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'One and one is two, I am all over you!'

Anushka Anastasia Solomon | Feb 20, 09 12:42pm

Long ago before Valentine's Day was commercialised and sexualised,, I loved it. It was the day in Malaysia when my friends at the Catholic school would scribble notes to each other, draw huge red hearts and roses on the blackboard and tease our Irish headmistress and all the teachers. It was all such fun and innocent. Even when we teased Sr Enda, our Irish nun about the La Salle school brothers, it was without guile.

We sang 'When Irish Eyes are Smiling' and indeed all the world was bright and gay. Gay meaning happy. We identified ourselves by name and not sexuality. So, here we were a class full of schoolgirls in high spirits celebrating St Valentine's Day by serenading our classmates, teachers and neighbours.

No one had much money. We wore school uniforms, blue pinafores and white blouses. We didn't buy the candy and flowers, we drew it on cardboard and cheerily passed the notes in the class. The teachers didn't frown on us that day. Intercepting a note would only interrupt the ceaseless flow of love, joy and infectious enthusiasm of the day.

The teachers' room was festively decorated and all the teachers got notes and cards expressing our love for their idiosyncrasies. Why not enjoy anyway the flood and the exuberance of love unleashed that day?



We had concerts for the teachers and love was in the air. We had not lost our innocence then. There was no sex education, teen pregnancies were rare and Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists attended the Catholic schools and sang all the love songs lustily with gusto. Everybody loved Gandhi, Jesus, Buddha and Prophet Muhammad.

If any of these 'men of God' had entered our school premises they would also have been regaled with high pitched girls voices yelling, "Happy Valentine's Day!" and showered with love. We showered Mr Wang the only male teacher in Assunta Secondary School and enjoyed Mr Labrooy, our hockey coach with what today they tell me is 'agape love'. I thought it was platonic.

"One and one is two, I am all over you!" Mr Wang would play his guitar and sing at our Valentine Day's Concert specially put on to celebrate love. Mr Wang was small, slight and Chinese. He taught physics and took his role as a teacher very seriously. We had to talk him into singing for us.

"You've got to sing for us Mr Wang. We promise to get better marks in physics, Mr Wang. We love you Mr Wang, please sing for us," we cajoled him.

"No, no," he'd insist, "you girls have to love the subject. Not me. No distractions. I have to make you sure you all study. I am your teacher. I am not playing the fool."

"But Mr Wang, your singing for us will inspire us. We promise we'll memorise all the formulas by next week. You can even give us a test!", we'd plead, crowding around him.

And when he gave in and sang, we all leaned over the banister all along the vestibule and the passageway outside the classroom and screamed like he was the greatest rock star ever. Mr Labrooy was our national language teacher's husband.

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Glad to be alive

We loved him because it was clearly evident he loved our Mrs Labrooy and treated us like his daughters. "Hey, what are you girls doing down there, powdering your noses?", he'd yell over the loudspeakers when our hockey game got slow. The game would stop because the girls would start giggling.

It is a shock to me now to find how different things are in the American culture. When I entered university in America, I was startled and then disturbed by the emphasis on dating, competitive sports and sex.

During summer vacations when we all returned to roost, my fellow Malaysians and I mused at how different things were in college. I walked around like a neutered cat saying hello to everyone and found myself in the awkward position of having to find ways to respond to a lecherous American teaching assistant or a professor who had read the Kamasutra and imagined me a courtesan from India. Eventually I learned to identify and then avoid the American who had had his head too long in the wrong books.

In the Hindu culture there are four stages to development – the child, a student, a householder and then seeker of God. Margaret Mead the anthropologist is not the only one who has upset our notions of adolescent development.

Freud and Wendy Doniger and other Western writers that I was assigned wrote and studied people from my culture of origin and told me who I was.

As an 18-year-old I sat in American classrooms listening to American professors who had never been to Malaysia or had been there peripherally to study 'the natives' and got us all wrong.

In Catholic schools in Malaysia at the time no one taught us any feminism, racism, sex education or religious doctrine. No one worried about who St Valentine was or if he like Santa Claus even existed. We were just glad to be alive and life was love and laughter. Today I look back with nostalgia during that period of my life before religion became politics and politics thrust between people like a knife.

One of my most memorable Valentine's Day note was scribbled in a school exercise book and left on my wooden desk by Debbie Doraisamy. Debbie, tall and svelte wrote a pudgy, short bespectacled girl these words "Anushka, you walk like an angel, talk like an angel and look like an angel!". Her words on that note stuck all through the difficult days of young adulthood.

Another friend Wong Mei Wan showed her love to me by whisking my spectacles off one day and taking a photo of me, "look, just look!" was all she said. Mei Wan was a beautiful Chinese Malaysian girl much admired for her silk and sophistication during class parties at the end of the year.

'How to love'

We all had the same preoccupations and desire to shine as people in contemporary culture but the difference was that there was no competition, no greed and an intuitive understanding of the essence of love. In the Catholic school I attended we were free to practice our own religion but equally free at the time to enter the chapel and sit in silence.



Around 16 years of age, I was having difficulty with maths and physics. So my girlfriends, Sheela, Monica and Ratneswari decided to show up at my home and tutor me.

Unfortunately born into a conservative Hindu family, my mother after consulting the Hindu almanac said that it was not an auspicious day for them to come by as we could not offer them any refreshments if they did. No worries. The three showed up and brought their own drinks. My mother had to laugh and let my friends in and tutor me in those two subjects. I learned something about love that day that I have never forgotten. This was before I ever read 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7.

As a mature Christian in America today, it troubles me when I read

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about pastors who haul a bed into the church precincts to teach about love. The lesson exemplified here is not love but lust. I remember when I returned from America and I asked Ben, (also a Malaysian Hindu at the time) soon after we met, if he loved me. Naturally, he said yes.

I bolted down the staircase to let my mother and everyone know. "He loves me! He said he loves me!" I yelled. My late mother, in the kitchen, steadily slicing vegetables for my father's favourite dinner that day, laughed at my enthusiasm and exclaimed, "Katrika! (Tamil word for eggplant) That's not love, that's lust! Love takes time. You will know if you love each other at the end of your lives together and not at the beginning."

Looking back, I think it is true. The key lesson to learn in life is 'how to love'. If we learn how to do that and do it well, then we the people can truly stand under that banner 'Mission Accomplished'.

Happy Valentine's Day, America! In the words of Mr Wang, "One and one is two, I am all over you! I am all over you!"

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