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The lost art of fine conversation

By Datuk Dr Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid

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IN dramatic ways, leaders deliver their last messages. There are the final messages of prophets, the last sermons of holy people or the last lecture of an academician.

Sometimes, there are memories of the last conversations with those who are dear or those whom we respect. We may also remember meaningful conversations with some casual stranger at the bus stop, in a taxi, at the train station or in an airport or in a boat -- just about anywhere.

Throughout the years of school or university life, it is possible that a person may not have any extended and deep conversation with experienced persons or superior minds.

Good conversations can occur among people across the generations. If throughout one's life, the focus of relations is peer interaction, or communication only with people within the same culture or "in" group, then there is a lost opportunity to learn from the Other, the "out" groups and from those who are more experienced.

A debate is not a conversation. Teaching and instruction in didactic ways is not a conversation. A speech is not a conversation. All these forms of one-way communication may provide lessons, but they are not conversations.

The art of conversation builds thoughtful persons and character. Good conversation allows for space to explore feelings and for soul searching.

Good conversation allows for maturity. The kitchen in a home, the canteen or talk corner in a school or university are places that may allow for extended conversations. Athenian democracy is one of the examples of a state in human history that fostered the art of conversation.

Howard Gardner, the renowned psychologist, discusses the Five Minds for the Future in a recent book of the same title. The five minds are the disciplined mind, the synthesis and creative minds, and the respectful and ethical minds.

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Good conversations help build the respectful and ethical mind. The respectful mind listens well to the stories and messages of other minds.

The respectful mind is empathic to other world views. In the safe space of good conversation, arrogant power is harnessed, egotistical tendencies are moderated, status distance is eliminated.

The art of great conversation sets the stage for the art of thinking. The art of thinking is fostered by the degree of consciousness and empathy regarding the messages of the conversations.

There are so many radios, TV talk shows, talk panels and sitcoms that provide examples of good and bad conversations.

Some of the evident characteristics and elements of good conversations are as follows: the respectful mind; wit and humour; calm inquiry; the searching, explorative mind; the non-judgmental mind; patience; and empathy.

In a technologically and power-oriented society, so many people and institutions set out to shape our views about almost everything.

So many of these power people want to control our minds, our hearts and even our souls.

Only the art of deep conversations will give us the clarity to be free and autonomous.

Only the art of deep conversation can unleash our freedom quest, and prevent the hidden persuaders, the advertisers and ideologues from taking a stranglehold on our thoughts, feelings and decision-making.

Mastering the art of conversation can make us strong on two levels, the inner level and the outer level. At the inner level we transfer the art of good conversation to our self-talk and self-understanding.

At the outer level, we transfer the skills of the art of conversation and decision-making to our roles in society. In our roles in society, we can make informed sound choices regarding products advertised or leaders who should be voted or not voted into power.

An enlightened citizenry will have a critical mass of people with high Emotional Intelligence.

Emotional intelligence is the capacity to understand and control emotions.

The emotionally mature conversation can use emotions to deepen understanding and thinking.

During school assemblies, in sports meetings, in social gatherings and in other occasions that present themselves, educational institutions can foster good conversations.

A society that intends to be a knowledge society must have the culture of good conversation. A knowledge society is not just the number of people with degrees and qualifications. A knowledge society is about the genius of the people, the unleashed autonomy and creativity of the people.

A knowledge society is about people engaged with deep conversations in serious and light matters. A knowledge society exists when every individual has the confidence, is unafraid and unthreatened to express

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his own views in conversations.

Former opposition leader Tan Chee Khoon once had a column, "Without Fear or Favour". A knowledge society is one where people will have great conversations and disagree with no fear and respect other peoples' points of view.

We are yet to set the educational agenda of building a society of achievers and inspiring conversationalists.

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