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THINK-TANK

Why a liberal arts education is useful

By Kishore Mahbubani



ONE of the most stupid decisions I have made in my life also turned out to be one of the wisest decisions of my life. What was my most stupid decision? It was to give up studying economics and sociology at the National University of Singapore (NUS), repeat a year and start studying philosophy as a single subject. Friends and family thought I was committing an act of total folly by giving up one year of income and graduating a year later, and studying an impractical and 'useless' subject.

So why was it wise? Simple! We are moving into an era of great uncertainty. Frankly, no one has a clue about the nature of the new world order which is emerging. Experts are clueless. No one predicted the Lehman Brothers crisis of 2008. Many more such crises are forthcoming because we have never experienced the kinds of historical changes we are experiencing now.

And how does one prepare for uncertainty? The only way to do so is to take nothing for granted. We must learn to question every assumption in our minds. How does one acquire the facility to do this? The answer is a Western liberal arts education.

Wikipedia defines it as follows: 'The term 'liberal arts' denotes a curriculum that imparts general knowledge and develops the student's rational thought and intellectual capabilities, unlike the professional, vocational, technical curricula emphasising specialisation. Contemporary liberal arts education comprises studying literature, languages, philosophy, history, mathematics and science. In classical antiquity, the liberal arts denoted the education proper to a free man... unlike the education proper to a slave.'

Though I specialised only in philo-sophy, I imbibed the liberal arts culture of challenging and questioning assumptions. This habit of questioning assumptions did not stop when I graduated from NUS in 1971. Indeed, it has intensified over the years. And this habit of questioning gives me the confidence to predict with certainty that we will be encountering uncertainty on many fronts.

At the global level, we have lived with a reasonably stable world order because the United States and Western Europe have provided pillars of stability since World War II. While the rest of the world shook with changes, they continued to remain stable, peaceful and prosperous. While they had upheavals from time to time - from the protests against the Vietnam War in the US to the Paris riots of 1968 - there was never any doubt that they would remain politically and economically stable, and that they would continue to support the benign rules-based world order they had created.

The most shocking thing to happen in recent times is that these two pillars of stability may well become two pillars of instability. The rhetoric of the US and Europe has not changed. But those who make policy decisions on the basis of rhetoric will get into trouble. In a fairly fundamental way, the political consensus on the global roles and responsibilities of the US and Europe has begun to break down.

It is possible that a new positive political consensus may well emerge, but I am not holding my breath. It would be safer to prepare for political dissension and gridlock in the US and Europe. And what happens to the global order when the pillars of stability become unstable pillars?

As for the regional level, we face uncertainty on many fronts. Asean is facing many challenges. Thailand, a traditional pillar of stability in the Asean family, continues to face an uncertain future. The fate of Myanmar is also uncertain. Externally, the simultaneous rise of China and India and the decline of Japan will give Asean both unprecedented opportunities and challenges.

The opportunities come in the form of free trade agreements signed with China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Today, the most important relationship is between the US and China. Soon, the most important relationship will be between China and India. Overall, the prospects of positive relationships look good. But there will be many hiccups along the way. And will Asean be torn apart if these relationships sour?

Domestically, we have just celebrated 45 years of peace and prosperity. This is a remarkable feat. But over the next 45 years, I can predict with great certainty that there will be political upheavals, economic challenges, social tensions and other unanticipated problems. Why am I so certain?

The 45 years of continuous peace and prosperity was the result of extra-ordinary skill and wisdom. Such extra-ordinary skill and wisdom comes once in 1,000 years. Singapore cannot keep defying the odds. Soon, it will revert to the norm and experience the usual challenges which most nation-states experience.

So how do we deal with these multiple waves of uncertainty which will inevitably come to our shores? We should learn a lesson or two from the surfers of physical waves. They train their bodies to immediately seize and take advantage of a new wave and try to ride it before it swamps them. In Singapore, we should all learn to become mental surfers, ready to ride the next wave of uncertainty before it swamps us.

The art of mental surfing can be best learnt through a liberal arts education. Singaporean parents are congenitally conditioned to push their children to learn something 'useful', like engineering or accounting. Yes, these are worthwhile professions - my son is studying civil engineering. At the same time, Singaporean parents should not despair if their children opt for a 'useless' liberal arts education - as my two other children have.

Such an education may actually provide the most useful education young Singaporeans can get.

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