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Remembering Tan Sri Ani Arope — Timothy Todd Diemer

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DECEMBER 27 — Tan Sri Datuk Haji (Dr) Ani Arope, a widely admired figure in Malaysian public life and a friend to our university, passed away recently, leaving us to grieve, reflect, and find continued inspiration in his enduring vision. Tan Sri Ani was an affable, multi talented man who was, as one of his many admiring employees once put it, knowledgeable about a wide variety of topics. As one of his guests I was soon impressed by the depth and breadth of his broad learning. His conversation revealed a man highly educated in a classic manner, with knowledge not only of the science of agriculture, but also history, the arts, humanities, current events, and the social sciences. Coupled to his clear commitment to life long learning, this made him a wonderfully engaging conversationalist. Witness his passion in retirement years for learning to fly. As with much in his eventful life, Tan Sri Ani approached learning to fly with a commitment to mastery, and he followed through.

In the early days of his tenure as executive chairman of Tenaga Nasional Berhad, Tan Sri Ani made some structural and administrative changes that were strongly resisted by a considerable number of technicians and other employees. The resistance grew into organised protests that were captured in newspaper photos of employees bashing an effigy of the new chairman. A lesser man might have capitulated, or responded with threats and punishments. Not Tan Sri Ani. An expert negotiator and one who by nature made friends, not enemies, he instead invited the lead protesters in for tea. He heard them out, listened attentively. He then





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consolidated the ring leaders and offered them jobs - positions that would make the company better. Those former protesters were later numbered among the most loyal supporters of Tan Sri Ani.

I later met one of these rowdy protestors, a young man named Yusof. He was an engaging, charismatic chap who retained his protest appearance, sporting the long beard of an ascetic and letting his hair grow shaggy. The former protester liked horses, and Tan Sri Ani, being an accomplished agriculturalist, helped him to get started with the horse farm that long operated outside the gates of Universiti Tenaga Nasional. He enabled the formerly disgruntled employee to do his TNB job and pursue his passion for horses at the same time. Tan Sri Ani would chide him from time to time about his appearance, but he never demanded that the young Yusof clean up. Effectiveness in the job did not require a neat appearance, and Tan Sri Ani focused on potential and productivity, not outward appearances. In time, the shaggy but productive employee cleaned up his appearance on his own, likely as Tan Sri Ani knew he would. He is one of the many who would no doubt credit his success to Tan Sri Ani.

I knew Tan Sri Ani not only as a successful and dynamic leader, but also as a deeply religious and morally upright man. Tan Sri Ani was the sort of person who, by living the values of his faith, could inspire insights into one's own religious experience. Such was his goodness. If there is truth in the notion that followers of the Abrahamic religions all pray to the same God, then there is potential for expanding one's sense of spiritual community. Tan Sri Ani was the one who led me to this realisation, not by explaining it to me, but by living his faith. Knowing my interest in the diversity of the world's religions and cultures, he once suggested that I join in the first week of the Ramadan fast. At the end of the week, he graciously invited me to a traditional dinner to break the fast, starting with dates. To this day, when I taste the sweetness of dates, I think of this gracious and enlightened man. I count it a large honour to have known him.

With deep religious faith, it follows that Tan Sri Ani expected a high standard of ethical behaviour and professional integrity in his employees and in his own work. A recent newspaper article quoted Tan Sri Ani as having said, "If it is legal and not fair, I will not do it. If it is fair and illegal, I still won't do it. It has to be legal and fair." He told me that several times during his career, while in a closed elevator with wealthy clients, he would be offered a briefcase packed full of bands of gleaming cash. In turn, he was expected to agree to favourable terms for the client. Unshakeable in a strong moral code, he always refused.

When I first met Tan Sri Ani in his role as chairman of Kumpulan Guthrie Berhad, he was a prominent figure in Malaysia, and people treated him with great deference. But as a senior administrator remarked when Indiana University awarded him the honorary Doctorate of Laws and the Thomas Hart Benton Medallion, Tan Sri Ani Arope was "An easily approachable man of good humor." Indeed, he struck me as a man of the people, able as easily to have an engaging conversation with the gardener or the housekeeper as he was with the university president or a prominent politician. Tan Sri Ani told me that one reason he liked visiting the USA — apart from the fact that some things were surprisingly inexpensive — was that in the USA, his status counted for little. He was treated as an ordinary person when he travelled about, no one knowing that in fact he was a person of high rank in the home country. He liked that feeling, he said.



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In the earliest days of the newly established Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN), Tan Sri Ani insisted that the Indian students room with the Chinese and the Chinese live with the Malay and vice versa. Of course I was only a visitor to Malaysia, an expatriate, but I never met anyone who was so congruent in talking about and practicing bangsa Malaysia. His implicit message to the UNITEN students was that God put us all here together in this beautiful country, and we must learn to live and work together to make it something better than we found it.

Many of us whose lives are the better for having known Tan Sri Ani will take comfort in the realisation that his vision will continue to inspire us. In fact, I will think of it every time I visit UNITEN. I can stand in the center of the UNITEN campus and know that around me is his monument, not just the buildings, but the ideas.

**The author is an American who worked with Indiana University Malaysia programmes from 1988-98. Currently he is director of international services at the Purdue School of Engineering and Technology, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. He continues to visit Malaysia regularly both for business and pleasure.*

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