

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE**

Farewell, Tuan-Tuan Guru

THE untimely passing away of two great personalities in recent weeks has made us poorer education-wise. This can be gauged from the many people from all walks of life who paid their last respects to the late Datuk Bentara Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat (1931-2015) in Kota Baru last week.

I first met him in the late 80s as the more fondly known Tuan Guru, who was also a well-known scholar. As a young academic, I was invited to speak on *Thinking and the Brain* at an event officiated by Tuan Guru, the then Menteri Besar of Kelantan. This was when Higher Order Thinking Skills were not in the picture which only goes to show how forward-looking he was.

He reminded participants that “thinking” and “reflecting” are *ibadah* (worship) that the Quran speaks about repeatedly.

That brief encounter was all the more memorable because his personality — he was not only soft-spoken but his humility was also written all over him, from the way he dressed to his greetings.

Though the *numero uno* in the State, he did not stand out like a sore thumb but commanded respect quite naturally from those in his presence. This perhaps explained why so many took the time to say their goodbyes, recalling the encounters with him — even momentarily — that have affected their outlook or even lives.

As for me, two things stood out apart from his down-to-earth man-

ner. First, I could not help but noticed he jotted down points for his official speech with a ballpoint pen at the event where I was the speaker. For an academic, the pen is a status symbol to be flaunted (never mind if we do not write very much!). I was just about to decide the brand name to take pride in (I did not have claim to a column then) but he changed all that.

I am now quite comfortable with an ordinary ballpoint pen (sometimes courtesy of events and hotels), on the understanding that the words that form as a result of the pen are more important than the brand itself.

This was later affirmed by several prolific writers whom I met. In fact, the humble ballpoint pen —

in part — motivated me to attempt a weekly column (now in its 20th year) with the *New Straits Times*. I have only the late Tuan Guru to thank.

The second thing, perhaps, is more significant. As an invited speaker, I had the chance to sit close to Tuan Guru and learnt some of his words of wisdom. However, his actions made more impact — he politely ushered me to sample the light snacks.

After pouring me a cup of plain tea, he cued that unless the guest



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Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat

took the first sip, no one was allowed to do so. He ended by emphasising: *tetamu mesti didahului* (the guest comes first). One can imagine a young academic's reaction to the preferential treatment when he is treated otherwise more often than not. Placed at the lowest rung of the academic ladder, few paid attention to young educators, be they guests or otherwise.

Again Tuan Guru shaped a new thinking that became principles that I hold dear: *orang berbudi kita berbahasa and ular menyusur akar tidak akan hilang bisanya*.

I met Tuan Guru occasionally when he was admitted to Hospital Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and I never failed to recall that formative encounter. Now he is gone, but the memories live on.



David Watson — Picture courtesy of [timeshigher education.co.uk](http://timeshighereducation.co.uk)

The other great personality was no less influential: Professor Sir David Watson (1949-2015), principal of Green Templeton College at University of Oxford. He was also Professor of Higher Education at the university from 2010 to 2015. Malaysians who studied at Brighton Polytechnic between 1990 and 1992, and University of Brighton from 1992 to 2005, remember him as the director and later vice chancellor of the institutions respectively.

Sir David had expressed his fondness for Malaysian students under his tutelage.

I met him much later in the course of my career at USM when grappling with community-university partnerships and community-engaged teaching and research. He

was a monumental giant in this area, pioneering thoughts and ideas that influenced USM's vision of becoming a sustainability-led university when it was awarded the APEX (Accelerated Programme for Excellence) status in 2008. His leadership and scholarship, no doubt, fired much enthusiasm and imagination that drove USM to higher heights.

There is no denying that Sir David was the other Tuan Guru fondly acknowledged for his areas of expertise and he will be dearly missed for this, among other things. Malaysia, however, will have much to thank him for and his ideas will be prominently featured in the development of the higher education landscape in the country.