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Understanding where we came from and where we are heading



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ADVERSITY INTELLIGENCE: Our intangible wealth is inter-generational family, community and national narratives



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IN the Malaysian past, most people were poor. Now many are rich, or at the worst, they are in the lower socio-economic class.

On Independence, most people did not get an education. Now the citizens are highly literate and are driven to be achievers.

In the past, most people did not have vision. Now they begin to envision and achieve many dreams for themselves or for their children.

In the past, most people led ordinary lives. However, many were extraordinary people. Now many people may lead seemingly extraordinary lives, but most are ordinary people. Whatever their lot, parents understand the value of education. Whatever their backgrounds, they send their children to school.

Even when the parents are illiterate, they discipline their children to be literate and educated. Many leaders in society today can tell stories of

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their poverty-stricken childhood, of walking for miles to school. And when they had no shoes, the first pair of shoes became a memorable life event.

There are stories when brothers, who had only one pair of shoes in the house, took turns to wear shoes, either when going or returning from school or the following consecutive day. Lat has captured some of those bygone days of childhood adventures. Awang Goneng also captured such life experiences in Growing Up in Terengganu.

Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz studied rural children who collapsed during school assemblies because of hunger and malnutrition, and they were also not free from worms, sores and other sicknesses. Few children had opportunities to see doctors or dentists except in cases of emergencies. Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor was chairman of the Drop-Out Report which was used as a reference for one of the milestones in educational reforms. Based on its evidence, the school food and school milk programmes were initiated to help children.

Fishermen, farmers, smallholders, rubber tappers, tin mine workers, boat builders, fruit sellers and vegetable gardeners brought their families up well on meagre incomes. During the years of subsistence farming, people were relatively self-subsistent.

They had to compete with the weather. The worst of their economic woes were when they could not pay the chettiers or reclaim the necklace or gold ring or whatever was pawned. People lived in rural areas and in villages. They had water from wells and rivers. There was no electricity in villages but they made do with kerosene or gasoline lamps.

There was not much furniture in homes. Every piece of furniture crafted in the village or imported was treasured. The wealth of a village was measured by the bicycle. Then Honda bikes came into the villages. Those who possessed the Morris Minor, Austin or Ford were the wealthiest.

There were no clocks in homes and there were few watches. But people understood the importance of time and valued time.

Then the towns grew. Petaling Jaya is an example of the town which created jobs in light manufacturing industries. Penang Port, Port Klang, Rantau Panjang and Padang Besar opened up the country, beginning with barter trade and driving the circulation of money. In the past, the population on subsistence economy did not understand the payment of income tax. Now there are approximately 12 million jobs in the country for approximately 5 million households or so. Only about 1.4 million pay income tax.

Students now go to school using public transport, use personal drivers or even drive their own cars to colleges and universities. Now there is much family and community wealth being shared.

One intangible wealth is inter-generational sharing of family, community and national narratives. The realities of past poverty and past sacrifices must be understood by present and future generations. From such humble lots, Malaysians have become extraordinary people.

There is strength in being stoic. There is strength in understanding family origins and adversities.

There is strength in understanding that even as we have made much progress, the road ahead is winding and long, with many dangerous potholes and precipices, and dangers lurk at every turn.

We need to have the map of the future, understanding Alfred Korzybski's notion "The map is not the territory" ... distinguishing belief from reality.

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The nation can only really be developed when there is sustainable cumulative wealth of communities and when most Malaysians have high income and begin to pay their taxes as a sacred responsibility.

Writer is a deputy vice-chancellor, INTI Laureate International University



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