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It is a covenant to keep, individually and communally. It is a reminder that chauvinistic behaviour is forbidden.

To support our avowed aspiration, we have legal and social protocols such as those against sedition.

However, unless in abject denial, each of us can probably recall some experience of bigotry — either as victim or witness, or even as perpetrator.

Bigots favour their own religion, race or culture, with condescending rejection of others.

For many in Singapore, race, religion and culture are intertwined, so the most common form of bigotry here can, for convenient discourse, be called racism.

In recent years, several incidents have stimulated frank conversation about racism in our society.

While some say talking about such issues creates more discord, relationship therapists tell us that respectful discourse about conflict is vital for growth and progress. Hence the following discussion.

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PACE THE CHALLENGES

For those from the majority race, our first victim-experience of racism would probably have been overseas, as student or tourist, or possibly on an overseas job posting.

The sheer novelty was a cold slap; the injustice left us feeling powerlessly hurt. Once back home, we recounted it, confident of a sympathetic ear.

For those of us from a minority race in our country, regrettably, we may have first suffered some version of racism as a child, perhaps even in school.

We would have tried to figure out, unaided, how to not let it define us or constrict our self-esteem and goals. Unfortunately, the wisdom required to ward off the dampening of the human spirit does not characterise a child's psyche. Why would this happen despite the avowals in our pledge?

Usually, it results from a majority person's thoughtless actions or speech, with little malice intended.

But the impact on the victim can be far reaching.

I know a minority race woman who only now, in her twenties, can laugh (albeit bitterly) about a teacher confronting her (a meek, trembling primary school pupil with naturally curly hair neatly tied back) and telling her to cut all her little "flyaway" curls because her hair was not flat and sleek like everyone else's, and detracted from the uniform appearance of the choir.

It takes great resolve to remember that such negative events, while scarring, were not meant to be hateful.

A comparable episode for an adult is to be asked why they are wearing their ethnic outfit at a job that does not require uniform office wear. Or to be casually told that if they spoke the language of the majority, they could assimilate better.

Equally mindless is racism in social situations, like at a party with friends. Someone tells a racist joke and the minority person who cannot force a smile is deemed to be over-sensitive or humourless.

And then there is the gratuitous compliment, where a minority person is praised for their good looks, diligence or eloquence despite their race and skin colour.

Or where a minority race detail is irrelevantly mentioned such as when a relative recalls how his life was saved by "an Indian doctor" or "a Malay doctor", whereas all his other doctors (surely just as committed to keeping him alive) are apparently race-less.

Each of the above examples is real. Imagine an individual experiencing multiple similar events. That is the typical experience of many minority persons in our country.

A child can be excused for feigning a smile to accommodate the racist.

For the adult (whether the minority victim or the majority witness at the incident), the imperative is to speak up and educate the unthinkingly unaware racist.

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Smiling silently does not help us achieve our pledge as such clueless racism could become entrenched.

Much more dangerous than motiveless racism is blatant malevolence.

Malicious racism permeates social media — someone randomly records you on a phone and posts racist comments on YouTube; or someone posts a treatise on why a particular minority race will never be loyal citizens.

At least one bigot went beyond bombast, escalating their racism to an alleged physical attack on a minority woman under the pretext of admonishing her for being unmasked.

Fortunately, this type of rare bigot is not a protected species; they will be punished.

Shockingly though, some comments on social media excuse the alleged perpetrator for having been provoked by pandemic fear or the woman's tone.

Such flawed rhetoric is hard to correct simply because it pops up in any discussion thread, and is soon followed by supporting statements from the easily swayed.

We have seen how, in some countries, race becomes the face of people's economic, social and psychological challenges.

In the wake of the anxieties that many Singaporeans are facing — job security and financial worries, compounded by health scares from the prevailing pandemic — devious racists use a tantalisingly simple narrative by linking every difficulty to minority race foreigners working in our country.

However tempting it may be to rebuke rudely, angrily or sarcastically, this might create misunderstanding, or even accusations of "playing the race card" and "stirring the coals".

The better option is to muster all one's politeness to calmly correct the perpetrator (and anyone else who might be persuaded by the bigotry).

Where appropriate, make the necessary police reports. Never allow the prevalence of hate make you doubt your duty.

Most of us, with the maturity of life's experiences, become aware that achieving our aspirational pledge is sometimes impeded by the imperfections of human nature and the assaults of circumstance. Transient emotions and random incidents may temporarily override our reasoned and rational goal.

Our only choice is to keep striving towards an achievable version of that goal.

This continual endeavouring must define our nation-building effort as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion.

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