

## **Racial Harmony in Singapore**

My name is Sage and I live one kilometre from my primary school. Thinking back, I seldom venture beyond my neighbourhood, yet in Singapore's multi-cultural society, I had the privilege of being taught invaluable lessons on personal values by many inspiring teachers of different races and origins. In my story today, I will speak of four of these teachers who have taught me such lessons, hence exhibiting harmony amidst diversity.

I first met Ms Shalini when I was asked to contribute some of my artwork for an art exhibition that she was putting up. Ms Shalini has long black hair and beautiful eyes. A whirlwind of energy and inspiration, she was always in the studio working with her students. At our first meeting, she told my mother and I that making art was like a reflection of the moon shining in the water on a clear night, and that disturbing an artist was like muddling up the reflection with a stick. I suppose Ms Shalini used the moon as an example because of its great significance in India, where many festivals and religious ceremonies were mapped out against a lunar calendar. During Diwali, the festival of lights, it was said that people would gather on rooftops to welcome the moon. Ms Shalini left India, her homeland 25 years ago to accompany her husband who came to Singapore to work. Through this example, Ms Shalini taught me the importance of focus and gave me carte blanche to practise my art.

My second inspiration was Mas, my Kindergarten 2 form teacher. She wears a tudong, a Malay religious dress, daily. Wearing a constant smile, her patience however was sorely tested one day. The class was particularly rowdy, with the boys running round the room and many of the girls chatting at the top of their voices. Mas told us promptly that if we did not behave, she would make us stay back during playground time for six minutes. "Why six minutes, Mas?" I peeped. The whole class, eager to hear the answer, quietened down immediately. With a very straight face, Mas said that as we were all six years old, she had chosen the magic number 6. We became less rowdy after that incident. Mas

taught us the importance of discipline and setting a good example for our younger peers.

While I exhibited for Ms Shalini, Yang Lao Shi was actually my first art teacher, teaching me art for four years in her native language Mandarin. Everyone said that she was very pretty, with her long dark silky hair that she always tied into a ponytail and her colourful smocks with designs of flowers and birds on them. She took great delight in teaching art, and was well-liked amongst her students because of her kindness. Yang Lao Shi left China to come to Singapore 7 years ago. She told me that in art, there was no right or wrong. As long as an artist uses his imagination, the art will turn out beautiful. Yang Lao Shi taught me the importance of creativity which I try to practise till today.

For a decade, my family has been buying bread from our neighbourhood baker, Uncle Dean, who always has a twinkle in his ocean blue eyes. His friendliness and generosity is as well-known as his scrumptious baked goods. Previously from Australia, his bakery caused a stir in the neighbourhood when it was first set up in 2012. This year, homebound because of the Covid pandemic, I wrote a book of poems as a holiday project and in a flash of inspiration, we thought that copies of the book could be sold for charity. Uncle Dean bought 100 copies to give out to his regular customers to spread a little joy when people were feeling down and gloomy. It was a meeting of minds, despite our different background and origin, to help the less fortunate and spread cheer at the same time. Uncle Dean taught me the importance of goodwill and community spirit in the midst of adversity.

These invaluable lessons on personal values show that racial harmony is one of our country's greatest weapon. It keeps us together to brave through any problems that are thrown in our way. It helps us make a more enriching life for ourselves. And most importantly, it lets us march into the new future, stronger together.

the Founder and Director of Little Artists Art Studio at The Mandarin Gardens. Mas is Masyithah Mahmud, senior teacher at Chiltern House, Turf Club Road where everyone is on a first name basis. Yang Lao Shi is the owner of Miro Art Studio, Beauty World Centre. Uncle Dean is Dean Brettschneider, the Founder of Baker & Cook at Hillcrest Road.

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