

The Uncommon Common Sense

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Something is amiss. Have you noticed the way we react to something or make some of our decisions? It seems to lack sense at times doesn't it? And then we will go through a period of remorse and regret because we realise too late that we have acted in haste or have made a decision without thinking seriously about it. While reflecting on this, it dawned on me that some of us are no longer adept at using our common sense for routine day-to-day decision making. A fleeting thought passed my mind - could it be that the sense that we call common is no longer common! In fact as I ruminated more about this, the more convinced I became that common sense is fast becoming uncommon. As far as I can recollect, I remember having been told that all of us inherit (vaguely remember hearing something about our genetic make-up) a package of rational thinking, no matter our educational levels and achievements. It must have been the maximum use of this package called the common sense that got our parents through life with so little by

way of education.

Why are we failing to use this critical mental faculty? As I rummage through my mind, all the instances where common sense has not prevailed appears as an endless list. To cite a few, here goes: Take the case of Penang. I do not know how many of you remember those crazy days of ferrying between the island and the mainland when we had to buy tickets for the ferry at both ends. The queues were endless and the jams were horrendous. I learnt from a friend (when I was an undergrad in USM) that a foreign consultant was hired to come up with a solution. He was housed in the most posh hotel and feted for two weeks. At the end of the two-week stay, rumour has it that he wrote a three-word report - "Charge one way"! And lo and behold the queues became immeasurably shorter. I believe he was paid a hefty fee for this report. I am quite convinced that the guy figured it out in one day that Penang being an island, whoever from the island went out, had to come back and whoever came in from the mainland had to

go back. Making users pay double at one end was the obvious solution. Sheer common sense. Since we could not figure it out ourselves, we had to pay for it.

Recently my clerk called up a courier company on a Monday morning and asked to have a dispatch boy over to pick up a manuscript that had to be sent to Singapore urgently. It was promptly picked up on that Monday afternoon itself. Come Wednesday we call Singapore and it has not found its way there yet. On Thursday morning, I get a call from a sweet young thing who pronounces my name as though it is one of those tongue-twister Russian names and then inquires as to what to do with the envelope that has a Singapore address with a professor's name and my name as the sender. She continues that we have not given her any 'instructions'. I almost choked with anger as the adrenaline coursed through my veins. Seething with anger, I asked her why would anyone want to use a courier service if it is not an emergency and why had she to wait for four days before ringing me up to receive 'instructions'. She is shocked at my anger and tells me as a matter of fact, "I am new here. Surely you don't expect me to know my job immediately". I cannot get over it. Surely none can dispute with me that it is a case of the uncommon common sense.

Is it not common sense that when we give to people something that they have not worked for, then we are taking away something that someone else has worked for. Yet we continue doing it.

Take the case of our youth

and their indulgences. So many grandiose schemes have been put forward to keep them occupied and away from unsavoury activities. The crux of the matter has been missed. Even with all these schemes, the child can go wrong if the family has not given the child an upbringing. It is common sense that only the parents can parent and inculcate the necessary life values in a child. Neither the state nor the maid have the qualities and the empathy to undertake this crucial task of parenting. Yet so many of us are guilty of expecting the school, the college or the state to do this task for us. With thousands of children to handle, can they do it for us? Is it not common sense that we parents are the best people to undertake this task?

Is it not common sense (especially if you are a wage earner with a regular income) to spend on essentials at the beginning of the month and then indulge in whims and fancies if you find that you have extra cash on hand? No, this is not the case. So many of my wage earner friends tell me that they indulge in themselves at the beginning of the month, really tighten their belt (and that of their children) towards the middle of the month and are just jubilant when pay day comes at the end of the month. Does it make sense?

Is it not common sense to set standards that we require (for almost everything) and the guidelines to achieve it before we lament about falling standards? Yet today almost everyday we read in the papers about graduates who are not up to mark, buildings that collapse, roads that cave in, pipes that run dry etc. Com-

mon sense again. What else can we expect?

Are we going to be learning lessons like this all the time. We must remember that school life does not really prepare us for the life ahead because of one remarkable difference in the pattern of learning. At school, we have our lessons daily. Then we sit for our test. But in real life, we get the acid test and then we learn our lesson. Why? Because we are not using our common sense. And what is even more senseless is that we never learn from these lessons. We continue to make decisions mechanically rather than drawing on our capacity to rationalise and analyse.

I ask myself why? I wonder whether it is because we are looking without seeing, hearing without listening, touching without feeling, and tasting and smelling without differentiating? I recently read a research article that our brain, like all other parts of our body, needs exercise. It needs the vital exercise of thinking, reflecting and ruminating. According to this report, the more we think and write, the greater our prowess in thinking. And thoughts form in our mind as a result

of what we see, read, hear, touch and smell. To me, it appears then that common sense is a direct result of a full and maximum utilisation of the common senses. If we think about it, surely there must be a relationship between the two. The more we think, the more adept we become in thinking. And after sometime, for anything that we undertake, serious thought becomes second nature. I can only think that in doing things mechanically, we are in danger of not giving sufficient exercise to our brain. Remember the great Sherlock Holmes, a fictitious character, no doubt. Remember how convincingly Sir Arthur Conan Doyle used to write about Holmes' powers of sight, hearing, touch, feeling and smell which enabled him to solve seemingly mysterious problems. And then he would wind up with his famous words, "Elementary, my dear Watson".

I am not advocating that all of us reach the level of Sherlock Holmes' "Elementary, my dear Watson". But certainly there is an acute need for greater rationalising and logical thinking in the way we make our decisions. It makes better sense.

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