

This piece was written before the news of Covid 19 spread world-wide and the virus moved across country boundaries. Though reality has experienced a disruption we could not anticipate, I do believe the message of this piece – still holds meaning and hope.

Look beyond today. Be Calm. Be at Peace. All will be Well.

Patricia Nunis, 1 December 2020

The Inclusive Lions of the Year of the Rat

On Chinese New Year morning, 25th January, 2020, I was privileged to be present at a Lion Dance to celebrate the New Year. It was held in the compound of the Church of Divine Mercy, Glenmarie, Shah Alam. Present were a few hundred people of all ethnicities in Malaysia- Chinese, Indian, East Malaysians of various tribes, Eurasian, Caucasian ... etc., who were regulars of the parish as well as, visitors for the holidays. The front porch had been prepared for the Lion Dance and people lined the entrance from the gate and formed a circle 4-5 deep in the parking area and lobby of the church. The cultural practice would take place outside the main hall or nave of the Church before the Celebration of the Eucharist. I found a spot where my 4ft 10 in frame would not be blocked by a potted plant or a taller person and settled to watch the Lions. It was always an energizing, celebration of life every year – to see the confidence and daring of the young acrobats embodying the vigor of lions to welcome a new year.

The drum beats and cymbals announced the start of the Lions' entrance and they pranced in through the gate and made their way to the front of the lobby to acknowledge the presence of the Pastor, Rev. Gerard Theraviam, and made their respectful bow before a quick display of their prowess – jumping and posturing and showing their skills in “being” the Lions. I was less than 10 feet away separated by a railing around the side overlooking the carpark. It was not the first time I had been so close to the performers – and I delighted I had a clear uninterrupted view. What was new, was that the set up of the crowd in a circle around the lobby area gave the Lions a circular stage and they took the opportunity to get up close to the waiting crowd – much to their excitement and appreciation.

I watched these 2 Lions taking off in different directions so that they could greet everyone in the circle – and I realized quickly that the dancing lions performed for every family and person there – irrespective if they were Chinese, or Indian or Kadazan or any other category of person. These dancing performers were being inclusive! Perhaps, the performers themselves, may have been intrigued by the mixed audience of the CDM parish. Perhaps, they had been instructed to play to the crowd... perhaps, whatever it was, they moved from families to groups and individuals playfully, and with grace. They even slowed down near the elderly and wheelchair-bound, and, allowed them to caress their costumed back and touch their head. This was new for me – in previous times when I witnessed a Lion Dance, the performers seemed almost detached from the crowd, performing to their own rhythm. These Lions were playing with us...

I gave my place up to a child so she could have a better view and moved into the lobby area. I thought I would take my seat in the Church and get ready for the service. I was surprised to realise that the lions had come up the lobby steps and were now circulating among those of us standing at the entrance to the nave. They made a slow progress among the group again, allowing each person who wished to give them a pat or stroke, as they passed by. I was one of many who reached out to touch the red and gold robes covering the dancing forms – who wouldn't want to touch a dancing lion when its just in front of you within arm's reach?

As the lions moved on to another section of the building to greet others around the hall, I walked in to take my seat and have a moment to myself. I could not have had a better experience of the Lunar New Year – then the words of this title popped into my mind. These were the Inclusive Lions of the Year of the Rat. I was complete.

The Lions were for me a metaphor of what this year could be, should be, needs to be – if we are to grow as a nation. Though the Lion Dancers are clearly a Chinese cultural performance – on this day, at CDM, these Lions chose to be inclusive and bring everyone into their celebration. The diverse gathering also welcomed the Lions and enjoyed their presence – enjoying the moment of joy and the celebration of life. No qualms were raised about the mix of culture and faith – just the acknowledgment that each had its place in our life. The human psyche is complex and mysterious and rejoices in metaphors and rituals to bring together the various strands of our history and experience. I can be Chinese and Catholic and rejoice in both. I may be Indian and Christian yet, take joy in a Ponggol celebration or share my neighbor's joy in a Lion Dance. I may be Chindian or Eurasian and acknowledge that we are all uniquely same yet different – and be joyous.

Whatever the dominant strand of news-bits in Malaysia today – it seems that there is a perverse wish to sow division and dissension among our citizenry. Where we used to be proud of our diversity – we now see seeds of suspicion being sown by individuals who should know better, some sadly, our elected leadership. The inclusive dancing lions are for me, a sign of the resilience and groundedness of everyday Malaysians. We can, and do, accept differences as part of our lives – even though, there are those who would divide us.

Yes – I agree that there is much yet to be done in Malaysia before we can fully experience a mature democracy. We are only 63 years old and 60 of these years have been in the hands of a party practicing a feudal autocracy masquerading as a guided democracy. We have a long way to go and much to unlearn.

Those inclusive lions invite us to know our roots and be confident that we will find our way if we stay open and listen to each other as we build a new society in Malaysia. The youth who look at the world with new eyes, have no fear. They do not linger over the atrocities of 1969 or the nostalgic memories of the 50's and 60's before race and religion were politicized. Talk to young persons – they will surprise you about how they view Malaysia. They very likely will find the answers to their own questions and ours as well. We would do well to provide them with our insights, share the history, and empower them to action based on our shared values and principles. The future is theirs to explore.

So - at the beginning of this Lunar New Year – join me and the Dancing Lions, as we welcome the Year of the Rat – the first year of the Chinese Zodiac calendar – promising to be a year of new beginnings and growth.

Gong Xi Fa Cai!

Patricia Nunis
1 February 2020