

The Journey called Life

After watching Ismaël Ferroukhi's *Le Grand Voyage* (the Big Journey), I felt a certain bond with the characters in the film; the traditionalist Moroccan father and Reda, his irreligious French-born son (who drove his father across 10 countries, through Bulgarian snows and Syrian desert to Mecca). I empathize with their turmoil as they tried to reconcile issues of generation gap, modernity and religion. *Le Grand Voyage* is not merely a film. It is my and your journeys through life.

"What do you know? You don't even know how to read."

[Reda told his father who insisted on following his instincts than the foolproof road map]

How often have we displayed such arrogance especially to our elders in an attempt to show off our worldly views perceived to be superior to theirs? We are, after all graduates of high school and university whereas they are proletariats who, due to life's fateful turns, ended up being schooled on the streets. It is interesting how young people tend to associate education with paper qualification. Reda's father, the illiterate migrant worker, was somewhat 'educated' enough to be able to read the Quran and had the skills to negotiate with an unauthorized Bulgarian money changer while his educated son stood aside.

"You may know how to read and write, but you know nothing of life."

[The angry father reprimanded Reda when they lost all their money due to Reda's carelessness]

Education does not only mean the ability to read and write in the conventional way. It is the ability to apply that knowledge in everyday life, just like Reda's father who was able to communicate with people from all walks of life. They say a wise man is an educated man whilst an educated man may not be wise. To go through life, one must be wise enough to read beyond the alphabets; to see through human kindness and/or hypocrisy. Only then can one proudly claim to be a graduate of the University of Life.

We're at the customs.

So?

This is not the place to pray.

Don't you believe in Allah?

[Reda was told to stop the car so that his father could perform the evening prayers]

The meaning of religion differs for Reda's father and Reda. While the father prayed in the hotel room, near some trees, in the Syrian Desert, the 18-year old Reda walked elsewhere or observed his father from an awkward distance. These differences in perception of religion are typical among migrant Moroccans and their French-born children. The Moroccan parents would try to conserve their religion and culture while their children, due to their assimilation into the French culture, take religious matters lightly. Some know nothing beyond fasting during Ramadan and celebrating Eid. Furthermore, the gulf that separates them is made deeper by their status as 'exiles' in France.

Although this situation is not reflective of our local context, we should be prudent of how modern life can somewhat influence one's perceptions of religion. Our young must realise that religious values are not the exclusive rights of the old. To be modern and integrated into society does not equate to the abandonment of religion. However, judging from the current societal problems that plagued the Malay Muslims community especially, one cannot help but be weary that the young might adopt the same nonchalance attitude towards religion.

"Don't you practice forgiveness in your religion?"

[Reda drove beside his father, pleading for forgiveness]

The old-age issue of generation gap transcends all boundaries and nationalities. The angry father stormed off, preparing to walk to Mecca alone after catching Reda flirting with a belly dancer in the hotel room. Reda begged for forgiveness but his father never answered his pleas. This elliptical film reminds us of the gulf between

father and son. This generation gap is further accentuated by their association of other characters they met along the way. Reda was happy to get drunk with the sly-talking man they met at the Bulgaria-Turkey border, who assured him (using a Sufi aphorism) that it was alright for Muslims to drink alcohol. While father warned Reda, "*Don't believe anything he says.*"

The clashes in values were heightened when Reda grabbed the money his father had given to a beggar. His father slapped Reda before returning the `sadaqah' (donation) to the beggar. The frustrated Reda stormed off atop a sand dune, angry that his own father had used force on him. Such conflicts are but typical in all societies where dialogue between parents and offspring is difficult, even impossible. Very often, the young is unable to decipher their parents' actions. Parents should take the time to explain to their children the rationale behind their actions. Reda, who did not understand some of his father's actions, dwelt in misery and hatred. However, the times when Reda asked his father to explain the reasons for some of his actions that we see the opening up of an understanding between father and son.

"You're stubborn. I'm the one who decides here."

[Reda's father forced the car to a halt when Reda refused to stop driving]

Reda's relationship with his father mirrors our own relationship with our parents. The parents are seen as the authoritative figures that make the decisions while the children are mere followers or executioners of their parents' plans. As Reda so aptly pointed out to his father, "*We're a not on the same wavelength*"; his sentiments are echoed by many of today's youth.

The youth are grappling with the vast differences in opinions and views. Some elders use their superiority in age and experience to demand obedience from them. The youth's ideas are brushed away as idle thoughts. Sometimes the young just gave in, like Reda who told his father, "*Comme tu veux*" (As you wish). However, one fears that such harshness of the father figure might instil rebellion in the young and cause further rifts.

As with Reda who replied stubbornly in French to his father's Maghrebi-Arabic questions, we too are faced with issues of multiculturalism; of language and communication across gulfs of culture and generation. How often have we heard Malay speaking parents speak to their children in Malay, only to hear the children respond in English? Or hear how some Malay parents unashfully exclaimed that their children are performing badly in the Malay language. The first distillation of culture is the erosion of language. With the emphasis of English as an important commercial language, one must strike a balance between maintaining one's cultural identity and aligning to societal norm.

Reda's uneasiness and almost absence dealings with the Arabic speaking strangers who warmly invited him and his father to follow their Hajj entourage is but a sad reflection of the erosion of Reda's native language. It will indeed be a sad day for me, should my children not know their *bahasa ibunda* (native language). To be able to speak one's native language is synonymous to being proud of one's heritage. The situation nowadays is unfortunately the reverse.

"You're free now."

[Reda's father told Reda in Syria that he need not drive them to Mecca anymore]

At the beginning of the journey, Reda angrily told his mother that he had once failed his college entrance exams. Agreeing to drive his father to Mecca meant postponement of the exam for another year. Most of us, like Reda, will initially fret when making sacrifices for our family but ultimately the strength (or the lack) of our family bonds will determine whether or not we make that trip.

And just like any dutiful son (his father only gave him 4 days' notice to leave), Reda embarked on the big journey that moved the father-son relationship of hostility, indifference and sullen resentment to one of recognition, reconciliation, respect and ultimately, love. Reda was finally 'freed' in Mecca but his freedom came with a heavy price.

As we embark on our own journey in life, we too will realise the importance of understanding and accepting our heritage in order to accept ourselves. As for Reda, besides learning more about his religion, he had also learned humility. On his journey back to France, the once reluctant son stopped to give some money to the beggar at the roadside. His 3,000 miles drive to Mecca was not in vain.

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