

SPEECH BY MAYOR ZAINUDIN NORDIN AT THE FINALE OF THE NATIONAL ORANGE RIBBON CELEBRATIONS: HARMONYWORKS! CONFERENCE 2008 – “BEYOND TOLERANCE; EMBRACING DIVERSITY” ON SATURDAY, 26 JULY 2008

Good Morning

My fellow Members of OnePeople.sg Management Committee,
Mr Tan Huan Peow, Director School of Hospitality Republic Polytechnic,
Students, Teachers, Lecturers and Guests,

I am heartened to see so many of you here rise so early on a Saturday morning to participate in today's Conference.

The HarmonyWorks! Conference provides a platform for youths like you, to discuss debate and reflect on race-relations and most importantly actively contribute towards efforts to strengthen racial harmony in our country. The passion from our youth is what drives the HarmonyWorks! Conference, each year. We started this conference in 2005 and targeted it at youths. The success of the past conferences is because of the dynamism, ideas and contributions from the youth.

This year is special, as today's Conference marks the Finale of the National Orange Ribbon Celebrations, a month long celebrations on Racial Harmony. The Orange Ribbon pin that you wear today, symbolizes the trust and friendship among our multi-ethnic and multi-

religious communities in Singapore. Our country could not have come this far, if not for these treasured bonds. While we celebrate, it is also important for us to reflect on the deeper issues of Racial Harmony and what it really means to all of us.

I recall a polytechnic student mentioning to me two years ago at the HarmonyWorks! Conference, then, that tolerance is not enough if we talk about racial harmony. He added that if we are just going to rely on tolerance alone, what we have today is not going to last very long. This comment of his two years ago, actually paves the way for today's Conference proceedings. In my view, today's Conference theme "Beyond Tolerance; Embracing Harmony" tackles two core issues of the future of Race Relations in Singapore. First, whether tolerance is alone sufficient if we aim to build strong race-relations. Second, how do we deal with diversity as Singapore moves towards a globally connected and increasingly diverse nation.

Let me share with you my views on tolerance. When we tolerate, it tells us there is a limit or a threshold to what we are willing to accept. Should we view race relations in this context? Let me elaborate. I was rather troubled by a recent incident, where a 24 year old man was arrested for making inflammatory racial remarks on his blog. Some of you may have read about it in the papers. Though it was an isolated incident, it just goes to show what can happen when we breach the limit of tolerance. We become insensitive and we hurt the feelings of others. I was glad that Singaporeans from all walks gelled together and was steadfast in condemning his actions. The

question is that this person was an educated youth, yet he resorted to blogging discriminatory remarks against another race.

It brings to mind a few questions. All of us were in school and are educated. Education just alone does not make us better human beings. Values will make the difference. Values such as being sensitive to others needs, respecting, and appreciating one another's differences is what we need to cultivate if we truly desire to bond and connect with one another.

Singapore targets a 6.5 million population in year 2030. We will see a different landscape of Singapore in the near future, what we would call a global city where we would face more challenges and have more opportunities. Soon we will have Singaporeans as well as new citizens such as Chinese and Indian nationals, Myanmaris, Russians, and Koreans living side by side sharing our common space. If you are living in the heartlands, I suppose you would have noticed how we live now is different from what it was in the 70s, 80s and 90s. You would see people from different backgrounds in HDB flats. This is already taking place in our neighbourhoods and in our schools. Beyond our multi-racial community, we will have people from different nationalities, different cultures with distinct traditions. This is a new challenge in fostering race relations.

Our foreign talents and new citizens contribute to our economy. They share our nation's ideals. As hosts, we need to make an effort to welcome them and make them feel at home. We need to join

hands to create a unique Singaporean culture. Just like what our forefathers did. If integration was possible then when it was more difficult and we had fewer resources, with a more mature and advanced society, it is certainly possible now. All of us just need to take the first step forward.

Today's emcee Kaushal, the young gentleman here, is an example. I did not know him then but he wrote to me soon after the launch of OnePeople.sg, last year. As a Permanent Resident he was impressed with Singapore's model of promoting Racial Harmony. He shared with me that he wants to contribute in our efforts to promote racial harmony. Kaushal is now volunteering his time with OnePeople.sg's youth engagement initiatives. Youths like Kaushal, show us that people who are coming to live with us in Singapore; be it new citizens or foreign talent need not necessarily be very different from us. They share the same cause. They want to enjoy peace and prosperity. They too want to integrate and live together in harmony. That itself is a common space. The desire, the wish and the aspiration is common to all of us.

There are opportunities for us to work with our new citizens to tap on their energies and to build a harmonious country. Creating common and comfort spaces is a start. For example, our Government decided in the 60s that it is important for us to be able to communicate across all the different races. So, English became a common language for our new citizens as well as Singaporeans to communicate and to bond with one another. If you have a friend, a

new citizen or foreigner who wants to improve his or her English language skills, you can always introduce to him or her National movements like the Speak Good English Campaign or bring him or her to our libraries, share our history and share our culture so that we can all understand each other better. These are examples of simple things that we can do on our part to ease our new friends to the Singaporean way of life.

We have come a long way in the way we communicate. We now have diverse communication platforms. Blogs, You Tube, Facebook, are now a hit among our youth. We share stories, our personal experiences, our photos, videos, with not only with those around us but with people all over the world. The new media presents lots of opportunities for us to integrate and communicate but let us use the new media responsibly. Use it as an opportunity to make friends, get to know people and exchange our Singaporean values. The new media presents a limitless capsule for dialogue and exchange. This is an essential ingredient in forging friendships. Just as the new media gives us a lot of opportunities and a wonderful platform for communication, it does present challenges. It is up to you to be responsible and make it a positive tool.

Back to this conference, I would like to encourage you to be an active participant. We want to hear your voice, what concerns you, what you feel, what you want to do to promote Racial Harmony. You are the future of Singapore and what you think really, really matters. You do have an exciting day ahead. We have prepared a wonderful

programme for you. Take this opportunity to learn about each other and make new friends.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank the students of Republic Poly for coming forward to co-organise this event. I learn that they are from the Hospitality course, a new course for an exciting future in Singapore. I wish all of you an engaging and meaningful Conference.

Thank you.