

Seeking truth: Being open, being true

Truth seeking is more important than
ever in an age marked by conflicts.
But how to go about it?

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We find, more than ever, that the world is split. Recent years have been troubled by heightened political and social conflicts across the globe. Societies in every continent are riven into polarities with accompanying attention to fake news. This isn't matched by commensurate attention to its binary opposite, truth.

We are in dire need of reflection on what it means to seek truth.

TRUTH AND TRUTHS

There is the Truth and there are truths, human discoveries and understandings held to be true

until proven otherwise.

Truth is quintessential, whereas what is held to be true is, in some way, ephemeral and subjective.

Over time we have seen how the pursuit of knowledge and understanding has yielded evolving truths. The discoveries of Newton, Einstein, and the advances of quantum physics present a series of truths about the material realities of our universe. The quest for "the grand theory of everything" is never-ending.

The best efforts in human history to establish truths have been shown, time and again, to be but attempts to attain the Truth.

In the sciences, limitations in conceptions and experiments excite and stimulate further

research. In the arts, truth-seeking revolves around detailed observations about nature and the human condition.

Art-making is a mystery, giving voice and form to what is inside the self, presenting the lived truth of the artist to his audience.

EXPLORATION

In the university, the arts and the sciences are academic realms of truth-seeking. They are environments in which new knowledge is sought, discussed, and established.

But truth-seeking isn't confined to the library or the laboratory. It is an everyday practice involving exploration, introspection and reflection.

I reflected on this with Latiff Mohidin, without doubt the most highly rated Malaysian artist living today.

There was an exhibition of his art in Paris in 2018, at the Centre Pompidou, which later journeyed to Kuala Lumpur and ended recently in Singapore at the National Gallery.

In the 1960s, he travelled through South-east Asia, across Indochina. He went to study in Germany on a scholarship. He reads extremely widely, drawing influences from many different cultures. He is not only a painter, but also a poet and translator. In my interactions with him, I happened to ask about his childhood. He told me about *merantau*, the Minangkabau tradition of sending boys at puberty away from home, out into the world. Exploration, introspection and reflection are intertwined in the rite of passage of *merantau* in Minangkabau culture.

Exploration is at the heart of *merantau*. Latiff Mohidin wrote in one of his publications: "Every child, without him knowing it, is an adventurer."

To be an explorer in this sense isn't about travelling in search of thrills from risky physical activities

or Instagrammable sensory experiences. It is about opening up the self to the world, whetting our innate curiosity and desire for knowledge.

Exploring allows you to go out – into the world; and go in – towards a deeper understanding of the self. As the poet T.S. Eliot said: *We shall not cease from exploration And the end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started And know the place for the first time.* *Merantau* shaped Latiff Mohidin as man and artist. Openness is characteristic of his oeuvre, as in the case of all great artists. His Pago-Pago series, for instance, manifests his interpretations of the Eastern motif of the pagoda, demonstrating his engagement with tradition, nature and history through fresh forms.

OPENNESS

By nature, I am more a mediator than one who is inclined towards contesting.

I will contest a view if it is warranted, but contesting is a tool I use ultimately to seek a mediated end. This brings me to a very simple principle I use which I feel isn't used enough: triangulation.

To arrive at a better understanding, the intersections of different realms of knowledge need to be examined.

At most meetings I am listening out for diverse points of view. In board deliberations I look for intersections, exploring around them to look for not just common ground but clarity.

Truth-seeking in this sense necessarily involves introspection and reflection. Introspection is internal to yourself, digesting one's thoughts and experiences. Reflection takes one beyond one's self, for when we reflect, we learn to draw on the knowledge and experience of others, including their introspections. This is how we gain collective wisdom.

Truth-seeking is about listening,

being open to different approaches, different systems of thought.

Quite often, we fail to realise that truth can be culture-bound. Eastern philosophical traditions are a different culture of seeking knowledge from that of scientific inquiry.

The evidence-based Western system of knowledge came about in the Age of Enlightenment. But this is not the only viable mode of understanding the world, as other realms of knowledge have shown.

The Nobel Prize in Medicine was awarded three years ago to a trio of scientists for their research on circadian rhythms. This scientific field is also an area of ancient knowledge and animistic practice. Circadian rhythms have long been central to traditional Chinese medicine. Indigenous peoples, too, have known about them for a long time through lived experience.

Differences in opinion about an issue are often the result of cultural difference. Being aware of how our personal and social truths are culture-bound makes us appreciate the need for all of us to be mindful and open to other philosophies and systems of belief.

Before the schools system in Singapore was changed in the 1970s and 1980s, truth meant different things depending on the language and culture in your school.

If you had attended a Chinese school in the old days, how you understand things is very different as opposed to someone who went to an English school. Different values seed different truths and vice versa.

There is a necessary virtue of humility in all this. All our attempts can lead to truth only if we recognise first of all that no matter how dominant or correct a view may be at some point in time, it's never for all time. The only exception would be certain eternal truths, which are privy only to the saintliest and the wisest.

Today, we see conflicts that arise

from cultural difference in the arena of global business and politics.

The world is clearly entering a clash of different systems of thought: China versus the US. This global geopolitical reality is volatile and impacts our lives and that of future generations. If we are not nuanced and open to new ways of seeing and understanding, we will be in trouble.

ARRIVING AT WHO YOU ARE

When I have to make very difficult decisions, injecting a sense of feeling is extremely important.

Very often, hard decisions involve lives; there are stakes for the persons involved, and thus potential situations of conflict. All the hard decisions I have had to make have been decided not only by ideas and reason, but also by senses and feelings. Together, they bring clarity.

Openness to one's intuition is at play; openness to others too. What is at stake is lived truth, the internalising of truth to one's self.

Truth-seeking, as I see it, happens in the everyday and is lifelong. Very often the word "truth" leads people to imagine something immovable and monolithic like a mountain.

Truth is sought in the hope that it will be given, and that all we have to do is to wait to receive it. Instead, truth is dynamic and truth-seeking is a way of life.

How to bring truth into your life so that it grounds you – that, indeed, is the real challenge of one's life.

• Mr Hsieh Fu Hua is chairman of the Board of Trustees, National University of Singapore (NUS), and chairman of the National Gallery Singapore. He wrote this piece with author Yeo Wei Wei for *Across The Board*, an editorial series published by NUS featuring insights from members of its board on issues of the day and topics of the future.