibition at the ASEAN Secretariat. In 1994-95, it toured four cities in Australia, followed by Tokyo in 1996 and Auckland, Montreal, and Victoria ending in Kuala Lumpur again in 1997. A small idea became much bigger than I ever dreamed.

As much as I complain about the amount of travelling I have to do, one major advantage of it is that from the outside you get a very interesting vantage point on your own country. Sometimes you get so cut off from the everyday distractions and passions of being a citizen that you are able to take a more objective view of things. Often enough the objective view is not very pleasant but I am happy to say that most times, my country, in my own humble opinion, comes off very well.

When I travel, I get to compare different countries and it is often interesting to figure out why it is that some countries are able to do well and others are not. Some countries have tremendous assets whether human or physical, and still they cannot put the pieces together. Others, including ours, can have so many potential problems and still make not just a go of it but emerge as a showcase of success. Of course nobody holds the monopoly on perfection. Everything is relative.

It has struck me though that what is really important is the psychological

factor. If you can convince people that they can be something better, they will feel empowered enough to do it. I think this is what our founding fathers and mothers did for us although whether consciously or not I don't know. They told us that we could be astronauts if we wanted to. That there was nothing on earth that says that we have to be what our ancestors were, that to break rules imposed on us by centuries of tradition was OK. I am sure it was not easy and I am sure that living in the times that we do helps enormously but still, breaking moulds and setting up new role models must have opened up avenues of inspiration and aspiration like nothing else.

In America recently I picked up a copy of *Ebony*, a magazine targeted to and published by African-Americans. Although the African-American community is beset with problems, a lot of which are not of their own making, *Ebony* does not dwell on them. Instead the editors constantly feature the success stories: blacks who have made it in the world, overcome their problems and become successes not just by sheer luck but through hard work and foresight. In short *Ebony* features very positive role models for the black community, who their wide readership can take inspiration from and emulate. It was in many ways enlightening for me because apart from a few singers and actors, one doesn't get to hear about successful African-Americans. One gets the media-fuelled impression that the American black community is on an ever-vicious downward spiral. They may have problems but who doesn't?

I have been spending a lot of time working in a neighbouring country where the people are friendly, creative, educated and hard-working. And yet they never quite get their act together. They have been unfortunate in having leaders who have mainly had their own interests at heart. But they have managed to finally get rid of them and instituted laws which will never allow a repeat of such selfish leadership. Yet something seems to be still holding them back.

I finally realised that centuries of tradition, handed down by the privileged, have fossilised what people think is possible. Who gets to do what and who gets to succeed is so entrenched that nobody can imagine any other way. And there are no role models to emulate.

In our country, the psyching of our people to do well is ongoing. We see successes and therefore we try for our own successes. Some of the role models are far from perfect but they still serve the purpose of boosting aspirations and giving hope. We all feel that we can be like them when we

hear that they have come from the most humble of beginnings and that hard work and a little bit of brains does pay off. Not all actually had to work that hard of course but we usually know how to differentiate between who to respect and who not to.

In the country I am working in, people cannot imagine starting off as a noodle-seller, say, and going on to become a zillionaire. The possibility does not exist so people just shut off the idea and therefore disempower themselves. The idea of breaking that mould is beyond the dreams of a vast number of people and therefore it is never broken. And of course there are lots of people to ensure that these moulds remain in one piece.

One never reads of self-made millionaires because there are not really any. There are immigrants who have made it from humble beginnings, but they do not serve as role models because they are essentially foreign. Nobody is able to see what an unprivileged person of the majority can do to become a success because hardly any ever make it to a level that is exceptional.

The result is a fatalism that I find sad. Maybe we were like that once but someone somewhere was brave enough to kick us out of it. It shocked me profoundly the first time I heard a local refer to other locals as 'natives' and then go on to describe the stereotype that Westerners like to have of us brown-skinned types; fun-loving, gentle but indolent and not really good for anything.

I must say though that there are people there who are concerned about the psychological shackles that people are trapped in and who are doing something about it. But I think it will take some time.

Meanwhile maybe we as neighbours have a role to play. We have many things in common, including our ethnic background, and I think we can take on that role of providing examples of success. There is always the danger of being considered arrogant and patronising of course but then there are gentle ways of doing things. The first and best way is to behave like genuine friends and not opportunists, to want to share and not to preach. And to understand that, just like us, change has to come from within. The benefits I am sure will be shared by everybody.

A SOUND BASIS FOR ASIAN VALUES

May 15, 1996

In 1996 I was invited by The Asia Society to attend their 25th Williamsburg Conference as one of ten Young Leaders. It was an awe-inspiring conference because of the many illustrious participants including former Prime Minister of Pakistan Moeen Qureishi, Prof. Tommy Koh of Singapore, former US Ambassador Morton Abramowitz and various journalists, academics and diplomats from both the US and Asia. My fellow Young Leaders struggled to participate at the same august level and to their credit, the 'oldies' gave us the space and respect. We also visited the Pentagon and the US Congress as part of the programme. Since then I have kept in touch with some of my fellow participants fairly well; they remember me best for bringing up the topic of sex at Williamsburg for the first time ever.

The discussion inspired me to relate the debate on Asian vs Western values with some of the ways we treat marginalized groups (like people who are HIV-positive) in our own society.

I have had many privileges in my life but the one that I have been most grateful for is the privilege to have met and listened to some very interesting people. So it was with some excitement that I recently flew over twenty hours to a little town in Virginia, USA, to listen to some of the world's most eminent statesmen, academics, businessmen and politicians talk about the ever-interesting relationship between the United States and Asia.

It is awe-inspiring to sit and listen to articulate intelligent people who really know what they are talking about. I kept looking up the biodata of particularly erudite speakers and had to keep myself from keeling over in humility at such distinguished curricula vitae. A former prime minister here, a professor with a string of celebrated books to his name there, a woman ambassador so exemplary she was named honorary citizen of the country she was envoy to. It was impossible not to be inhibited into a respectful silence.

However something did galvanise me to attention. All of a sudden, an ongoing debate ensued over several separate sessions on the issue of Asian values and Western values. A prominent Asian chastised a Westerner for supposedly being critical of the values that his grandmother had handed

down to him. This was something of a surprise since there had been no mention of anyone's grandmother before. But these longtime diplomats managed to smooth the waves and nothing more was said.

However it got me thinking, always a dangerous pursuit. Asian values versus Western values seems to be politicians' favourite subject every time they have to talk about foreign policy but nobody can clarify what exactly they mean. Furthermore there is a tendency on the part of Asians particularly to insist that all Asian values are good and that universal values do not exist. Which for my money is not an especially interesting level of intellectual discussion.

This topic seems to surface like a bad penny. And a strange phenomenon goes along with it. By and large, the people who are fond of this debate accept that there are Asian values and there are Western values and that we will do our thing and they will do theirs. But the problem for me is that more often than not the question of Asian values is used by Asians against other Asians.

If someone local has the temerity to voice a dissenting opinion, he or she is very likely to find accusations of being Westernised and not exhibiting Asian values hurled at him or her. This is a particularly low form of intimidation along the lines of: 'You have no right to speak because you seem to be tainted by foreign influences and are therefore a lesser being.' It is most often used by people who do not have the intellectual capacity to defend their stand on anything so they resort to this vague accusation. They cannot go *mano a mano* at the same level so what better way to stop discussion altogether than by calling the other person's background into question. It's hard to decide in these situations whether to laugh at the ludicrousness of it or to get mad.

If vagueness about a person's values doesn't work, then hurl a suitably vaguely 'Asian' value at them such as, in Asia, the rights of the community supersede the rights of the individual. I have heard this supposed value bandied about a great deal but nobody has ever bothered to examine it.

For a start, when we talk about the rights of the individual, the impression is often given that we are talking about one person against the rest of the country. But this is misleading. Firstly whenever this 'value' is invoked it is almost always when sanctions are proposed against a group of people. When this group protests, they are reduced to 'an individual' whose

rights must be waived. This is intellectual fudging at its best.

More often than not, if you did a head count of these so-called individuals, they add up to a lot. Sometimes more groups are added further swelling the numbers. In the end, it is ridiculous to talk about the individual because the numbers are so many that the individual has disappeared.

So what would be more accurate is to talk about the rights of an elite part of the community against the rights of the marginalised sector of the community. When have sanctions ever been proposed against people who are powerful? Sanctions that bring on debates about human rights are always targetted towards people who are powerless, voiceless and marginalised. This is why, in a just society, their rights must be protected. Otherwise we will see an ever-growing dictatorship of an increasingly diminishing elite against the powerless majority.

Lastly, if there is one so-called Asian value that I hold high, it is that of humility. To say that some people's rights should not matter requires an arrogance that should be, to us Asians, distasteful. We complain all the time to the West about their arrogance towards us. How can we not apply the same criticism to ourselves when we ride roughshod over people whom we deem unworthy of the same rights as us?

Some people say that a murderer has violated the rights of the person he murdered. Therefore it is only just that his rights should be curtailed. Fine, I couldn't agree more. But we often want to put punitive sanctions on entire groups of people (no matter how ill-defined) in anticipation of our rights possibly being violated by them. What are these sanctions then but an expression of our fear? Question is, should the basis of policy be fear? And where does fear come from but ignorance?

If we are going to talk about Asian values, let us have a sound basis for them. Otherwise we are only talking about Asian prejudices.

Talking to Young People

When I started writing the 'Musings' column for The Star, the original idea was for me to write about family and home. That's why my first columns talked a lot about my daughter, Neza. It was through her that I was learning about life in Malaysia again after having been abroad for a while.

However I have always been interested in our youth, and the challenges they face. Perhaps it is because I have a child and I have to envision the sort of future that I have to prepare her for.

More than 50% of our population is under the age of 21, yet young people have so little say in anything. Lately they have been disproportionately blamed for every social evil going. (Remember that one of the worst, corruption, is something they are not involved in.) It is unfair, and hypocritical, and we should really give more space for young people to voice their ideas.

I have met many fine teenagers, their hearts absolutely in the right place even though they may be inexperienced and naive. The young people I speak to often believe that we generalize far too much about them. Why are we so negative?

Recently I had the pleasure of having dinner with a group of young people who had formed an organization to talk about issues affecting our country. I found them enthusiastic, articulate and committed. When I was their age, there was no such group of young people, getting together and discussing issues of the day. Furthermore, no adults would give any space to such a group at that time. But here they were invited to attend a very important forum on Malaysia's future. Seventy of them turned up. They were so engaged that they even had strategy meetings to plan who would ask what questions. The most important thing to them was that now that they had been given a chance to participate, they should use it to the full.

The key thing is participation. So many of our young people feel that they can never participate in anything of importance in our country. I have talked with teenagers who feel that to speak out is to invite trouble and that laws, no matter how unfair, can never be changed. I suspect sometimes that teachers tell them this just to keep them in line.

But what is supposed to happen when they reach 21? Are they supposed to understand what it is to be an adult just like that? Do we expect subservient teenagers suddenly to morph into active participating adults as soon as they reach majority? Are the adults out there such fine examples to emulate anyway?

We need to take a cool hard look at ourselves first before we come down so hard on our young. We need to understand that nurturing them for the future is not just a matter of making sure they get good grades in school.

OFF TO SCHOOL

November 27, 1991

It is amazing how much agony and conflict the subject of your kid's schooling can engender. I have never experienced anything like it. The choice of which school to send your kid to can be the source of endless debates on the merits and demerits of certain schools, based to me on things which have little to do with kids' education.

My daughter is only in kindergarten and she will not go to primary school until December 1993. I registered her in the government school nearest my home because (a) it's convenient and (b) it's supposed to be a good school. I really did not think too much about where to send her. The fact that the school was near was certainly a major factor. Transport will be easy. The fact that it's also a good school is a plus.

Everyone else I know however is going through the throes of where to send their kids of the same age and it seems to me that some very misplaced deciding factors are in play here.

Granted, every parent wants the best for their children and education is certainly the passport to a better life. But people sometimes confuse education with passing exams, which to me is not the same thing. Kids nowadays are pushed to an extraordinary extent. The headmistress of my

daughter's kindergarten told me stories of parents who insist on their children being given homework. Our kids are going to have homework for the next thirteen years of their lives; we might as well put it off for as long as we can. But no...

Then they push their children into schools which are really going to work them to achieve the kind of exam results you can tell all your friends about. I know of a school which makes four-year-olds sit for three-hour exams. That would be enough for me to put it on my list of places I never want my kid near but there are any number of ambitious parents who actually put their children through it. My Neza can hardly sit still for half an hour, let alone three. I think it is far too much to expect of a little toddler.

Education is not just exams, it is all about life. Part of children's education is how to grow up to be decent responsible people who care about society and the environment. If they are clever into the bargain, that's great but it's not the ultimate. Education is a bigger package. If we want to have this caring society for instance, pushing a kid to keep his nose in his books all the time is not going to do it. He's got to be out there caring. I often have the suspicion that making kids study all the time (or pushing them into all sorts of competitive activities) is a way of neglecting them. You don't have time to give yourself to them so you make sure that at least they're learning something while filling up those hours without you. With karate, computer, ballet, piano, tennis and of course tuition filling up their after-school hours, it's a bit hard for anyone to say that you're not giving the best to your children.

I suspect that sometimes parents want their children to reflect themselves in the sort of light that certain modern-day values judge is the best. It's rather like having designer clothes: now you have designer children. A kid who always comes out tops in class is obviously a kid who is going to elicit easy praise from other people, reflecting back on his or her parents. A report card with all As is a very tangible thing and something that other people can see immediately. Not so obvious nor tangible are personality and character qualities like humility.

The same holds true for the school the kids are sent to. I will concede that smaller classes are much better for a child especially one who needs a lot of attention. But I am not entirely sure that high fees are always reflected in benefits for the child. Part of the reason that parents send their children to a private school must surely be the cachet of exclusiveness. And this is exactly

the reason I will not send my child to one.

I'm a big socialist when it comes to education. I really believe that education should be available and open to everyone no matter who they are. I find it really rather disturbing to opt out of the public system. Sometimes these private schools with the best teachers are really open only to those who can pay; those who cannot get the dregs. Do private schools embody a responsible attitude towards society as a whole? Surely the more responsible approach is to improve the system by constantly agitating for change. Demand higher standards, ask for more and better schools and don't quibble about the taxes you have to pay if it is eventually going to go towards improving the entire education system.

A child must learn the right values, fairness and social equality being just two of them. The problem with private schools is that the students there almost all come from one particular stratum of society. These students are not necessarily a negative influence but I would like my daughter to learn that there are all kinds of people in life, not all of whom are as lucky as she is.

I remember one significant lesson for me as a child. My brother had brought home something from his art and craft class. I played with it and broke it and he was furious. It turned out that it was not his at all but a friend's. He had taken it home for his friend because his friend had to take the bus home and couldn't carry it home as easily as my brother could in our car. It drove home to me that not everybody lived as we did (and we did not live a very upscale life by today's standards). It has stayed with me ever since.

That is exactly the sort of education I would like for my daughter. I want her to know that there are many children who cannot afford to go to Toys 'R' Us whenever they want and who do not think that a holiday in Bali every year is a normal thing. And those children have the right to the same dreams and hopes as anyone else, no matter what kind of background they may come from.

Surely the point of *pendidikan* (which means much more than school education), is to ensure that we carry out our responsibility to bring up honest, confident, fairminded, caring and responsible citizens of the future. That they perform well at school at the same time is our short-term reward. That we leave our earth, our country and society in good hands is our long-term one.

DREAMING AND LEARNING

September 29, 1993

In 1993 I attended a two-week course at Stanford University known as the Stanford Professional Publishing Course. The course is designed for those working in publishing, whether for books, magazines or multimedia. Lecturers include the biggest names in the publishing world, and participants come from all over.

Have you ever dreamed of soaring up in the sky like a bird? Have you ever thought it would be fun to be in someone else's body? Wouldn't it be amazing to be able to walk through walls and on water? I recently had the opportunity to listen to the man who dreamed of all these things and then set out to make them 'happen'. I put the word 'happen' in quotes because he did not really make them happen, he only made them virtually happen. This man's name is Jaron Lanier and he invented Virtual Reality.

Virtual Reality is such a wild idea that it had to take a man like Jaron Lanier to make it real. A rather pudgy man in his thirties with waist-length blonde dreadlocks, he is the sort of person who treads the fine line between genius and weirdness. He tried to explain to us why he came up with Virtual Reality and what he saw its role in the future but to tell you the truth, it was very hard to understand him. It was not that he was inarticulate but simply that his vision of things is so far ahead of everyone else that it was difficult for an ordinary person to comprehend what he has in mind.

In the two weeks that I spent in the States recently, Jaron Lanier was not the only high-technology visionary that I listened to. There was the young team from Apple computers in their shorts and sneakers who enthusiastically showed us their wonderful Newton. There were various people who gave us a peek at what publishing will be like in the twenty-first century, an electronic world so different from what we have today that it is almost too much for even a computer fan like me to take. You can only feel comfortable with it when you accept that all this technology is really for our children and they will have no problem with it at all.

What really impressed me however was the awareness of not only the types of minds that could dream up these things but also the type of environment that nurtures them.

If we look at all the great inventions in time, we realise that they are almost always the result of one individual's imagination. One person somewhere sees a problem or a need and sets his or her mind to working out a solution or fulfilment of that need. Sometimes you can get two different people working on the same thing but this is often coincidence because they usually work in isolation.

The imagination is one of those rare things which cannot be collectivised. It is well and truly individual and the only way it can come out of the privacy of its home in someone's brain is if it is encouraged to. The type of environment it is nurtured in is important. It seems to me that one of the reasons that so many inventions generate out of the United States is because it is a highly individual society. The Japanese may perfect and improve an existing idea but they do not come up with the original idea first. The Newton, the personal digital assistant which is completely based on a normal person's work habits, is a case in point.

For all the faults in the American educational system, one thing it does do is to encourage students to question, to speak up and to display what they know. And because the imagination is allowed to run riot, so to speak, some of the better imaginings in the hands of certain types of individuals eventually become reality.

I think that we have a fairly good education system because everyone gets a good educational grounding. In many ways I know our children do much better than American children who very often do not get 'educated' because their basic skills are not as well-taught. But our kids will probably not grow up to invent anything as wild as Virtual Reality because we do not encourage individuality and imagination.

I read a great article some months ago by a local writer on the so-called Tall Poppy Syndrome prevalent in our schools. This is the habit of bright children not wanting to show how smart they are for fear of being unpopular with their classmates. The outstanding student is often brought down to the level of everyone else basically because of jealousy and rather than withstand the pressure, the student censors him or herself.

This is not as farfetched as it seems. I recall when I was young, whoever came out tops in class was always labelled 'proud'. This was an all-encompassing term which had no definite meaning except that the so labelled person was unpopular and was to be kept unpopular until they 'came down

a peg or two'. Similarly anyone who came from a better-off family than most or was prettier got tagged with the same 'proud' label. It is a peer leveller and I'll be very surprised if this practice has ceased among our kids.

Similarly if anyone tries to be in any way different in our society, they can expect to come under tremendous pressure to conform. I would never expect someone like Jaron Lanier to exist in our society, let alone be encouraged to pursue whatever wild dreams he may have. I remember interesting schoolmates who talked about doing very different things from everyone else but who eventually toed the conformist line. It is probably wrong for me to be disappointed but I always felt their potential was not nurtured, and was therefore lost.

I have met many people who would be regarded as being on the fringes of society, but who are much more intelligent and articulate than your ordinary Joe. In Malaysia, they are exceptions to the norm and their potential contributions to society are generally disregarded. Their values are tangential to those of regular society, so it is assumed that they have nothing to contribute. The general consensus is that if they're so smart why aren't they making money and living in a nice house like everyone else?

It is tough to be individual in any society because being social almost by definition means you have to conform. Therefore to be different means that you probably have to be regarded as antisocial. But perhaps there are more inventors and visionaries out there than we think. Maybe they either bow to the pressures and never indulge their fertile imaginations or they drop out completely and therefore lose mainstream support. Perhaps in a more open system where an individual is not only tolerated for his or her individualism but also encouraged, we can give the world our own Jaron Laniers some day. Just hope we have enough imagination to recognise potential when we see it.

RAISING A DAUGHTER

October 13, 1993

Ah, the frustrations of being a modern parent! Neza has picked up a new habit. 'Neza,' I say in my best 'soft authoritative' voice, 'It's late.' 'So?' she says, hardly looking up from whatever it is she is doing.

Has my daughter reached teenagehood already? She is only six but the way she talks, anyone would think she's stepped out of the cast of Beverly Hills 90210.

Back in the 'old' days, children, especially in my family, would never dream of answering our parents back, let alone with a Mom-you're-so-uncool 'So?'. My own mother is laughing her head off. This is what I get for trying to be a 1990s liberal modern mother.

In a way it is my fault. I was very conscious of not wanting to be the authoritarian parent of old, where every word is law and defiance is rewarded with a spanking. I did not want to rule by terror, so to speak. Before I raised my voice or my hand to my child, I was going to use my powers of persuasion. I was going to be a friend to my daughter, her confidante, her comrade-in-arms, her companion, every New Age mother-daughter relationship going.

Generally though it has worked. We have conversations about everything. If she's upset, it may take a while to get it out of her but eventually she tells me. We are great friends and miss each other dreadfully when we're apart. We do things together and we *lepak* together quite a bit (hey, this is the solution to the *lepak* problem: the family that *lepaks* together stays together).

I don't want to brag about my daughter, but other people have said how mature she is for her age. So mature, she has a whole string of eager little boys wanting to do her every bidding, none of whom she really gives a hoot about. She can say the most astounding things, sometimes to put down her overpreening mother ('Don't you just have the best-looking mother?' 'Maybe I do and maybe I don't') but more often insightful opinions of things we just take for granted. She told a friend of mine who likes to sing with a quivering voice, 'You sound like you're freezing!'

Of course I had not reckoned on external factors like school and TV. I'm quite sure this 'So?' business comes from school. But I can't march into

school and question every kid there. It's still infuriating to me. It is downright rude. It's just Not Done. I can hear my mother trying to suppress a giggle.

My Modern Mum persona seems to get more and more tested these days. Besides the 'So?', there is the 'How should I know?' and the 'Who cares?', both of which make me foam at the mouth. Am I being unreasonable here? I've tried being quiet but firm but Neza has a stubborn streak a mile long, so strong that I get reduced to being exactly the sort of hysterical bad-tempered mother ("You listen to me because I'm your mother!!") I swore never to be. To her credit, and one of the reasons she's still living, my daughter has not shouted back at me. Yet.

I must admit to being ashamed whenever I've recovered from losing my cool. I always wish I could exercise more patience but then children seem to always know exactly what buttons to push and when. Also, deep in my not-so-subconscious, I know that a lot of these annoying habits are attention-grabbers. She's the most independent child in the world except when I'm around. Then she can't even go to the toilet at home by herself or take off her t-shirt. My friends all want to swap her for their own brats because she's so wonderful in front of them and reserves her worst brattiness for me.

My mother of course knows the secret to all this. She told me one day, with a smirk on her face, that really what I had done was given birth to myself. Every little irritating quirk I'm tearing my hair about in my daughter came originally from me. And indeed I must admit that there are times when something she does gives me the most awful sense of *deja vu*, albeit there is a much more sophisticated tinge to her. It is a bit like watching a pint-sized reflection of yourself, only a lot more confident than I used to be.

In fact confidence is really what differentiates kids these days from those of our generation. Urban kids these days are just so much more exposed than we used to be. They travel a lot more, know a lot more and are generally given a lot longer leashes than we were. So they're just a lot more confident about speaking out and voicing an opinion or just simply saying no, unheard of in our time. Parents have stopped being THE authority; there are also teachers and even maids. Of course some people would like to blame this on women going out to work. But these people conveniently forget that there are just as many problem children from families where mothers are at home. Really you'd need not only eyes at the back of your head but twenty arms to control your kids all the time.

But lest I sound overly pessimistic about my child, I must admit that there is an upside to all this. For a start she really is my friend and a loving and affectionate one at that. We can giggle together and do girl things together. We make great travel companions. When she's tired and upset (by someone else) it is me she turns to and we sit and cuddle. First thing she does when she wakes up every morning is give me a kiss. If she thinks I'm upset she tries to cheer me up.

Much as I dread her becoming a teenager because I'm sure she will be a supremely headstrong one, I think it could be fun too because we would have just so much more to giggle about. And I don't intend to tighten the leash at all because by that time I would have instilled in her the right values and the knowledge that I trust her to live them, much as my parents did.

Meanwhile I take great delight in overhearing her talking to her friends and going, 'My mother, you know....' Her mother, that's ME.

TALKING TO KIDS

January 22, 1994

Oh it's tough to be a young person these days. Everybody is hitting out at them as if they were the cause of every social ill there is. They can't hang out because apparently this makes them potentially bad and when they go off and do something, like form a rap group or something, this is the wrong thing to do. What is a kid to do these days?

Although it's been a long time since I was a teenager I remember it very well. It was in many ways an exciting yet confusing time. So many things were changing not just in my body but in my head. I remember being totally confused about boys: only a short while earlier we girls simply hated boys, those awful coarse teasing creatures, and then suddenly they became interesting. It was difficult to even admit to liking boys, especially as a convent schoolgirl, but you couldn't help being interested. One of our biggest problems was the fact that most of us eventually had to transfer to a boys' school for upper secondary schooling. How awful to have to mix with those aliens on a day-to-day basis (but how exciting!).

I don't doubt that teens today are just as confused. But the difference is

that today they have access to so much information and as a result they are either more confused or more confident, depending on the background they come from. Whichever it is, an average 14 fourteen-year-old Malaysian kid today probably knows more than his or her parents ever did at the same age.

They particularly understand issues that affect themselves and the world; the environment, Bosnia, AIDS. The young people I have met have always impressed me with their knowledge and concern about issues and their desire to want to do something. I have heard a young man express more articulately what to do about AIDS than some of his elders.

Our kids today are just so much more open and this is something wonderful. When it comes to issues, it is important to be open. But they need encouragement. Kids today seem to be, in their parlance, hit upon all the time by 'grownups'. The most natural thing for a kid to do is hang out with friends and adults treat this as if it is the beginning of a catastrophe. Whole surveys are going to be devoted to the *lepak* issue, a total waste of time as far as I can tell. Suggested alternative ways of spending their time are laughable: none of them really realistic in terms of attractiveness to young people. They are usually tantamount to telling kids to go off and become nerds, anathema to a hip 90s kid.

Why don't people simply go down to the malls and talk to the kids and ask them what else they might like to do? Perhaps we should have teen community centres where they can hang out without bothering anyone and where they have a space to do things they are interested in.

What are kids most interested in these days, is anyone bothered to find out? They like music and the movies. So okay, give them a space where they can make music, practise dance steps, start a newsletter, do an environmental project, paint, take photographs, make home movies. Sometimes all they need is a space, especially in the city.

Our biggest mistake, I think, is that we don't bother to talk to them in their own language. We assume that our language is the best one there is. But if it does not communicate, it is useless. In our adult arrogance, we assume that we always know better and we seek to impose this on kids. And trying to impose anything from above on teens frequently receives the wrong reaction, as anyone who knows kids will understand.

The first thing we have to do is stop telling young people that the whole country is doomed if they don't shape up. Hey, it was not they who

spoil our environment, it was us. They know only too well that they have to clean it up for us. We want them to become responsible citizens but we lay a guilt trip on them. They just won't buy it.

And supposedly exemplary adults are being highly irresponsible by not giving our children proper sex education. Anyone who has spent any time talking to kids realises that they know a lot about sex, but they need to know more. Sex is one of the great mysteries of life and it is the most natural thing for a kid to be curious about it (don't we remember?). Why then do we withhold the information or couch it so vaguely and refuse to take responsibility for the consequences?

The dumping of newborn babies is the responsibility of our entire society. If we do not teach our young people that if they have sex, they will in all likelihood create a life, a baby, which is a major responsibility that they will have to undertake, they will carry on doing it. Instead we behave as if they will never do it and then express shock horror when these babies appear. Studies have shown that where we have sex education for kids, rather than encouraging them to indulge, they are likely to behave more responsibly because they understand the consequences. And in these days of AIDS, this is even more imperative.

May I quote the 1994 UNICEF State of the World's Children report, pertaining to AIDS and children: "In countries which have actively focussed on sex education for the younger generation, young people are beginning to adopt safer sexual behaviour, including reducing the number of their sexual partners." At last, a statement that deals with the real world.

Adults are such hypocrites and they don't seem to realise that kids know this. It is far too easy to pick on a group that can't fight back. By our behaviour, we are teaching our kids that it is okay to pick on the powerless. Do we want our kids to grow up into hypocrites? Do we want them to be the sort of people who say one thing for public consumption and then behave differently in private? We cannot talk about instilling moral values in our kids when we ourselves hardly practise them. We must not only tell them but show them that it is not okay to lie, steal, cheat, rape, murder, be corrupt, pollute the environment, treat women, children and anyone less privileged badly. Hanging out in shopping complexes is the least of the sins they can commit.

If we want to ensure the future of our country, we must show our young that we have faith in them. And they will respond in the best of ways.

THE AFFAIR OF THE OIL PASTELS

February 8, 1995

'Teacher said,' Neza told me late yesterday as I drove home in the rain, 'We must bring oil pastel crayons for art class tomorrow.'

'But you already have lots of crayons,' I said.

'Yes, but I can't bring those and Teacher says I must have these crayons.'

I thought it was ludicrous to buy new crayons when she had just been given a gift set of 96 crayons and said so. At which point the whole issue threatened to turn into a major crisis. 'MY TEACHER SAID I HAVE TO BUY THESE CRAYONS! What am I going to do tomorrow?!' she bawled.

I have been getting a lot of 'Teacher said's' these days. The week before, Teacher said to cut out pictures of animals from magazines every day for an entire week. I buy a lot of magazines and since they are mostly about fashion or decor, I'm hard-pressed to find pictures of animals in them. I did find a not-so-old copy of *National Geographic* and (to the horror of other *Geographic* collectors, I'm sure) I had to sacrifice that.

It made me wonder what children from poorer homes, where magazines, especially something like *National Geographic*, are probably a luxury, did when given an assignment like this. 'Teacher said' is very much taken as 'Teacher commanded' and no kid would ever ignore this. (I once had to search for pictures of transportation vehicles for her and it was a real horror trying to find a photo of a bus. Why would anyone want to take a photo of a bus?) If you have no magazines at home, you could go to a library but you can't cut up library magazines.

Children seem to be under a lot of pressure these days at school whether from their friends or from their teachers. They can't bear to be left out and parents feel they have to comply either not to upset their child or not to be left out. I know sometimes schools think they have to provide all sorts of extra services in order to maintain the edge for their students. But I do think sometimes it goes over the top.

Neza's school has recently offered some special classes and while I do think that they will probably do her good, I'm also concerned about the time it takes up in her week. As a child, I hated having my days taken up with all sorts of classes so I'm careful not to overburden her. But, as a

sympathetic friend said, if you don't join, you always think your kid will be left behind.

I sent Neza to school to get an education, not to compete. She happens to be doing well and I don't think she will be left behind. But I hate the idea of being pressured into signing her up for classes whether she needs it or not just because of peer pressure, hers and mine.

The other day the school sent a note about computer classes which I thought would be good. To my surprise, Neza said she did not want to join. Pressed for a reason since she normally loves playing with my computer, she said, 'Yes, I like computers but I don't want to learn about them!' In other words, it's fun now, don't spoil it by putting it in a class.

She said she would explain to her teacher why she didn't want to join. That evening when she returned I asked her what happened. 'Teacher said everybody is joining and anyway it's during school hours,' she replied, a far cry from the previous evening's stubbornness and tears. So it's OK if everyone does it and it's OK if it doesn't take up extra time.

But what happens to people who cannot afford to succumb to every bit of pressure that the school puts on the kid? Special classes to stay competitive may be one thing but not only are they expensive but getting kids back to school in the afternoons for them is another hassle. Does this mean then that only privileged kids will be able to have that competitive edge? The field is already not level even in primary school.

Schools are competing even with one another and I wonder sometimes if this competition is right or healthy. Sometimes it looks like a competition to get into the papers. To whose benefit is this really?

I know teachers have been getting a lot of bad press lately. Children also have been criticised for not being the nice obedient students that we used to have in the 'good old days'. I don't think that either should be blamed. What really needs to be looked at is a materialistic system that breeds competition in everything including in education with the resulting enormous pressure on teachers, kids and parents to perform. The very idea that what you do or don't do in primary school or even in secondary school is going to affect your whole life sounds to me like an exaggeration born out of some ill-defined myths. Is it really true that you only have one chance to get it right?

HAVE YOU SEEN YOUR CHILD'S TEXTBOOK LATELY?

August 10, 1995

It is term exams time again in school and try as I might to avoid it, my anxiety level rises. My daughter has the knack of being able to irritate me each time by displaying a total lack of knowledge about almost everything when I sit down to revise with her. She is incorrigibly careless, messing up the spelling of the simplest words or failing to see minus signs in her Maths problems and adding up instead. It remains a mystery to me how she passes each time, much less how she gets the As that she does. She is probably like me when I was a child, not dumb but with brain machinery that needs constant polishing.

When I was a child, exam time was a time of frustration and tears. My mother would personally take over our revision and her blood pressure would rise at not only our apparently total non-absorption of any of our lessons but also at the disappearance of pencils, rulers, erasers and everything else that we required. Half of study time would be spent looking for these things, my eyes all the while blurred with tears in anger at my 'cruel' ruler-wielding mother.

My parents believed in dividing up the work when it came to exams. My mother was Cruella De Vil before exam time when we had to revise and my father was Jafar the Evil Wizard when we got our results.

As a way of avoiding these dire circumstances, I simply would not tell my parents when exams were due. That way I got away with not studying. But I could never bear to start exams without a Good Luck wish from my mother. So, early on the first day of exams, I would creep into my parents' room and whisper into my mother's ear as she lay sleeping that my exams were beginning that day. The drowsy 'uh-huh' was enough of a blessing for me. This way I managed to avoid Cruella but not Jafar.

My daughter has no such luck. I must admit, as modern Mums go, I am relatively slack. I do not sit down with her at a proper table and go over everything she's done. More often than not, I'll sit on the sofa and ask her questions and she'll lie prone on the floor writing her answers out. It's friendly rather than adversarial except when I insist that Power Rangers have to give

way to Ugama. Neither of us so far has thrown any tantrums. I justify my lack of commitment to total anxiety over Neza's exams by the fact that she's only in Standard Two. One day I'm sure I'll have to grow up.

Revision time this time has been rather revealing to me. I have started to wonder who actually writes our children's textbooks. Whoever it is must be old, without children, living in rural areas, or all of the above.

Why is it that in our children's textbooks, everybody is so stereotypical? I realise that you can't be too fanciful in these books but could they not be more real? Every mother in the textbook is a housewife. I have not found a single mother yet who isn't cooking and cleaning or shopping at the wet market. There is not even a supermarket in sight. Every father is a fisherman or a farmer; no bankers, doctors, or engineers.

The mothers in my daughter's textbooks come home from the market in a trishaw. It's been a long time since I've seen one. Have these books not been revised since my own childhood?

I realise that we don't want to make rural children feel deprived but why then do we assume that all our children live in villages? In my daughter's Ugama textbook, families eat on the floor and the kids almost always walk to school. I rather resent the implicit message: it is more religious to eat while sitting on the floor. I also wonder if the reason religion is not that interesting to our city kids is simply because they cannot relate to the examples in their textbooks.

Some of the stories in the books are simple to the point of boredom. Is fantasy not allowed at all? If the point is to teach language, does it matter if the stories have a bit of imagination? Neza is reading Roald Dahl stories these days where the characters are imperfect, sometimes disgustingly so, but colourful and have real adventures, not all of which end happily. She used to read Dr Seuss's books which are nonsensical and whimsical. But because the words rhyme, the books are excellent ways of teaching kids to read and understand the beauty of poetry. I actually think that kids are learning more language from the Power Rangers than from their school textbooks. It's not surprising really when even textbook illustrations lack any sophistication at all.

It also occurs to me as being rather odd that in this modern high-tech age, exam paper questions are still handwritten, at least in my school. Are teachers so poorly paid that they cannot afford even a typewriter, much less

a word processor? Or are primary school kids assumed to be able to read only handwriting? But they read books all the time.

Perhaps teachers can find computer-literate parents to help with doing up exam papers. It would save so much time. I do realise however that what really takes up time is not the setting of questions, which you only have to do once, but the marking of them, which is repeated at least forty times per subject. Nobody has been able to mechanise that yet.

The one area that my daughter is actually better than me is Maths. She has been learning a method using just her fingers which allows her to do very long addition and subtraction much faster than I can with my old-fashioned ways. Now she's learnt to use an abacus. I find it amazing. To think that the abacus has been around for thousands of years and we were never taught it, and now just as we are about to enter the twenty-first century, my daughter's fingers are clacking the beads almost faster than the eye can see.

By looking back to the past, Maths is the only subject on my daughter's curriculum that's really forward. It's her favourite. Also she wants to be scientist and already has some original inventions I think I ought to patent.

Now what would those textbook mothers make of that?

PREVENTING RAPE

August 16, 1995

I know that life is full of contradictions, that there is often a gulf between what we want and what's good for us, what should be done and what can be done. But that doesn't stop me from occasionally saying, 'huh?'

The other day I read an innocuous enough bit of news in the paper where a police official, no doubt with the best of intentions, said that in order to prevent its increasing occurrence, parents and teachers should make children be more aware of rape.

It sounded like a sensible enough idea except that most sensible ideas usually stand up to scrutiny. And somehow this one didn't.

First of all, in this country we have endless non-conclusive debates about the merits and demerits of sex education for our young people. I'm on the pro side of course and I can provide an endless list of why we should provide

sex education (or family life education or whatever euphemism we insist on using) to our young people, the deadly realities of the HIV/AIDS epidemic being only one of them. The anti side have only one, non-provable claim, that, if you teach them about It, they'll all go out and do It. The end result unfortunately is that the vociferous antis have their way and everyone else is too chicken to really fight for it.

Now, if we cannot even talk about sex in a calm, clinical way, in an atmosphere where we can teach our children about the responsibilities and consequences of sex, how are we expected even to begin to talk about rape? Is it possible to tell a kid about rape without first talking about sex and their sexuality? Our children are not taught that sex is part of everybody's life, that it comes with love and responsibility, that it is in fact something wonderful and to be cherished and therefore worthwhile postponing until the right person comes along. We don't teach the positive side of sex yet now we are being asked to talk to our kids about the ugly violent face of it? I think it's obscene.

How do we even begin? How do I tell my daughter that there are bad men out there who might do nasty things to her that will probably scar her for life? I don't want her to go through life thinking that sex is something horrible that happens to you, I want to have grandchildren some day.

What is more, there seems to be an underlying assumption here that the onus of prevention is upon the victim. So what do we tell children about preventive measures? No provocative clothing? No walking down dark alleys? All these rules which, if 'broken', means 'you asked for it'? I think it is wrongheaded and insulting to all the women and young girls who have been raped.

Why don't we educate society at large that rape is not to be tolerated at all? Why don't we educate our boys to respect women and never to use their physical superiority to assert power over women sexually? Do we assume that all men are animals who cannot help themselves and therefore women have to avoid provoking them? How sad.

It just goes to show really how rape victims suffer in every way. They have to go through the trauma of rape, only to then suffer again through any investigation if they choose to report the rape, all the while knowing that lurking in the mind of society is the thought that maybe, just maybe, they asked for this to happen to them.

It may have been a bit of a coincidence that in the same week that I saw this report in the papers, I happened to sit down with a group of sixteen-year-olds for a chat about what they thought about social issues. It was a fascinating experience because there were so many things I did not know about teen life, and so many wrong assumptions that I had made about young people were shattered. The five young people were concerned and articulate individuals who resented very much the generalisations that adults like to make about them. They felt strongly that a few rotten apples don't spoil the whole bunch but adults insisted on making them all feel bad anyway. And I think it was a novel experience for them to sit with adults who were actually interested in what they had to say and in fact encouraged them to be more candid than they were used to.

In the midst of this conversation, we started talking about the much-debated phenomena of *lepak* and *bohsia*. [Editor's note: *bohsia* or 'without a word' is the term given by the press to girls casually exchanging minor sexual favours for money or thrills, while congregating at shopping centres late at night, a practice first reported in 1994.] The teens hated the media tendency to dub an entire generation as indulging in a 'culture' of loafing and slacking. What does anyone know really about our lives that they can say we're just a bunch of loafers, they rightfully asked?

We asked them if they knew of anyone who was involved in *bohsia* activities. Yes, they said, they did. Why, we asked, did they think young girls did this? Was it because it was fun?

Everyone shook their heads. Then one young girl, alert but quiet as a mouse until then, said, 'I don't think *bohsia* girls do it for fun. I think they do it because they have many problems.'

She said it with such authority that we had to ask how she knew that.

'I have a friend who was a *bohsia* girl and when I knew this I asked her why she did it,' she elaborated.

'And what did she say?'

'She said it was for revenge. Because, you see, her father had raped her and she was so upset about it that she just decided that since her body had been taken away from her by her father, she would just then give it away to anybody.'

We sat in stunned silence. Something so tragic had slipped out so unexpectedly. Finally we asked, 'What did you do?'

'I told her she shouldn't do that and finally she agreed and reported to the police.' she continued, 'But her mother turned against her and called her a liar and a bad girl and in the end she voluntarily asked to be put in a girls' home because she could not stand being at home any more.'

To say that the experience shook me would be an understatement. I think the girl who recounted the story had also undergone some trauma because of what happened to her friend. So she refuses to make simple judgements about people. The next day I read the suggestion by the police that we should teach our kids about rape. Pity that girl whose father didn't warn her.

JUST A PASSING PHENOMENON

January 22, 1997

I have a confession to make: I was once a punkette. Now before anyone says 'aha, that explains everything', let me elaborate. I entered the University of Sussex in the autumn of 1976. The previous summer, the hottest summer in Europe for over twenty years, a new youth phenomenon had burst upon the scene. A band of four not-very-attractive young men, fronted by a fellow called Johnny Rotten, had made a record which was brash and discordant. They went out of their way to look ugly and behave in ways no properly-brought-up English person ever would. These guys did not like anyone, not even their audiences, to the extent that they even spat at them at concerts! Anarchy was the name of the game.

Like any new social phenomenon, punk, as the movement was called, attracted a lot of media attention. As often happens, once the media gets into the game, the whole thing becomes endangered. The tabloids started telling everybody how punks dress and behave. Anybody wanting to be hip began to dress like punks. Whatever philosophy underpinned punk got submerged under the media attention. The stereotype became the story—anyone who wore safety pins, did their hair funny and snarled was a 'punk'.

As far as I'm concerned, punk died not too long after it was born and I pretty much contributed to it. If someone as normally brought up as me could have a punk theme party for her nineteenth birthday and dress up as a

punkette for a night, complete with chains and black eyeliner, then punk was no more than a passing fashion. Anything that could so easily become a matter of costuming could not possibly have staying power.

Today when I see punks, I get a wave of nostalgia. Recently the Sex Pistols went on tour again and there he was, Johnny Rotten, fat and old. He calls himself John Lydon now. A more normal name you couldn't find.

The point of all this is that we are having a kerfuffle about punks some twenty years too late. What punks and punkettes we may have now are only the superficial costumes much like those who came to my birthday party. They don't understand anything about the anarchy that was the original basis for the punk movement, all they care about is the outer layers. And like all teenage phenomena, it's fashion and will stay that way until they get bored and something else comes along.

Before I went to school abroad, I went to a local boarding school where fashion was very much frowned on. We could not wear skirts that were too short and had to suffer the humiliation of having our hems measured every weekend (of such pettiness are future leaders meant to be bred!). Then, because maxi skirts were in fashion, we could not wear them either even though they exceeded minimum hem lengths by at least a foot. The point was to keep our minds on studies and off trivial things like fashion. However the powers-that-be, in their constant vigilance of our hemlines, seemed to have nothing but exactly these trivialities on their minds.

As far as I could tell, all of us who spent a lot of time thinking about fashion grew up to be quite normal. But the ones who felt themselves above these trends and spent all their time thinking and brooding were the ones who later on became trouble. They thought that they ought to be above such superficialities, that they should be worrying about the state of the world. Trouble was, at that age, all their experience was in the abstract, not tempered by reality. So sometimes what they thought about got a little weird. I remember when we went overseas to study, all the 'deep' ones were the ones most easily influenced by charismatic 'philosophers'. The rest of us disco'd and studied and now are pretty regular career people with families. We were young when we were supposed to be young and in the end grew up quite normally.

The problem with us these days is that we view everything young people do with alarm, as if it means that society will be destroyed just because someone cuts their hair a little differently. It takes much more to dismantle

several decades of civilisation. It's really their parents' problem if these kids get away with funny haircuts, not society's.

I watched with great amusement a TV news report where a camera crew had gone out to look for these so-called punks. After an evening of combing the back streets, they had to admit that they could not find any but implied that there had been secret signals sent out and all the punks had gone into hiding. I suspect it was simpler than that; the crew did not know what they were looking for. Like every other label — *lepak*, *bohsia* — we adults like to give kids, punk in Malaysia is vague and has no real definition. It might help perhaps if someone drew the definitive picture of a 'punk' so that we can all recognise one when we see one. That should bring up a big laugh from our kids. After all, adults missed completely the 'grunge' phenomenon.

Basically, with the global media carrying information at such high speed, our kids are going to know about every new fashion, trend and habit in no time at all. Certainly they will know about it way before their parents do. Some will be good and some won't but they're all passing phenomena. The challenge for adults is to look coolly at each trend in perspective and not reject them just because they're not to our taste. If roles were reversed and kids controlled the world, they would think our adult habits pretty appalling.

Lately there have been all these letters in our papers from people complaining about their parents' interference in the way they bring up their children. They complain that their parents won't let them be parents in their own right and in their own way. Parents who can't let go of their children are probably insecure, reluctant to admit that their young have grown up and are ready to leave the nest.

The same goes for the way we treat our young people. We invest all our hopes and dreams for the future in them and yet we make it plain, as often as we can, that we have no confidence in them. We treat every little thing they do as personal affronts, meant to destroy everything we've built up. Where did we get this idea from? We have no control anyway over what they are going to do when their turn comes round, we can only impress upon them that what we have is precious and they ought to nurture this country of ours.

Last year I met an impressive group of young Malaysians, all of whom had either just graduated from or were still studying at Cambridge University. They had just started a new magazine for youth. My favourite was the editor. He was bright, thoughtful and articulate. And he had bright orange hair.

Women in Malaysia

I come from a family of strong women and supportive men. My maternal great-grandmother ruled the roost and my grandfather believed in the education of women. He forbade my mother to get married until she finished her medical degree, and instituted the law in Selangor state which compelled a man to obtain permission from his first wife in order to marry his second. I have an exceedingly energetic 76-year-old aunt and my own mother is of course one of the best role models any Malaysian woman could have. So it is only natural that I feel strongly about women's issues.

One of my great disappointments about women in Malaysia is their generally lackadaisical attitude towards their own rights. Perhaps this is the fault of their leadership. There seem to be very few strong women leaders in Government willing to stick their necks out to fight for the rights of women. Women get blamed for many things in this society and yet, except for a few vociferous NGOs, often criticised patronisingly as 'too emotional', women leaders in Malaysia are very slow off the mark.

Too many seem to think that to fight loudly for their rights is too 'unfeminine' which simply buys into men's ideas of women's roles. So we have a long way to go yet.

I do see hope amongst younger women though. Perhaps they are more exposed, less complacent and more willing to take risks. The challenge is to keep their fighting spirit going before age and comfort dampen their enthusiasm for rocking the boat.

IS IT A COVER UP?

February 19, 1992

I may be a jaded old woman by now but every now and then some things can still stop me dead in my tracks. I was having lunch with an Indonesian friend, a sharp young stockbroker, and asked her when she was coming to visit me in KL. 'I don't want to go to Malaysia, she said. 'You have all those fundamentalists there.'

I must say I was startled. There I was in my bright fuchsia shorts and my much more conservatively-dressed friend was worried about how so-called fundamentalists would react to her! Lots of people might argue that I am not typical but the point surely is that if someone atypical can comfortably exist in this country, we can't be that intolerant.

I would have understood my friend's reaction if she had been a European or American whose idea of Islam derives entirely from the media's depiction of the Ayatollah Khomeini as evil incarnate. Westerners don't seem to realise that there are enormous cultural differences between different Muslim communities around the world and this often plays a part in how Islamic rules are followed. The religion is often about the only thing we have in common and it is far from being the only influence on a people's thinking.

Outsiders look at our women wearing the *tudung* here and think that everybody is a fanatic. It takes a while to realise that there are many different degrees of covering up ranging from the fashionable and colourful to the all-black walking curtains. They don't seem to realise that the only ones you may have to be wary of are the walking curtains and even then, they don't bother with heathens anyway.

For the most part, we all coexist quite happily. Which would shock a North African for example where the covered and uncovered occupy opposite banks of a vast ideological gulf and would never deign to sit down together. I once had lunch with two friends, one of whom wore a simple scarf and the other a mini-*telekong* and long gown. I had quite an expanse of thigh exposed but the question of what we wore never arose. It was irrelevant because what mattered was what was inside our minds and hearts.

Furthermore nobody takes note that we are a multiracial, multicultural country. Our success rests on an enormous amount of tolerance. If we are as

extreme as some people think we are and with the type of cultural and religious mix that we have, there must be something very positive going on for us to be so peaceful. Take a look at Northern Ireland where the people are basically the same religion.

I can understand outsiders' concern however. All they know is what they read in the Western media, which do not know much about other cultures. (Worse still, of course, is that they do not know that they don't know.) Women who are covered here are probably equal in number with those who aren't (or maybe even less) but they simply look more conspicuous (which once again must mean they are in a minority).

But nobody seems to take note that for the most part our women who do choose to cover themselves up are far from a dour lot. They smile a great deal, they like beautiful clothes like any other woman and they make adaptations to their dress that permits them to be modest and fashionable at the same time. Most of them also work outside the home in jobs that are interesting and challenging. In short they are no more lacking in choices than Western women.

I would not say the same however for the extreme end of the spectrum where the women are pushed back into roles by their men. I don't think the Prophet Mohammed s.a.w, who had some very emancipated wives, would ever have condoned that. It is hard to see how anyone can gain points from repressing other people. I'll probably get hell for this but I know enough women who have had their intellects curtailed, their horizons drastically limited, and their potential destroyed by men under the guise of religion. It saddens me how women who could have contributed so much have been denied their possibilities.

But, as I was trying to convince my friend, that is the extreme end of the scale. It still mystifies me how a minority can give my friend such an impression. In Indonesia, they have similar if not worse problems with extremists. Perhaps my friend thought, given the size of our respective populations, our lot is not such a minority after all.

I don't think I can convince her unless she comes here to see for herself. This is exactly what happened to some French friends of mine who were very reluctant to come because they feared they would be subject to harassment or at the very least a very cold welcome because they were different. They were more than pleasantly surprised to find that this was not true.

If we want to attract tourists or investment here, we therefore have to address this misconception. I can understand the political benefits of aligning ourselves with our Islamic sister countries. But as in any group, there are the spoilers including the latest lot who claim to be the first Islamic country with nuclear capabilities. This gives all of us a bad name. We should never deny what our official religion is but we should emphasise the qualities of that religion and all the others that peacefully coexist here, tolerance and honesty chief among them, that are practised here in every day life to a greater degree than in many countries in the world.

TAKING THE WRAP

July 22, 1992

I'm a real sucker for packaging. Show me a beautifully-wrapped box and I buy it, no matter that the contents are useless and probably cost a lot less than the packaging. In fact I adore boxes of any kind, the more beautifully made the better. Manufacturers know only too well that there are a lot of people like me who can be persuaded to buy anything on the strength of the attractiveness of the packaging. Hence the reason I have more eyeshadow and lipsticks than I really need; I fell in love with the outside and my hands automatically went to my wallet.

Knowing the reasoning behind this, I also often make attempts to package myself. As I've said before this is a great source of stress because I sometimes feel the need to package myself in clothes to suit whoever I'm seeing. In other words I wear costumes. So if I'm seeing a banker, I'm invariably wearing a conservative suit, smart enough to look like someone worth paying attention to but sober enough to look responsible. When I have to venture into a government department, I wear traditional dress. If I'm having lunch with arty friends, I get more creative with my clothes and colours.

Lest anyone think that I'm a calculating chameleon, I must say that my problem is that I'm easily bored and much more comfortable with variety. Hence looking different all the time, as my closest friends will attest, is very much part of my make-up. Also I never ever quite get it right; some perverse streak inside me will invariably make me put on something a bit out of

synch, like fishnet tights or orange shoes or something equally offbeat. (On weekends, everything breaks down and I become a slob. Slobbery is youthful, don't you know?)

Why do I wear these costumes? For the simple reason that I find that people are very judgemental. Sometimes this is necessary and as they say first impressions do count. Nobody is going to give the time of day to anyone who looks messy, with torn hems or laddered tights. A messy dresser is probably a messy thinker too. Also, feminist or not, it always helps a woman to look 100-volts good (actually I wish men would realise that it would also help if they looked 100-volts good too); it can soften the impact of a 1000-watt brain on a man. Still, within this costume drama we call Malaysian society, there is a really reprehensible tendency: to judge a person wholly by their outside appearance.

The old saying goes that you should never judge a book by its cover. Having helped published some books, I now know that the person who chooses the cover need not necessarily have read the book. He or she may choose a cover design that is not quite in tune with the contents of the book. I have been fooled many times by attractive covers that gave no clue of the inferiority of the writing inside or dull book jackets that hide a gem within its folds.

Similarly with people. It is nearly impossible to tell what a person is like simply by what they wear because people very often use clothes as a shell around them, to protect themselves from the prying eyes of strangers until there comes a time when some trust is established in the relationship. Demure damsels may turn out to be vamps and long-haired scruffy males may hide an ultraconservative heart. It takes a person of great intelligence and perception to be able to quickly intuit what a person is like from a first meeting.

Such people are few and far between. Unfortunately, there are far more of the variety who are quick to condemn on the basis of what a person has been seen, sometimes by somebody else, to wear once. Just because someone, usually a woman, decides to adorn herself a certain way, her entire personality, family, morals, and professionalism are held up to suspicion.

There are two problems with this as far as I can see. One is the way narrow-minded judgements about people simply from the way they dress have the potential of truly damaging that person. Women who feel they ought to have a choice of how they want to dress (and always dress decently)

are often made to feel guilty for not conforming. I don't blame anyone for bowing to pressure because it takes someone very strong and sure of herself not to buckle under. But what is truly abominable is the way aspersions on a person's character can be made simply because that person chooses to dress a different way. I'm not talking about a woman who wears low cut blouses and very short skirts into the workplace. Even then women like these are often simply ignorant of what is considered proper work clothes and are very often, from my experience, very junior staff who have not worked in an office before. I'm talking about the woman who is dressed smartly and decently but not necessarily...um...'religiously'.

The interesting thing of course is that it is always men who are arbiters of what the women in the workplace are going to wear. In offices where women are in authoritative positions I have never found the question of the type of clothes an issue at all. They may discuss clothes, as most women like to do, but very rarely do they bother about what sort of clothes anyone in the office should or should not wear.

Men of a certain sort however take an inordinate interest in what women should wear. Having never (I hope) worn women's clothes themselves, they have no idea what makes a woman wear one thing or another. Comfort usually comes first, followed by attractiveness. Some men however are under the presumption that all women wear clothes simply to entice the other sex, most especially themselves. Guys, allow me to let you in on a secret: women, more often than not, dress for other women. Unless they're going on a date, in which case, it is only natural that enticement becomes part of the mating game, women are more concerned about what other women are going to notice (because men never notice anything).

Some men are so full of themselves, they think that the women in their workplace are sirens waiting to ensnare them. Therefore they seek to 'protect' themselves by making women conceal themselves. The imagined temptations should be kept under wraps so that the poor weak temptees, having nothing else to think about, may not succumb. This is a bit odd considering the inexplicable ways in which men do succumb when they want to.

Thus everything about the woman in the workplace is reduced to what she wears rather than the more important things like competency, professionalism, productivity etc. The saddest thing is how so many women simply buy the whole story from the men: it is their responsibility, it seems,

to ensure that the men go to heaven by not succumbing to the 'evil' that women who bare their arms and legs exude. Such poor self-image in women makes my heart break.

Nobody questions what this sort of attitudes say about men themselves. Sex is never far from their minds even when they are supposed to be working at their jobs (for which they are paid). They think that they are uncontrollable creatures and are not ashamed of it. Yet they think that it is women who are irrational, biologically unable to keep cool. These are the sort of people who think they have a place in 2020. If that judgemental attitude is what is in store for us in thirty years' time, then I'd rather not see it.

WOMEN IN HIGH PLACES

June 23, 1993

Things have changed since I wrote this. Tansu Ciller is no longer Prime Minister of Turkey and in fact she spends a lot of time trying to fight off accusations of corruption. Mary Robinson is ending her term as President of Ireland and does not want to stand again. And let's not talk about Benazir Bhutto's far from exemplary career. The only interesting change is that in the 1997 UK general elections, more than a hundred women have been elected to Parliament, the largest number ever in the history of stodgy old Britain. And I don't think they wanted to emulate Margaret Thatcher.

A woman has just been appointed the Prime Minister of Turkey, another is poised to become Canada's first ever woman Premier. In Ireland Mary Robinson has made the Presidency much more hands-on than the ceremonial post it was intended to be. In the United States, there are now an unprecedented number of women in Congress and Hilary Rodham Clinton heads the very powerful National Task Force on Health Care. Is this finally the era of women?

Actually I'm not sure. After the great disappointment of Margaret Thatcher, I really wouldn't set too much store on women in high office. But of course it depends on what you want them to do.

First of all, most women are not elected because they are women.

Ironically enough, that bastion of male dominance, politics, can be brutally egalitarian when it comes to electing leaders. A woman aspiring to be a political leader just has to be better than her opponent, whether man or woman. Nobody has ever chosen a leader simply because she was a woman. This is particularly true when the Japanese Socialist Party elected Ms. Takako Doi as their leader. She just had more b— than the men. But she couldn't lift the party out of its doldrums so she's out now.

Once a woman is elected however, all other women make the mistake of expecting her to behave like a woman. That is, she has to be nice and kind and compassionate and soft and pretty. Which, for her to have become Big Boss in the first place, she cannot possibly have been. You have to be wily, aggressive and smart to do that, not traits people generally attribute as 'feminine'. (Of course, we can debate endlessly here about what is and isn't 'feminine'). Being pretty and nice is an advantage but not necessary.

On the other hand, women leaders also forget that the female population makes up one hefty constituency and they should not be ignored. There is a good reason why Hilary Rodham Clinton is heading the Health Task Force in the US (and it's not because she sleeps with the Big Boss). Besides the fact that she is eminently qualified with a track record in public service that is as long as your arm, anything to do with health most definitely needs a woman's touch. Health services affect women in disproportionate numbers (if only because at some point or other almost every woman goes into hospital to have a baby) so a woman's input is very important.

But it amazed me that Hilary got so much stick from the American public for being a working woman. They even hated her hairstyle so much, she had to change it. Can you imagine anyone here trying to tell our Minister of Trade and Industry that she should change her hair?

But I'm not comparing like with like. Hilary is not an elected official while most women leaders are. And this is a very important point because an elected woman has to convince the entire public to trust her to do her job. So what she has to have, besides a track record, is substance.

The most successful women leaders (and I will concede that for the most part Margaret Thatcher was) had this. When they don't have it, they invariably fail. Mrs. Aquino comes to mind. In Asia there seems to be a bad habit of electing women just because they are related to some past leader (usually dead male ones). I have never understood this because surely this is

the most flimsy of pretexts for electing a leader. Even Benazir Bhutto who admittedly is smart as hell has traded a lot on her father's name (and he was not exactly an angel either). But what has she really done for Pakistan?

Electing women leaders because they are related to a male one (and because no suitable male substitute can be found) really does not help the cause of women at all. Already having gained the position through the most dubious of qualifications, they very often don't show any aptitude for it. And to put it mildly, the head of a country is no place for the inept. (Not that there aren't any inept male leaders out there.)

The only woman leader I have respect for these days is President Mary Robinson of Ireland. Already a woman of great substance (she is a prominent lawyer), she campaigned hard for a position that has been hitherto a ceremonial one and made it her own. Instead of only opening their Parliament and decorating charity balls and that sort of thing, she is giving the office a form and substance that is in many ways a womanly one. Using the position as a beacon for the less fortunate and as an example of what good can be done by someone with power, I think she comes as close as possible to being the ideal woman leader. But then she doesn't have to deal with politics.

Women in Malaysia sure have a great affinity for politics. I suppose in many ways politics reflects a lot of every day life. If a woman gets involved in politics, then she has to be prepared for an 'every person for herself' battle if she wants to get into some sort of leadership position. Which is all very well. After all, it helps to have power and position in order to do something for society. But sometimes it looks like the fight for the position is more the point than doing good for society.

So at this ripe old age, having believed in woman power all my life, I am wary of women in power. Call me cynical but it seems that once women get into power via the political process, the fact that they are women becomes irrelevant. Which is a good and bad thing. Good because obviously their merits are universal but bad because along the way, they stop looking out for their female constituency.

I still believe in woman power when it is untainted by politics. I think women can be more humane in their policies. I think women care more about the really important things in life: the health of their families, the environment, education. Who really conscientiously carries out the activities around the house that promote environmental care? (Why do you think

household products are the first to become environmentally-correct?) Who takes care of their children when they are ill and therefore has direct contact with health authorities? Who goes to see teachers and observes first hand our educational system and its flaws?

No prizes for guessing. But the way the system works, none of this woman power is ever going to be put to the test. But I have an idea. Can't we have an alternative parliament even if just for one day where the MPs are just women and we can lay down laws that we think are really needed and important. And then let everyone judge whether they make our lives better than what we now have? After all if we can have a Children's Parliament (with its scripted 'debates') every year, can't we have a women's one? Think about it.

WHORES AND SAINTS

June 8, 1994

In 1993 and 1994, a shocking phenomenon gained many column inches in the newspapers. The press reported several cases across the country of babies being abandoned by their mothers soon after birth. The nation reacted in horror and revulsion, fuelled no doubt by TV coverage which would actually show the poor babies lying in bushes or in toilets. Condemnation was heaped upon the mothers who were invariably young and unmarried. It took some time before anyone realised that the fathers of these babies had gotten away unscathed. In the meantime several of these young mothers had been dragged into court, gotten their photographs and names in the newspapers and in the case of the woman who killed her baby, sentenced to prison.

I am not usually paranoid, but lately I feel a bit justified in thinking that women are being hard done by. Certainly by officialdom. Take all these cases of abandoned babies that have been in the press lately. Very sad I agree. But how do people react? By blaming the women who had abandoned them. Now I am not saying that unwanted babies should be left by the wayside. But babies are the end results of a bigger process. There are a lot more issues involved here which nobody really seems to want to delve into.

Firstly nobody is taking the trouble to find out how these babies got conceived in the first place. Were their mothers raped? Could be. Were they young women in love who, possibly like their partners, were a bit deficient in the sex education department? Could be too.

Secondly, obviously no matter why they got pregnant, they cannot have had people to turn to in times of trouble. Where were their parents, guardians, teachers and other supposedly wise older people? Did they have no one or did the people they turned to simply not want to know? Were they thrown out of their homes, thereby exacerbating their predicaments? What were they to do with a baby on the way?

That does not for one minute excuse them from dumping their babies. But if I were a young girl who found myself in this situation and who had nobody to turn to for help nor money, I'm not sure I would be able to rationally work out what to do either. Much less so, if I didn't really understand that babies are a consequence of lovemaking. As any woman who has found herself with an unplanned pregnancy will know, you can go a bit berserk in this situation even if you're married.

Thirdly and quite unfairly, nobody bothers to make the guys accountable. Surely everyone at least knows the basic fact that it takes two to tango? Then why condemn only one side?

A newspaper reported about a month ago that all pregnant foreign workers will be sent home immediately. Obviously they only mean the women workers, leaving the men who impregnated them to carry on. Not only is there a certain underlying tut-tutting about the morality of foreign workers but there is unapologetic sexism as well. Nobody really wants to find out who the fathers are in case they might be local. I mean, local guys are such upright characters! (By the way, before anyone looks down their noses at the supposed wantonness of foreign workers, has anyone looked at the conditions they live under? Making babies is probably the only way they can feel human.)

There also seems to be an increase in the number of rapes lately, most alarmingly of very young girls by men related or at least close to them. I read with pain the story of the young girl raped by her stepfather, who became doubly traumatised because her mother sided with her rapist. On top of that she was characterised as a 'bad' girl. Heaven knows what hopes there are for her future even though her rapist got convicted in the end.

(Also it seems that you have to choose who to be raped by. 'Pick' the

wrong one, *i.e.* one who is not of the same faith as you, and not only will he be immune from prosecution, but you get done for illicit sex! Talk about adding insult to injury!

Next there is this misguided idea of isolating and supposedly 'rehabilitating' prostitutes with HIV so that they won't spread it around. Again, there seems to be something erased in the tape running in someone's brain. You get HIV the same way you get babies. If you don't believe in the immaculate conception, then it stands to reason that women can't get HIV by themselves (unless they are intravenous drug users who shared needles). So what happens to all the men? Aren't they going to get isolated and rehabilitated too?

I would like to repeat a statistic quoted by a director of the World Health Organisation Global Programme on AIDS recently: 90% of women with HIV have only slept with one person in their lives: their husbands. As long as this sexism exists which blames women for all social ills, we will never deal with our problems. Which is going to be a great tragedy when we have AIDS in the picture.

Just look at it logically: this proliferation of abandoned babies means that there are a lot of people out there having sex (no matter what angels we like to think our people are). If they can't protect themselves from having babies, they can't protect themselves against HIV infection either.

Why can't we get real and deal with the problem head on instead of fudging and hiding behind pious but empty pronouncements? Why don't people make judgements from an informed stand instead of from sheer ignorant prejudice?

Why on the one hand revere mothers as saints but on the other hand make the accidental ones feel like whores? So few of those old-time, prolific, saintly mothers had any choice in the matter but at least were lucky to have escaped society's censure because they were married. In age and experience, they were probably no better than their baby-abandoning sisters these days.

I look at these developments with great alarm. Yet I wonder why women's groups, particularly those in positions of great influence, have not made much noise at all. Is it from lack of insight, sheer timidity or simply distraction by the other more lucrative trappings of power?

WHITHER JUSTICE?

November 9, 1994

On August 25, 1994 an investigation was ordered following allegations that the then Chief Minister of Melaka was having sexual relations with a fifteen-year-old girl, which in the law is regarded as statutory rape. On October 6, while the investigations were going on, the Chief Minister resigned. On October 22, the Attorney General found, though 'there were strong suspicions', no evidence that would necessitate a court case. At the same time, he announced that the girl had slept with some eight other men who were all subsequently charged. Since she was also pregnant, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department announced two days later that the Melaka Religious Affairs Department must prosecute the girl in the syariah (religious) court, for having illicit sex.

Why am I not surprised? From the first time I read in the papers that police were conducting background checks on the fifteen-year old girl involved with a politician in Melaka, I could predict that the tables would be turned on the girl. And now they have. I have always had faith that our legal systems, both civil and *syariah*, were based on the concept of justice. I must have been naive beyond belief.

Correct me if I'm wrong but I thought under our Penal Code sex with a minor (under sixteen years old) is called statutory rape. Also in rape cases you cannot question the background of the victim. Pretty clear-cut I thought. Why is it then that the men who have admitted to having slept with her have not been arrested and charged with statutory rape? [*Editor's note: they eventually were.*] Are there more politicians among them?

There are injustices in the law which are mind-boggling. A Muslim woman particularly has it hard. If she is raped by a non-Muslim man and gets pregnant, she is charged for illicit sex and he gets away. Wonderful! Even if she is raped by a Muslim, the administration of justice obviously depends on who he is, how old she is, whose family she comes from. The lesson is clear: choose your rapist carefully.

Now that even minors can be charged in the same way as an adult, what is the point of having any law to protect children at all? Increasingly we read about girls as young as eleven or twelve being raped and abused by older

men, often their fathers or stepfathers. Are all these girls going to be charged with illicit sex simply because they got pregnant and their rapists let off for lack of evidence too?

At an age when girls should be carefree, these girls are having to cope with the violence of rape, the demolition of their trust in an erstwhile guardian, the shame of public knowledge of their identities (when their family members are named, it is as bad as naming them), the confusion of a pregnancy and the humiliation of then being treated as if they are the criminals.

I don't really care what the fifteen-year-old Melaka girl is like but the fact remains she is underage. It seems to me to be a gross mockery of justice that she is the one being charged for illicit sex. I can tell already what is going to happen when the eight men who admitted they have slept with her get to court (if they are ever going to get there at all). They'll all whine and say, 'She made me do it.' As if they, poor things, are all hapless creatures in the face of a fifteen-year-old siren.

Let us put our imaginations to a scenario. If a fifteen-year-old girl is paid some attention by a much older man, the chances are that she is going to feel enormously flattered. Teenagers of either sex like to be noticed. If he makes any sort of proposition, whether just for dinner, a shopping trip or more, she is unlikely to say no.

Even if she felt uneasy, an older man is in a better position to convince her that it's alright simply because he is older, he is a man and he is probably economically better off.

Sexual negotiation is rarely conducted among equals. When already the circumstances of age, position and economic status are unequal, the position of the girl is even more weighted against her. The one who has the upper hand is always the man. His only excuse is to say that he could not resist her advances which simply underlines the weakness in his character. Otherwise he has the power to direct the scenario.

In such a situation, it takes a teenager of rare maturity, character and guts to say no. That is why we have a law that says that sexual intercourse with a minor, with or without consent, is rape. If this mockery of justice is carried out, it means that even if any minor who brings a complaint does manage to get a charge of statutory rape through, there will always be insinuations that she only got away with it because she was underage. It truly is then better to be an adult.

As a woman, especially a Muslim woman, I am angry, disgusted and ashamed. I have always thought that one of the foundations of my religion was justice. It cannot be subsumed to worldly things like politics.

As a mother I now have real fears for my daughter. What protection can we hope for our daughters if, in the interests of politics, a minor can be so easily sacrificed? Are we only to hope to God that the real criminals will be brought to justice at a later date because Man is too weak to do it?

ABUSE

March 29, 1995

In late 1994 the whole nation was shocked when a little Indian boy was abused so badly by his parents that he died. However no real preventive measures have been implemented since then, perhaps because no real analysis of the causes of child abuse has been done, though reported cases increased tenfold from 1981 to 1993. Another growing problem much reported in the newspapers is incest, usually young girls sexually abused by their own fathers, sometimes for years. In 1995 some 173 cases of rape involving family members were reported, a figure that went up to 200 in 1996. But no real will has been shown to prevent this problem.

I have been called a terrible cynic in my time and most times the title feels justified. But ultimately, maybe deep deep inside, I still have this lingering belief in the goodness of people. You cannot condemn the entire human race just because of a few spectacularly evil people.

This past week has made me examine this naive belief because it seems there are some truly evil people in the world. I read with shock and horror about the poison gas which has killed eight people in Tokyo and injured thousands of others. What sort of sick mind does this? I know the Tokyo subway from the days I used to live there and I've always felt safe in its labyrinths (unlike in the New York subway which always makes you feel as if you're descending into hell). This attack is a claustrophobe's worst nightmare.

Nearer home, something less high-tech but no less evil is going on culminating in the painfully pitiful photo of a seventeen-month-old (seventeen months!) baby girl lying in a hospital bed, having suffered more abuse than

any baby should endure. What sick mind could have done this?

I have been noticing with horror the increasing reports in the papers of girl children being abused sexually. Some may be just below the age of consent but many are even younger, about ten or eleven years old, raped and abused by much older men. In some cases these men have been relatives and male adults that these girls should have been able to trust. Sometimes their mothers have been able to help them but some of the more unfortunate ones have not even had sympathetic maternal shoulders to cry on. Instead they have found their own mothers libelling them as sluts and under-age temptresses. I wonder how much trauma these girls can endure without cracking.

Yet there has been so little public outcry. There have been lots of protests and sympathy for children who have been beaten, sometimes until they have died. But I don't understand why there is not the same for these young girls who have been raped by their fathers, uncles or stepfathers. Is there an unconscious hands-off syndrome when it comes to sexual abuse? Or do we, in our deepest souls, think that females have a slutty streak in them and these things happen? As usual, do we have to wait until something beyond our worst imaginations happens before we wake up? Well, now it has.

Every time a case of child abuse is reported and the outpourings of grief and rage among the public are duly recorded, nobody asks why it should happen in the first place. Yet if you read between the lines, some of these children are sitting ducks for abuse.

The last child who died at the hands of his father was one such child. His mother had left his father, taking with her their younger child. Obviously his father was under severe stress already from this. Couple that with having to cope with a child who is probably whining and crying and wanting to know where his mother is and you have all the signs of a risky situation for a child. Not all stressed parents beat their children to death but if you have one who has probably no outlet at all for his frustrations (the neighbours never even spoke to him), then something's bound to explode.

This seventeen-month-old baby girl who is currently in a coma is probably another sitting duck child. She has parents who both have to work in order to have a decent life and for some reason cannot rely on other family members to baby-sit her. Obviously they were always too tired to really wonder why she had bruises every time they picked her up from the baby-sitter's. Can you imagine how much that helpless baby must have suffered, unable

to voice her fear?

Yet we have these horrific things happening and nobody really comes up with any real solutions. Laws, hot-lines and funds are set up but what practical measures are taken? Have we ever done a proper study to find out why adults abuse children? Which children are the targets? What steps can be taken to prevent abuse? (Please don't say more religious classes; they're not enough.)

Should we not have a corps of social workers, trained to spot potential abuse cases, working in high risk areas? Shouldn't we find out if overcrowded high rise flats or squatter areas and other less-than-ideal living conditions contribute to putting children in danger? How do the children of abuse cope with life later? What do we do to help them? Are they left to cope by themselves? Or are they, like adult rape victims, subject to stigmatization for the rest of their lives?

Sometimes people think that women like me are a bit nutty for getting so outraged by this. They think we're being so left-wing when we talk about the low status of women which allows them to be abused. They think we're talking hokum when we talk about sexual abuse being about power; that the abuser is using his greater physical, social, political or economic position to demonstrate his power against his victim. Do we need to wait until we have the extreme example of a powerless child lying comatose in a hospital to illustrate this?

And just as an interesting addendum: to anyone who disbelieves that more young girls are being infected by HIV worldwide because they are at the bottom of the social power pole, how many more cases do we need before we find out for ourselves the truth of this?

Another addendum: is the press naming this child and her parents because they think she's going to die anyway? If she lived, would she be forever known as the child who was sodomised? Children have the right to dignity and privacy too.

I WILL BE THERE IN BEIJING

August 2, 1995

In September 1995, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China. Held only once every ten years, the Conference attracted some 30,000 women from all over the world who gathered to discuss issues affecting women. Health, the issues of education and political participation, violence against women and the effects of war on women were on the agenda. Much controversy raged over the issues of sexual and reproductive rights but most countries endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action, a blueprint for the betterment of the lives of women to be implemented by all countries over the next ten years.

The press has lately been full of features about the absolutely humongous Women's Conference that is coming up soon in Beijing. About 50,000 women are supposed to gather in the Chinese capital to focus the world's attention on the problems of women and set out a ten-year agenda to redress the many injustices that women suffer.

I will be among them and despite my reservations about being part of such a large crowd and despite the Chinese government's attempts to make it as miserable as possible for the NGOs who are coming, I do think that it will be stimulating and galvanising for a lot of women.

A lot of people, mainly from the other sex, have had a chuckle or two at the idea of all these women gathering together to share their problems and find solutions. Some people seem to think it will be one big tea party, with everyone sitting around gossiping. Why this preoccupation with women's issues that such a big conference needs to be organised? It's just one big feminist fest with all the worst connotations, some people snigger.

Well, if my mother, myself and some of the women who will make up the 200-strong Malaysian delegation can be held up as proof, the stereotypes will surely crumble. And yes, we all do feel strongly that women's issues exist and need their own special forum for us to decide how to handle them. (By the way, some of the delegates will be men.)

Consider this. For some weeks now I have woken up each day with a feeling of disorientation. I keep thinking I've been transported back several centuries in time. The reason is these ludicrous reports in the papers about

men feeling cheated because they've found that their new brides are not virgins. Hello? And some religious officials are actually spending time trying to find a way to solve this problem.

Luckily wiser heads have prevailed and people have pointed out that not only is it impractical to even try to check brides for their virginity but that it is very degrading to women to even have to submit to such a check. What a relief!

But still you can't help wondering who were these men who complained? Did they think they had been duped into buying shoddy goods and therefore they could try and return them? Is this how they view their wives, as just plain commodities? What ever happened to love?

I am intrigued that the question of the virginity of the men never came up. I should think that this should be an issue too, especially in these days of HIV/AIDS. Some girl might have saved herself up for the right man all her life only to find herself at risk because nobody thinks the virginity of the man is an issue. Certainly, in some neighbouring countries where cultural mores dictate that men lose their virginity as soon as possible, long before they get married, a large number of young brides have become infected with the virus in precisely this way. So it's not a joky question, folks.

I half-suspect that the reason that nobody wanted to really do something about checking the virginity of new brides is because of what it may tell us. Perhaps our people have sexual habits that we'd rather not admit to. Also, of course, since we assume these brides are heterosexual women, there must be at least an equivalent number of men who are non-virgins. Is this a can of worms or what? So, let's then not open it and stick to the same sweep-under-the-carpet mentality that justifies barriers to realistic AIDS prevention programmes. By the way, what about all these sexually abused young girls then? Raped at ten and doomed for life.

And then today I read in the papers about a special promotion by an alcoholic beverage company where tequila-drinking men get to lick salt off women's cleavages and then suck off a lemon from between the women's lips. Now who's the dodo who thought of this? Has he (gotta be a he) never heard of Political Correctness? This sort of thing used to be conceived by Neanderthals until we women rightly bashed them on the head. You mean, we didn't get all of them?

I can just see all these guys sitting around the conference table trying to

think of nice gimmicks to sell their drinks.

'Right, we need girls of course. Can't sell drinks without girls,' said Neanderthal No. 1.

'Yeah, yeah, put them in low-cut tops and shorts. Makes the guys buy more,' chipped in Neanderthal No. 2. (Hey, what has logic got to do with anything?)

'But we've got to do something more, you know. Everybody's got girls in short shorts,' says Neanderthal No. 1, 'Think of something different.'

'I know,' says Neanderthal No. 2, his normally dull eyes lighting up and disappearing beneath his fleshy cheeks. 'Since the right way to drink tequila is by licking some salt first, gulping it down and then sucking on a lemon slice, why don't we spice it up a bit?'

'Like how?' asked Neanderthal No. 1, starting to sweat with excitement.

'Why don't we turn the girls into salt licks?' said Neanderthal No. 2. 'We'll put the salt on the backs of their hands and the customers can lick them off.'

'I've got a better idea,' said Neanderthal No 1, jumping up and down. 'Why don't we put the salt in the girls' CLEAVAGES and the customers can lick it off THERE!'

Neanderthal No. 2 stared at Neanderthal No. 1 with awe. 'Boss, you are BRILL! We'll sell TONS of tequila!'

'AND,' continued Neanderthal No. 1, obviously on an unaccustomed mental roll, 'why don't we get the girls to hold the lemon between their LIPS and the customers can suck it off them?'

The room exploded as the other Neanderthals present leapt up with joy and prostrated themselves at their Boss's feet in homage to his genius. And thus was born the Lick, Gulp and Suck Tequila promotion to tap the wallets of all the nascent Neanderthals out there in Malaysia's pubs.

I'm glad that there have been a lot of protests about this puerile promotion but I also bet you that there are probably quite a few snide remarks about the type of women who would a) allow themselves to become these promotion girls and b) protest about such an inanity ('they all jealous, what!'). We never win.

And these are just some of the relatively trivial things we have to deal with. Plenty of delegates to the Women's Conference are coming with much more serious problems, from genital mutilation to rape of women in war to

the trafficking of women and girls for sexual purposes. So do we still think the Women's Conference is unnecessary? Are you KIDDING?

BACK FROM BEIJING

September 20, 1995

Well I'm back from Beijing, still in one piece. What an experience! It was more than what I expected and less than what I expected. First of all, the toilets were fine. Never have I come across a delegation more precious than the Malaysian one. Horrific speculations about the condition of Chinese toilets affected every level of delegate from the glitteriest Mak Datin to the supposedly hardest social worker. Food was another subject of worry resulting in whole suitcases of rendang and noodles being brought along. In the end we had no time to eat them and anyway there was always McDonald's.

What was amazing for me was the sheer disparity between our expectations and the actual situation and also between what was reported and what actually happened. Communications played a big part in this conference in more ways than one.

In the first place, there were many of us, especially from Asia, who could not understand why other people were complaining of the inability to express their opinions in Beijing. They were going to a Communist country, for heaven's sakes, where nobody gets to express their opinions freely. It would really have been objectionable if the meeting were in a democratic country and they would not let us speak but as it was, why expect a country like China to suspend its system for two weeks just because we were there? In any case, I thought the Chinese were pretty restrained, much more so than I would expect from our own country.

Of course culture also played a great part. The Chinese have never understood the need to have alternative views. They were not the only ones. This was obvious when some of our own delegation chided Malaysian delegates for speaking out about less than pleasant things in our country, with the implication that these delegates were not being patriotic. For a start, despite that old adage about doing as Romans do in Rome, we did not have to shut up just because we were in a Communist country especially when we

were not breaking any laws.

Secondly, acknowledging that our own country is not perfect is not an indication of a lack of loyalty. In fact it can be seen to be a sign of great love for the country because only when you acknowledge its faults can you then set to right them. And that's something which many of our delegates are trying to do. How can we sympathise with other people talking about problems in their own country (we do not accuse them of disloyalty) and yet not apply the same stance to ourselves? I think it's an intergenerational cultural problem more than anything; the older you are the more likely you are to think that you should not wash dirty linen in a foreign public.

Then there was the disparity between news reports. Nothing made it clearer to me that the freedom of information is a good thing than reading the *China Daily* every morning. On the day after Hillary Clinton spoke, you opened the *China Daily* and would have been forgiven for thinking that Hillary had not come to Beijing, so completely did they ignore her. Yet in the evening, there she was on the front page of the *International Herald Tribune*. Those of us in hotels which had both newspapers were lucky to be able to compare the two and decide for ourselves what went on but the English-reading Chinese public certainly could not.

Similarly with a report in the *China Daily* that local Tibetan women were deprived of their right to speak at a forum chaired by Tibetan women in exile. Others who had been there or who had reports from eye witnesses said that the situation was in fact quite different, that the Chinese-sponsored Tibetan women had tried to disrupt the meeting. It really made you think about media manipulation.

Not that the foreign media were not equally guilty. After a week I really thought of putting up a banner in the press centre which said 'Foreign Press, Stop Trivialising this Conference'. All the reports that went out talked about the chaotic schedules, non-available buses, flooded apartments, protests and demonstrations. Most of these were true but in the overall picture, they made up a small part of the conference. Yes, the first few days were chaotic and scheduled meetings did not happen but we all settled down soon enough and worked on what we were really there for, that is to meet other people working in our fields, exchange experiences, ideas and strategies. Furthermore such demonstrations as there were were very peaceful and the Chinese authorities generally did no more than watch. Even the security checks proved

futile in the face of so many delegates; a lot of the security personnel allowed us to enter buildings without being checked if we ignored them.

What did not get written about Huairou was the overwhelming sense of community, friendship and peace that pervaded the atmosphere there. It was amazing to see so many women from all over the world getting together in one place. The opening ceremony at the Olympic Stadium was truly touching because everyone felt that we were together on a common if somewhat grandiose mission; to make the world better through making women's lives better.

Not that there were no arguments in Huairou. Some of the most raucous sessions involved Muslim women from both far sides of the spectrum. The disabled also got justifiably annoyed at the lack of access for them. But generally people were cordial and helpful and many new friendships were forged. Winnie Mandela came and spoke about 'fighting' for rights in South Africa and somehow the violent imagery that she evoked jarred with the atmosphere there. Yes, we want our rights but we don't want to resort to violence to get them. There is enough violence in the world as it is.

On my last day at Huairou, I walked around the entire site feeling very sad. My ten days there had gone by so fast. I have so many memories: some poignant, as when a Rwandan woman spoke about the state of her country after the genocide; some exhilarating, as when a workshop conducted by some Malaysian women with very moderate views about Islam was so well-received; some humorous, as when a comedienne stood on a street corner and did wickedly accurate impressions of delegates; some enjoyable, as when I danced to the salsa beat of an all-woman band from France called Zarmazone; and some exhausting, such as trying to catch the bus back to Beijing in the rain while carrying a full bag of brochures, documents and posters I had collected. But not for one second did I have anything to regret about going. In fact I'm already planning to attend the next one. And I'm bringing my daughter with me.

WOMEN NEVER WIN

December 13, 1995

Women never win. This is a fact. Even in these days of so-called emancipation. The other day I heard the strangest twist on equality ever. I was on the radio answering questions about HIV/AIDS when a man called up to make a comment. He said that in these days of equality, it would be wrong to only blame men for spreading the virus. Since women, "once the hunted, now the hunter" have equal opportunity to go out of the house and work, then they should be equally blamed for transmitting HIV.

Don't gape, ladies, I already did that. It sounded very much as if he was saying that all women who work are no better than prostitutes because he obviously thinks that only prostitutes get HIV/AIDS. As calmly as I could, I explained that we weren't blaming all men for spreading the virus but it is a fact that there are more and more women being infected and they sure weren't getting it from each other. Furthermore, it is not the women who are out working who are getting it but the poorest, least educated, most stay-at-home types who have no way of educating themselves about HIV and the prevention of infection, are unaware of their rights and think that their own good health is a negligible issue. The caller had to backtrack in the face of facts but still his call was quite astounding; not just for the illogicality of the argument but because, in this day and age, the attitude of blaming women for anything and everything still exists.

And sometimes the worst culprits in blaming women are women themselves. I know of two cases where mothers have found out that their husbands have been sleeping with their teenage daughters and in both cases, they have preferred to blame the girls, calling them liars and whores (quite forgetting that in so doing they become the mothers of liars and whores). One of the mothers perhaps unwittingly gave a clue to the reason why: 'Well, I depend on him!' So it's okay to sacrifice your daughter as long as you get to keep your man.

And of course there is the most famous case of a certain fifteen-year-old where everyone took pains to destroy her reputation so that nobody important could be blamed. What's a teenager's reputation anyway?

I don't know where people got it into their heads that women are

intrinsically evil but there have been some outrageous things said about women lately, mostly by men. Everyone's heard now about the statement that it was better to roll in the mud with a pig than shake the hand of a woman. I think that quaint notion has been well taken care off. But there are also people claiming that hell is full of women. I suppose they have a hot-line to hell and that's how they know.

Trouble is we women sit and listen to this rubbish, burn inside and say nothing. We are afraid that to protest is unfeminine so we let these thugs (since they thrive on intimidation, what else would you call them?) spout their nonsense and appeal to the worst sides of some people.

If we are going to take the blame, let it be for allowing these insults to women to go on. It took a man, don't forget, to come out loud and clear and say that we must always respect women because everybody springs from a woman's womb. And we women cheered. But we could have just as easily said so ourselves. Why do we have to always let a man defend us? Are we swallowing the male stereotypes about us?

Perhaps there needs to be a generational change in women's leadership in this country. Perhaps we need women who truly understand the problems of today's Malaysian women and will fight for them. Perhaps we need more representational leadership. Then maybe we have a fighting chance.

SEX IS TABOO!

January 24, 1996

In late 1995, the Minister of Islamic Affairs announced quite suddenly that from January 1997, all Muslim couples intending marriage would have to undergo mandatory testing for HIV. The reason for this was 'to protect future generations' from getting infected. Much debate was held in the papers regarding this but in the end facts and sound reasoning prevailed and the idea was dropped in favour of encouraging couples to get tested voluntarily.

People like me moan endlessly about the unavailability of proper sex education in schools even under whatever euphemism we want to use. Despite the obvious need for it, especially in these days of fatal sexually

transmitted diseases, and despite there being a very well-thought-out curriculum in existence, we are still hemming and hawing and shuffling our feet. The other day, in a fit of frustration, I put my mind to wondering why.

It is a bit odd really that even though we trust our teachers to teach all sorts of complicated subjects to our kids, we apparently don't trust our teachers to teach them about sex. This despite the fact that the curriculum is set by the Ministry so they can't make it up. Critics of sex education always claim that if you teach It to kids, the first thing they will do is run out and do It. I wonder what this says about our teachers? I can't imagine teachers, especially the ones I personally have experience with, standing in class and teaching our kids how to do It. The point is, after all, to teach them how *not* to do it!

It then occurred to me that the reason we are so hesitant to teach our kids about sex is because there are rather a lot of us adults who are not very well-educated about it. There are adults who think, for instance, that sex is something you can do while you pay for your groceries. This was certainly news to me; I shall never be able to look at all that butter in the dairy section in the same way again.

Then there are the people who think you can get babies by kissing people on the cheek especially in front of hotels. It amazes me that they don't worry about what may be happening upstairs in the rooms but get their underpants in a twist because some people greet one another with a couple of pecks on the cheek. And what's more, they only label a woman a tart if she is pecked by a foreign man, and not by a local. I guess these observers must be very affection-deprived people.

If things aren't absurd enough, there is the other lot (or maybe it's the same people) who object to our schoolchildren learning to play wind instruments. I was asked very seriously once whether it was true that religion forbids us to play wind instruments (even though our ancestors have always played the *seruling* and the *serunai*). After I had finished laughing, all I could say was 'Only if you have a dirty mind!' When I was in school I was in our prizewinning recorder band. The only thrill I remember getting from playing the recorder was when we wiped the floor with all the other school bands in competitions. Did I miss something or do these people need to get a life?

And yet, despite this pathetic level of sex education among adults in this country, there is an inordinate obsession with the topic. There are people who must think of nothing but how to prevent themselves and other people

from ever having to think about sex, even if it is limited to the slightest drying of the mouth.

We can't see anyone kissing because this will surely make us want to smack everybody we meet on the lips. We can't use words like 'lusty' and 'busty' when we play word games on TV in case these will inflame our tender audiences. It reminds me of the little old lady from India who got up at one of the workshops at the Women's Conference in Beijing and declared that 'in India, sex is taboo!' Boy, there must be a lot of hardworking storks on the subcontinent!

Sometimes it feels as if our sex-obsessed authorities are convinced that if they do not have all these restrictions, we are all going to do nothing but have endless orgies. They must believe that rather than food and shelter, our most basic need is to have sex.

Certainly in the past few months certain pronouncements seem to suggest that people only get married in order to be able to go to bed with someone else legally. If there is any couple about to tie the knot who will admit to that, then I will take my hat off to their refreshing honesty. For how else can we explain this focus on testing for HIV before marriage unless you think that marriage is nothing but legalised sex. And how do we interpret the suggestion by one of our state chiefs to publicize the names of people with HIV/AIDS, so as to prevent them from getting married? You mean to say that they need that piece of paper before they can transmit the virus?

Obviously a lot of illicit sex goes on. All you have to do is read the papers and the abundant cases of rape, incest and abandoned babies. Did all these people have any sex education? If the critics of sex education are right, then these people must be the direct result of being taught about sex when they were schooling. Of course nobody has bothered to do any research on this but we can guess at the likely answers when we see cases of seventy-year-old grandfathers raping their own granddaughters.

Victorian England used to be like this too. On one hand, there was the prudery so extreme that table legs had to be covered in case they reminded anyone of female limbs. And yet so much Victorian era pornography has been discovered. Hypocrisy was obviously a major characteristic of that period.

As it is of this. It often occurs to me that the most vehement opponents of the very mention of sex in this country must be either getting too much or too little of it. Either way, it addles their brains.

It's not that our kids are more naturally inclined to have sex than adults but in making sure that they don't learn anything sensible about it, we ensure that they get hyperconscious about sexual relations. We jump on every little thing so much that we make our kids think that everything has a sexual connotation. And in so doing we do exactly what we don't want to do; emphasise the sordid side of sex at the expense of the natural and the beautiful.

At this rate, we better find out from that little old Indian lady where to get the storks!

WHERE IS THE IMMORALITY?

July 10, 1996

Let anyone think I've become overly pessimistic upon my return from my holidays, may I say that a few things have happened that have restored my faith in Malaysians. First there was that judgement by the Alor Setar judge who reduced virtually to nothing the sentence on a single mother who was charged with abandoning her baby. The wondrous thing about it was firstly, he was a man and secondly, he took the trouble to really find out why she supposedly did it and then set about to correct an injustice. Maybe some of our quick-draw politicians can learn a thing or two from this judge.

Lately, there has generally been an atmosphere of greater sympathy towards unwed mothers in our country. Once upon a time we heaped condemnation upon them and sought to punish them. Recently we remembered our lessons about the birds and the bees and realised that it takes two to tango and that punishment has been consistently lopsided. Everyone is now trying to outdo themselves with sympathy. Hospitals have been directed not to refuse to treat any pregnant woman suspected of not being married and now there is this proposal of having baby banks.

It's amazing how we can suddenly change. Still, perhaps we should not ask too many questions: it is so rare that the authorities take women's side of an issue. I would like to think that this is the start of a true political will to deal with a problem realistically.

What is the real problem facing us? The unwanted babies are the result of some deeper problem caused by a variety of factors. These could include a

lack of sex education among our young people, the lack of knowledge about how to prevent babies, young women's lack of knowledge about their rights, a lack of any sense of responsibility among our men, an environment that stigmatises unwed mothers and provides little support for those who find themselves in this situation. Whatever it is, we have to identify the root cause and then deal with it realistically.

We must realise that with our economic prosperity, there are many young men and women who have gone to work away from their families, home villages and towns. They may have new money and independence but may not have the necessary skills to cope with them. Their clothes may be modern but their thinking may not be, particularly when it comes to male-female relationships. Also they may not have much idea about the myriad aspects of life that we try to address in the framework of sex education.

These young people away from home are vulnerable to almost everything, especially to exploitation by more savvy people. Young girls are the most vulnerable of all, especially those who have been brought up in the most traditional homes. In a non-traditional setting, that upbringing may not be your best protection.

These are girls who are brought up to trust people, especially men older than them. They were taught to obey their fathers, uncles, older brothers, male bosses regardless of what is actually right. It is only natural then that they should trust and obey any older man who seems kind to them. Hence they get into trouble.

Any woman in this situation is going to get very distraught. He's disappeared and she's left with this growing tummy. She can't go back to her parents out of fear, she can't talk to anyone else out of shame. The people she needs most are the ones she most fears not least because she feels she's let them down. And when the baby has to be born, what do you do if you have nowhere to go and no money? And since it is obvious evidence of this terrible mistake you have made, what should you do with it?

I applaud the recent proposal to have the so-called 'baby banks' but certainly this is a short-term and imperfect solution. Yes, it is a good idea for these young women to have a safe (and hopefully confidential) place to leave their babies but yes, it can also be abused. Ultimately baby banks only deal with the obvious symptoms of a larger problem and not the problem itself.

What we should be striving for is an environment where young people

are more knowledgeable about their bodies. We should teach our young to respect their own bodies and other people's. We should inculcate in our young men the idea that it is not macho to seduce as many women as possible just as we should teach our young women that there are better ways to keep a man than to succumb to having sex with him.

Many studies have shown that in countries such as Holland and Norway (but not the USA) where they have long had a good sex education system in their schools, the rate of teenage pregnancies is much lower than in those that don't. Also teens who have had sex education tend to put off having sex.

We should also realise that as much as we try and teach our young people to behave themselves and stick to traditional and religious values, there are going to be a number who are going to fall by the wayside. This is not out of defiance of traditions but because they find themselves in situations that sometimes we refuse to deal with in our religious classes. If we think that a situation where a boy asks a girl to sleep with him is too 'immoral' to talk about, then we are not going to provide our girls with the skills to say no. She may understand all the right reasons why she has to say no from a religious standpoint but she may not always be able to. It is very doubtful that a young inexperienced girl would have the poise to out-talk an amorous man by simply telling him that he's about to commit a sin. Not when he's convinced that not doing it will kill him or at least make him insane.

In our efforts to solve the larger problem of what makes young people have sex with each other before they can really cope with it, we should also not neglect the other problem of babies being born and abandoned, sometimes to die of exposure. The presence of these babies belies the old adage that condoms encourage promiscuity. Condoms have always been available but it is quite obvious that these young people are having sex and not using them. Even if they did know about them, I would bet anything that these young men have got it into their heads that it is somehow unmanly to use them. As if it is manly to impregnate someone and then abandon her! At least if these babies were prevented, we would not now have to worry about taking care of them. Prevention, as the old saying goes, is always better. Not just of babies, I might add, but also of diseases.

So while we are now proving that we are a caring society, let us get real and truly try and solve the problems even if it means asking some hard questions about ourselves.

Chapter Seven

AIDS

I started working in HIV/AIDS fairly recently, in 1993, quite by accident. I had always been concerned, because I had friends who were HIV-positive or who had AIDS and then died. But I had no real idea of how I could contribute, except through fund-raising. So when I was invited to join the Malaysian AIDS Foundation I jumped at the chance. I soon discovered that there are no half-measures in AIDS work, and I became more and more involved. In 1994 I was elected President of the Malaysian AIDS Council, which runs actual programmes.

I had to learn about HIV/AIDS pretty much on the go, and this is evident from the first columns I wrote on AIDS. I was using phrases like 'AIDS victims' and 'HIV-positive virus'. But the later columns reveal how much my knowledge grew over the years.

The most interesting thing about working in a field like this is that it is so multifaceted. You do not spend most of your time talking about the medical issues at all, although you must have knowledge of them. Most of our time is spent talking about all the issues surrounding health—economic disparities, legal and ethical issues, human rights, women's rights. In fact, one of the most difficult things has been to convince the Government that all these other issues must be given equal attention. Otherwise there is virtually no hope of ever tackling the AIDS pandemic in Malaysia, which in the first half of 1997 stands at 21,000 reported cases. And the numbers are still growing.

GLORY OR IGNORANCE

June 9, 1993

Call me naive but I have always been given to abundant faith in humanity. I prefer to believe that people are generally good. I think it would have been easy for me to bumble along through life believing in this because I have so rarely come up against anything that would challenge this assumption. Sure there are annoying people in this world and plenty whose values are suspect but you always feel that when pinch comes to shove they must behave decently.

I'm in shock now because these assumptions are being proven wrong. Through my work, I'm beginning to see an ugly side of people. This is very distressing because it comes at a time when people have to rally together.

AIDS is a horrible disease. I would say it is the worst known to mankind, because there is no cure and because AIDS patients go through so much suffering before they die. I am sure one day we will find a cure or at least people will take enough preventative measures to arrest the spread of it. But meanwhile there is nothing. More and more people are infected by the HIV virus which means they will eventually get AIDS and die.

People generally associate AIDS with gay people and drug addicts. But in Africa, hundreds of thousands of people are HIV-positive but are neither. There are lots of heterosexuals who are HIV-positive and in fact the rate of infection is rising fastest among heterosexuals and especially among women. These are the facts.

In our country, most known cases are drug addicts because the virus is spread through sharing needles. What is not known is how many more infected people there are out there who probably don't want others to know of their condition for fear of the stigma (because people will probably immediately assume they are either gay or an addict). Who knows, your best friend may be one of them.

I was prepared for a certain level of ignorance about AIDS in this country because after all most people do not know anyone who has it. Therefore it seems a marginal problem. But what I was not prepared for is the total lack of compassion that some people display for those afflicted.

Someone who is educated and in a leadership position thought it might make good copy to criticise the AIDS Memorial Night because it appears to

glorify gays and drug addicts. I don't see how these groups can be glorified when we are remembering that they died a horrible death. If anything it is a warning to everyone that this is what can happen if you do not change lifestyles.

Then a friend reported how he had been at a dinner party and the conversation came round to the latest advances in finding a cure for AIDS. And a woman turned round and said, "Why should we find a cure for AIDS at all?" In other words, who cares about all these deviants anyway?

There are currently two known ways of contracting the HIV virus; through sexual contact and blood transfusions. The virus cannot differentiate between the sex of the people it is being transported between nor does it know what type of sex these people are up to. As far as the virus is concerned, if the setting is congenial and it can go from place to place quickly and easily, it will go.

I was very sad when Arthur Ashe died of AIDS. Poor Arthur was a victim of his time. He had the misfortune to have had a heart operation at a time when blood supplies were not routinely tested for HIV. The difference between Arthur Ashe and my own father was simply that my father had the 'good fortune' to have had his heart operation at a later time when hospitals are more cautious. If my father had needed the operation at the same time as Arthur Ashe did (never mind that they were in two different countries), then the chances are he might have contracted HIV too.

So now tell me, how do these two people fit into the scheme of things whereby 'people who have AIDS deserve it'? The reason we must find a cure for AIDS is that one day we may know somebody, and God forbid it may be ourselves, who will need it.

Perhaps I feel strongly about AIDS because I have known four people who have died of it. In all four cases we did not know they were HIV-positive until they were dead. I live in fear of how many more of my friends may be hiding their suffering because society has no compassion at all.

How can you say that babies who contract HIV from their mothers deserve to die too? The people who say this probably carry on a lifestyle that is very vulnerable to AIDS. They think it will never affect them. They think because they're neither homosexual nor drug addicted, they are completely immune and they don't have to practise safe sex. But the HIV virus loves anybody who is promiscuous. Well, do you really know where your partner

has been?

And what about haemophiliacs who contracted the HIV through blood transfusions? In France, a fifteen-year-old haemophiliac just died from AIDS which, like his younger brother who died two years ago, he contracted after receiving infected blood from a non-tested blood bank. You may have read about how French Health Ministry officials allowed contaminated blood to be given out and thereby infected thousands of people. I think these officials deserve to be shot but how can you victimise the patients, especially when some of them are so young?

If the disease is just a gay and drug addict problem, how then do you explain more and more women being infected? If these women die and we remember them in a memorial, what is wrong with that? If anyone thinks that gay people deserve this, then how do you explain that on a relative scale the safest people are lesbians. This is because it is much easier for a man to infect a woman (or another man) than for a woman to infect a man. Therefore it follows that it is extremely hard for a rigidly lesbian woman to infect another.

Obviously there is a lot of work to do to educate people about AIDS when even people you think are educated are spouting out the most ignorant pronouncements. We don't just need to educate those in most danger of getting it but also those who seem invulnerable. Because besides the physical effects of AIDS for the sufferer, there is the mental suffering of not only the patient but all those around him or her. I think there must be a special place in heaven for those who stand by their loved ones who have AIDS and try to make their lives as comfortable as possible, all the while feeling helpless to assist them. And I'm sure families need support too because the 'stigma' towards the AIDS patients must extend to them as well.

I am praying that working on AIDS awareness programmes will mean I will see more of the compassionate side of people than the opposite. Saying that people who have AIDS deserve it is not that far removed from the Serbs saying the Bosnians deserve it because hundreds of years ago, somebody insulted someone else. When you justify cruelty to people just because they are different, it is not a big step towards 'ethnic cleansing'. We must therefore be very careful of never descending into any sort of 'cleansing' because of this terrible disease. If we did, we would be diseased ourselves.

'I AM FINE, DESPITE MY HIV'

February 9, 1994

Both William and Siti are real friends of mine. William died in 1994 and Siti died in early 1996. Siti particularly was a great loss to the Asian AIDS world because she had been very active in programmes in her own country, as well as around Asia. The last time I saw her she had been very healthy so it was a great shock to get a call one day to say that she had gone. When I think of her I think of a person of enormous strength. How else could someone as young as she have coped with losing a husband and child to AIDS, as well as dealing with her own illness?

My friend William sent me a card the other day enclosing the fabulously dramatic photographs he takes of the landscape on his island. 'I am fine,' he said, 'despite my HIV.'

I met Siti at a conference. She is petite with dark eyes, a trendy haircut and fashionable clothes. The first day I met her she told me she was going out to buy some Guess? jeans which were cheaper there than in her hometown. I thought, 'Oh wow, a fellow shopping maniac.' The second day I knew her she told me she was HIV-positive. What was more, both her husband and her son had died of AIDS. To compound her suffering, her government had not allowed her to give her loved ones a decent religious burial.

What do you feel when someone you know tells you they have HIV? The first reaction is shock and then sadness. You think, 'ohmiGod, they're going to die'. You get awkward, you don't know what to say. Then you notice that for people who have supposedly a death sentence on them, they are amazingly calm.

You start thinking about it and things fall into perspective. The first thing you realise is that everybody, HIV-positive or not, is going to die. Perfectly healthy people sit at home and their entire house crashes down around them. Other people get cured of an illness, leave the hospital, and get run over by a car crossing the street.

The second thing you realise about people with HIV is that the fear that other people often feel about them is not so much about their dying as their living and therefore being testimonials to lifestyles we don't want to think about. Or worse still, not really being able to answer why and therefore keeping us in that state of uneasy uncertainty. If they can't tell me how they

got it, how do I know I won't get it?

Everyone by now thinks they know how one gets infected by HIV. There are only three ways: sexual transmission, blood-to-blood transmission and mother-to-baby transmission. But because, in our country, the reported cases of HIV and AIDS come from certain groups of people from marginalised sections of society, we can also fall into the trap of thinking that if we don't mix with these groups, we are never going to get infected.

If Siti had never told me that she was positive, I would have gone away none the wiser. People with HIV do not have marks suddenly appearing on their foreheads which identify them. They can be perfectly healthy and stay that way for up to 15 years. Scientists are still trying to figure out why some people develop AIDS quickly and others don't. There is some speculation that if you had an unhealthy lifestyle in the first place, your immune system is already inefficient so that once you get infected you are likely to develop full-blown AIDS much quicker. Whereas if you exercise frequently, eat well, don't smoke or drink, even if you get infected by HIV, chances are you will continue to live a healthy productive life for longer than you think.

But how do you know you have HIV? Only by testing your blood, and even then only if you're past the 'window' period when you are so recently infected that your body has not had time to develop the antibodies which indicate you have HIV. Now seriously speaking, how many people, with even a smidgeon of conscience, are going to go and get themselves tested for HIV just to be sure?

None.

How many of the people who are registered as HIV-positive took themselves to be tested? Very very few. The rest all had mandatory testing (usually when they got rounded up by the authorities) with no pre- and post-test counselling.

Which is all very well of course until you think of how many people there are out there who may have slept with a few too many people in a few too many places (it takes only once really) or who may have had blood transfusions in dubious places or who cannot really be certain what their spouses have been up to throughout their lives. Since 99% of human beings are not saints, that leaves a lot of people who perhaps should worry.

Except that most people don't worry at all. They know what they've been up to. Which is fine but leaving out all the virgins who have never

donated nor received blood, that still leaves a lot of people who can't be entirely sure of their partner's sexual history or who have had their skin pricked with a needle for whatever reason.

Which means that there may well be a lot of people out there who not only do not know for sure their HIV status but will probably carry on the sort of lifestyle that will facilitate transmission. Translated, that means there may be a lot more infectious people around than we think.

Obviously we can't go around and test everybody. What a hue and cry there would be! All sorts of indignant respectable types will froth at the mouth at the very idea and will probably be able to nix any move to do this. It's fine to test all those grungy types, they say, because they're bound to have it but NOT US!! We are upright citizens (although what we do in private is our own business). Well, exactly.

I am not saying that AIDS is running wild in our country. It isn't. But it will if we remain as complacent as we are. If we refuse to face up to it, we are going to have an AIDS problem. We can prevent it from being as serious as it has become in some countries. But we will still have People Living with HIV (PLWHs) and People with AIDS (PWAs) among us, probably in significant numbers and from a range of backgrounds including 'regular' folks like you and me. We have to think about what to do with them.

We can't isolate them as some people have proposed because we'd never find a space big enough. Besides, some of them might be people we know and love. People with HIV who have been lucky enough to have had a lot of love and moral support have been known to live much longer and productive lives than anyone could have hoped for. Similarly there have been PWAs who have become so depressed from lack of care and understanding from society that they have shortened their own lives by committing suicide.

In some sub-Saharan countries, populations are projected to decrease because of AIDS. Also the population that remains is not going to be healthy enough to keep their country economically developed. It becomes a tragic downward spiral. We cannot let that happen to us. We can't afford it financially because so many of our resources will be diverted towards care of the sick instead of development. Nor can we afford it emotionally because watching people die strains one's inner resources like nothing else.

We have to wake up now. AIDS is everybody's problem.

PEOPLE WITH HIV

December 7, 1994

I get asked pretty often how I manage to do the multitude of things I do and quite frankly most times I have to answer that I don't know. Maybe it's genetic. Or maybe I'm just plain crazy. But if I am tired, it's only physical. I've just spent a week of hyperactivity because it was World AIDS Day and despite the late nights, the endless worrying about little details, the hours on the telephone cajoling reluctant people to volunteer their services, the reams of letters that needed to be written and the lack of sleep, it was worth it.

I don't know how to explain what it's like to work in a field that people think of as depressing, morbid and hopeless. Yes, you do feel sometimes that whatever you do is too little to make a difference. There are times when you feel desperate because the problem is so urgent and each day, somebody new gets infected and you didn't manage to get to them. Or you feel despair when you get to someone infected at such a late stage that there is nothing more you can do for them except make their last days as dignified as possible. You feel intense frustration and anger when you encounter blatant and unashamed prejudice against the disease and everybody who has been infected by it. (One wonders what sort of fears such vehemence must mask.) You feel exceedingly sad when some people refuse to see that lives are at stake and insist on scenarios which have so little relation to reality.

But there are the moments when you feel that you are getting somewhere. I felt that the other day when at an exhibition of art on HIV/AIDS that was held at a local gallery, one young artist who had done a piece that was very negative said that she had done it because that was how she felt at the time but she had just seen a TV documentary that had enlightened her so much that she came to feel quite differently about the issues. I get very encouraged by moments like this when a little barrier has been broken, a new person has started to think, a degree of acceptance has been achieved, a dialogue has begun. Dialogue and the ability to freely talk about HIV/AIDS and all the issues that arise out of it, no matter how troubling, is the way that people really get educated.

I hear of these special moments from all my colleagues in this field. One of them employed a Person with HIV in his office and he said that one of the most moving moments in his life took place one morning when he

asked his employee how he was and the reply was, 'Better and better,' accompanied by a smile. When you know that you have helped someone who faces a future of so much pain and problems say that with no bitterness or pessimism, you know that you have really made a difference.

But still every day we face the growing enormity of the pandemic in our country. Despite what anybody says, the numbers are increasing. We are going to be tested over and over again, not for what is in our blood but for what reserves of patience, tolerance, strength and compassion we can muster. What do we do with our fellow citizens who are infected with the virus? How do we care for them? Do we have the capacity to care for them?

I think we are still at the stage here when we still feel that it will not happen to people of any consequence to us. Therefore we do not think of how we are going to care for them because they don't matter. But unless we shoot them all dead as soon as we know their HIV status, we have to think about caring for them. There are people writing in to the AIDS Council asking how best to take care of children with HIV and we haven't even begun to think of caring for adults, let alone children.

We are still only thinking in medical terms of what to do with People with HIV/AIDS. But we have not put our minds to all the other ways that life generally has to be coped with by a Person with HIV. How is a parent with HIV supposed to care for his or her children? How can you remain a productive person when you have to keep taking sick leave, yet you cannot afford to lose your job because your family depends on that income? How do you plan to live as long as possible when people keep thinking you're a dangerous person? A person with HIV is probably in more danger of catching illnesses from other people than the other way around. How does one give a Person with HIV spiritual sustenance when other people may try to claim that his or her very status renders him or her irreligious? I think some of the most religious people I have ever met are those who work with People with HIV/AIDS because without faith and belief, you cannot possibly do it.

It's tough. There are times when I feel as if I don't ever want to hear the initials HIV or AIDS again. The emotional demands are huge and sometimes you feel you don't have the capacity to cope. My friend William died of AIDS two months ago and I really had to pause and take stock of how much of myself I could really devote to this.

But then I think of all the HIV-positive people I met at the International

AIDS Conference in Yokohama this year. How diverse they were in their backgrounds and how truly they reflected the fact that the virus does not discriminate. And yet how matter-of-factly they accepted their fate and just went on to do more to prevent other people from getting infected. I realised that what problems I have are insignificant.

And then I look at my daughter and I see a life, to be nurtured, to be cherished, to be protected. That's my long-lasting battery.

BEING RESPONSIBLE ABOUT AIDS

May 24, 1995

A few weeks ago I was invited to sit on a panel on a TV programme to talk about the global AIDS pandemic. During the programme, viewers could call in with questions for the four panellists to answer.

One woman called and asked how we could make sure that people with HIV would not spread the virus. A man called and said that if it weren't for tourists, HIV would never have come into Malaysia and therefore we should build a 'firewall' with which we could keep out the virus by testing everyone who wants to come.

The questions were revealing of many things. Firstly it revealed a denial on the part of Malaysians that the HIV/AIDS pandemic was our problem. It is always someone else's problem and we have to stop them from giving it to us. Malaysians are such upright people who would never get infected if foreigners didn't give it to us. This denial comes from ignorance which then translates itself into prejudice.

Malaysians get infected with HIV through their own behaviour. It was brought into our country by our own countrymen and it is certainly continuing to be brought into our country primarily by our own countrymen who then go on and infect other people.

It therefore follows that if we do not want to get infected, it will entirely depend on our own behaviour. Malaysians think they know how one gets infected by HIV. They think, "If a person with HIV does not share needles with me, nor sleep with me (nor gives birth to me!!), I will not get infected."

But the truth is this: if I do not share needles or have unprotected sex,

I will not get infected. Preventive behaviour is active, not passive.

The man who wanted to build the 'firewall' was not all that concerned about his fellow citizens. We asked him in turn what he would do about Malaysians who were already infected. He said we should just let them die off. The positive side of a call like that is that it is so repulsive that hopefully more compassionate people will be turned off. Also it gives us the opportunity to give accurate answers.

The truth of the matter is that people with HIV/AIDS are in more danger from the rest of us than we are from them. Besides the very real danger that we can pass on to them otherwise harmless bacteria and viruses which become dangerous to them because their immune systems are weakened, we want to persecute, isolate, incarcerate, reject and 'rehabilitate' them. We, the healthy people, are the ones who are frightening. Why do you think we must have strict confidentiality over HIV test results? Because people who are HIV-positive are afraid of what we might do to them.

People with HIV/AIDS have been thrown out of their families and their homes. In hospitals, they are often neglected by medical personnel and left to die alone and unwanted. Infected children have been abandoned and left for the government to care for. Is this the way a caring society is supposed to behave?

Some of my friends who are HIV-positive were deeply hurt by the questions that were asked by viewers. Many of them have worked hard to help with educational programmes which are essential to prevent people from getting infected. Their experience of being HIV-positive has an incredible effect on their audiences. I have seen schoolgirls in tears after listening to a young HIV-positive man describe what led him to be infected and what it feels like to be infected. I am certain they will always remember him and will think hard before they do anything that will expose them to infection.

May 21 was AIDS Memorial Day, one of the two international special days in the AIDS calendar. The other is World AIDS Day on December 1st. There have been people who have criticised AIDS Memorial Day for supposedly glorifying people who have died of AIDS. This is to grossly misconstrue the meaning of this day.

People who have died of AIDS were not special people. They were ordinary people like you or me. They had families and friends. Somewhere along the way, they got infected. After that, their lives changed for the worse.

The worst part was probably finding out that other people didn't care.

On AIDS Memorial Day, we do take time out to remember those who have died. But we also remember that they have left families behind who are still suffering their loss. For some the stigma lingers long after the person has died. We take the time to reflect on the suffering that is caused by HIV/AIDS on people, on families, on women and children, on communities, on countries. And we vow to continue the fight against that suffering.

The education we provide about HIV/AIDS is still very shallow. It undoubtedly raises awareness about AIDS but it does very little to change behaviour, particularly sexual behaviour. Until we stop handling the subject with kid gloves, we will keep having AIDS Memorial Day, each time with more and more tragedies to commemorate.

POSITIVE LIVING

December 4, 1994

Positive Living is a support group for People with HIV/AIDS. Since I wrote this particular piece it has grown in membership, though it still has much to do to reach outside the Klang Valley. Recently, for AIDS Memorial Day 1997, an art exhibition was held, of work done as therapy by People with AIDS. The works were accompanied by narratives from the artists. They were revealing and moving, and they gave an insight into the world of an HIV-positive person. It is important for the rest of society to get first-hand insight into the life of Person with AIDS, but this has not always been possible, because of stigma and discrimination. The exhibition was a rare opportunity for the two worlds to meet.

A couple of Saturdays ago I sat down with eight people of diverse backgrounds who had one thing in common: they were all HIV-positive. It was the first time I had met some of them and in fact there were still others who had not come. For a long time I had waited to be invited to meet them. But so great is the fear of People with HIV/AIDS (PWH/A) of anyone knowing their status that often they do not even find each other, much less meet people like me who are not infected.

The worse thing for a PWH/A is to think that they are alone in their

disease and their problems. Several months ago I sat and listened to an Australian woman recount how it had taken four years before she met another woman with HIV. In that time although she had the support of her husband and child and some men she knew who were also HIV-positive, she nevertheless felt alone, unable to really communicate with a kindred spirit who would understand her specific problems as a woman with the virus. I cannot imagine anything more lonely.

Another woman from San Francisco faced the same problem. When you are HIV-positive, how do you find someone with HIV to share problems and experiences with? Your doctor cannot tell you who else he is treating because of confidentiality. You cannot just go up to someone and ask if they are HIV-positive. Also there are still relatively few HIV-positive women who have had the courage and confidence to form support groups as other affected communities have. In the end what this woman did was start a newsletter addressed to women 'out there' who may also be HIV-positive. Gradually others began to get in touch. The result is an organisation called WORLD, a support group for PWH/As based in San Francisco.

There are now several such groups around the world, the two largest ones being the Global Network of People With HIV/AIDS (GNP+) and the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICWLH). In our country, a fledgling organisation, Positive Living, has been in existence for a few years with so far only sixteen members, despite the fact that there are at least 13,000 people with HIV in this country.

Why is there a need for PWH/As to organise? The same reason why any other group of people with mutual interests needs to come together. A problem shared is a problem halved. And PWH/As face many problems.

They face grave medical problems. Although PWHs remain healthy for a long time, every single cold, every bit of pain must be taken seriously. There is no cure for AIDS but there are drugs which can prolong one's life, primarily by treating the opportunistic diseases which become much more serious than they normally would for a noninfected person. Unfortunately the drugs are horrendously expensive and not very easy to get unless you have sympathetic doctors.

Much more difficult is the problem of the stigmatization and discrimination that PWH/As face. We have had many educational campaigns on AIDS in this country but many of them have served to create images in

people's minds that only certain groups get the virus. These groups are already marginalised by society so having this further stigmatization has made their lives even worse.

This insistence on focusing on groups instead of behaviour has been a major hurdle in getting the general public educated on their vulnerability to infection. It breeds a dangerous complacency among those who do not identify with these groups. Furthermore while it is important to have campaigns that talk about prevention, we are now at a stage when we must talk about care. More and more people are getting infected and more and more people are having to respond to this at a very personal level. This includes family members who have to care for their infected relative, friends who may wonder why their friend suddenly avoids social get-togethers, employers who are puzzled about their employee's many requests for sick leave. Even teachers will start to inquire why some children miss school so much and might not realise that their parents have to depend on them to take care of younger children at home while the adults go for medical treatment.

When I talked to Positive Living, it became clear that the challenge for PWH/As is not to die but to live. How does an infected individual carry on with daily life especially when he or she is not sick? How does such a person cope with the fear that if his or her status is revealed, he or she may lose a job, which could begin a downward spiral. With no job, there is no money for daily living and treatment. With no money, it will be certain death, ironically not necessarily from the virus but from the deprivations that poverty brings.

Unfortunately there are people who think that the best thing for PWH/As is to let them die because 'after all they are going to die'. That's a little bit like saying that nobody should be born because they are only going to die in the end. We are all going to die; in the meantime we make the best of our lives to the best of our abilities. We do not lie down and wait for proof of our mortality every day.

There is a certain amount of wilful ignorance among many people perhaps because it is more comfortable not to have to think. Out of this ignorance, which is deliberate yet worn like a badge of honour, comes a kind of arrogance. Not only is this ignorance directed towards PWH/As but also those who work in this field, as if these people are tainted by association. I have heard people complaining that NGOs working in HIV/AIDS are not doing enough, judging by the increasing numbers of PWH/As, yet at the

same time wanting to thwart these prevention efforts by withholding support.

HIV/AIDS work is not glamorous by any stretch of the imagination. The fund-raising may be fun and glittery at times but the real work is not. We face people in despair all the time, either because they are suffering from their illnesses or because they are worried endlessly about how they and those they will leave behind will survive. Doctors, nurses, counsellors and outreach workers frequently reach burnout where they are unable to cope with any more sad situations. A man cries every day because his AIDS-related brain tumour threatens his former independence. A couple learns the happy news that they will finally have the baby they've been waiting for only to also find out that they are HIV-positive. The emotional toll on workers is hard, although nothing compared to the suffering of those who have the virus.

We are thankful for every survivor and yet we wonder why survival should be so difficult. Occasionally we get happy news. The other day a friend came up, glowing with health, with the news that his CD4 (the cells in our body that fight the virus) count is up to more than 1000 per millilitre of blood. Since an uninfected person has about 1600, this is a miracle. Every little miracle is savoured in HIV/AIDS work.

December 1 is World AIDS Day and the theme this year is Shared Rights, Shared Responsibilities. We are all affected by HIV/AIDS, much more than we think, so we have to reach out together. Start by imagining what it would be like to be HIV-positive and hopefully your heart will open.

AIDS: WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE?

December 27, 1995

When we get older we often learn that rules that we make ourselves can, sometimes with a little swallowing of pride, be broken. One of the rules I have made over the last two years with this column was that I would only talk about HIV/AIDS twice a year, once in May in conjunction with AIDS Memorial Day and once in December to coincide with World AIDS Day. Otherwise I feel that I should not allow this column to become a one-topic read. However today I am about to break this self-imposed rule a little because of recent developments in our country and because I feel the subject

is too important to let go.

The festive season, which this time will last all the way until the end of February, is upon us and with it is a sense of goodwill towards all humankind. It is this spirit of goodwill towards others that I would like to talk about in relation to HIV/AIDS.

There is no denying the fact that this is a terrible disease which has infected about twenty million people around the world, with no sign of abating. There is no cure in sight despite scientists' efforts, so all we have is prevention. And prevention can only happen through wise behaviour which in turn can only be brought about through education. And the education must be truthful, appropriate and sustained in order to be effective.

Before we can talk about preventive education, we must be absolutely certain that we ourselves are educated enough. HIV/AIDS is a highly technical, complicated subject. It involves a vast array of related subjects other than the medical; to truly understand the whys and wherefores of the epidemic, one must know something of medicine and science, sociology, psychology and economics.

Despite the importance of this knowledge, there is still no better way to understand the epidemic than to talk to someone who has been affected by it, whether by having been infected or by having cared for someone. To truly understand what the real impact of the epidemic is, in real human terms and not as something abstract that happens to other people, one must make it real to one's self. How does it feel to be infected? How does it feel to know that someone you love is infected? What are the problems in living an HIV-positive life? How do you care for someone who is ill with AIDS? How do you ensure that your family is secure, medically, socially, financially, if you are HIV-positive?

Only then, when you stop thinking that it will never happen to yourself or to anyone you know, do you begin to appreciate the real dimensions of the problem. And it leads also to a very spiritual understanding of the epidemic.

The idea has often been promoted that HIV/AIDS is divine punishment on those who have 'gone astray'. The immense variety of people who have been infected proves this wrong but I personally do believe that there is divine reasoning behind the epidemic.

If we look at the recent history of the world, we human beings have

been guilty of being very inhuman. We have killed, maimed, exploited, raped and stolen from our fellow human beings and from the earth at an unprecedented rate. We allow so many of our people to remain in poverty and ignorance, to starve and suffer, all of this in spite of so-called civilisation having reached technological and material levels never before achieved. Are we better off than in the ancient days of savagery when humans could not care less about one another?

What really differentiates human beings from animals? In my mind, it is the ability to think and differentiate between good and evil and the ability to be compassionate. And in the past few decades, we perhaps have lost these abilities. Hence the difference between us and other creatures is becoming blurred. Why do we marvel at people like Mother Theresa? Is it because compassion has become such a rare commodity that she is an exception?

So I think perhaps with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, we are being challenged to return to being human again. It is an opportunity to prove that the noble qualities of empathy, kindness and compassion reside within all of us. It is a chance for us to prove that our fellow earth citizens mean a lot to us, as we hope we mean a lot to them.

It is perhaps also for us to prove, in these cynical times, that love still exists. We can only help those less fortunate than us if we genuinely love them. We can only be of service to our society if we truly love it unconditionally. We cannot say we will only love our fellow citizens if they behave only in ways that we think is right. This is arrogant. And there has never yet been an authentic caring person who is not also humble in spirit and manner.

Many injustices have been perpetrated in the name of HIV/AIDS. People, infected or not, have been discriminated against, vilified, punished, incarcerated, exploited and generally cruelly treated simply because of a perceived association with so-called risk factors. If you count all the families and friends of HIV-positive people, more innocent people have suffered from the epidemic than the number of actual infections. And at an estimated rate of twenty million people with HIV, that is a lot of suffering people.

But HIV/AIDS can also bring out the best in people. I have never seen more moving demonstrations of love than that of people who care for their infected loved ones. I have met couples where only one partner is HIV-positive, absolutely glowing with love for each other. There are thousands

upon thousands of brave selfless women around the world who care for husbands, children and other members of their families who have been infected. I know mothers who upon learning that their child has been infected simply said, "We are family. Your pain is my pain and I will never leave you to suffer it alone." And they carried on doing what mothers do best, being supportive and nurturing to those who really need it.

To read the story of Noreine Kaleeba of Uganda who cared for her husband Christopher until he died, and who has now become one of the best-known AIDS activists in the world, is to understand the meaning of love. There have been many more people who have sacrificed their own needs in order to care for others and make their lives as comfortable as possible before they leave this earth.

We talk about family values a lot these days and yet we never talk about how this threat to the existence of all people on earth can help us rejuvenate the qualities that keep families together. We spend more time and money trying to find ways of separating people for the most dubious of reasons yet never encourage the strengthening of the bonds that keep people together. We worry about social problems attributed to the dismantling of the family unit yet do nothing to keep the family together in the face of a disease like this. No wonder our people get confused.

In this coming season of goodwill and charity which will take in three major religious and ethnic groups, I hope we have time to pause and think about what it really means to love our fellow humans. And if we find ourselves failing, how we can rectify ourselves before we lose everything to blind ignorance, arrogance and prejudice.

I wish everybody a very Happy New Year and hope our common future is filled with love, joy, and kindness.

BEING DISCRIMINATING ABOUT AIDS

May 29, 1996

In many countries, including Malaysia, there has been a tendency to react to any grim news about AIDS by wanting to test more people. Despite there being no evidence that mandatory testing does anything for prevention, and despite the fact that there are not enough medical services to support such a programme, the knee-jerk reaction still prevails. Suggestions to test people before they get married keep coming up. Schoolchildren are another group which it has been suggested to test (if they test positive for drugs). The latest group to be targeted is pregnant women.

What is common to all these proposals is that testing is only ever seriously followed up for people who have little chance of protesting. The history of these proposals has shown that the Government usually backs down when the targeted group is a voting bloc that they cannot afford to alienate. Schoolchildren, drug users, and prisoners are expendable. Engaged couples and pregnant mothers (and their husbands) are ultimately not to be trifled with.

The other characteristic of people who like to recommend mandatory testing is that they never think of themselves as likely subjects for testing. I still get letters from people who disagree with me about mandatory testing for couples intending marriage. I usually write back and ask if they are themselves single and intending marriage, and if they are, I tell them I will be happy to recommend a good doctor they can go to for their own tests. That usually gives them pause.

Here are the real-life stories: A mother organises round-the-clock duties for herself, her two daughters and friends to sit in vigil with her son, lying near death from five different illnesses that have attacked his body because he has AIDS. As a result of this and the dedication and care of his doctors, he survives.

A sister tells the story of how she and her family had cared for her younger brother until he died of AIDS. At the funeral, the family including her aged mother had to suffer the humiliation of begging a reluctant imam to conduct the funeral rites and then the further indignity of having him condemn and mock the dead man in front of the grave.

A woman in a *sudung*, through barely-restrained tears, asks why society looks down on all people with HIV/AIDS, even those who unknowingly became infected through blood transfusions.

A young HIV-positive woman automatically puts up her hand to cover her face when, while walking among a crowd of friends, a passer-by says hello. She herself finds it hard to believe that she is not marked in some way.

These are true stories of Malaysians whose lives have been dramatically changed by HIV/AIDS. Besides the virus, there are several other things they have in common:

They are all women. Whether infected or not, women disproportionately carry the burden of the disease. Whether it is the mother, daughter, sister, wife or girlfriend, the woman suffers either from the physical ravages of the disease itself or from the emotional trauma of caring for a desperately ill loved one or the burden of having to carry on with life, deprived of any semblance of support. But what love these women are capable of!

They are all afraid of what society thinks of them, whether or not they themselves are infected. In the case of the aged woman who buried her son, she is now afraid even to go see her doctor for her own health problems because she is worried of what treatment she will get from other people.

Discrimination is indiscriminate. Society looks down equally on all affected by HIV/AIDS, no matter who they are or how they were infected.

This year the theme of International AIDS Memorial Day (May 19) is AIDS Discrimination is a Global Epidemic. And no theme could be more timely. All over the world and on our shores, a parallel epidemic is following the AIDS pandemic, the epidemic of fear and ignorance that is manifesting itself in denial, repressive measures, stigmatization and discrimination. Never in the modern history of public health has a disease invoked the sort of hysterical reaction that is being seen everywhere. And this, for an easily preventable but incurable disease.

I wish I could say that we Malaysians, with this dream we have of creating a caring society, are better than other people about HIV/AIDS. I wish I could say that our fellow citizens with HIV/AIDS feel that this is a safe country for them to be in and that they can hope to have access to all the treatment necessary to allow them to live as long as they can. I wish I could say that we have a forgiving society. I wish I could, but I can't.

Even though the level of awareness of HIV/AIDS in our country has reached unprecedented levels, that awareness has no depth. It is neither adequate for anyone to protect themselves nor enough to make them treat a Person with HIV/AIDS (PWH/A) in an intelligent and compassionate way.

Partly this is because the education programmes that we have are still incomplete, unfocussed and sometimes even inappropriate. More importantly they are confusing.

Our mass educational campaigns tell us how HIV is spread and it is obvious that except for mother-to-baby transmission, these modes of transmission are based on high-risk behaviours such as unsafe sex and the sharing of infected needles. Yet our mass campaigns also instill in the public the notion of the so-called high-risk groups. While these groups are certainly more vulnerable to infection if they indulge in high-risk behaviours, they are no more at risk if they do *not* do these high-risk activities than any one else who does not.

In other words, whether you are a drug user, sex worker, executive, waiter, farmer, politician, student or government servant, if you partake of high-risk behaviours, you will be vulnerable to HIV infection. Having a certain occupation or social status is no protection if your behaviour does not change.

But this constant insistence on certain groups has produced two negative effects. One is that it breeds a complacency among those who do not consider themselves as belonging to these groups, a belief that somehow they are invulnerable and that they can carry on dangerous activities with impunity.

Secondly, it not only further stigmatises already marginalised groups but it spreads the cloak of stigmatization on anybody and everybody who is HIV-positive or has AIDS.

It is therefore ironic to me that having picked on groups of people to stigmatise, we should then turn round and ask people not to isolate them. What are people to make of this?

There are still some people who believe, despite the wealth of research and knowledge that is available, that AIDS is punishment from God on certain people for allegedly breaking His laws. Yet, if there is even an ounce of truth in this, nobody has been able to answer why everybody who has AIDS, whether they 'went out and got it' or were the 'innocent victims of infected blood transfusions', suffers in the same way.

Why does a child, born HIV-positive to an infected mother, suffer the ravages of the same opportunistic diseases as a drug user with AIDS? And why do the families of people with HIV/AIDS also have to live in fear and isolation when they have done nothing more than provide the loving care

and support that one should expect of families? It seems odd that God, ever Benevolent and Merciful, should be so sweeping in His punishment when our religious laws are so precise in what constitutes a transgression.

When we discriminate against one group of people, we in fact raise the potential of discriminating against ourselves. For instance, when we insist on having mandatory testing of certain groups of people, usually the most marginalised and powerless among us, we are being discriminatory for the simple reason that discrimination is defined as inflicting hardship on people by virtue of their membership in that group. There is no way that anyone can say that testing for HIV is a light and fun thing.

Yet, at the same time, we have campaigns encouraging people not to avoid people who are HIV-positive. Is this not confusing? People who have HIV/AIDS do not go around with a badge saying 'I'm HIV-positive but it's OK, I got it through blood transfusion' or 'I have HIV because I did drugs'. There is no way we can tell them apart and neither can we separate one from the other. As a result we discriminate against them all.

I have never been more chilled when, in a heated discussion about the rights of the individual versus the rights of the community, I asked who the individual was and the reply was 'the 15,000 plus people with HIV/AIDS in this country.' It was chilling because 15,000 people certainly add up to more than the theoretical single individual that is always maligned in this argument (and to use their own words, 'these people are only the tip of the iceberg'). What was even more chilling, there was not the slightest attempt to separate out those who were 'innocently' infected from the rest.

In other words, no matter how you came to be infected, you can be sure to lose your rights if you become HIV-positive.

Is it any wonder then that decent people with the slightest compassion feel discomfort at the idea of imposing mandatory testing on couples intending marriage or on schoolchildren allegedly showing signs of drug abuse? A response to a problem that calls for discriminatory laws on more and more people is not only inappropriate but ultimately serves no purpose.

Even from an effectiveness point of view, no mandatory testing policy tried anywhere in the world (and mostly they have been tried in the West) has ever worked in reducing the rate of infection.

Which brings us to the ultimate question: are our HIV/AIDS programmes in this country aimed at successfully reducing the rate of infection

in this country, so that fewer of our people will get infected as would if we did nothing? Or are our programmes aimed at making us the sort of wonderful people which, because we have HIV among us, we are so obviously not? Are we offering a public health programme or are we trying to make people be what everyone agrees they should be, but in reality they are not? Are we really therefore trying to prevent the spread of HIV?

As we ponder these questions, more and more people get infected every day and more and more people are pulled into the cycle of suffering and despair. The AIDS Memorial Day theme has a second part: 'Together we will overcome.' I wish I could believe that.

THE WORLD AIDS CONFERENCE

July 24, 1996

Every two years, a global AIDS conference is held where everyone concerned with the pandemic, whether they be scientists, social workers, government officials, drug company representatives, activists and People with HIV/AIDS, gather together to learn about the latest developments and share experiences and ideas. I have been to two, in Yokohama in 1994 and Vancouver in 1996. In between are the regional conferences, which are often more relevant to our work than the very large global ones. Still the conferences give us a chance to listen to and question the best experts in the field. The opportunities to network with others doing similar work are tremendous.

Is it possible for me to return from Vancouver and not talk about it? Remembering how I was galvanised by the last AIDS Conference in Yokohama, should I restrain myself from reporting the good news that was had at Vancouver? Not possible.

On the medical front I'm sure everyone heard the good news. No, we don't have a cure yet but we do have drugs which can weaken the HIV to such an extent that an HIV-positive person can have as good a quality of life as anyone else can expect to. This means that people who previously could only hope to see a very short future and had made plans to only accommodate that can now think and plan on a longer term basis. If anything the news

about these protease inhibitors is that hope can become real.

The bad news however is that with such treatment costing about US\$15,000 per person per year, hope is only available to a select few. To the 94% of the people currently living with HIV who come from developing countries, this hope is very far off indeed. Nobody put it more starkly than an HIV-positive woman from Zambia who, in thanking the organisers for bringing her to Vancouver, noted that her hotel rates would pay her rent at home for three years and her air fare would feed her two young children until they reach majority. This is the reality for developing countries, especially the poorest ones which are suffering most from the AIDS pandemic. When will hope ever reach them?

Thus we must turn to prevention if nothing else because it is always more cost-effective. I had the privilege of being a rapporteur in a satellite symposium entitled 'HIV Prevention Works' and the good news is that yes, it *does*, even in developing countries. Very poor countries like Uganda are showing success in lowering the rates of infection, as are fast-developing countries such as Thailand, not to mention the advanced countries of Canada and Australia. Australia now has an overall rate of 500 new infections a year, compared with our 300 a month! They must be doing something right.

What was particularly interesting for us are the successes in the developing countries. No longer can we say that the developed countries have succeeded because they have all the facilities when a country as poor as Uganda can also show success. Obviously the level of development is no barrier to making prevention programmes work. The symposium made clear the common factors among all countries where prevention has succeeded. They are:

1. *Political will*: where the political leadership is fully involved and supportive of all AIDS programmes, success has been achievable because full resources are committed. For many developing countries, denial at the top has meant the lack of resources and weak programmes, therefore allowing the epidemic to spread freely.

2. *The community must respond*, whether formally or informally. In Uganda, the social network of families, clans and tribes responded very quickly to the impact of AIDS because they have a long tradition of taking care of their own. This response however must be nurtured with continued capacity-building, meaning that people must be enabled to respond; just wanting to

is not enough.

3. *Success depended on a partnership between the government and the community.* Neither can do it alone, not with an epidemic that has such far-reaching impacts. This partnership has to occur at all levels including decision-making levels, and must be based on mutual trust and understanding of how each other works. Furthermore the partners must be equal but retain their separate identities so that the resultant 'creative tension' leads to continuous innovation.

4. *Every successful prevention programme has involved People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA).* This is something which governments particularly refuse to accept because of the perception that PLWHAs are unreasonable people. Such an attitude flies against the facts.

It is important for PLWHAs to establish a sense of community and belonging and that the community they had always been part of before they got infected will not now reject them. If they feel that the environment is safe, then they will be able to help themselves and in so doing help others. They are the ones who will be able to teach us how to design effective programmes because they will be able to give us first-hand input on the circumstances which led to their becoming infected. But they are not going to do this if they feel they are going to be looked down on or punished. That is why discrimination should be eliminated and why the arguments that the rights of these infected individuals are being put above those of the community don't wash. If we protect the rights of these individuals, we will automatically be protecting the rights of the community.

5. *A multisectoral approach is very important.* This means everyone, not just those working in healthcare, must get involved and take action. Uganda started doing this in 1991 and Thailand only in 1994, yet both are already showing results. Thailand has taken a wholistic approach to AIDS, placing it as a national developmental issue. In this way, every single agency that would normally be involved in national development planning has to take AIDS into account. No longer can it be confined to the health sector alone.

6. *Evaluation of programmes must be built-in and on-going.* It is very important to have evidence of good results because this always provides the impetus for better resource allocations. Also evaluation means that if something is not working, you can fix it, you can make it more focused and targeted so that it works. What is the point of doing anything if you don't

know whether you are achieving your goals or not? Believe me, there are people who don't see the simple logic of this.

7. *And lastly, there must be resources for prevention programmes.* You cannot expect something to work if you're not willing to commit enough resources for it. This is particularly true if you want the community to get involved. There are trends in this country of withdrawing financial support from community-based organisations because the feeling is that they have to be self-sufficient. Yet conversely there is a recognition that AIDS is a problem that is bigger than all of us. As one participant at the symposium pointed out, 'A good public health response is always a partnership between the government and the community.' Just expecting one side to do the work is not good enough.

Tomorrow, July 25, eight of our Cabinet Ministers will be sitting down to talk about AIDS and hopefully to come out with a National AIDS Strategy. It will be chaired by our Minister of Health who went to Vancouver and learnt a great deal from it. What they come up with will have far-reaching consequences for us all, not just those who are vulnerable to HIV infection. Those of us who are working every day with the poorest, the most marginalised, the ones most suffering and who worry about how many more we will have to cope with, are praying hard that the strategy that comes out will be realistic, achievable and humane.

Malaysia has every reason to be a shining example of a country that successfully lessens the impact of AIDS on its people. We still have a manageable epidemic, we have access to all the information, research and data that we want so that we can learn from the successes and failures of others. Most of all, we have the resources. There is absolutely no reason why we should suffer the way so many other countries have.

Unless we blow this opportunity to do something now.

TALKING TO THE WORLD ABOUT AIDS

December 8, 1996

On December 2, 1996, the United Nations General Assembly had a special session to commemorate World AIDS Day. I was invited with four other colleagues, including Elizabeth Taylor, to speak. My topic was AIDS in Asia, the last continent to be hit by the pandemic. It was interesting that all five speakers were women; this reflects the intense involvement of women in AIDS work. Equally, we were from all parts of the world. The pandemic is truly global.

We never got to show the video of the session on Malaysian TV, though parts of it appeared in newscasts, and have been incorporated in a UNAIDS video called It's Not Over. For me, this will always be a special experience.

It was one of those moments when you had to blink several times to make sure that what you were seeing was real. There on my computer screen was an e-mail message from the Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS (UNAIDS) in Geneva: We would like to invite you to New York to address the United Nations General Assembly on December 2 for World AIDS Day.

My first reaction was that this was a joke and indeed I actually e-mailed back to ask if someone was having a bit of fun with me. No, said Sally Cowal, a former United States ambassador who is now Director of External Relations at UNAIDS, we are serious, we want you to come and give a short speech on AIDS in Asia, based on your experience in the field. And by the way, the other confirmed speaker is Elizabeth Taylor.

It still took a few more cybermessages to convince me that this was real. For one thing, I did not think anyone under the age of fifty could speak at the UN. Fortunately I was too busy preparing for a trip to Australia to have much time to really think about my speech and get nervous about it.

The next two weeks flew by rather quickly. I told a few people rather hesitatingly, afraid that they would not believe me and most reacted by asking me if I was nervous which did not help matters. Worse, I caught a stomach bug in Australia which would not go away. In a panic I finally saw a doctor on the eve of my departure for New York. "Do you have a Plan B?" she asked. Plan B meant getting someone to replace me if she thought I was too sick to go. No way.

And so loaded down with antibiotics and one nine-year old daughter,

we took the long flight via the Pacific all the way to New York City and landed in -2° Celsius temperature on Thanksgiving Day. (I would appreciate any tips on how to explain to a kid what the International Dateline is.)

We had a few days to get acclimatised before my big day. I had drafted my speech before I left but kept room for changes and additions so I was not too worried. New York, especially with a first-time child visitor, offered plenty to keep my mind off it. Only my stomach reminded me that my nerves were not feeling too calm.

Monday, December 2, arrived soon enough. My UNAIDS host in New York proved to be a rather chatty and somewhat nervous man. The speakers were all invited to lunch at UN Headquarters before the session by the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AMFAR), the organisation founded by Elizabeth Taylor which was co-sponsoring the event.

The day did not start too well when I went to a hair salon for a hair wash and the hairdresser arrived late. Another five minutes and I would have had to wear either a scarf or a wig when I gave my speech or disgrace my country (and more importantly, my mother) by looking like a slob. Luckily he arrived and tamed my hair in record time.

Then we ran off to the UN and were greeted at the door by the UNAIDS representative in New York, Mr. Somar, and taken to the lunch. It turned out that this was a major lunch by AMFAR. It was hosted by the actress Natasha Richardson, daughter of Vanessa Redgrave and wife of Liam Neeson. (By the way, another small triumph for Malaysia: Natasha was dressed in Zang Toi.) Lots of major New York people from the media and AIDS organisations were there. A perpetually sunglasses Bianca Jagger put in an appearance.

Two of the other speakers, Noerine Kaleeba of Uganda, Martina Clark and I were placed at a table with two UNAIDS people and the PR people and were largely ignored. The other two speakers, Elizabeth Taylor and Christina Seralegui, a TV personality on the Spanish-language UNIVISION channel, sat on the more important tables.

What was Liz like? Well, she does have one of the most recognisable faces in the world. But if it weren't for that, she would probably fit right in the KL scene. She's not young any more but she's still remarkably unlined, perhaps even a little puffy. I suspect she's not that well but nevertheless she's immaculate the way you expect a star to be. I had seen her before in Vancouver

last July and like then, she had her bodyguards, her assistants (including one to carry her remarkably quiet dog) and her hairdresser in tow. Yes, you know she is a star.

The lunch turned out to be very American. It began with Natasha Richardson asking for a minute's silence for the 350,000 Americans who had died of AIDS. Noerine, Martina and I looked at each other and wondered: what about the six million non-Americans who have died too? The AMFAR gave out awards to several organisations and individuals who had helped them, including an airline, a charitable organisation, a treatment advocacy group, Miramax Films and...Elizabeth Taylor. Which, I thought, was a bit odd since she's a founder of AMFAR but she didn't feel the least bit awkward about receiving the beautiful Cartier award. At the end of lunch, they invited everyone to the General Assembly for the special session where two of the speakers would be Elizabeth Taylor and Christina Seralegui. Noerine, Martina and I, the unfamous ones, just had to laugh.

But as they say, the proof is in the pudding. The Assembly Hall was packed. We had to assemble backstage where I finally got to meet Liz Taylor and Christina. I liked Christina instantly because she came and introduced herself to us and although quite a major star, had no airs whatsoever. Liz Taylor was not quite as forward, and certainly AMFAR staff are kept well on their toes when she's around, but still she was quite normal. When the Secretary-General declined to come out of his office to be photographed with us, it was Liz who decided that we would all just go into his office. 'It's easier,' she said with no sign of irritation at all. Then we took photographs with Tan Sri Razali Ismail, president of the 51st General Assembly, and then it was time to begin.

All five of us sat on a stage below the President, the Secretary-General and the Director of Public Information who acted as Master of Ceremonies. The room was full and in the front row was my daughter, my colleague Professor Datin Dr Sharifah Hapsah who had come from a meeting in Barbados to kindly lend me moral support, and a little further down, Sugar, Liz Taylor's dog, held in the arms of Leeza Wilding, her granddaughter. Later on they were joined by Madeleine Albright, the US Ambassador to the UN who, only a few days later would be the named the first woman Secretary of State by President Clinton.

After speeches by Tan Sri Razali and Mr Boutros-Ghali, it was our

turn. Noerine Kaleeba was up first, speaking, as she said, 'as an African woman, as the mother of four daughters, as an AIDS widow'. She is very well-known in the international AIDS community for having started an organisation in Uganda to support families affected by AIDS called The AIDS Support Organisation (TASO) after her husband Christopher died of AIDS. She now works on Community Mobilisation Programmes at UNAIDS. An eloquent and forceful speaker, her message was that despite the incredible suffering wrought by the pandemic, despite the fact that most people infected with HIV will never be able to afford the new treatments, we should not give up hope. There have been many good things happening and prevention does work, as shown even in developing countries such as Uganda and Thailand. We have to all work together especially at community level to replicate these successes in other countries.

I was next and in my nervousness stumbled with my first sentence. My basic message was that although much of Asia is developing economically very rapidly, and Asians are enjoying much higher standards of living, all this is being threatened by HIV/AIDS. Already South and Southeast Asia has the second-highest number of People Living with HIV/AIDS in the world, with no sign of these numbers waning. Denial on the part of many governments is the main cause of this and as long as there is denial, Asian populations will never get the education they need about HIV/AIDS making them extremely vulnerable to infection. I also stressed the particular vulnerability and effect of the pandemic on Asian women.

Christina Seralegui, 'the lady who talks about AIDS in Spanish', was next and she was excellent. In an almost conversational style, she explained about AIDS in Latin America and the massive denial that goes on there. She talked about the 'machismo' culture which encouraged boys to play around while expecting all girls to remain virgins, the total lack of sex education for young people and the Catholic Church's vehement opposition to condoms. 'The statistics do not reflect reality,' she stressed; the true picture is much worse. I thought everything she said could just as easily have applied to Asia.

Martina Clark is a young, blonde, very healthy HIV-positive woman who now works at UNAIDS as liaison with NGOs and with People Living with HIV/AIDS. She is also very well-known in the AIDS community for her work with the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW). Her speech stressed the fact that HIV-positive people are not

victims, they are often healthy and young. More and more of them are women. Those who are lucky enough like her to live in the US or Switzerland, where there are excellent facilities as long as you have insurance, will be able to live pretty much normal lives. But 90% of HIV-positive people are not that lucky. She stressed that nobody must think they are invulnerable, especially those who travel. Martina did a lot to dispel the idea that an HIV-positive person would be constantly morose or morbid, simply waiting to die.

Last was the person most of the room had been waiting for, Elizabeth Taylor. What can I say but that her speech was excellent. She started by referring to the *Newsweek* cover story titled 'The End of AIDS?' which was very upbeat on the discovery of protease inhibitors which, when taken by a person with HIV or AIDS, can inhibit the HIV to undetectable levels, resulting in a return to health for these people. She said we cannot be so optimistic yet, not when 90% of the people infected have no access to even the simplest medicines let alone the very expensive protease inhibitors. She talked about the one million children with AIDS and the millions of others orphaned by it and how they are all being neglected. She talked about women and how vulnerable they are and desperate to protect themselves and how there is an urgent need to develop female-controlled protection methods. She talked about how we must have a vaccine because this would be the best and cheapest way to prevent infection among people in developing countries. And she very strongly urged that the United States become more serious in helping developing countries in their AIDS programmes because they need help much more than the US does.

She got a standing ovation, which she deserved. But I don't think that the audience felt that the messages from the rest of us were any less important, not to judge by the number of people who came up to congratulate us afterwards. I think that having Liz and Christina on the panel helped to attract people who may otherwise have not come but all of us packed a punch and I think everyone learnt something. I just hope that the UN delegates will go back and tell their governments to get serious about AIDS if they haven't already.

Backstage again, we were all hugging and congratulating each other. Liz Taylor thanked each one of us for our speeches and I think all five of us felt that although we all had different backgrounds, on this matter we were all equal and we were all trying to do the best we could.

For me, the whole experience was fantastic. It's not every day that we get opportunities like this. It was a tremendous honour to have been asked, for me personally, and for our country. I shall always treasure that moment when I spoke before, as Noerine called it, 'this august Assembly'. And although the only family member who could share that special moment with me was my daughter, UNAIDS very thoughtfully gave each of us a video of the entire session which we hope to be able to show on TV here in Malaysia because I think it would be very educational for everybody.

Now I come back down to earth. OK kids, what is HIV...?

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