

My Say: Of paralympians and us

The achievements of our courageous, resilient paralympians in Tokyo earlier this year rightly deserve applause, the more so since they brighten a long season of Covid-19 fatigue. Their gold and silver medals testify to the determination of a wonderful group of “differently-abled” people. Even those who did not win medals deserve our praise for trying. I use “differently-abled” because as a post-polio person myself, this term sits more comfortably with me. Perhaps it does with them too.

One wonders though what awaits these paralympians after the pomp and splendour of the closing ceremony in September. We read of former paralympians reduced to near poverty, eking out a living. It is gratifying to learn that the National Sports Council finally stepped up, and so, now all Malaysian paralympian medal winners, past and present, will receive a monthly pension. What is even more encouraging is equity and equality when we learn that paralympians will get the same amount as other athletes. But as with all policies, the proof of the policy is in the efficiency of its implementation and management.

This brings me to reflect on how the government, through the relevant departments, treats all disabled citizens. Are our public spaces disabled friendly? Bathmavathi Krishnan of the Association of Women With Disabilities points out that the 2020 e-Census lacks views from persons with disabilities. A more inclusive Population and Housing Census would take into consideration data that would ensure better living quarters and safer surroundings for the disabled. The blind have fallen, the wheelchair bound despair because there is no wheelchair access, no ramps and suchlike.

Bathmavathi further reminds us that we are becoming an ageing society and many issues faced by senior citizens also overlap with those faced by persons with disabilities. She recommends a more inclusive survey, which should include a section on disabilities. If the Population and Demographics division of the **Statistics Department** thinks that would make the questionnaire too long (I am not sure this is a valid reason), then perhaps a specific survey on disabled citizens is timely. More importantly, such a survey on the needs of the disabled must be given equal importance and not be buried under thick departmental files to gather dust.

Disability can come in various forms and can be categorised on a spectrum of severity. To be open to noting such differences in disabled people, one needs mindful compassion. In addition, like all human beings the disabled have layers of identity which simply means that, like anyone else, their lives are influenced by other identity markers such as social class, gender and race. The paralympians, for example, come from a variety of backgrounds. When the applause ceases, when the limelight is switched off, who are they? We should pause to reflect. What are some of the adjustments, both physical and mental/emotional which a disabled person experiences as he/she negotiates his/her way in the world?

Some of the best essays on disability and identity are by the scholar Ynestra King, who contracted polio at seven. She perceptively points out the complex flux and flow of emotions as a disabled person adjusts to the world. Should the disabled person try to transcend the disability and so risk being in denial? Is transcendence of disability always liberating? Not really. Or should the disabled person foreground that disability? Would this be risking debilitating despair? Some disabled persons become very extroverted

with jokes at the drop of a hat to cover up potential embarrassment; others are introverts whose silence may unnerve others. Clearly a balance has to be deftly calibrated and this is very much contingent on the society the disabled person is in at any given moment. Everyone, whether disabled or so-called “normal” people, must negotiate such existential moments except that for the disabled, the interactions of self and others, like it or not, are inflected by the disability, whatever its degree of severity.

To reflect honestly on such body-emotions symbiosis as a disabled person navigates his way in society is to acknowledge the many triumphant, resilient disabled persons worldwide who may win no medals and gain no accolades yet soldier on with dignity and courage. It is also to give to those paralympians standing on the winning podium, and those paralympians who tried hard, their uniqueness as differently-abled human beings. By valuing the disabled as complex human beings, the able-bodied concurrently see their own human depths too. For both the disabled and the able-bodied, new insights can be gained on the challenges of being human.

I would like to end by referring to an enchanting poem by our National Laureate, Usman Awang, titled “Gadis dan Ayat Suci” (The Girl and Sacred Verses). In the night air, the melodious recitation of Koranic verses by a blind girl is carried by the breeze. The sweet voice whispering through the leaves (Suara yang manis bisik daun-daun) brings tranquillity to the listeners. In like manner, may we treat the disabled — or better, differently-abled — people we meet with respect and compassion and so enjoy the gifts that they can so richly offer.

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