This is the authors’ final peer reviewed (post print) version of the item published as:

Campbell, James Kennedy 2010, Comment : Let's reconnect to each other, New Straits times, pp. 1-1.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30031310

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“All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking.” — Friedrich Nietzsche

ONE of the most pleasurable pastimes I enjoy is, for me at least, also one of the easiest and most available to do. Stated simply I enjoy walking.

Every day I try to take an early morning walk, usually to my favourite coffee shop where I enjoy my espresso and then walk back home and proceed from there to work.

While it may appear that the coffee is the objective of the exercise, the walk really is the thing.

During my morning walk I think about the day’s chores and objectives.

I consider how I will approach my classes and lectures.

I wonder at what I have forgotten and reflect on how I will approach my writing.

I also enjoy taking a look at the different types of cars on the street, saying hello to others who walk past and looking at the gardens along the way.

Walking helps me to clear my mind, maintain a level of fitness and enjoy my surroundings. Walking relaxes me as well as educates me.

I recall that during my time working at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), I would always go for my evening walk and make sure that when I went out to eat the event would be couched between an interesting walk to the coffee shop, hawker stall or pasar malam.

The walk made the night, allowed me to build an appetite for my meal and gave time for me to digest it as well. As I walked, I would often wonder why people would use their cars to go the same distance to dinner when for an extra five minutes, you could enjoy the evening air and take a peek at the flowers and other flora along the way.

Evening walks compounded another activity I did during my time at USM.

I used to get there by another form of transportation. I rode a pushbike. I do recall that at times it was a little dangerous on the roads and getting stuck in a storm is no fun with papers in your shoulder bag and a bicycle underneath you.

However, again as with my evening walk, the pleasure and sheer stimulation of riding to work outweighed, in my mind at least, the obvious dangers. Consider, for example, the joy you have saying hello to passers-by on your bike or as you walk.
As I rode my bike, “Good morning” and “Selamat pagi” were uttered on several occasions and returned with a smile.

People from the man cleaning the street to the woman working the breakfast hawker stall on the road side would wave or smile as I passed on my way to work. There was genuine humanity in the simple pleasure of being able to recognise people and say “Good Morning” to them on the way to work.

I recall everyday rolling up to my office with a sense of happiness and optimism fuelled by the simple greetings and pleasantries that you engage in as you ride by.

I remember the effect of this positive feeling flowed on through my work as I tried to say “Hello” and “Good morning” to my colleagues.

The combination of riding my pushbike and having my evening walk to dinner kept me fit, gave me time to think, allowed me to smell, see and enjoy my environment and unexpectedly helped to maintain an optimistic view of my fellow humanity.

After all it’s hard to remain cynical and pessimistic when the guy sweeping the street gives you a wave on the way to work and says “Good morning”.

I can genuinely attest to the positive impact those simple gestures had on me as I arrived at work.

What’s more, while I cannot prove what I am about to say, it has definitely dawned upon me that if I had travelled to work by car and never gone for my evening walks I would never had exposure to the everyday, the simple good manners that came from passing by and giving a wave, a nod or saying “Good morning”.

My image of Malaysia is indelibly influenced by these experiences.

The good manners, the helpfulness and basic goodwill I experienced in the small things is, as they say, no small thing.

The thing is that the positive state that I enjoyed walking and riding reinforced the upbeat relationships I had in my work place and at home.

It strikes me that sometimes when we remonstrate with each other about the decline in manners, the pollution around us, and the increasing alienation and discord between us, perhaps a small part of the answer may lie in reconnecting to each other in a simpler manner.

I cannot say that walking or riding a bicycle would save the world.

Nor can I say that it would solve all of humanities problems.

I can say, however, that the practice has had a critical influence on my positive and optimistic view of Malaysia despite the sound and fury we see in the media and elsewhere.
While always walking or riding to work may be impractical for many of us, thinking about how we could integrate these practices with our lives would not only lead to a better sense of physical fitness, it may unexpectedly help with our social fitness as well.

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