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No vision? Youths need role models

Tan Seow Hon

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MUCH recent talk about the vision (or lack thereof) of our young people has revolved around a search for solutions in the form of programmes that give them an opportunity to broaden their minds and, it is hoped, develop their characters.

Madam Cynthia Phua, MP for Aljunied GRC, for example, noted the worrying trend of many young people being aimless in life and needing direction.

This was evident in their adoption of Western fads and blind adulation of celebrity idols. She suggested that an emphasis on sports in schools might facilitate character development through the encouragement of competition.

The focus on varied activities outside of the classroom is not new. For decades, our better students knew that to get the best scholarships, one must have a well-rounded curriculum vitae exhibiting various abilities and interests beyond studies. Second, we were made to do some 'social work' in the form of visitations to homes for the aged or the handicapped.

We were then teenagers still searching for meaning and direction in life. Some of us did not quite know what to do when we were trooped off in school buses to those homes.

Occasionally, those leading us would be teachers already overwhelmed by administrative duties, or who saw it as their primary task merely to help students cram for exams, not to give an adolescent guidance in his or her search for meaning.

Some of us, when visiting homes, or going to youth adventure camps, may have had a glimpse of life beyond academic mugging. These visits helped us to learn that there were others less fortunate than ourselves, and some of us might also have been inspired to care for others as a result.

But I fear that for most, the once-a-year visitation that went into our curriculum vitae as brownie points for service, sometimes accompanied by little explanations of why we were doing what we were doing, failed to inculcate values of watching out for others or caring for those who need help.

Nor did it stir up any lasting compassion in us. How could it, when there was little or no follow-up, and our visitation was, sadly, no different from the one to the museum?

The fact that we did such activities usually after school hours may have further conveyed a message that such activities were stuff that one did if one had lots of free time and energy, rather than something everyone should incorporate into his lifestyle.

As for our occasional youth adventure camps, do these infrequent outings actually teach the value of teamwork and train leadership skills? Or do they merely accentuate the differences between the natural 'born leaders' and youths outside the 'inner circle'?

Don't get me wrong. This criticism is not targeted at the utility of camps, but rather at the continued dichotomy between the average school day in which student initiative and leadership are not encouraged, and the unreal setting of the camp in which certain students discover their leadership abilities, while the bottom of the crop continues to remain 'unseen' and unhelped.

Structured programmes are good, but they are not enough. What our young lack are worthy role models whose lives are so integrated and consistent with what they say they value that young people

would feel they are worth emulating. Young people need older people who will show the way, whose enthusiasm will infect them, who will, even unwittingly, teach by example. Have we not learnt best this way?

When I did my master's programme in Boston, a lovely Mexican couple with whom I shared a mutual friend picked me up from the airport without telling me in advance they were going to do so. The husband was doing doctoral studies in the same university.

They ensured I settled into the new environment, watched out for me in little things, cooked dinners for me occasionally, and were generally there for me whenever I needed someone to talk with. When my printer broke down, I thought of them first, and they readily gave me a ride to the repair shop. Later, I learnt that they were hospitable not just to me, but to many others who participated in some student activities they were leading.

Years later, when I returned to Boston for my doctoral studies, a newbie no longer, I remembered their acts of kindness. My mum remarked that they were no longer there to watch out for me. I was sad, but I also felt impressed to do for others what they had done for me. They had shown me lives worth emulating.

To this day, wherever I am, I try to do for others the little things they did for me, because I learnt by their actions what was valuable, what would touch another person, and what would impact a life forever.

To my mind, the solution for youths' lack of vision lies not in structured programmes, but in letting our lives show what vision is. This is a solution that all who are older persons can participate in without special effort.

As someone who interacts with a number of young people in my work, I have found that while our youths seem bolder and more ready to challenge authority, the heart's cry of every human being (which may get muted by life's challenges as we age) is to find out what a life worth living looks like.

The challenge, though, is this: Do we as older persons know what we value, what we're living for? What message do we pass on in the choices we make in life? Are we just doing our own things, or will we, who have a chance to encounter young people, make time for them? Will we rise for the next generation?

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