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Critical thinking straight from the heart

Seow Hon TAN
Singapore Management University, seowhontan@smu.edu.sg

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Tan Seow Hon ,

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The state of the hearts of our young people, specifically whether they have the moral courage to stand up for what they believe in, is in the spotlight again with this newspaper's upcoming Youthink pages intended to showcase their views.

Mr Verghese Mathews' article, Lost Generation Or Future leaders: Our Call (Dec 30), and Mr Jamie Han's response, Our Smart Students Not Willing To Think Critically (Jan 1), too, deal with this issue.

Mr Han called hers 'a generation of lost sheep' with 'an appalling lack of passionate, critical thinkers', who 'lack the moral courage to speak out after going through an education system that rewards conformity and punishes originality'. The Youthink pages might go some way to show if the concern is well-founded.

An interesting issue is raised: What exactly is critical thinking?

Critical thinking might commonly be taken to refer to a contrarian approach to all mainstream views - disagreeing or challenging for disagreement's sake. Mr Han, for example, refers to 'a generation of sheep, too afraid to challenge the authority of our herders', with the 'few wolves left among us who do challenge the status quo run(ing) the risk of being labelled as anarchists and troublemakers'. In this particular illustration, he veers towards this view of critical thinking (though I believe he says more than this).

Critical thinking, however, has the potential to be more than alternative or contrarian wisdom per se. Mr Mathews noted that the most important question was whether 'we prepared (the young people) to be morally courageous, a trait without which being able to think critically would be more academic and, indeed, self-serving'.

On a more constructive level, critical thinking refers to a rigorous examination of all views. Only after such a rigorous examination may one be said to have chosen to believe or to take a particular stand.

This contrasts with following, or being part of the herd. One's chosen stand may well coincide with authority or conventional wisdom. One's genuinely adopted belief system becomes the basis for one to stand up. The motivation for critical thinking and the speaking up that follows is the antithesis of apathy and indifference - one cares enough to consider. Critical thinking is not just a matter of the mind - but of the heart.

So, the basic issue raised by the question of whether our young people have the moral courage to stand up for what they believe in is that of whether they believe in anything at all, apart from building a comfortable life for themselves.

As someone who is arguably young enough to be regarded as part of the generation that Mr Han calls Generation S (for Sheep), I have encouraged my contemporaries to speak up, sometimes only to be rebuffed with retorts of how our views would not matter and we would not make a difference.

When recounting my own experiences, to show how our views do matter, fail to penetrate the thick wall of cynicism masquerading as 'cool' lost idealism, I have sometimes wondered if that wall is a mere veneer for the state of the heart - that the heart is, at the end of the day, not grounded in any belief of what is worthwhile beyond building our own lives.

The heart does not care. We do not speak because we do not know what to say. We do not know what to say because we cannot be bothered. As one friend puts it, we are like the hobbits in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord Of The Rings, who have a congenital preference to stay in the comfort zone of their shire.

Unsurprisingly, if we are unclear about our values, a removal of barriers to our speaking up is more likely to lend to the first type of critical thinking rather than the second. But the first type does not quite qualify as critical thinking, as it involves an unthinking rejection of all which is mainstream, conventional or in line with authority. We are still part of the herd, albeit a different one.

At a Singapore forum in Boston years ago, a group of us wondered why able young Singaporeans were leaving the country after studying overseas, while Nigerian counterparts were passionate to return to their country to implement social change. Several persons promptly proposed that the way to bring Singaporeans home lay in making Singapore a more attractive and competitive place. It was pathetic of me to have kept quiet although I had something to say (ironic in the light of this article).

To my mind, the point was sorely missed, for Nigerians were going home with ideals for social justice and for the love of their country, however unattractive it was. Surely then, the anecdotal evidence showed something about the state of our hearts rather than that of our country. We do not need to feel guilty about caring about opportunities for our own advancement, but do we care for more than these?

The problem of a lack of critical thinkers, identified as a problem of the heart, cannot be addressed by a removal of barriers to challenge of authority, though that is a first step. True, apathy and indifference may have resulted from perceived barriers to civic participation, but the greater challenge for society is to address the root of the problem.

As someone who interacts frequently in my work with a sector of 'Generation S', I ask myself these questions: Do our young people have any value system to stand by when all barriers are stripped away? If the answer is 'no', why not? How can we fan every flickering flame and nurse every bruised reed, and help them find their way once again?