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Podcast Series 03
Episode 02

The Shape of Distance; Part 2

with Leng Lim & Elaine Herdman Barker

Does accountability look the same to elites and governing classes as it does to the rest of us? Is it shaped by culture and history? What does it mean to harmonise good and bad energies? Is it understood differently in the Global North and South? Here in the West, do we live in a one flavoured soup? One way of seeing, and judging? In some cultures, the relationship comes first, in others the principle or rule. What can that teach us? How do the words we choose shape our attention?

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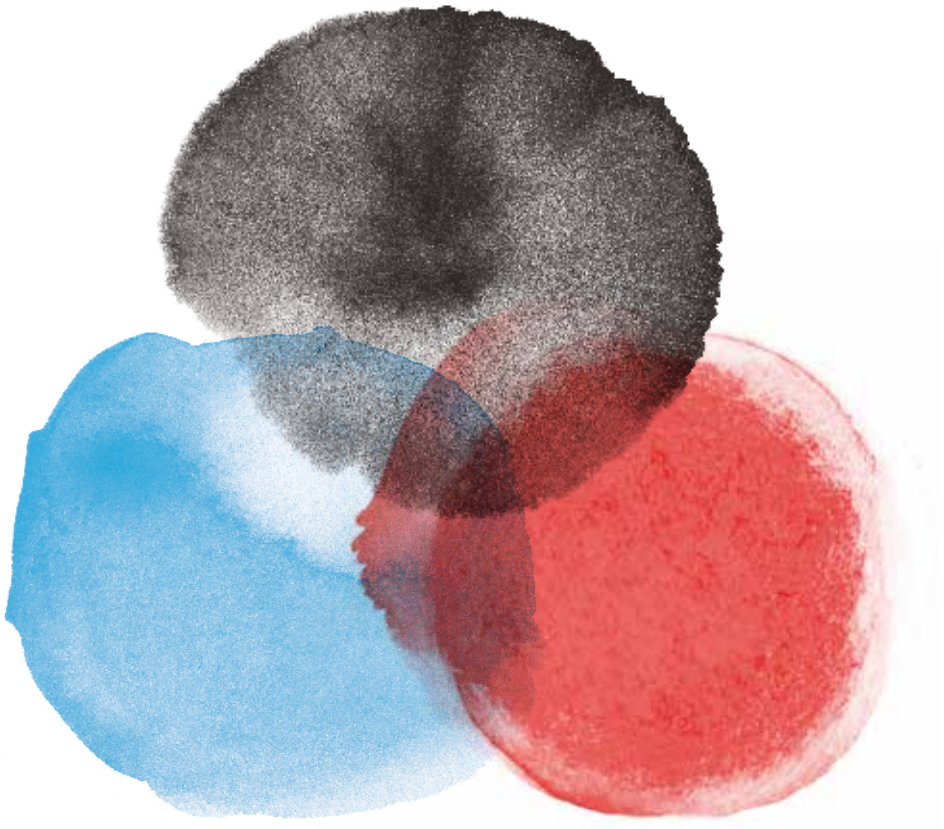
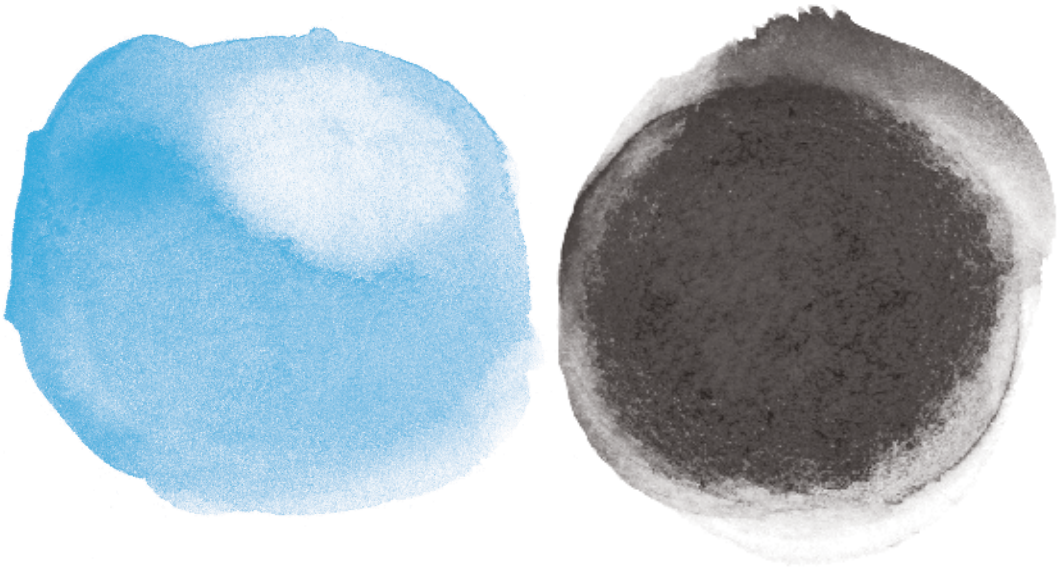
Elaine Herdman Barker, Co-founder of Global Leadership Associates, speaks in Part 2 of The Shape of Distance with Leng. In this episode, Leng Lim offers, in his own words, his perspective on what is both life-giving and limiting about leadership traditions in different parts of Europe, America and Asia. His diverse career includes serving as a corporal in the Singapore military, leading mountaineering expeditions while at Princeton, working as an Episcopal priest in Los Angeles, and studying both Divinity and Business at Harvard. Leng has built a global reputation through his work in healing, teaching, coaching, and advising. In this conversation, he speaks to the cultural and historical influences that give shape to our lives.

N.B. Inevitably, when using terms such as 'West' and 'East', 'Asia', 'Africa', 'Global North' and 'Global South' we are generalising and seek only to surface what we inhale from our different cultures.



Today, Leng Lim joins me from Bali while I'm in the south of England. Remarkably, I've known Leng for 20 years or more – although we've only met in person once, I think! Welcome Leng; lovely to be with you.

Thank you very much, Elaine.



I guess this illustrates some of what we're going to talk about… How distance, environment and social histories may lead to different conceptions of life, leadership and happiness… I'm wondering how we, many thousands of miles apart, engage with unfamiliarity? Do we take on strangeness and uncertainty to broaden our horizons, create friendships and unite us? Or do we see unfamiliarity as a reason for division and estrangement? And I've been keen to get you on this podcast for a long time, Leng, because of your experience living and working in Eastern and Western cultures, fostering deeper understanding between people by considering leadership from historical and cultural perspectives. And I'll mention now that listeners can find additional information on your website which we'll link to in the show notes. Perhaps you could tell us a little about your life, your early influences and what you faced moving, I believe, from Singapore to the US.

That's right. And I've moved back to Southeast Asia too. Now, when you asked about my earlier experiences, I wrote down three things… The evangelical church, my grandmothers – and Enid Blyton! Because when I was 12 and 14, I would say I had spontaneous, mystical experiences in which Jesus was very real to me. These were very real, embodied experiences that – even later on, given my more rationalised education, given being gay and given the opposition from the church and from theology in general – continued to stay with me. Faith comes from encounter not dogma.

Obviously, I've moved in my own faith journey… From being very biblical and certain and fundamentalist to what you would broadly call liberal and progressive; to now… I see the unity of all paths, which – to some Christians – would make me a heretic. But I'm reminded that the word heresy comes from the root word 'hairesis' – meaning 'you get to choose.' But both my grandmothers were born in China and moved out to what was then British Malaya and British Singapore. And both of them had semi-bound feet…

Semi-bound feet?

Yes. It's an almost 1800-year-old custom that some Chinese emperors tried to get rid of but couldn't. There are some things, I think, that are so pervasive... Foot binding had everything to do with heterosexual male predilection for whatever aroused them in the same way that Victorian corsets functioned in the male psyche. But learning this later gave me a visceral sense of how Chinese women had suffered and endured; of their capacity to really be with pain. My paternal grandmother was a Buddhist, Taoist, Confucianist... I sat by her side as she chanted Buddhist chants, and I think that's where I also developed the sense of the world being an alive and sacred place.

What about your maternal grandmother?

My maternal grandmother was a much sadder story. The Japanese occupation devastated her. As a result of war, her side of the family became members of the Malayan Communist Party, went back to China and were persecuted by Mao. I once asked if they ever hated Mao and they said no because he unified the Chinese nation. And I leave these stories, and the different conclusion I think our listeners would automatically make from them, to say, that I've become attentive to how one must not assume a particular set of behaviours. My aunts and uncles understood they were living in a revolutionary historical time period and didn't take things personally.

Fascinating. You also mentioned Enid Blyton?

Yes, because I thought Julian in The Famous Five was really rather dashing! I was an only child and my parents separated and later divorced... The way my mother handled childcare was to say, "Go read a book." So Julian, Dick, George, Anne and Timmy the dog became my friends. Now, why do I bring this up? Because if you're talking about distance and cultural differences, and what happens in the colonies or ex colonies, what we were reading in British books shapes the imagery in our minds...

So The Famous Five, Malory Towers – Enid Blyton – well I pretty much wanted an alternative life outside of the Singapore of the 1970s. It was small, hot and humid; none of us had the income to travel. That little island felt like a terrible prison: it was school, home, shopping centre... I want to come back to Julian and Enid Blyton because I think this lays the groundwork for some interesting conversations about misunderstandings, projections, transference, countertransference... So that's my background.

I'm looking forward to this story developing! And you've reminded me of Malory Towers; a name I haven't heard in a long time…

I was talking to a friend about the British imprint in the former colonies. She said her cousin wanted to go to Britain to see Malory Towers for herself. And when I got a scholarship, I think I chose to study in Princeton because the building, in my mind, would be what Malory Towers would look like…

And on that, you spoke about going into the world with the imaginary realm from your books. Was Princeton part of an America that you imagined? What was the impact on you when you began a life there?

What was most wonderful in the US was the space. I was happy on these five-day Greyhound journeys across the country… Where other people experienced backaches, I was grinning from ear to ear because this immense space was such a joy. It felt like freedom. And you know, I went climbing in Alaska. I was part of Operation Raleigh. I've led three expeditions there… I kayak. It's just the immensity of the space. And certainly, the Americans were very generous with scholarships, including for attending the United World College, of which (then) Prince Charles was Patron.

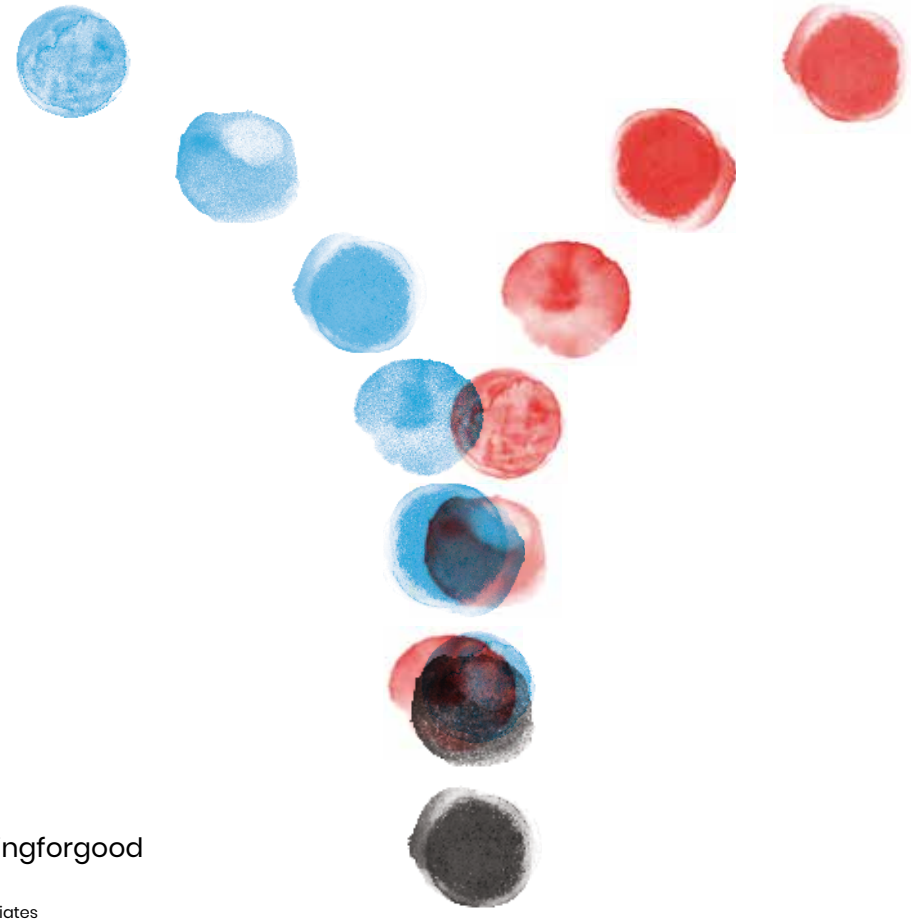
But when I did arrive in Princeton, it was really Gothic! And there was a night when there was some rowdiness outside… My fellow Princetonians had come back from the private eating clubs. You have to, bicker is our word, but you had to sort of prettify yourself in order to be selected, very exclusive, right! Now, it's a very pretty campus, but these Princetonians were very drunk; climbing up a lamppost and using their foreheads to bang it until it went out. These are white guys – it's important to have that in mind. Then they went to the next post and basically destroyed these lamps. I thought, 'My God: isn't that what used to be called hooliganism?' And wouldn't the campus police do something? But nothing happened. I was really mystified and talked to my classmates; they said it was most likely prep-school boys which only deepened the mystery.

Are you suggesting that this goes beyond harmless Malory Tower's mischief? Did you see the lack of restraint and some destruction as representing freedom? Or was it something else?

Yes, it wasn't like everyone did it; that's not what I'm saying. It was a particular group. And in retrospect, these institutions are training the elites. But I'd gone there thinking training the elites meant we'd study, be meritocratic, learn good ideas and interact... But, of course, all these institutions have a long history of filtering in and out a particular set of people who'll be your governing or ruling class, right? I imagine it's true of Oxbridge, too... But what does this event mean? Non-accountability. You don't have to be accountable. It was as blatant as that.

What did you make of the perceived privilege and non-accountability of these leaders in waiting? And your classmates' reaction?

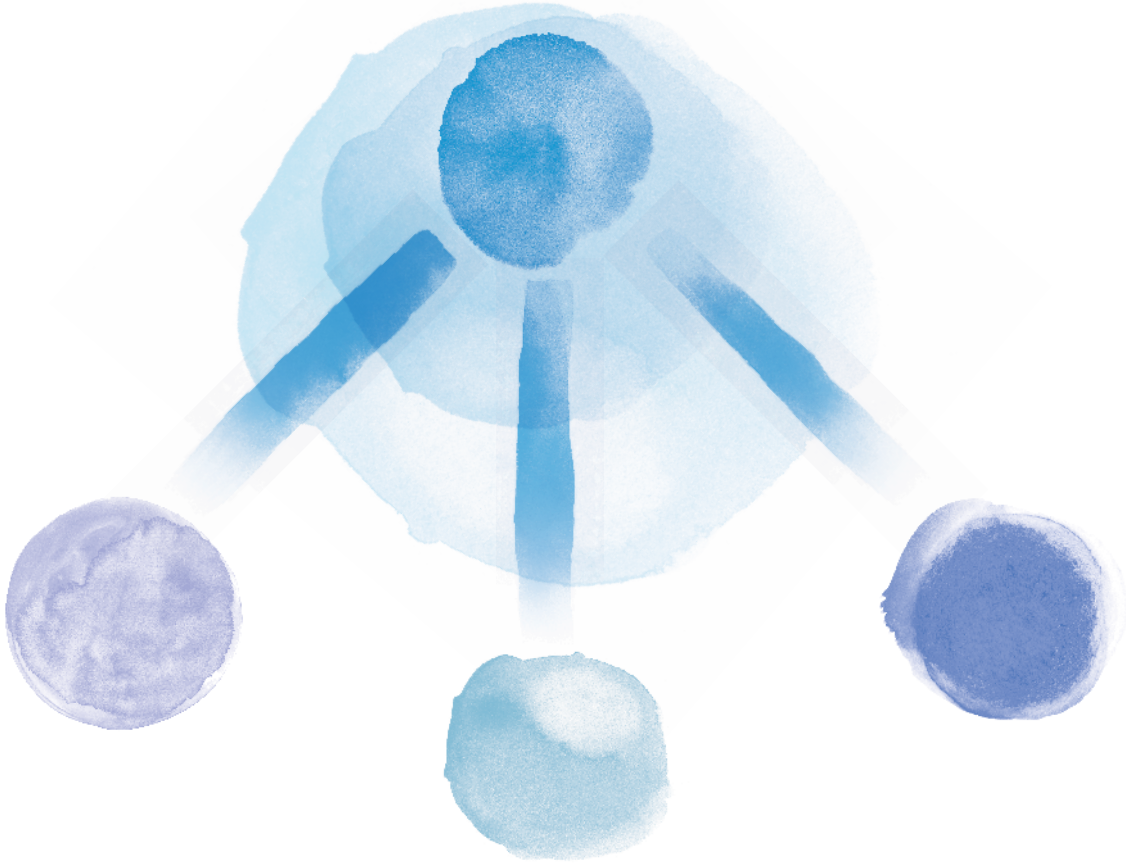
If an African American had done that – I mean, he would have been mad to – I don't think he would've been ignored. It wasn't for him to do that; it wasn't his privilege.



And what sense have you made of it as – through the years – you've experienced leadership and those who've become the elites? What do you notice?

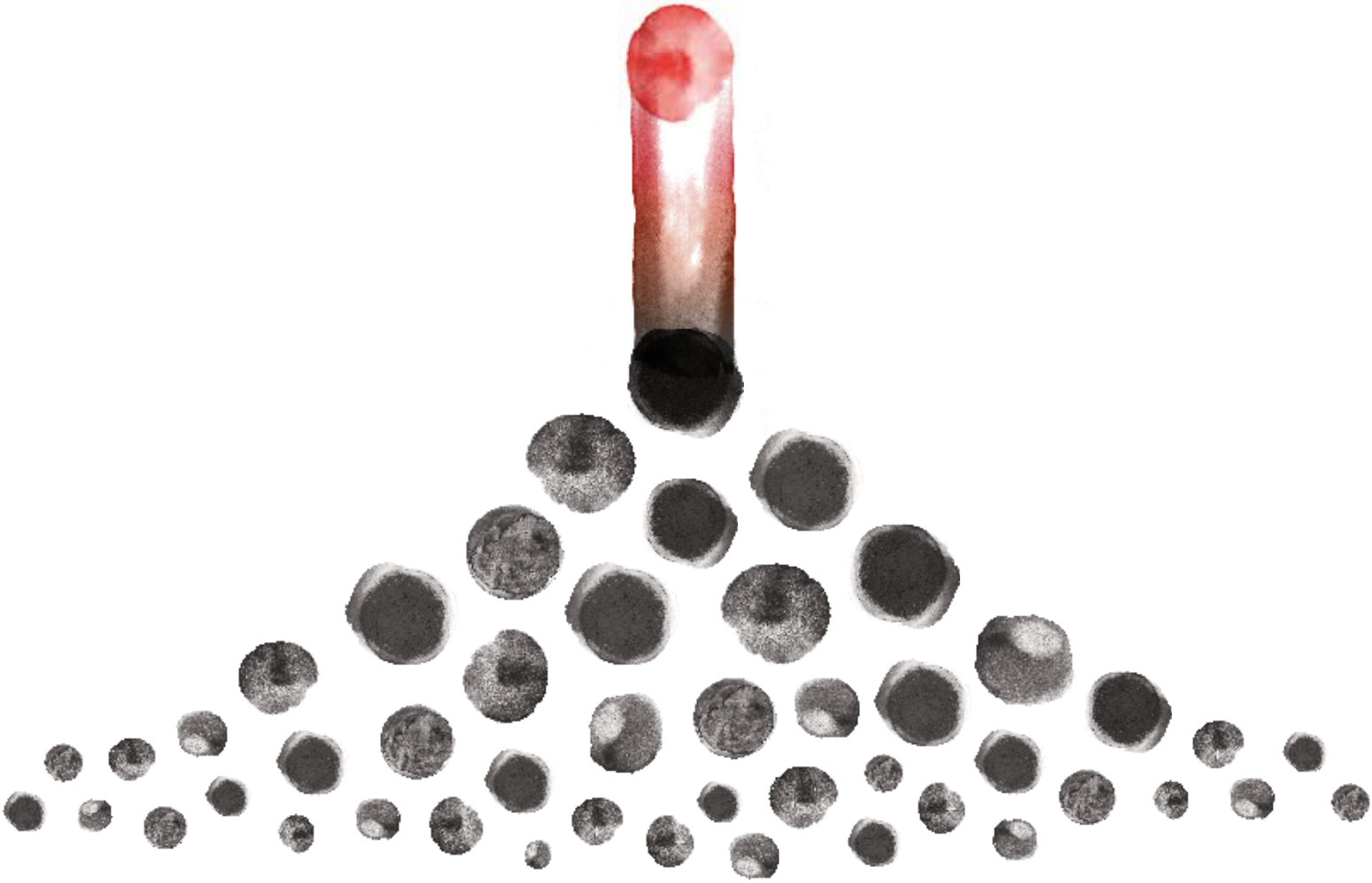
I noticed how little we all notice about what we invest in the word 'leader.' It's a word that's so bound to your culture; with how you grew up in your family. Frankly, this whole leadership thing where everyone can be a leader only happened in the last 20 years. Let's look at what I think has happened to leadership and what I think is the crisis now... There's always an elite class in every society. I think it's inevitable: when society gets more complex, the capable get to the top, then pass the privileges they have to their children – who may not be as capable. But resources tend to accrue – whether financial, educational or whatever. Then the question really becomes: what does that class of people feel they owe or are duty bound to give their fellows?

Now, you can call it a social contract or whatever, but that distancing has increased. You just see callousness and cruelty and disregard. And then one must ask the fundamental question: what's happened to the cultures that can no longer say leadership comes with responsibilities for the whole? For the *we* – and not just your own class?



You raise an important question… What happens when the elites lack a strong sense of responsibility to society?

And here, I think the West is actually getting into quite a bit of trouble. Curiously enough, with China – and I've had a long relationship with China, having visited in 1986… I've had to change my mind about it again and again and again. But the Party, seems to have made sure that their leaders are responsible for more than themselves… There's this sense that we must lift up the bottom, and they've lifted 800 million out of poverty. So some of us think that what's come back – despite the Cultural Revolution and all of that – is something within the collective Chinese psyche and the Confucianist heart, which says you must serve your society. And I think that's hard for the West to grasp, let alone appreciate.



We've spoken before about political systems having different structures, roots, and underpinning stories… But how do these histories feed into what you're suggesting are different forms of leadership between the West and China?

I think we can certainly go into the histories. I'm now thinking whether I should go into a narration of the history – which could get quite long winded – or cut to the chase about what's happened with the different histories and where we are now. I came to this podcast wearing a Balinese headdress because I thought it would be visual for us…

Thank you!

This udeng has a knot in front; the two ends are up there. I thought this was just to keep the headdress together… But I was at a cremation once when this priest asked if I knew what the knot I was wearing was! It shows good and evil intertwined; it's intertwined in you… So our job as human beings is to find the right balance. And I thought, this is a completely different ontology than mine – given that I was raised as a Christian… Even liberal Christianity doesn't say it's our job to balance these energies. And certainly, if you're secular, that's not what we think about… So the notion of preferring good over bad, which you would assume is self-evident, isn't how people here think about things.

So in wearing your headdress, you're highlighting the connection between good and evil. And as I look at it – and we'll have a photo in the show notes – I'm seeing good and evil as being in relationship. There's no distance really between them… Could you share an example of that before we go back to accountability in society?

Yes! You know, we usually put a little flower in our ears here as an offering. And my driver, who's the son of a priest, also once said to me: "You know, we make these offerings – the top ones – for the good spirits. Those on the floor are for the bad spirits." When I asked if he worshiped all of them, he said no… "We don't worship. It's an offering." I said, "What's an offering?"

I'm intrigued….

And he said that the good spirits are there. So you want to offer something to them to say you respect them. And the bad spirits are there, and you want to offer something different… Offer them something not so nice, like alcohol, to acknowledge that they're there too. So it's a worldview that says we live in a world and a universe with mysterious forces around us. Our first attitude to all of this is just to acknowledge they're here, which is the first sign of respect.

Does this discussion about the knot of good and evil suggest that some cultures separate good and evil more distinctly? If so, how does this influence our thinking?

So, what are they, the Balinese, trying to say? They're trying to say that we live in an infinite, mysterious world of all sorts of beings and we're in a relationship with all of them. And this is the point I want to tie to what we talked about earlier... I think the West – from Christianity and Plato to Immanuel Kant – likes first principles... Let's get the dogma right!

If we get that right, we're going to be a good Christian, a good leader, a good whatever it is – then everything else is wrong. But I think there's a different mindset that says we're in relationship. So what do we need from this relationship? And how do we attend to this relationship with this other being? Where I want to tie this up is with some Iain McGilchrist books that I hope your listeners have had a chance to read.

Oh?

The Master and His Emissary, and The Matter with Things... I think McGilchrist puts it really well: the difference has to do with which culture has started to have a bias towards the left hemisphere of the brain and making that hegemonic over the self. And he'd say that the collective West today is very biased towards the left... I'd say those of us who are modernised as well, but let's stick with the West. And the left hemisphere way of seeing the world is black and white; good and evil – because it's survivalist and looking asks, "Is this food a poison, friend or foe?" Whereas the right hemisphere is looking at the relationship of everything, and one's place in it – the wholism of existence.

Given the likelihood that some of us in the Global North may feel uncertain about the future, could you talk about how leaders might build better relationships? Particularly because we're in a strange, multipolar world... Power is in flux and the temptation might be to hunker down; to hold even more tightly to our cultural narrative and go more left brain, which might mean creating more right versus wrong positions. And instability may well be very challenging for those of us who've lived in relatively stable, secure environments... But now there're global shifts in prosperity and influence.

Yes...

And I feel I hear a defensiveness in some leaders, questioning their lifelong narratives, about greatness and security and wondering how to go forward. So I guess I'm asking if uncertainty heightens fear and increases our need for security, and whether this in turn leads to greater distrust or hostility towards others?

What are we to do? Let's face it, life is sometimes pretty confusing and difficult for those in leadership positions, especially as there seems to be global truth decay. I heard that phrase the other day – I can't remember where – but I think it may resonate because we're living in filter bubbles and echo chambers, some of which may well be fuelling nationalism and our loss of a sense of wider fellowship. So where am I going with this? My question is: how do we come more into harmony with ourselves and more into harmony with others? Because some of these big movements worldwide feel beyond our control.

But I think that crisis of confusion is mostly in the West. I don't see it here. The great anxiety here is that we don't have a supermarket called the United States to sell to anymore! The big crisis is: who are we going to sell to? How are we going to make a living? It's not an existential, ontological, philosophical crisis. And there's actually very little sense of angst or glee at what's happening in the West – whether it's the war or the United States and Trump or any of that... It's just, 'Wow! That must be really tough for them.' And yes, it's tough for us because now we can't sell. I think the big anxiety, though, is really in the West. It's not universal, but the sense of identity being under siege is Western.

Now, let's just pick up on the word harmony, which President Xi Jinping of China has used. And I'm using him not because I'm supporting him – I'm not a citizen of PRC – but mostly because he's a figure in the news and the imagination of the West. Anyway, he's talking about harmony, and folk are looking at that and going, 'Oh my gosh! You're all going to march: left, right, left, right!' – like in the military parade. But that's not what he means...

What is meant by harmony?

Daniel Bell is a Canadian, but he's a Chinese scholar teaching in Hong Kong. He says the Chinese word for harmony is not what Westerners think of as harmony… What Westerners think of as harmony means 'You can't be you, I can't be me. We have to compromise…' Then we're harmonised and kind of sing kumbaya together and it's a bit sickly sweet. But the Chinese think of the word harmony more as if you could enjoy the taste of salt in a dish but it would still have other tastes in it… You would have the salt with sour and with sugar!

This is why there's so much food when you go to Chinese banquet! You're supposed to get all your taste buds tickled. The crunchy comes with a surprising burst of sour or bitter. That's the notion of harmony to match. How do you continually tweak different components so that the whole is something else? And the whole that is something else is changing all the time!

You know, I live next door to a Balinese temple where they play the gamelan. Initially, it feels like just a cacophonous clanging of bells – but it's a different harmony. They're trying to bring syncopated beats with tones that clash. Overall, it's meant to move you in a different way. In fact, my British friend Phil – who teaches music in Manchester – tells me that the Western harmonic scale, which has overtaken the world, was created by a particular pope because he really wanted it to sound sweet so that the sine curves all come together. So I think what happens in the West is back to Good. The Western notion of harmony is that we're there with the angels, singing Gregorian chants. The prickly difficult things aren't there anymore. And this is what we always want. And then real life is 'not so.' And what then are you going to do with what is not so? Do you know what I'm saying?

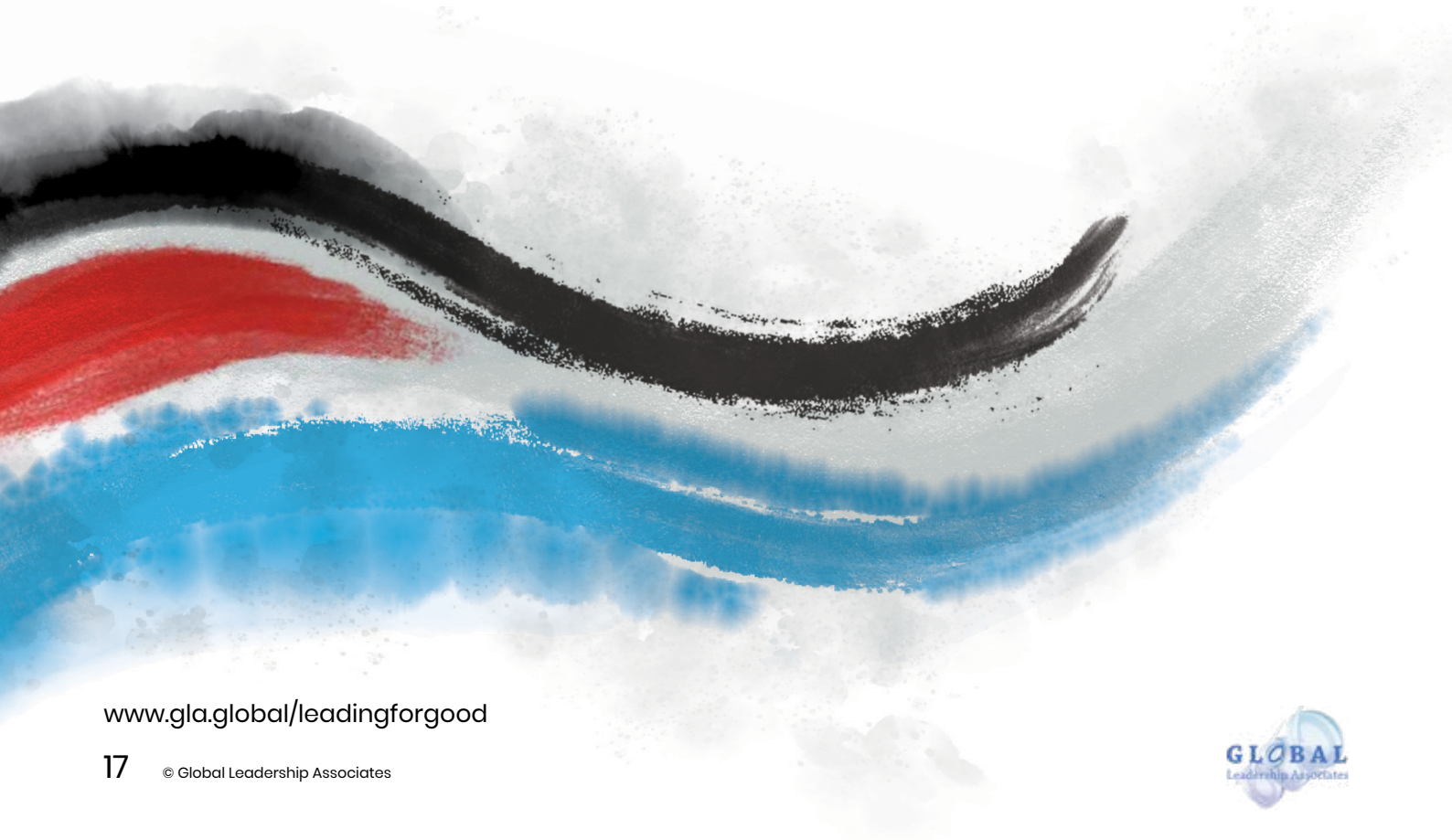
I believe you're saying, Leng, that a Western understanding of harmony risks creating a bit of a one-taste soup. We tend to oversimplify, take out the natural clashes, because we find that unpalatable and it's not in our normal narrative. So how do you see this split of right and wrong playing out socially or politically?

This sense that we live in a world of good and evil still pervades. So one needs only to say, 'Putin has become the devil!' It's almost impossible among my European friends to say, 'Have you ever thought that he and Russia might have their own particular strategic interests?' You know? You can't even bring that up. And I'm sure my saying this on a podcast has some people already reeling.

But I bring it up for awareness. But I must say that, here in Asia, people have no problem talking about it. I also have western friends who hate President Trump – or Biden or whatever it is. So I say to folks, "Don't you think Cromwell has come back again?" Or "Don't you think John Calvin has come back again?" Because I look back and I say, "How did the Protestants go at each other for so long over things that nobody in the West thinks of as important today?

I loved your phrase earlier: "…tickling the taste buds." Now, in my mind Leng, we're all in our environmental and historical soup, which is a part of the world we're in. And that soup has a particular taste to it…

Yes.



I'm thinking particularly of the leadership groups here: how do we all – East and West – become more alive to the taste that we are tasting? Bill Torbert used to talk about tasting one's taste. How might we become aware that our buds could be tickled by a different art of leadership, to a different understanding of harmony? What is the work that you do towards that?

The work that I do in Asia is different than the work that I do with Western friends and professionals. And actually, even with them, it's not one-on-one anymore. But I think the leadership we're talking about is at a moment in which the world is going through seismic epistemological shifts at a cultural level. We're talking about how we adjust to that. So let me speak to my Western friends and colleagues who may be anxious, maybe even challenged or offended by what I'm saying...

I really think Iain McGilchrist's work is so important. He's basically saying the ability to "taste", that is to say, to know is shaped by culture. Now Western culture, has replicated itself in the last hundred or so years since industrialisation and colonisation... The West looks out and starts seeing the world as dead things, as commodities, as resources. When the left hemesphere mind looks at a mountain, the mountain is basically copper ore and timber. You only see the parts, not the whole. But the capacity to see the whole is in human nature.

Your suggestion is, I think, that we in the Western world are more likely to be attempting to do the impossible, to square a circle. We're trying to comprehend someone or something without actually being in relationship with them. And being in relationship is the crucial point you're making...

I think that's the big challenge of how we lead our lives with others. Otherwise, we keep on trying to persuade ourselves: 'How am I going to try to understand you as a...' whatever?! And how am I going to accommodate whatever-isms; trying to square the circle all the time?

Could you give an example of how we might pay attention to both the relational ingredients and the spicy ethical or justice issues?

I've forgotten his name, but we have a colleague in the field – he's Dutch and works in cross-cultural understanding…

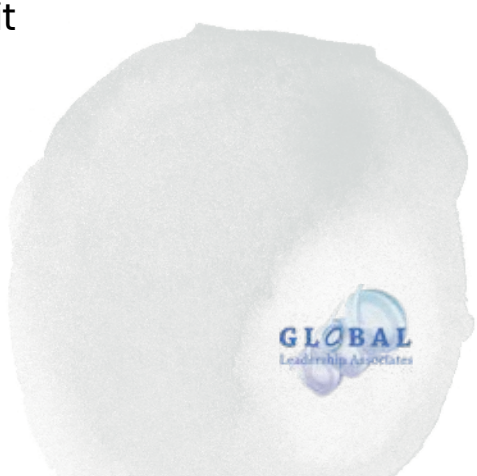
Frons Trompenarrs?

In one of his courses, he gives this example: you're driving with your friend as he's way above the speed limit. He gets into an accident – and someone is hurt. You go to court… You're the only witness and the judge asks you what happened. Fron's question is, "How do people from different cultures answer?" Because there's a dilemma. Do you say your friend was speeding? Because that would be mostly the Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, North European countries who would say the friend violated a principle. But when you ask Koreans and Japanese, they would say the friendship comes first. But then am I going to lie? What would be the strategy? Should I not show up in court?

Of course, he goes further and adds that some would go to their friend and say, "Please confess!" Or one might say they'd tell the judge the truth but still visit their friend in jail. But what are we talking about? Attending to the principle and attending to the relationship? That's the capacity to attend to both… We might say the left-brain way, the right-brain way, if we can do that: you attend to the principle, but you also attend to the relationship.

Neglecting either the relationship or the issue leaves us lopsided, doesn't it? Which is problematic, especially across great distances…

Some cultures would say you attend to the relationship first and you attend to the principle. Others would say we attend to principle first, then the relationship. That's just a cultural way of which one comes first. You want to attend to both. I think what we're talking about now is that the West isn't attending to the relationship because it's so hung up on the principles. And of course, it has double standards… It doesn't always adhere to those principles. And the rest of the world is now saying to the West, 'Stop lecturing us!' Because it undermines the relationship, and the principles!



So you think that the West's emphasis on its own values, which many will see as a strength, can seem like lecturing to others? Which relationships do you see this affecting?

Let me give you an example. There've been all these criticisms about ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. There are 10 of them; 11 with Timor-Leste joining. Unlike the EU; *they don't have principles; they don't castigate each other... They haven't done anything about Aung San Suu Kyi and her incarceration in Burma for example. It's just a talk shop. They meet hundreds of times a year to eat* – but this is very Southeast Asian... You have to attend to the relationship to get things done. And there was so much pressure to ostracise the military junta in Myanmar after the coup. But ASEAN didn't want to do that because if they ostracised them, what then? Then we can't talk! But this comes across to the left brain, left hemisphere as unprincipled. Whereas people are tending to the relationship. Then what I'd say about leaders in the West – and I put myself in that place – is that we live in a binary world of good and evil and all that... It's only natural that our own ego wants to identify with good – because why would you identify with the evil?!

Therein lies the problem. If you identify with good, how are you going to look at your shadow? How are you going to look at other parts of you that never conform to Kant's categorical imperative or whatever? So the dark side of principle orientation is you become fanatical. Now, there is a dark side to relationality as well and that's that you end up with cover-up and all sorts of corruption. Let me end with one more story about this... I was talking to my friend Mpho Tutu van Furth, who's an Episcopal priest; the youngest daughter of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. She told me the story about Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how there was an occasion in which a man had confessed that he'd brutalised a Black woman's son or husband... It was her first time listening to it. And the man said to the woman, at the end of it all, "Please forgive me." May have been in English, may have been in Afrikaans, but 'please forgive me' was translated into Xhosa.

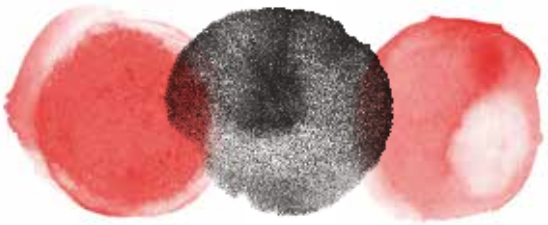
That phrase is – I can't pronounce it well, Ndi-Xolele. And what it really means in her language is, 'let us live in harmony'; 'may I live in peace with you'. That's a relational language; a relational motif. I've told you all this horrible stuff. What I now want is 'may you and I live in peace.' Now, when the mother heard that, she gave it to him because that was what her family had died for. That was what all the suffering had been about – so that she could live in peace. So she said, yes. But what he heard was, 'You're forgiven,' meaning you're absolved; the past is gone... You're free to be an individual; go out to do what you want. He didn't stay behind to make the relationship work!

So where do these misunderstandings take us? How we tend to miss each other, as we all speak from our different doorsteps?

I was trying to dig at the residual of unforgiveness and trying to feel my way back to my grandmothers, right? Both my grandmothers suffered from the Japanese occupation. And my maternal grandmother lost her eldest son, who was a Queen's Scholar – he committed suicide. But when I was very young, seven and eight, I had two Japanese girls as classmates. They'd come from Japan to help Singapore in the early years of the economy. And I just loved them and everything about their culture. My mother was too young to have experienced the war and didn't find the Japanese as bad. So she encouraged me to have them as friends. My grandmothers knew, and they didn't stop me. And in my mind, I think what they did was say, 'Okay, if this is the new world and he's friends with Japanese girls, let them have their new world.' They were attending to the fact that their youngest grandson loved two Japanese girls. Let him have his friendship.

I love your phrase and sentiment. "Let him have his friendship" – as opposed to...

As opposed to a white friend of mine that grew up in the South. When he came out as gay, his family just threw him under a bus. He still tried to love them, but he told me this heartbreaking story of growing up in the South where, at nine-years old, he had a Black friend. He didn't see racial colour. But his mother said to him, "You will not bring this boy back home again." Now, that's living in a world where you see things as fixed and you don't see the relationality.



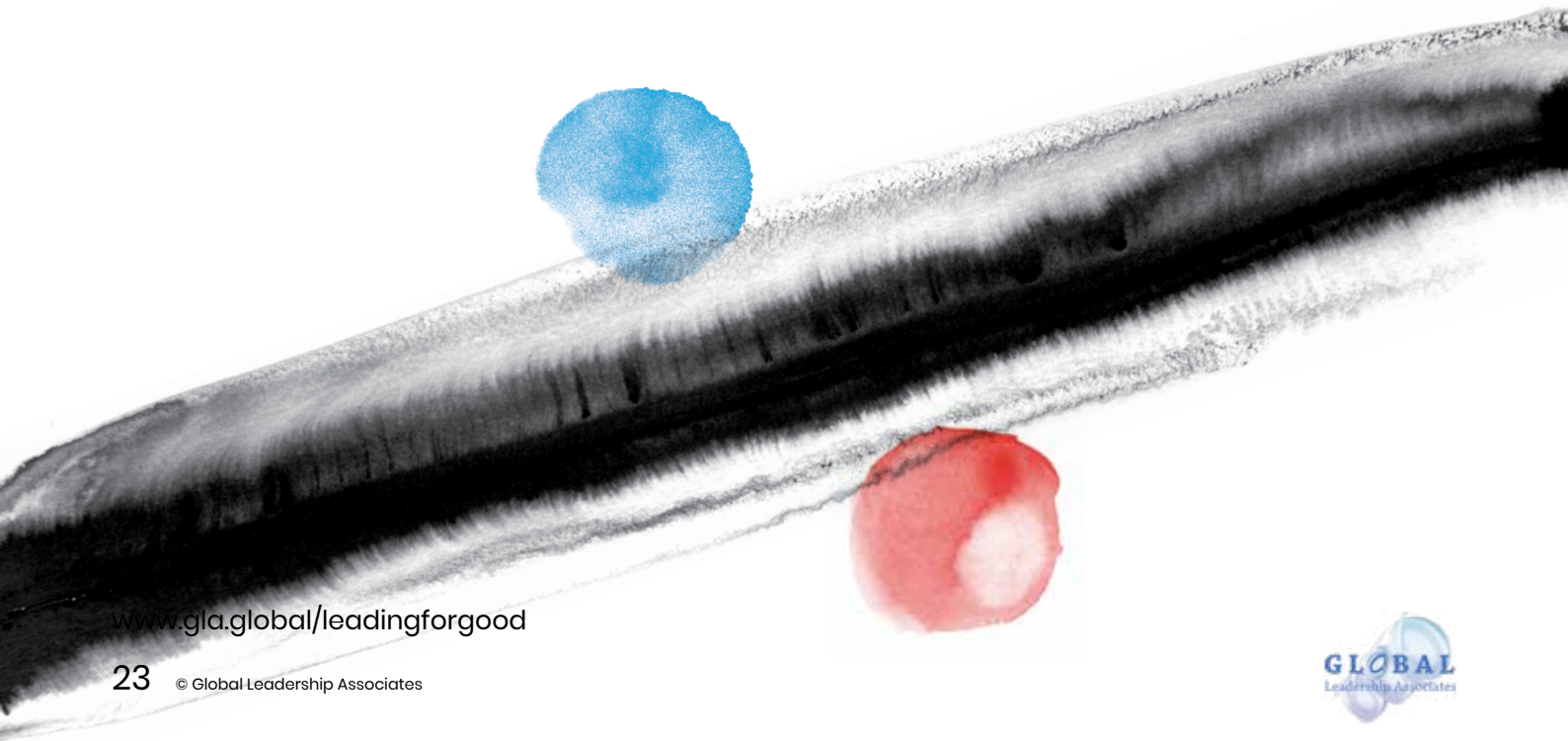
May I ask if forgiveness and acceptance are present today in your family with your parents?

My parents have that same fixed mindset because, when I came out to them, they tried to cast demons out of me because they're really left-brained Protestant Christians, and that principle must override our relationality.

What is your relationship with them today?

We aren't completely reconciled because their brains are fixated in a particular way of needing to be right – and this is why I feel kind of sad and emotional about it. But let me end with Enid Blyton and maybe point a way out to leaders and to healing and to trauma. Enid Blyton set those 23 Famous Five books between 1947 and 1949. Julian was 15, so his actual contemporaries in 1947 would've gone through the bombing of London; they would've known people that died. So English boys and girls in 1947 were not like Julian, Dick and George and they didn't have Timmy the dog...

More than that, the England Enid Blyton described wasn't the real England for those of us living in the colonies – nor was it even a real England for the British of 1947! So I came to understand: this was trauma literature. This was to help English kids and families cope... To imagine the heath and have quaint adventures and ginger beer, scones and treacle and all that stuff I was fascinated with because it felt so wonderful and beautiful. So that's an imaginary from Blyton's mind that was both for the English and for those of us in the colonies. Then it stays in our minds as an imaginary. It gets really complicated to think about why it functions that way, but its main function is actually to keep you from the truth. Because the truth is really very painful.



You mention the imaginary world people lived in across England and in the colonies. What do you see as the truth?

The truth was that England had suffered terribly. Did it ever come around to recognising what imperialism had done? Not just to the colonies, but to itself? Because there's a cauterisation of the heart in order to regard the Other as objects. And where's the recovery? Recovery is not to crawl on your knees. It's to feel the pain and tragedy of all this violence. Because what my grandmother was doing was thinking: there's really no point in telling my grandson the poison so that he can hate these Japanese girls... But the question is: did these Japanese girls and her parents ever feel through their trauma being on the oppressor side?

So I think what I'm trying to say is there are actually layers of trauma that have cauterised the heart, whether you've historically been on the side of the oppressor, victim, saviour – whatever. And this deep wounding has prevented us from really connecting... So sometimes I think we can't directly talk about the trauma because it's re-traumatising. But when we're ready, we need to. Then, out of that, we really do need to find some forms of wisdom for how we can live. And I don't have any wisdom around it! I'm only surfacing what I think are the issues. Forget about being leaders – how are we just going to lead our lives as human beings? How can we have spaces to hear how our hearts have been broken? And I think there's another thing very important as the world polarises. With all these news media wanting us to take sides and to cheer on the winning side, it's like we're back in the Roman Colosseum again. And we must understand that the Colosseum is being replayed, distracting us so that we're energised, so that we are righteously indignant.

Just before we go, Leng, one question about your phrase, "our hearts have been broken…" Is there also heartbreak and trauma in the East and a need for hearts to mend? I'm thinking of going back to your soup and the different tastes.

The East is a very big place. We can talk about Singapore, Bali – all of that. But let me just refer to China since it's so much in the press. They were traumatised by the invasions and by the century of humiliation with the West. Then they were traumatised by what they did to themselves as they tried to right themselves through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. And many people would benefit from therapy, from more expression… But what's so interesting is that they've channeled all that energy into work, into righting their economies, into standing up and recovering from the humiliations through actually doing things.

And therefore, that sense of a deep culture of humiliation is…

It's not there. I mean, if someone from the outside went in and poked at them again and triggered them, they're going to get a bad reaction. Generally speaking, I think the challenge in the West is the loneliness and the utter chaos of being individuals. How do we find community again? Now, whether that's family or with the other, how do we find this connectedness?

The challenge in China and the Global South is...

Generally, the connectedness is there. It can be a prison, but we all need times in our lives when we can experience our own individual self. I think the West's contribution to the world consciousness is that, for example, it gave me my sense of adventure so I could be an individuated self away from the constraints and prying eyes of a very small Singapore that just wanted me to do A,B,C. So for healing in the East, I do tell younger people that they need to learn to be naughty! You've got to find a space where you can be you and be naughty.

So if you need to do something just to feel yourself and not to feel all these familial voices whispering to you to clump together, I say, 'Okay! Go to Burning Man! Spend one week there... Quintessential, American, Western... Be you; go feel you as an individual and then come back and be an individual in your community...' Taste your own unique – I don't know – pepperiness or whatever it is! Then come back and be in community. I think the challenge in the West is: how is the West going to be in community?

You've been so generous with your time, Leng. Thank you. I've noticed that, when you tell stories, you introduce new expressions and share new perspectives... Could we end by reflecting on some specific features of language?

Let me collect my thoughts around something the East can offer. In English, if I want to say hello to all of you, I might say, 'Hello everybody!' And everybody is one, two, three, people, ten – or more... 'Hello everybody!' That already betrays a particular epistemology. In Mandarin, you would say, 'Dàjiā ho.' 'Da' is big, 'jia' is family or home, and 'hao' is good. So you would say, 'big family, hello!' 大家 is the Chinese word for 'big family' or 'everyone'. You see? And I think we want to start paying attention to what we really want to say. Maybe collectively we can come up with new words... I want to invite those of us using the English language, which has imported French and German words, to go ahead and import some words from Chinese and Indian... Because those words will morph and shape things differently.

Also, I've always known – from both Malaysia and Indonesia – that 'thank you' is 'terima kasih.' But really 'terima' is 'I accept' and 'kasih' is 'love.' So 'thank you' turns into 'I accept your love.' And there are three words in both Malay and Indonesian for love... 'Cinta' – which is romantic, erotic love. 'Sayang' which is compassionate love. And 'kasih' which is more like 'agape' love. It's interesting that, in saying thank you, they've chosen this particular form of unconditional love. You'd say that to each other and you wouldn't reply 'You're welcome' because it's not a debt. You'd say, 'Sama sama, terima kasih' – 'I receive your love too.' And I find it so beautiful that when it comes to thank you, there's a certain equality to it: 'I accept your love too.' I hope we can do this kind of work of a mutual global cultural renaissance... I've been encouraging my Chinese friends who've come here to go back. And because we sometimes say 'merci' – a French word – why not say terima kasih?!

I love that Leng. There's magic in words and it's such a crucial point. I love the 'Hello, big family' to the point that it makes my skin tingle. Sometimes, it's the simple things we can do that change reality. It truly is magic. It changes the atmosphere that we're entering with people.

Let's use that language! And if you're a European saying, 'terima kasih' and some politically correct person says it's cultural appropriation, say: 'Yes, it is!' Right? We want it; we want infusion. Because the English language also gave China a way to talk about things that it had never been able to talk about either. It's very clear with subject and verb order. So English is very clear in terms of who said what to whom and when, whether it's conditional or not. So it's a wonderful language to do science and historical sequence properly and to go into a law court because classical Chinese is much more ambiguous. So there's a place for ambiguity and there's a place for exactness.

That's so lovely. I'm glad we had the opportunity to bring this into the conversation, Leng. It feels incredibly important and beautiful, actually. Language can be beautiful if only we would pay attention.

Yes, if only we would. And it's more than attention, isn't it? What I'm learning is it's intention... Intention already has a priority; a will and a template. But attention is prior to that. It's much more receptive; more 'right hemisphere' as Ian McGilchrist would say. Let's simply be attentive. And I think this polarisation endangers the collective world psyche, inviting us all to look at a mirror and a moment of danger, but as a moment of transformation to make home together.

...make home together. What an exquisitely powerful phrase. It's so simple, isn't it? It gets to one of our most basic human desires. Terima kasih, Leng.