

7 Habits of a Singaporean

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IN TWO years, Singapore will celebrate its 50th anniversary as a sovereign and independent country. The Government of Singapore has appointed me to the steering committee in charge of the celebrations. In this essay, I wish to share my reflections on what makes me a Singaporean.

- First, I am a Singaporean because I was born here, grew up here, went to school here, married here and live and work here.

My wife used to ask me: "Where would you like to spend your retirement years?" I would reply that I wish to work until I die and would like to die in the land of my birth. I have spent my whole life working for Singapore and, although I have never signed a bond of service, I feel bonded to Singapore.

It is, of course, true that you don't have to be born in Singapore to be a Singaporean. One of our founding fathers, Mr S. Rajaratnam, used to say that being a Singaporean is not a condition of one's birth but of one's conviction. In that spirit, we have welcomed many, who were born elsewhere, into our family. I count among our compatriots friends like Mr Asad Latif, born in India; Mr Alain Vandendorpe, born in Belgium; Mr Ray Ferguson, born in the United Kingdom; Mr Simon Israel, born in Fiji; and Mr Gautam Banerjee, born in India.

- Second, what makes me a Singaporean is the fact that my close friends include Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, Arabs, Jews, Armenians. I venture that hardly any Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian or Indonesian can make the same claim; and few even among Americans, from the land of the melting pot.

In the short space of half a century, we have succeeded in achieving a level of acceptance - I would even call it celebration - of the diversity of the human family, which no older nation has done.

I believe that, if presented with a worthy Malay candidate, the electorate of Singapore would elect him or her as our President. I also believe that Singaporeans are ready for a non-Chinese Prime Minister.

- Third, the Singaporean's cultural DNA includes a gene that respects all faiths.

Although Singapore is a very small country, our Inter-Religious Organisation consists of the representatives of 10 of the major religions of the world. A good Singaporean may or may not have a religion. However, he is schooled to respect all faiths, and no matter how much he may believe that his faith is the one true faith, he may not denigrate the faith of others.

This is why Singaporeans reacted so strongly when a Christian pastor was caught bad-mouthing Taoism and Buddhism. It is not only against the law to do that but it is also against our social norm. Inter-religious harmony is one of our most precious achievements.

- Fourth, I believe that Singaporeans share certain core values. The Singaporean is honest, hard-working, law-abiding and reliable. We believe in meritocracy.

I know that, as imperfect mortals, we don't always reflect these virtues in our daily lives. But I would maintain that, on the whole, they are the values that Singaporeans live by. For this reason, Singaporeans are head-hunted by the private sector and sought after by international organisations. The fact that Transparency International ranks Singapore as the cleanest and most non-corrupt country in Asia and one of the top five in the world vindicates my view.

I was also very pleased by how well Singapore did in the Reader's Digest's exercise, in which a certain number of wallets is randomly dropped in different cities around the world. The exercise was to find out how many wallets were returned. In Singapore, seven of the 10 wallets dropped were returned by the finders. This was a high score. I am also convinced that Singapore's taxi drivers are among the most honest in the world.

- Fifth, Singaporeans speak English in an identifiably unique way. I don't mean Singlish. I mean our accent and intonation.

I had a very close American friend called Miriam Levering. One day, she was on a street car in Vienna. She heard several men talking to one another in English. She went up to them and asked whether they were from Singapore. They said yes and asked her how she knew. She said: "You speak just like my friend, Tommy Koh."

Although I have spent more than 20 years of my life in America, I have not acquired an American accent. I therefore cannot understand why some Singaporeans, who have had much less exposure to the West, speak English with a fake foreign accent. We should be true to ourselves and speak English in the Singaporean way. There is no need to put on an Oxbridge accent or an American accent.

- Sixth, one of the things that make me a Singaporean is my love of our hawker food. Cooking and baking are two of the greatest inventions of the human civilisation. When I was living in New York and Washington, I would often ask Singaporeans what they miss most about home. In their replies, they would always mention family, friends and food.

Our hawker food reflects the inter-racial and inter-cultural diversity of Singapore. Eating is also an arena in which Singaporeans cross many boundaries. Thus, I have Indian friends who love Chinese food and Chinese friends who love Indian or Malay food. Our hawker centres should be preserved and enhanced because they are where Singaporeans of all races, ages and incomes meet and enjoy our unique culinary achievements. I am therefore very pleased to be one of the judges, for the fourth year, of the Singapore Hawker Masters competition, sponsored by The Straits Times and Lianhe Zaobao.

- Seventh, I love physical Singapore. I love our trees, parks, gardens, forests and beaches. Singapore should keep as much of our natural heritage as possible. We should also aspire to maintain a balance between heritage and modernity in

our built environment. I regret that my primary school has disappeared and my high school has moved house twice. I am, however, happy that my law school has returned to its original home at Bukit Timah.

I am very encouraged by the new interest shown by Singaporeans, young and old, to preserve our memories, history and heritage. This is good because a nation is a people bound together by their collective memories of the past and their shared dreams of the future. We need to anchor our memories of the past to physical Singapore.

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