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The final Big Idea: Love Singapore

And show it with three "Ls": litter not, laugh a lot and live the Pledge.

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

Now that I have reached the final column of my Big Idea series for 2014, I am happy to summarise the core idea underlying all the Big Ideas columns I have written this year. It can be captured in two words: "Love Singapore". If we can practise this with total commitment and conviction, Singapore will survive another 50 years.

So, can we love Singapore?

The simple answer is that love is not shown with words only but with deeds also. If our deeds do not match our words, we do not really love Singapore. This is why I am suggesting three practical deeds we can do to demonstrate our love. All three deeds begin with the letter "L": "litter not, laugh a lot, and live the pledge".

Litter is a key indicator of love. If we consider Singapore our own home, we would keep it clean. Sadly, Singaporeans do not keep Singapore clean. Mr George Yeo, our former foreign minister, once wisely said to me, "Kishore, Singapore is not a clean city; it is the most cleaned city". We currently need an army of foreign workers to clean up after Singaporeans.

Many years ago, when our Public Service Division (PSD) was trying to replicate the Shell scenario planning exercise to assess the future of Singapore, it wrote two alternative scenarios for Singapore: "Hotel Singapore" or "A Home Divided". When we check into a hotel room, we do not clean it. We expect the cleaning/housekeeping service to do so. Yet, when we come home, we pick up the trash and keep our rooms clean.

These two alternative scenarios were brilliant. Singapore will survive if Singaporeans treat it as their home, not as their hotel. Yet, when you go jogging in East Coast Park on Monday mornings (as I do) or walk around HDB estates in the morning with soiled diapers and tampons occasionally being thrown out of windows, you find plenty of evidence to suggest that Singaporeans regard Singapore as their hotel, not their home.

Our level of social responsibility is also very low. We are struggling to persuade Singaporeans to divide their trash into two categories: waste and recyclable materials. By contrast, each Yokohama household habitually divides its trash into 15 (yes, 15!) categories before the rubbish collector comes.

There is absolutely no doubt that the Japanese love Japan and cherish their homeland. Can Singaporeans learn to cherish their homeland and keep it as clean as the Japanese do? If we can, Singapore will survive. So, in 2015, can each of us make a simple commitment to keep Singapore as clean as possible?

Let me deal quickly with one counter-argument. Some argue that the Japanese are unique. Their level of social responsibility is one of the highest in the world. Those who say this should visit Taipei and Hong Kong. They have Chinese inhabitants, not Japanese inhabitants. But they keep their cities much cleaner than Singapore citizens do. What explains this higher level of social responsibility of the Hong Kongers and Taiwanese? Can we reflect on this in 2015?

Last month, there was a rock concert at National Taiwan University. When the concert began, the first two bands reminded the young audience to place their garbage on the side of the venue. They did so.

Before the third rock group, LTK Commune, arrived, the audience was told to bring the garbage up front. They did this because it is a tradition to throw garbage at this band. The audience threw the garbage incessantly. When the performance ended, another band leader came to the stage and said, "Okay, let's clean up". The audience complied. The place was spotless when the audience left.

Would a Singapore rock concert audience be capable of leaving a venue equally spotless on a voluntary basis after a raucous rock concert? Or would they expect an army of foreign workers to clean up after them?

Another way to demonstrate our love for our fellow Singaporeans is to learn to laugh with each other. Over the years, we have seen several surveys demonstrating that Singapore is not one of the happiest societies on our planet. Indeed, the surveys seem to show that even though Singaporeans have clearly been more successful than Indonesians in economic development, Indonesians are far happier than Singaporeans. Indeed, many of the Asean countries are happier than Singapore.

In a 2011 Gallup poll, Singapore famously ranked as experiencing the fewest positive emotions in the world. The percentage of Singaporeans who reported experiencing positive emotions the day before the poll was only 46 per cent, in contrast to Thailand, which ranked No. 5 at 83 per cent; the Philippines, No. 7 at 82 per cent; and Indonesia, No. 16 at 79 per cent.

In 2012, Singapore improved by 24 percentage points, hitting a five-year high of 70 per cent (No. 67). However, the other Asean countries were still far ahead in happiness: the Philippines ranked No. 8 at 81 per cent; Indonesia, No. 9 at 80 per cent; and Thailand, No. 34 at 75 per cent.

It would be foolish to try to analyse the deeper sources of our relative unhappiness in a brief article like this. However, some obvious facts cannot be denied. Of all the citizens on our planet, Singaporeans have the least amount of "physical space" to live in. We are the most densely populated real country on our planet. Several animal studies have shown that when animals are housed together in close proximity with little space to roam in, they become less happy. Hence, we have to learn to live with our existential condition of lack of space and not get unhappy about it.

One way of handling this existential angst is to laugh more. Singaporeans are by and large very serious and we rarely laugh at ourselves.

One small indicator of this is that we have still not found a good national cartoonist. By contrast, Malaysia was blessed that it found and nurtured Lat. He gave brilliant insights into Malaysia's society through his lovingly drawn cartoons. Tun Mahathir Mohamad was and still is one of the toughest leaders that Malaysia has produced. His stature was in no way diminished by the cartoons Lat drew of him. Indeed, they may even have enhanced Dr Mahathir's national stature.

Singapore is clearly not ready yet for a serious political cartoonist. However, we can try to encourage a culture of cartoonists by getting some of our leading citizens to allow themselves to be parodied. I am confident that some of our leading lights - like Tommy Koh and Chan Heng Chee, Ho Kwon Ping and Gerard Ee - would not object to being lampooned once in a while.

I have no doubt that we have the talent. Indeed, one of our cartoonists, Heng Kim Song, has had several of his cartoons published in leading global newspapers like the International New York Times.

So when we celebrate Singapore at 50 in 2015, we should also encourage our Lats who are hiding in the closet to come out and try to publish cartoon books that bring out the essence of Singapore society. I was truly happy that one of my Big Ideas calling for good historical narratives of Singapore led to the establishment of a triennial \$50,000 prize for the best history book on Singapore. I hope that another donor will step forward to launch a prize for the best cartoon book on Singapore. If we learn to laugh at ourselves and at our fellow Singaporeans, we will grow to love Singapore even more.

Finally, we should demonstrate our love for Singapore by living the Pledge. We will always be grateful to Mr S. Rajaratnam, our first foreign minister, for having crafted one of the best national pledges in the world. It is clear, simple and inspiring, and reads as follows: "We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation."

To me, the key phrase is "regardless of race, language or religion". If we can demonstrate that we love

fellow Singaporeans of another race, language and religion as much as we love fellow Singaporeans of our own race, language and religion, then we would have truly arrived as a real nation state.

Many of us say we do so. Here again, the question is: Do our deeds match our words? One good practice Singapore has initiated is to encourage the three main Singapore communities to take care of the poorest and most disadvantaged members of their communities.

This is why we set up, for example, the Chinese Development Assistance Council, the Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community or Mendaki, and the Singapore Indian Development Association (Sinda). These are noble initiatives and they have done much good. Each one of us was encouraged to contribute to the self-help groups of our communities. Hence, when I was in the civil service, there was a deduction from my salary to contribute to Sinda.

Let us now take this one step further and encourage Singaporeans to contribute to the poorest citizens of the other communities.

One gift we can give to ourselves as fellow Singaporeans is to do even more to erase the lingering divisions among the main communities in Singapore.

Hence, if Singaporeans could donate to or volunteer to help less-privileged citizens outside their own communities, we could demonstrate through our deeds, not our words, that we love our fellow Singaporeans "regardless of race, language or religion".

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