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## Emergency Times...

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**Emergency post:****12:27pm, Monday, March 14, 2022**

By the third day I felt better. Yet my psyche remained troubled and felt unstable for me to doubt my being able to critically articulate and reflect. Is it true that the brain shrinks? I refused to submit to it and forced myself to facilitate an online lecture. My mind was not as sharp as there were times I was lost for words, and disrupted by the series of throat-clearing reflexes due to the symptomatic secretion of phlegm. There was not a sense of fulfilment. Indeed, it has taken a grip on my usual self. However, I was positive while being ‘positive.’

By the seventh day I managed to complete a performance-lecture series. This is a significant project; the research which pivots on ‘Telok Blangah’ that commenced in 2018, and I needed it to end on a good, decisive note. Again, I was doubtful of my ability to moderate the discussion between two literary ‘giants’: writer-translator, Annaliza Bakri and poet, Isa Kamari. The aim was to highlight the critical aspects from previous lectures for Annaliza and Isa to comment. The outcome, however, was positively gripping. Annaliza’s commentary leaned towards the cultural and liberal, while Isa’s was grounded with the conceptual and spiritual. Sandwiched between these bastions of knowledge and experience I let go of my critical self to submit to the partial inertia of my brain cells; to allow more of their wisdom to rain throughout the assembly.

Surprisingly, not only did the ground turned from barren to a fertile one, but the anticipated loss of acuity in my mind had conversely led to a self-discovery. My psyche had completely recovered from an alternative ‘booster’! It was resurrected. I was more responsive to Isa’s elucidation. I thought that his would be an ideal masterclass for all art practitioners.

I shall only highlight three from the many. In response to what he considered as an emergency—the loss of etiquette in art practitioners, their ignorance of:

1. The need to interrogate history, not only through research but also through probing by creative process. History itself should not be perceived as ‘classical’ i.e. of the past, but as a movement of time forward responding to an ever-expanding universe.

2. Form, formula, and formation need to be remoulded to respond to the times—in two dimensions: Pure Duration and Serial Time.
3. The arts and cultural manifestation should embody the ‘I’, ‘We’, ‘It’, and ‘Its’ dimensions holistically. This creates layers of meaning, which are rich and integral to each other.

### **Emergency post:**

**10:13am, Wednesday, March 16, 1560**

To begin with an understanding of a particular word, the etymology online dictionary has been, for me, a key portal for a obtain a quick yet in-depth grasp on its meaning. It transports you to various dimensions of time in the probable birth of a word. Before you drown in the sea of meanings, one will rise above for you to understand an iota of its essence. To learn its entirety in a short period of time may not be recommended but to continue its search through the longer passage of time may allow one to be constantly richer in the sea of knowledge.

The word ‘emergency’ as a noun—it has a familiar ring in the medical context from ambulance to blood transfusion—stems from the Latin verb, *emergere*. This essentially means “to bring to light” or “to arise out of something.” *Emergere* can be broken down further into *ex* and *mergere*, which respectively means ‘out of’ and ‘to dip’, ‘immerse’ or ‘plunge.’ *Mergere* seems to be critical to the word’s meaning as it serves as the foundation for an essential understanding. Perhaps we often brush off the *mergere* from the *emergere*, dismissing its significant weight. Should we not ‘immerse’ ourselves in grasping emergency and to this end, reflect on and evaluate the morals that ‘emerge’ from it?

Imagine when the word was first written down for all commoners to behold during the Elizabethan era, a century after the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, when there was an influx of information. In *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Elizabeth Eisenstein recounted, despite printing being made more visible and texts much more used than they had been during the Middle Ages, that it did standardise the reception of information—bringing many minds to bear on a single text. The word, which used to be concealed, emerged from the chests of those only blessed with ‘wisdom’, is translated into the respective vernacular languages, to be interpreted at every kitchen table.

Imagine how the word is read by the ‘unskillful’, ‘unlettered’ and ‘unacquainted with the Latin tongue.’ When read in isolation without physical guidance, did it give rise a ‘new message’ or was it just the ‘new medium’ which changed Elizabethans’ domestic lives? Eisenstein pointed out that the word was internalised by silent and solitary readers, and was conveyed by an impersonal medium to a ‘lonely crowd’ of many readers. However, if these seem murky, the existence of the printed word strengthened the voice of individual conscience and created collective memory.

A striking resemblance indeed: then, the social networking of the Elizabethans’ printed ‘faith book’ and now, the interconnectedness of our online social media, *facebook*.

**Emergency post:**  
**12:45pm, Saturday, March 19, 2030**

In *Beyond Bicentennial: Perspectives on Malays*, one of the contributors, Isa Kamari, reminded us of the *White Paper* released by the government of Singapore which aims to achieve a target of 6.9 million citizens by 2030. This includes allowing an influx of immigrants to support the economy. Hmm, smells like 1819.

What bothers me more is how our reading habits will fare by the year 2030. Since the inception of the pandemic (or even before) our use of digital and social media platforms have clearly defined and changed our daily routines. One of which is our reading habit. In what few or many ways has it changed? Has any change emerged at all? By 2030 how much are we going to rely on printed reading materials? Will they be obsolete when we become comfortable meeting, studying, writing, and reading through digital media platforms? What would become of our cognitive and moral advancement? Perhaps our millennials would be affected by or engaged with issues arising from social media and mental health. As I write they may be sinking in states of anxiety, depression, suicidal thought, cyberbullying and other forms of ‘ills’ derived from ‘the solitary self’ while their use of social media as entertainment, companion and guardian continues to rise. What would become of our children?

To me, as I weigh it, this is worse than being infected with the virus. Fortunately, though the virus did lead to a short-term physical inconvenience (isolation), it did allow one to retreat to recover, resting the body for it to be recharged and restricting the body from meeting the other bodies, opening a space for the essentials to be reflected upon. What would be unfortunate is when we surrender ourselves to digital media and social media to be immersed in a long-term cognitive impairment and moral degradation unwittingly. However, there is a way to handle and moderate this.

Maryanne Wolf in an ‘emergency’ book, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, foregrounds the characteristics of contemporary readers in one of the chapters particularly, our children of the 21st century: that they have poor quality of attention; they do not have the patience to read; they adopt a skimming and word-spotting manner of reading; and they are contented with TL:DR (Too long; didn’t read) practice. How do we rescue them from these? One of the best ways Wolf proposes is to return to the “ancient soul of a child”—to protect and guide the unique legacy of the reading life. Definitely, no laptops for their first five years! This calls for an ambulance! But the ideal reading life must begin on a loved one’s lap where a shared physical dimension takes place. This simple act, according to Wolf, facilitates a time when parent and child are together in a timeless interaction that involves a shared attention: learning about words, sentences, and concept. A case study by Wolf on how active a young brain is when it listens to stories demonstrated that significant changes occur not only in the regions of the brain underlying the receptive aspects of language, which enhance learning the meaning of words, but also in region underlying the expressive aspects of language learning, which enable children to articulate new words and thoughts.

Jonathan Sacks reflected in *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* on the urgency of the momentous “face of the other” over the connecting technology of *facebook*—the world of “advertisements for myself.” While it claimed 2.41 billion monthly active users since its emergence in 2019, it continues to damage physical and mental health. Worse still, it damages the capacity for sustained and focus thoughts; and echoing Sacks, leaves us morally underdeveloped, addicted to a search for popularity in the form of ‘likes’—that has little to do with character and virtue. We need true communication. The ‘global village’ when the “electro-magnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous ‘field’ in all human affairs,”<sup>1</sup> which was first coined (and prophesied) in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* by Marshall McLuhan, is not a true village where the primordial face-to-face of language takes place. If the prophecy stays true, it does allow the infiltration of the human elements more and more into one another, with minds mutually stimulated by proximity. Is this an illusion? A substitute for true communication? Where the abundance of ‘likes’ reigns over genuine engagement? Yikes!

<sup>1</sup> McLuhan 31

Questions and sentiments for the year 2030 are as follows: What becomes of the ‘We’ where the ‘I,’ ‘I’ and ‘I’ dominate? We need ‘We’ immediately. We need to be present—to be alert to feelings through direct encounters with other human beings. At the same time, who can articulate for us or alert us (better) to the presence of an emergency. Artists?

**Emergency post:**

**2:15am, Saturday, February 2, 1963**



IN CASE OF  
EMERGENCY  
STORE THEM  
IN  
THE FRIDGE.

Drawing #1 by Child #1

No refrigerator in the world excels this unique cold storage, developed fresh from World War II, for you can trust that it can store over 100 pieces of dead meat yet keeping them fresh! Beyond that unassuming design, is the guarantee that only hidden mechanisms can give, yet they embody all the secured features which are part of any modern refrigerator. This

unique freezing compartment stands alone as the pioneer of the British built-and-sealed refrigerating system.

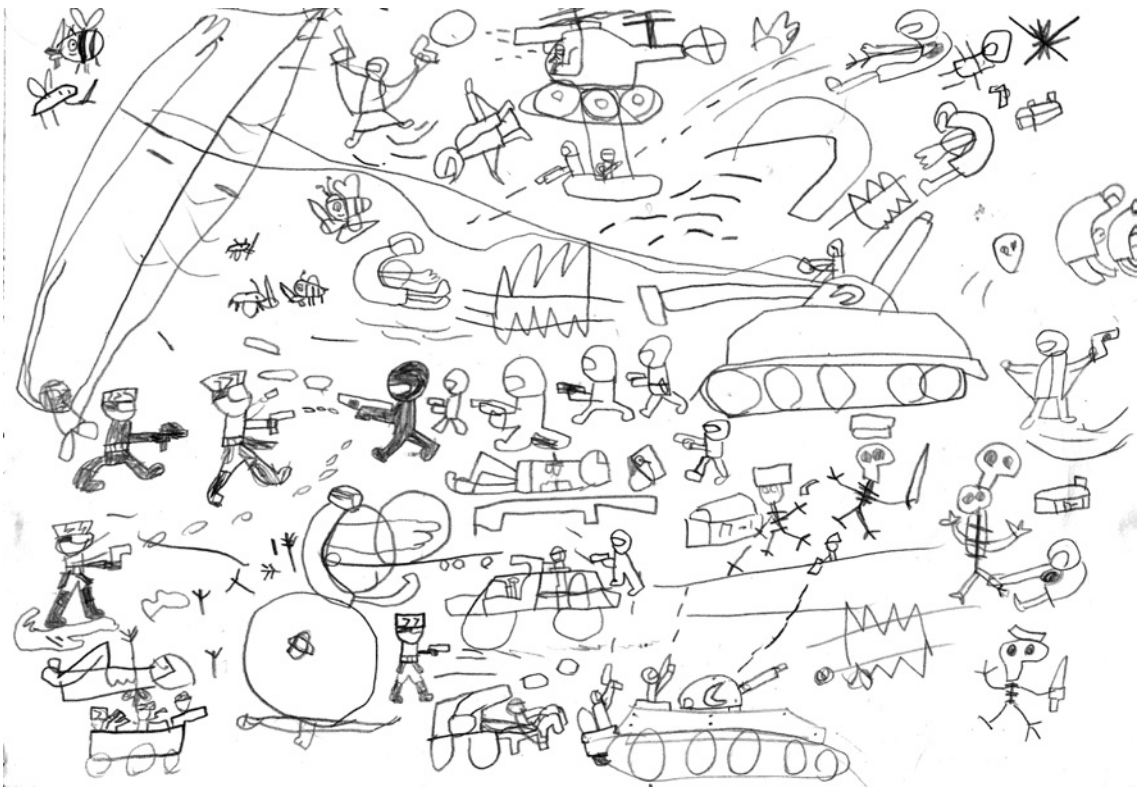
Industry too chooses this unique cold storage, promising that your lives can be simplified through their unique frozen processed foods. Do not worry. Just consume and be happy. Just keep storing and stock-piling. Rest assured they will be fresh!

A 10+-year protection plan fully guarantees each system.

**Emergency post:**

**12:00pm, Monday, July 21, 1964**

In the image below, circle in red all the various types emergencies which are caused by a mutual lack of misunderstanding.



Drawing #2 by Child #2

**Emergency post:**

**8:00am, Tuesday, July 7, 2020**

I believe relief comes after difficult times; for indeed after every difficulty comes relief, after every difficulty comes relief and after every difficulty comes relief, although both can coexist. Between every difficulty and relief there is a significant lesson to be learnt. Lessons will be learnt by

those who seek to reflect on the severe fallout caused by every pandemic. There is certainly a blessing in a catastrophe's quasi-deceptive cloak—when one sees through its illusory concept and context.

What then is the blessing which I have learnt?

The pandemic has left an indelible mark here and beyond. Many submit to their emotions and egos, they project mindless verbal expressions on social media; some benefit profoundly by protecting, nurturing, and devoting their time physically on their loved ones, patiently, wisely, and critically with an innovative spirit. Why then do they say we are trapped? Or are we truly isolated?

At some point during that time of imposed isolation, I smiled. We had sought forever the ideal work-life balance. It only came when we were commandeered, cornered, and had to retreat to our domestic space. Aaahhh... After every difficulty comes relief? I found home. I found my family. My wife and I found each other. We found our children; through intimate observation, reflection, and conversation we found meaning in their growth. We have been reading aloud to each other. In spite of the family being cloaked with emotional and psychological pressures, we found beauty—a fundamental understanding on what essentials means—the living room lives, the kitchen cooks and the bedroom comforts us under a single sheet.

While we comforted ourselves in spite of the emergency, we sought solace and gained wisdom from the counsels of the blind gnostic, the reviver and the saintly Abdallah al-Haddad. Due to such times, we learn lessons:

On Intention  
On Vigilance  
On Inner and the Outer Self  
On Acquiring Knowledge  
On Remembrance  
On Reflection  
On Cleanliness  
On Social Duties  
On Kindness and Charity  
On Gratitude

These are pearls and gems which could not be found under normal, routine, passive, lonely and contented circumstances. Only when one is cornered, challenged, and tested... blessings come after.

A blessing in disguise indeed.

Emergency post:  
12:27pm, Monday, April 11, 2022



Drawing #3 by Child #3

I am thinking about what is the state-of-the art 'art' that has emerged from the pandemic. Can I be happy with the hybridity of art exhibitions, presentations, and installations, where experiences are facilitated digitally through sophisticated means on the internet? At this point, I am also imagining 'social distancing art' where art could be appreciated and valued while complying with distancing rules. Will we miss the exemplary 'relational aesthetics' where most of its beauty derives from physical interactions, event-based participations and meal parties? Even if we were told, "Let's get back to the Old Normal from the New Normal!" will we still be hesitant, traumatised and be 'touchy' over a 'touchy' situation?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ed. Note: 'touchy' (colloquial meaning: sensitive) over a 'touchy' (literally: physical contact) situation.

One that is on top of my list of the state-of-the-art 'art', is the unassuming ART test. At a glance, one would feel strange about ART being evaluated by strict measures, but no, A.R.T. stands for Antigen Rapid Test. It is the most prevalent medium ever created—conceptualised, designed, and curated for all walks of life to use. We need to 'interact' with it. It is practical, experiential, and cheap! Even better, it is disposable (could be possibly recyclable material for future art performances). However, its ambivalence would lie between the celebration of being 'negative' and sadness of being 'positive'. This could be historically significant whereby these terminologies are in a dilemma. Should we think positively if tested positive? Yes, why not? Let the body rest. Let it recover for a state of renewal however temporary it is. Let the body be isolated within the household. Let it reflect on its parts, on its domestic essentials. Let it exercise its rights with the family. Let it drown in deep reflection within multiple time dimensions. Let it revise its role in the family and society. Let it rise with optimism. Yes, appropriating Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message," the ART test is indeed a medium worthy of critical study—in the context of interdisciplinarity. It instills trauma yet we are dependent on it. It is not a survival kit but rather an alarm: a medium that gives a paradoxical message and paints an inessential biological, psychological, and economic crisis.

The late literary figure, Kurt Vonnegut wrote a compelling theory or simile on the role of artists in society (also mentioned by Maryanne

Wolf in *Reader, Come Home; The Reading Brain in a Digital World*). I shall quote him at length here for emphasis:

Writers are specialised cells doing whatever we do, and we're expressions of the entire society—just as the sensory cells on the surface of your body are in the service of your body as a whole. And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms. I have the canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. You know, coal miners used to take birds down into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick. The artists certainly did that in the case of Vietnam. They chirped and keeled over. But it made no difference whatsoever. Nobody important cared. But I continue to think that artists—all artists—should be treasured as alarm systems.

There is an affinity to “let the body reflect its parts” and a familiar “call to duty” from Isa Kamari, that artists should take part in defining or redefining history through their creative thoughts, processes and outputs. It is not surprising that Vonnegut was much inspired by the works of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, who I think were the world's forgotten ‘alarm’ systems. Just to name a few other uncelebrated ones—Socrates, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Neil Postman, Jonathan Sacks, Maryanne Wolf, and Isa himself. They were and are very super-sensitive—they did press the panic button and forewarned the world— to the notional loss due to the ‘global village,’ decentralisation, isolation, standardisation, individualism, from ‘We’ to ‘I’ are contemporary emergencies which has started, accompanied by evidentiary sources, since the great civilisation of antiquity. The ‘loss’ ends in a craving for a more stable foundation on how the world works. Paraphrasing a review by Alexander John Watson on Innis’ *Empire and Communications*, their works when read anew, in this age of present-mindedness, seem fresh and indeed, prophetic despite the many years since.

In an intriguing video conference between Nick Bongiorno and McLuhan's son, Eric, streamlined from the home of his grandson, Andrew, it was deemed as a historical lineage of dissent in relation to media. When asked about the irony of the nature of the interview, its relevance to the ‘global village’ and what McLuhan would think about the current use of internet, smart phones and ‘gadget lovers’ of apps, Eric responded:

He thinks we pretty much made a good mess out of it. That is, we have no more control over these forms and forces now than we did generations ago. The only difference between us and our forebears is that a few of us have some idea of what is going on and the rest is just as blind and stupid to the whole business as ever.

Eric's reference to a collective ignorance and loss in perceptive analysis of the media coincides with Isa's response to the lack of understanding in the arts and cultural manifestation. To achieve an understanding that is ‘layered’—rich and integral to each other—one should embody the ‘I,’ ‘We,’ ‘It,’ and ‘Its’ dimensions holistically. The ‘I’ stands for the individual; ‘We’ represents the collective, society, nation, country or humanity; ‘It’ refers to materials, objects or things; and ‘Its’ signifies the philosophy, hermeneutics or dialectics.



What do you think of Vonnegut's reference of canaries to artists? Can artists adopt 'state-of-the-art' rather than confined to its relationship to products or materials? Is it true that artists are ahead of their time? Will there ever be a gripping sign that states: BEFORE EMERGENCY BREAKS, CRY FOR ARTISTS?

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