

Beware of your thoughts

I NORMALLY buy a book to celebrate Prophet Muhammad's birthday.

And I read it with his exhortation to "seek knowledge" in mind. "The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim," as reported by Tirmidhi.

This time I chanced on a book co-written by Tan Sri Razali Ismail, diplomat extraordinaire and no stranger to the international scene, and more recently an environmental champion as well as advocate of social justice.

I got to know him better when he was Universiti Sains Malaysia pro-chancellor, lending his name and stature as the university earned its place internationally as an academic institution that pioneered sustainable development in Malaysia.

A *UN Chronicle*: 1988-1998 by Razali with Sharifah Shifa al-Attas published by the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (2014) gave an in-depth profile of his personality and his thoughts on world affairs as Malaysia's renowned diplomat.

It was, therefore, not surprising that Razali started his book with the confession "I like words" and

he is "overawed by the imagery and symbolism of words". "Words have power, force," he wrote, and "can disturb you".

In my article *Reevaluate the Use of Terms* in last week's column, I highlighted the disturbing way words — ranging from "liberal", "secular" and "radical" to "extreme" — are used to (mis)label Muslims.

It is confusing and, at worst, can lead to violence and infighting we witness in many parts of the world.

What is even more disturbing is when there seems to be a planned strategy to "divide and conquer", shrouded in the use of the words.

Razali made this point well: "Words can get out of hand; you go deeper and deeper into your psyche with them, like demons tunneling inside you. It is quite scary."

It is even more so if words translate into paranoia, described by yet

another word, "Islamophobia", an euphemism that has come to haunt many today.

In truth, this is a word intended to incite prejudice against, hatred towards or fear of Islam, Muslims or ethnic groups perceived to be Muslim, or mistaken to be Muslim as in the Sikh community.

Indeed some scholars associate its underlying concept with racism that is veiled against any form of sanction.

This is apparent from a *Islamophobia and Religious Discrimination symposium in 2009* where it was reportedly stated that the use of the term "Islamophobia" absolves the user of "the responsibility of trying to understand them (the discriminated)" or trying to change their views; and it implies that hostility towards Muslims is divorced from factors such as skin colour, immigrant status, fear of fundamentalism or political or economic conflicts.

Such is the power of words as testified by Razali. Unfortunately not too many are as discerning as he is and too readily accept the arbitrary use of words, even to their

detriment and they are unaware of the imprisoning effect on the psyche.

As the saying goes:

"Beware of your thoughts, they become your words.

"Beware of your words, they become your actions.

"Beware of your actions, they become your habits.

"Beware of your habits, they become your character.

"Beware of your character, it becomes your destiny."

As I read *The UN Chronicle*, I cannot help but feel the truth of the saying about "words", let alone "thoughts".

And how many "destinies" have been made and destroyed because we are less careful about the words that we use or profess to mislead others.

This comes out quite clearly in the chapter *Searching for a New Paradigm* which begins with the quote: "As president of the General Assembly, I feel guilt myself, that our response (to the Rwanda situation) is feeble.

"As a human person, I have a sense of anger at myself for holding this post but not being able to make a dent on decision affecting life and death..."

Ultimately, Razali asks some pertinent questions: "Are we just looking at the radicalisation of people or is it something beyond this?" and "What makes someone radical, what makes someone cross that line?"

These and many more questions demand more exhaustive responses than mere "words" or "labels" so as not to distract us from the real answers and long-lasting solutions. Otherwise, we will never find out the answers and we become part of the problem rather than the solution.

Correction

IN this column last week, a sentence should read as follows: In 2007, RAND Corporation published the report *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* advocating key findings...

The error is regretted.



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