Critical thinking straight from the heart

By Tan Seow Hon
For The Straits Times

The state of the hearts of our young people, particularly whether they have the moral courage to stand up for what they believe in, is in the spotlight again with this newspaper’s Youthink pages intended to showcase brave Mr. Verghese Mathews’s 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 uncomfortable question is raised: What exactly is critical thinking?

Critical thinking might commonly be taken to refer to a contrarian approach that still maintains being 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 elders, with “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, redundant.

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 standing up that follows is the antithesis of apathy and indifference to a basic human issue: one’s own identity.

Unsurprisingly, if we are unclear about our values, a removal of barriers to our speaking up is more likely to lead 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 perceived as 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, thought 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?

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