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The Educated Heart: As Cunning as a Serpent, as Innocent as a Dove

Levan Lim & Rosalind Y. Mau

Moral and spiritual progress is infinitely more difficult than technological progress;...even surrounded and served by intricate and marvelous machines, man may be little more than a cruel and clever ape – unless he constantly thinks about what is truly good and strives to attain it.

Gilbert Highet, *The Immortal Profession*

The Eternal Egypt exhibition opened earlier this year at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. A highlight of this exhibition was a female mummy. A cover story in *The Straits Times* described the ancient art of mummification. During the mummification process, organs such as the stomach, liver, intestines and lungs were removed and stored in jars and buried with the mummy for these were considered necessary to afterlife. The brain was considered useless and discarded. Only the heart was left in place because it was believed to be the seat of intelligence and emotion.

One wonders about the ancient Egyptians' symbolism attached to preserving the heart and discarding the brain in preparing for the journey into the afterlife. What qualities of humanity did the ancient Egyptians value most? How did the ancient Egyptians perceive the relation between the mind and the heart? Why was the heart seen as the seat of intelligence as well as emotion? These were some questions that came to us when we read the article. In more recent times, the heart and mind appear to have taken on more clearly antonymous associations that dichotomise the two. The divisional nature of mind versus heart is evident in the famous adage: "Rule your heart lest your heart rules you". The assumption is that the heart with its emotions cannot be fully trusted and is to be subjugated to the faculties of the rational and reasoning mind.

In our search and efforts towards making Singapore a “world-class” city that has both the brains to succeed in an intensely competitive global society and the “heart-ware” to be a gracious and caring home to both locals and expatriates, it is important to reflect upon how we go about achieving this vision of a good society. Significant changes in government policies regarding the education of the young indicate a rethinking and reprioritization of the type of society that is desirable in the next millenium: a society that values both the mind as well as the heart.

Already, the feasibility of such a vision is being translated into practice through fundamental policy changes in education such as the “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” framework which places character building at a higher priority over knowledge in education. There is a growing recognition that unless Singaporeans succeed in working together for the good of their nation, and value a collaborative and community spirit, the country’s ability to meet the challenges of the next century will be heavily compromised. The concerns of Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew on social cohesiveness in present-day Singapore underscore the government’s move toward character building and values education (*The Straits Times*, 1999).

Working together to maintain and advance Singapore’s stakes in the international arena essentially requires people to care and feel for one another, a value that until recently has not been made officially explicit in educational priorities. Until recently, the hallmark and defining criterion for quality education in Singapore has been the traditional emphasis on academic excellence. Though still part of the educational paradigm, its sole emphasis has been hastily deconstructed as insufficient for meeting the challenges of the next century. In its place is the “Desired Outcomes of Education” document (Ministry of Education, 1998).

This explicitly embraces a holistic approach to educating the young that values and develops the “whole child” in terms of the moral, intellect, physical, social and aesthetic dimensions so as to foster qualities such as graciousness, caring and compassion. Being able to get along and relate with others from diverse backgrounds was also another educational aim espoused in the document. Simply translated, “smartness” for self in order to survive and get ahead of academic competition is no longer an ideal and practice the educational system would like to reinforce.

“Smartness” for self and others is the new proclamation in education. Terms like “ability-driven” education reflect the new educational goals. Current educational practice emphasises group and project work which promote students’ use of both their cognitive as well as affective faculties to achieve educational objectives. Gurus such as Daniel Goleman, the author of *Emotional Intelligence*, have been invited to Singapore to speak to school teachers on the importance of emotional literacy to relating to self and others.

These changes to the education system suggest that those parts of ourselves that we have traditionally employed and long cherished in creating a good society are not adequate in our current expanded and holistic educational paradigm. To realise this new paradigm, a rethinking, reconstruction and reflection on how we perceive the relationship between the mind and heart are needed. To use a frequently spouted term, we need to perceive and construct a “win-win” situation when it comes to this relationship between the heart and the mind. We need to examine the avenues of change that we have been used to in our society to translate visions into reality.

The change-from-without avenue that relies on an external system to regulate change and human behaviour has been the traditional *modus operandi* which promoted an efficiency-driven model of society. The shift towards an ability-driven education system in which schools are seen as educating communities where individual capacities would be cultivated, tolerance for difference nurtured and character molded for the good of society calls for a vision of the good society that values both emotional as well as intellectual literacy. As the highest priority is nurturing values that are socially cohesive, exemplary practice will be expected from all involved in education, since the young are only too quick to point out the discrepancy between what is taught and what is caught.

To create the good society, we need to think, feel and act inclusively and teach our young likewise. Two years ago, Singapore played host to the 7th International Conference on Thinking. The theme of the conference was “Borderless Thinking: Creating a Global Learning Society”. The term borderless thinking evokes images of internationalisation in the global information age. However, we also need to

revisit such themes in its application for all Singaporeans in the pursuit of the good society. Our aspired values as a nation need to resonate with truly borderless thinking that will transcend the primitive typologies and categorisations that lie at the heart of excluding those who are not perceived to be as capable or intelligent or useful, such as older persons and people with disabilities. We need to subscribe to a vision of the good society for all Singaporeans.

For those of us who are deeply ensconced in the habits of the traditional system that value the mind over the heart, what are some values we need to unlearn and shed before we take on the challenge of assimilating new values that will promote our new vision of the good society? The answer to this question will be easy to those who have, in the words of Charles Handy, one of the world's best management gurus, "been true to oneself" (*The Straits Times*, 1999). These words of wisdom contain an age-old belief that one is closest in mind, heart and spirit to one's values by being true to self.

What does it mean though by being true to self in busy, hectic Singapore? It is in being aware of the self, accepting its strengths and limitations, and celebrating its spirit in both strife and success. It is in recognising the diversity and vulnerabilities within self that are common to everyone and rising to the challenge of expansively extending the latitude of hospitality and acceptance to others who are unlike ourselves. Knowing self and its vulnerabilities makes it easier to appreciate those within our society who are rarely the objects of our thought such as the disabled, the disadvantaged or the elderly who may neither command our attention or participate in the global information revolution. When one is true to self, one cannot help not being true to others.

Samuel Oliner, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust who researched the values and qualities of individuals who rescued many of the Jewish people and those who were bystanders (nonrescuers), noted in his book *The Altruistic Personality* that rescuers tended to be individuals who grew up in households valuing caring, acceptance, generosity and relationships with people of diverse backgrounds. Unknowingly, these rescuers were being prepared to become their best during the

Holocaust. Their life-risking response to their Jewish neighbours grew out of a strong sense of valuing others and community which were instilled and practiced from an early age. Their ability to act in the most noble and decent manner in the worst of times bears testament to how they discharged their own values and duties of what they thought and felt was good and right. Using their intellect to hide their Jewish neighbours in the most cunning and creative ways and their hearts as the leverage to be moved by their neighbours' plight, they indeed became "as cunning as serpents and as innocent as doves". Perhaps, it is in moments of the most dire circumstances that a flowering of the human spirit occurs that aligns ever so perfectly the service of the heart and the mind. We hope that such a renaissance of the human spirit can also occur under less dire circumstances so that the good society can be achieved in the here and now for all.

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